

# What is text?

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FoF instituttsseminar 8.9.2016

# The plan

## I. Some definitions and distinctions

1. Document carrier ≠ Document ≠ Text
2. Writing ≠ "Texting"
3. Sign ≠ Symbol

## II. Ontology

1. Objects, properties, events
2. Texts as objects
  - Texts as types
  - The FRBR ontology
  - Texts as immaterial objects
3. Texts as properties
4. Stock-taking
  - Why texts are rather not objects
  - Why texts are rather not properties
5. Texts as events
- 5.1 Texts as actions

# Some philosophical vocabulary and concepts important to my investigation

- Object vs. Property vs. Event
- Artefact vs. Natural object
- Type vs. Token
- Concrete vs. Abstract / Non-concrete
- Mental vs. Non-mental
- Material vs. Immaterial
- Sign vs. Symbol
- Substance vs. Accident
- Substantial change vs. Accidental change
- Universal vs. Particular
- Actions vs. other events

# I. Some definitions and distinctions

1. Document carrier  $\neq$   
Document  $\neq$   
Text

# Document ≠ document carrier

- Document carriers: sheets of paper, computers, tablets, smart phones, trees, stones, pergament ...
  - NB: Both artefacts (e.g. paper) and natural objects (e.g. trees) can be document carriers.
- Documents: the sign inventory/ies on a document carrier.
  - NB: Documents are artefacts.

# Document ≠ Text

- "Text" is used for concrete physical entities like documents and even document carriers (text in sense (1)) - but "text" is also used for abstract / non-concrete entities (text in sense (2)).\*
- Text in sense (2) ≠ document / document carrier
  - For «text» in sense (2), meaning seems to become a *constitutive* part.

\*Cf. Wittgenstein on surface vs. depth grammar of concepts and expressions.

# Text in sense (2)

- "The poem exists in a handwritten and a typewritten version."
- "Vent ikke skyt ham!" / "Warte nicht erschiessen!"
- Cf. synonymy and homonymy / polysemy



# Text $\neq$ Document $\neq$ Document carrier

- A change in the document will always also imply a change in the document carrier.
- A change in the document carrier may, but needn't also imply a change in the document.
- A change in the document needn't also imply a change in the text.
- A change in the text needn't being matched by a change in the document or the document carrier.

# NB: "Text technology"

- Text technology is partly *document* technology (e.g. OCR) or even document *carrier* technology (e.g. archiving methods), and partly *text* technology (e.g. semantic search).

This talk focuses on the nature of text in sense 2.

–≠ document

–≠ document carrier

➤ What is it?

## 2. Writing vs. «Texting»

# Writing = producing documents

- Is a *basic action*, at least in terms of its physical movements.
- Produces a *finite and concrete result*, namely the written (= «document»).
- Has *one* agent, namely the author.
  - Naturally, co-authorship is possible: Two or more agents produce in separate writing acts one document.
- Does not need to be writing *with understanding*.
  - Documents can be produced by machines.

# Documents

- Documents result from writing and are finite and concrete objects.
  - Objection: This may be valid for written documents, like written recipes or articles; of these one may say that they are finite and concrete objects. But isn't it adequate to also regard the results from speaking documents? If so, are they objects?

# «Texting» = producing texts

- Is not a basic action:
  - Is dependent on the action of writing
  - Is also dependent on the action of reading
- Is essentially mental.
- Has a mental result.
- Has a result which is inherently unstable and potentially non-finite (open-ended).
  - The text can change with each new reading.
- Has a result which can be both spatially and temporally discontinuous.
  - The text can pause its existence (can cease to exist and again come into being).
- Has a multitude of agents (which can naturally coincide in one person): the author *and* the reader(s).
  - Is a shared, joined action.

# Texts

- Texts are unstable and potentially continuously ongoing and changing, partly also "pausing" mental entities that result from actions which are *co-produced* by writers and readers on the basis of documents.
- Are texts objects?



