

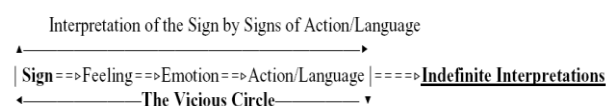
The Epistemology of "Text" Meaning: The Context is the Proof-Conditions Upon Which We Prove the Truth of Our Interpretation of the Text

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1. Introduction: Can We Have Text without Context?

The *Oxford Dictionary* defines Text as "the original words of author" and Context as "parts that precede or follow a passage and fix its meaning; ambient conditions." If we explicate *text* as any cognitive sign operation, as verbal and non-verbal cognitive behavior and creations, and *con-text* as the conditions upon which we interpret the meaning of the *text*, then a text without context has no meaning (Eco, 1979). So what is the *context* and its function in conducting fixed meaning to *text*? The question is how to understand the concept of context; how upon the "ambient conditions" we fix the meaning of the text, which cannot be done without the *context* (Searle, 1979). In discussions of context the usual explanations are very general and vague so we have to fix the meaning of *context* (Stout, 1982). The common knowledge is that we fix meanings by interpretation, but how may we explicate the interpretation of text in context? I will discuss some major problems of text and context in theories of interpretation and how to overcome the predicaments of "hermeneutic universalism" and "hermeneutic contextualism." If universalism means that everything is interpretation we are apparently involved in an *indefinite series of interpretations*, and contextualism implies that truth is relative to some *interpretive vicious circle* since there are no external or outside grounds that would warrant the validity of interpretation (Hiley, 1991; Bernstein, 1983; Palmer, 1969).

[1] The Two Phenomenological Predicaments in Interpretation of Cognitive Signs:



Assuming that every cognitive operation involves interpretation, the question is if we can interpret, understand, and explain the meaning of the text without being entangled in the paradoxes of phenomenological hermeneutics (Heidegger, 1930; Craige, 1983; Guignon, 2002; Neshar, 2002-2005).

2. Can the Language-game be the Context of the Textual Meaning?

Wittgenstein understood the difficulties of an endless series of interpretation and attempted to find a solution to this predicament by rejecting the function of interpretation in understanding the meaning of text and looking into criteria for teaching and learning the meaning of words through their use in the language-games (Wittgenstein, 1953). In analyzing Wittgenstein's conception of *explanation of meaning* of a word in *its use* in the language it can be shown that knowledge of the meaning of words must precede their use in language, otherwise we cannot know how to use them (Neshar, 1992). What can be the *criterion* for teaching and learning the *meaning* of the word in the

language-game? We face a Fregean difficulty because if the criterion is a private-subjective experience how do we know that persons experience the same phenomenon? And if the criterion is external to the language-game and to our experience, how do we know that our experience represents it truly (Wittgenstein, 1969; Guignon, 2002)? Thus we have to revise Wittgenstein's Grammatico-Phenomenological conception of *criteria* with the pragmatist theory of meaning and truth. The criterion of *meanings* should be the *proof* or *quasi-proof*, as with perceptual judgments, of the truth of their *interpretation* in propositions that make them *clear* by being *true* representations of reality. However, without confrontation with and representation of reality independently of the text and its context we cannot explain the operation of interpretation, its truth, and how we fix the meaning of the text. Yet if we can know the *meaning* of a text only through the context, then the context must be the conditions of our instinctive and practical quasi-proofs or rational proofs of the truth of our interpretation of the text. In my pragmatist theory the *criterion of the true interpretation of meanings* must be the *proof-conditions* of the text which are its specific *truth-conditions*, the mental and social conditions of the speaker, scientist, or the artist creating the artwork, and the *proof method*, (with *epistemic logic* not just *formal deduction*), namely the procedure to prove or quasi-prove the true interpretation of the text upon its truth-conditions (Neshar, 2005).

3. Different Contexts of the Same Text Can Allow Different True Interpretations of Its Meaning.

This understanding of interpreting text also solves an essential difficulty in the theories of interpretation: are interpretations a matter of opinions and always relative to the interpreters, so that different interpretations of the same text are incompatible (Garcia, 1999)? Ricoeur suggests understanding text as an entity, a kind of *semantic autonomy*, as if language and even actions have meanings independent of their agents, as in the Fregean-Russellian formal semantic conception of the sentence (Ricoeur, 1976; Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1954; Barthes, 1971; Hirsch, 1967). Ricoeur accepts the formal semanticist position when the autonomous text refers by itself to the world through "the genuine referential power of the text" (Ricoeur, 1976), since otherwise there is only the interpreter's subjective meaning or the author's subjective intentional meaning in creating the text, which we cannot reach (Fish, 1980). Without any criterion for interpretation of the text how do we know that we understand the genuine referential power of the text "disclosing a world that constitutes the reference of the text?" We must know this "world" in order to interpret the text because otherwise we enter either into indefinite interpretations or into a vicious circle of hermeneutics. However, we can know the world represented by the text through our knowledge of the world of the creator of the text. We learn the initial meaning of texts by being ostensibly taught the language in our culture through true interpretation of our perceptual experience