# 3. Sign $\neq$ Symbol

# Signification

- The symbol is the sign equipped with meaning.
  - L. Wittgenstein: *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* #3.32 a.o.; *Big Typescript* Ch. I a.o.; *Philosophical Investigations* §1, §81, §432 a.o.
- Who equippes the sign with meaning?
  - The sign processing / understanding human.
- Documents are signs - Texts are symbols.

\*

# II. Ontology

So, what sort of entities are  
*texts in sense (2)*,  
ontologically  
(metaphysically) speaking?

1.

# Objects, properties and events

# Object vs. Event

- Object: 3-, not 4-dimensional entity
- Object (spatial entities) vs. Events (spatio-temporal entities)

# Object vs. Property

- An object can take on different and contrastive properties without necessarily becoming a different kind of object.
  - Aristotle:
    - Substance  $\neq$  Accident
    - Substantial change (e.g. dying)  $\neq$  Accidental change (e.g. getting ill)
- A property is often conceived as a universal.

2.

# Texts as objects

# We are dealing with at least three entities

- *Document carriers* are concrete **objects** (e.g. paper); they are particulars.
- *Documents* (texts in sense 1) are concrete **objects** (e.g. written signs on paper); they are particulars. Documents are text carriers (cf. German «Textträger») (texts in sense 1))
- *Texts* (texts in sense 2) are **objects**, too?



# Text as abstract object in the sense of a *type*

# The OHCO thesis: Text as object

”The authors argue that **text is best represented as an ordered hierarchy of content **object** (OHCO), because that is what text really is.**” (DeRose, Durand, Mylonas, Renear 1990)

# A. Renear further on text as **object** (1999)

**S. Hockey, A. Renear, J.J. McGann 1999: Panel: What is text? A debate on the philosophical and epistemological nature of text in the light of humanities computing research**

## **1. Position statement from Renear**

I will present and defend a particular view of textuality. ... this view is not only a rather good account of textuality, it is the best account we have.

I will advocate this theory by defending five theses; I will argue that **texts are:**

- **real: they have properties independent of our interests in them and our theories about them.**
- **abstract: the objects which constitute texts are abstract, not material, objects.**
- **intentional: texts are, necessarily, the product of mental acts**
- **hierarchical: the structure of texts is fundamentally hierarchical**
- **linguistic: texts are linguistic objects; renditional features are not parts of texts, and therefore not proper locations for textual meaning.**

# The FRBR (Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records) ontology

- Work (type) – the intellectual / artistic object as such
  - The difference between Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* is on the level of work.
    - The text as prior to expression in its most abstract object form.
- Expression (type) – the intellectual / artistic object as soon as it takes on a form
  - The difference between the *Tractatus* and the *Proto-Tractatus* is on the level of expression.
    - The text as expressed in its most abstract object form.
- Manifestation (type) – an expression as it manifests itself in the object type of a physical embodiment
  - The difference between the 1922 and the 1966 edition of the *Tractatus* is on the level of manifestation.
    - The document in its most abstract object form.
- Item (token; a concrete object, particular) – a manifestation as it is embodied in a specific object token.
  - The difference between my own copy of the 1966 *Tractatus* edition and Rune's copy (same edition, same impression) is on the level of physical item.
    - The single document / document carrier objects.

# A. Renear:

<https://ischool.illinois.edu/people/faculty/renear>

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the faculty page for Allen Renear. The browser's address bar shows the URL <https://ischool.illinois.edu/people/faculty/renear>. The page header includes the School of Information Sciences logo and a navigation menu with links for 'our school', 'academics', 'research', 'careers', 'people', 'giving', 'newsroom', and 'help desk'. The main content area features a photo of Allen Renear, a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a white shirt and a dark vest. To the left of the photo is a sidebar with a search bar and a list of links: 'faculty', 'staff', 'doctoral students', 'alumni & friends', 'school directory', 'committees', and 'scholars-in-residence'. The main content area also includes a search bar and a 'Go' button. The page content includes the following sections:

- Home > People > Faculty > Allen Renear**
- Allen Renear**
- Professor and Dean**
- PhD, Philosophy, **Brown**
- 112A LIS
- (217) 333-3281
- [renear@illinois.edu](mailto:renear@illinois.edu)
- <http://people.lis.illinois.edu/~renear/renearcv.html>
- OFFICE HOURS**
- Please contact [Christine Hopper](#) to schedule an appointment.
- RESEARCH FOCUS**
- Information organization and access, particularly the development of formal ontologies for cultural and scientific objects and the application of those ontologies in information system design, scholarly publishing, and data curation in the sciences and humanities.
- OTHER PROFESSIONAL APPOINTMENTS**
- Professor, Philosophy
- BIOGRAPHY**

# Text as abstract object in the sense of an *immaterial* object

3.

# Texts as properties

If text is a property – is it a property of the document or a property of the document carrier?\*

- Changes in the document carrier yield changes in the text only then if they are also changes in the document.
- The text, if a property of either the document or the document carrier, is a property of the document rather than of the document carrier.

\*Disregarding for a moment that it could also / additionally be the property of something else.



# If texts are properties of documents, then ...

- ... one and the same document can take on different "textual" properties
  - Diachronically: One and the same document can receive different interpretations in the course of time.
  - Synchronically: One and the same document can have different interpretations at one and the same point in time.
- ... the same "textual" properties can instantiate in different documents
  - "The poem exists in a handwritten and a typed version"

# NB. Documents as properties of text is also a possibility!

- If documents are to be conceived of as properties of texts, then it shall be possible that one and the same text can take on different documents as its properties.
  - "This poem exists in a handwritten and a typed version."
  - Synonymy

4.

# Some first conclusions and stock-taking

# Why texts are rather not abstract (incl. immaterial) objects

# Texts can pause in their existence

- A text is a rather unstable entity, and it is not at all untypical that it pauses its existence and resumes it afterwards as the same text.
- Objects are characterized by a certain stability, continuity, and synchronical as well as diachronical identity.
- Objects typically don't pause in their existence, though it does seem possible that an *artefact* object pauses its existence and later resumes it as the same object.\*

\*Thanks to Christian Kanzian for this comment.

# Texts have change as a basic ingredient and have causal powers

- Though texts don't seem to be concrete objects, they still do have a beginning in time, do exist at particular times and places, and do undergo change. They also seem to have causal powers.
- If texts are objects, then they are either abstract objects or immaterial objects. Now, with regard to abstract objects: These don't change, and do not exist at any particular time or place. Neither do they have causal powers.

# Text as immaterial object: Two objects?

- If texts were immaterial objects then we would get two objects:
  - First object: The concrete *document* object (particular).
  - Second object: The immaterial *text* object (particular).
- How are the two connected?
  - The relation would in any way need to be different from the relation between an object and its properties (be properties now conceived as universals or as particulars).

# Why texts are rather not properties



# Properties, understood as universals

- Texts exist in space and time, properties as universals rather do not?
- Texts change, properties as universals rather do not?
- Texts can pause in their existence and have temporal gaps, properties as universals rather cannot?

# Properties, understood as particulars

- Texts can themselves have properties which can change.
- Now, if texts are properties – can they as *properties* again have properties?

# Texts do not belong to one object only (cf. properties)

- If text was a property, it would need to be a property that is split up (in molecule-like ways?) in three bearers: the author, the document and the reader.
  - NB: The author and the reader can coincide in one and the same person.
- A property typically exists in an object in its entirety rather than being split up among a number of objects.
  - NB: Sure, one and the same property can be instantiated in a number of objects – which is a different thing.

What we are looking for is ...

# ... a type of entity that

- has change as an essential ingredient.
  - Texts are unstable and changing entities.
- exists in time.
  - Texts have a beginning in time.
- exists in space.
  - Texts (writing and reading and understanding acts) happen in space, e.g. in the office.
- can be both spatially and temporally discontinuous.
  - Texts can not only be spatially dispersed, but also pause existence and again resume it afterwards.
- is dependent on concrete objects as its substrata.
  - Texts need documents and authors / readers as their carriers.
- can be the result from human agency.
  - Texts result from texting which is done by humans.
- has itself causal powers.
  - Texts have causal powers.
- can be mental.
  - Texts are mental.
- is co-constituted by human understanding.
  - Texts are co-constituted by human understanding.
- can have properties.
  - Texts have properties. (NB: Layout is *not* a property of texts!)
- is rather not a property.
- is rather not an object.