representing our world. And when we encounter a text that belongs to our culture we interpret it *instinctively* in the common way, what Ricoeur calls a "guess" (Ricoeur, 1976; Hirsch, 1967). Sometimes, when we are not certain about our initial interpretation of the text, we continue on, explaining it by a *rational* interpretation called exegesis (Fish, 1980; Stecker, 2003). Our knowledge of the proof-conditions, which include the author's intentional *spirit* and the images and emotions embedded in her language, is always relative and develops with the inquiries the interpreters make about them (Jakobson, 1987; Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1954; Hirsch, 1967; Barthes, 1968; Carroll, 1997). Therefore, based on different methods of inquiry operating upon different truth-conditions, the interpreters can prove true different interpretations of the same initial meaning of text. Thus the same *text* can have different true interpretations if they are based upon different contexts, so that they intersect but do not contradict (Hirsch, 1967; Margolis, 2002). Therefore, there is no "conflict of interpretations" between different true interpretations since they are based on different proof-conditions of the same text (Hirsch, 1967; Ricoeur, 1969; Stout, 1982; Barnes, 1988; Thom, 2000). However, since there can also be false and doubtful interpretations, only different true interpretation are compatible (Krausz, 2002).

4. Hirsch on Validity in Interpretation without Truth.

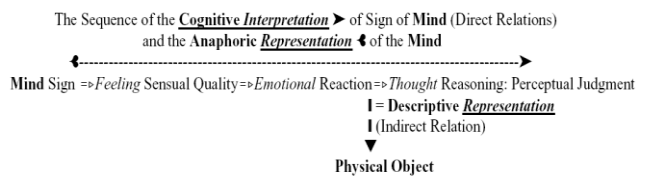
The question is how can context stabilize the meaning of the text as its significance. According to Hirsch the main criterion for the validity of the interpretation of the text is the coherence of its components' meanings (Hirsch, 1967, 1976). The problem is how to find the coherence of the initial meaning of the text since the interpreter's coherence of its meaning may deviate from the author's intended coherent meaning of the text. The principles or laws of "the criterion of coherence" operating our interpretation of the text cannot be formal artificial ones since they have to explain human cognitive behavior of interpretation whose truth depends on the true representation of reality. To understand the original meaning of the text we have to understand the author's meaning and the truth of his text in representing reality (Neshier, 2004). Hirsch's basic difficulty is with accepting the Husserlian phenomenological epistemology which cannot explain human confrontation with reality, hence also the proof of the truth of our interpretation of the initial *meaning*, the "verification" of its *significance* (Hirsch, 1984). So interpretation is thoroughly circular: "the context is derived from the submeanings and the submeanings are specified and rendered coherent in reference to the context" (Hirsch, 1967). Validation of the interpretation of the meanings as the Husserlian experiential-intentional objects should place an independent restriction on finding common ground between the meaning of the author's text and its interpreter's. Moreover, Hirsch holds the Popperian conception of absolute truth, namely that since we cannot prove it but only refute our hypothetical theories we will never know whether the truth has been reached. Thus he rejects the possibility of verifying the truth of our interpretations of texts, and thereby of stabilizing their meanings. The question is how we prove the truth of interpretation of the text, which is always limited and relative to its known proof-conditions.

5. The Context as the Proof-Conditions to Prove the Truth of Our Interpretation of the Text.

The proof of the true interpretation of the text upon its proof-conditions is by its true representation of reality. This can be explained only through confrontation with reality, both physical and psychical, such that *interpretation* of cognition and *representation* of reality are the *twin* components of the cognitive operation of mind.