# ”Spatially and temporally discontinuous”

- ”It rained yesterday afternoon in Bergen.”
  - Spatially discontinuous: It rained in Laksevåg, Sandviken, Solheimsviken.
  - Temporally discontinuous: It rained 13:00-14:00, 15:30-16:00, 16:15-17:00.
- What sort of entity does ”It rained yesterday afternoon in Bergen” refer to?

5.

# Texts as events

# Why does the event category seem to be a good candidate?

## Events

- have change as an essential ingredient.
- occur in time and space (have temporal and spatial location\*).
- can be temporally and spatially discontinuous (can have temporal gaps\*, be temporarily suspendable\*, and resume their existence, be reassembled\* as the same entity after the pause).
- are dependent on and run on concrete objects as their bearers.
- can be the result from human agency.
- can themselves have causal powers.
- can be mental.
- can be co-constituted by human understanding.

\*Vocabulary in parts borrowed from J.W. Carroll & N. Markosian (2010):  
An Introduction to Metaphysics. Cambridge.



Developing the idea of texts being  
events a bit further ...

# Some consequences

- What is it that occurs when text-events occur?
  - It is acts of understanding that occur.
- Which are the bearers of text-events?
  - Texts have three bearers: the author, the document, the (understanding) reader. They are initiated by authors, but essentially performed by readers. The locus of a text-event is (as the locus of any event) the locus of its bearers, and the text-event can thus be widely distributed in time and space.
- Under what conditions can text-events «pause» or even cease to exist?
  - The text begins with a document that in an act of understanding is equipped with meaning, and it ceases / pauses with either the document or the understanding reader being absent.
- Do text-events have phases?
  - As events in general, so do also text-events have phases: the single phases of acts of understanding the document. The change that occurs in text-events is the change from one understanding-phase to the next. With each new reading the text can change. The text can undergo accidental and substantial change.\*
    - \* What classifies as *substantial* change of a text belongs to a different discussion.

Events are particulars rather than universals (Kanzian 2001)\* - Does that create problems?

- Particulars, though they are instantiations in place and time, can be mental.
  - Texts are non-concrete mental entities.
- Particulars are unique and non-repeatable.
  - Texts are unique and non-repeatable in terms of the whole text event, not in terms of the single phases the event is composed of.
  - This will have some consequences for identity conditions for text.

\*Chr. Kanzian (2001): Ereignisse und andere Partikularien. Paderborn.

Identity conditions for events,  
applied to texts

It looks as though there  
are some challenge  
here!

# Texts as (shared) actions

# Actions

# Action as special type of event

- Actions are events, and they are both *caused by humans* and in their existence *dependent on humans*.
  - "x is caused by humans": Causing an avalanche *can*, but needn't be a human action.
  - "x is in its existence dependent on humans": The avalanche is, even if it is caused by humans, in its existence not dependent on humans, and it is not an action, nor is it a human event.

# From events to actions

- If texts are events, how do they start?
  - They start with an author producing a document and a reader understanding the document. The same human can be (and is in most cases) both the author and the first reader.
- If texts are events, how do they persist?
  - They persist as actions performed by readers on documents.
  - They persist as *mental* actions performed by readers on documents.
- Why is the author kept in the game?
  - As soon as one conceives of texts as events, one needs bearers of the event. The author is clearly a bearer of the text-event, even more so if the text-event is conceived of as an action.
    - Texts are actions shared between authors and readers.



# Texts as shared actions

- Shared actions are successful if they *are shared, co-produced*.
- If texts are shared actions, then one can say that they are successful only if the reader is willing to co-act with the author (with the author's intention)?
  - The author and the author intention would be back also here?\*

\*Cf. «The author is dead.»

# Identity conditions?

If texts are events, more specifically actions, then it seems to make sense that one tries to derive the conditions for text identity from views of identity conditions for (shared) actions. That would be the next step.

# THE END

Many thanks to Christian Kanzian (Innsbruck) and Sorin Bangu for help with questions about analytical ontology.