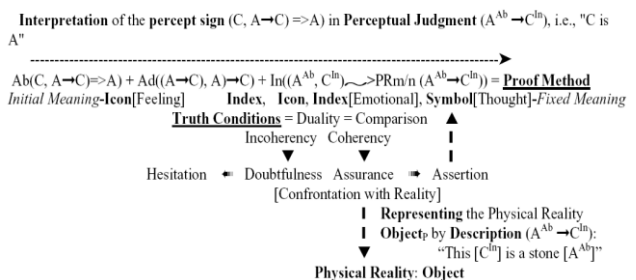
[2] Siamese Twins of Interpretation of Meaning and Representation of Reality:

–Reflective Self-Control Feeling of Cognitive Operations of Interpretation and Representation–



We cannot represent physical reality without representing our own cognitive minds, and vice versa. So we represent physical reality when we prove it cognitively and we represent psychological reality when we prove its interpretation on the constraints of physical reality. Thus the interpretation of mind's cognitive signs is the essential twin component of the representation of both physical and psychical reality (Iser, 2000; Thom, 2000). With this understanding of our cognitive minds we can avoid both the *indefinite series of interpretations* of "hermeneutic universalism" and the *vicious circle* of "hermeneutic contextualism" (Habermas, 1998). Through confrontation with reality with our reflective self-control of interpretation of the initial vague meaning we can continue to quasi-prove or prove, locally, the truth of our cognitive interpretation and representation of reality on specific proof-conditions. One can call the instinctively and practical interpreted meaning the *meaning*, and the rationally proven true interpretation of the initial meaning, its exegesis, *significance* (Gadamer, 1960; Hirsch, 1967, 1984). Yet interpretation can go beyond the initial meaning of the text, into its Reconstruction according to our knowledge of the author's intended spirit of the text. Still, we have to distinguish between the interpretation of the *initial meaning* of the original text as *Significance* and its *Application* to new historical proof-conditions which might be foreign to the author of the text (Gadamer, 1984; Hirsch, 1984). To explain the conception of *context* as the *proof-conditions* we can start with our perceptual judgments as our basic factual knowledge and ask what is context for their meanings (Peirce, *CP*). The *proof-conditions* of perceptual judgment are the *method* of quasi-proving the perceptual judgment upon its *truth-conditions* (Neshier, 2002:V, X).

[3] The Context of Perceptual Judgment Text Is Its Proof-conditions



The general cognitive *method* is the Peircean *trio*, the sequence of the inferential rules of Abductive Discovery (Ab), Deductive Expectation or Prediction (Dd), and Inductive Evaluation (In), to prove the truth of the interpretation of the meanings of our texts. The *truth-conditions* of our perceptual judgments are the relations between its cognitive components, the Iconic Feeling of an object and the Indexical Emotional reaction to it. By continuously reflecting on them instinctively and practically we feel their coherence as the condition for their synthesis in truly interpreting the meaning of the perceptual judgment (Neshier, 2002). However, the applications of this general cognitive *method* of proof are specific to any field of inquiry and its particular *truth-conditions* (Hirsch, 1967).

6. Conclusion: If the Context of Text Is Its Proof-Conditions What Are Their Proof-Conditions?

As I have theorized elsewhere, facts are our proven true propositions and genuine facts are our quasi-proven true perceptual judgments as our basic contexts upon which we prove the truth of interpretations of other propositions and theories (Neshier, 2002:X). Therefore, contexts are not given arbitrarily and not self-proven or self-defined but are proven true in our cognitive confrontation with reality. The *proof* of the *truth* of any proposition or hypothesis is always relative to its *proof-conditions* (Hirsch, 1967; Wachterhauser, 2002). The relative advantage of one true interpretation over another is in respect to how their different *proof-conditions* comprehend the subject matter of the interpretation and representation (Thom, 2000). There is no absolute proved truth but only local truths, although as in our scientific, aesthetic, and other cognitive activities representing reality, they evolve and extend as we develop the proof-conditions to represent reality better (Croce, 1901; Neshier, 2002: X). So it is similarly with our interpretive activities, when we develop our proof-conditions of the text to understand its meaning better by proving the true interpretation; thus true interpretations with different *proof-conditions* can continue indefinitely (Stout, 1982; Margolis, 1995; Neshier, 2002; Krausz, 2002, Habermas, 2003). We can follow the Peircean epistemology showing that the *trio* of Abduction, Deduction, and Induction is our basic epistemic complete method to prove the truth of our interpretations of texts as representation of reality. Hence the truth of this method itself cannot be proven by one of these logical inferences, and so nor can any one of them prove another, and thus surprisingly only when the trio comprises the entire sequence of these inferences can we prove its truth. I claim that by self-controlling our local proofs as true interpretations and representations of reality, in a long run we prove this *trio* as conducting truth relative to our truth-conditions, hence as a relative true method of proof.

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