Fixing the Text: Is it Time to Do away with Tradition?

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Abstract:

Human intellect and knowledge has enjoyed an intimate relationship with text in different form(ats). With the evolution of human civilization languages undergo certain change and same is the case with languaged texts. Present study critically reviews the defining characteristics of text and the compositionary nature what attributing languaged scripts as text. It further reviews the theorist stance regarding text which seems to evolve as a fluid term currently. Relationship of reading and writing is also explored and why traditional textuality is considered superior.

Key words: Text, Composition, Reading, Print, Superior

1- Introduction-Definition of Text

To know the nature of text and its meanings per se, it is customary in research practices to give the literal meanings of the word in question. But the term 'text' demands much more than the literal definition and calls for an operational definition. Rimrott (2001) defines text as a "structurally complex unit of speech that is thematically and conceptually coherent. With a text, a speaker or writer performs a speech act with a recognizable communicative function" (p. 2). This

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function of communicative act is verbal than anything else. However, the change in the nature of textual representations made theorists revise the traditional definition of text that restricts it to merely verbal expression. This definition is very much traditional in nature, and it mostly addresses the characteristic features of the printed texts. Nevertheless, another famous theorist, McKenzie (1986, 1999) provides an inclusive definition that sees texts as:

> verbal, visual, oral, and numeric data, in the form of maps, prints, and music, of archives of recorded sound, of films, videos, and any computer-stored information, everything in fact from epigraphy to the latest forms of discography. There is no evading the challenge which those new forms have created. (p. 13)

Thus, McKenzie considers myriad representational forms under the definition of 'text', including expressions/representations of antiquity to the modern music collections. These new representational forms challenge both the readers as well as the critics, raise questions about the lenses the readers would use to interact with these emerging texts since they are in their "pre-paradigmatic stage" (Miall & Dobson, 2001).

This is a comprehensive definition that encompasses the various modalities now involved in the production of textual forms. Zambare (2005) cites Gaggi (1997) who considers "any representation" including email conversation a textual representation (p. 6). These definitions clearly reflect that *Text* is not limited to linguistic representation; rather, sign, image and visual languages are also a part of it, so there is a need to understand the meaning making process that happens through all these representational forms and not just the printed word. Haggod (2003) makes a pertinent remark to study texts under a broader perspective for an enriched comprehension and understanding. To her, media, communication studies and cultural studies are part of texts and play their role for a comprehensive meaning making process.

2- Reading and Writing- an Interactive Process

Texts are composed for reading purposes, asking readers to interact with the representational forms for meaning making and consequently, understanding. The whole process demands active participation of the reader, and for the writer to make informed choices about language and textual representation with regard to prospective and potential readers. The meanings of a text do not exist if not understood and/or appreciated by those who come across this textual material in any mode. So, the act of reading is the core of this interaction (Mazzali & Schulz, 2004, p. 3). Reading some text, especially a literary text is basically an immersive activity where reader's memories, images and desires get activated (Mazzali & Schulz, 2004, p. 15). However, it is not only with the literary texts, rather all the texts deem it mandatory for the reader not to overlook the message that the author wants to impart. For Miall (1998), every text calls for the relevant knowledge, the feelings and the values that a reader has about it (p. 7).

Like reading, writing has also invoked debatable thoughts and asked thinkers whether writing is necessary to reify human thoughts or not. From the age of Pharaoh onward even the Greeks did not welcome it cordially (Eco, 2003, p. 3), as they were apprehensive that the act of writing would affect their skill of memorizing that they emulated and cherished. This was merely the 'fear of the unknown' because, in the words of Eco (2003), "we know that books are not ways of making somebody else think in our place; on the contrary they are machines that provoke further thoughts …" (p. 4).

However, it was not only the books, for Eco, but also the paintings, printed images and the oral stories were also the sources of transference of knowledge. These textual patterns are traditionally recognized and historically situated. Presently, all these expressive modalities are embedded in the new artifact of digital interface, and thus, pose a challenge to the

age-old print-based texts. This is why Marshall (2005) hints at the changing nature of reading. He observes that it is a heterogeneous activity, and "The changes in reading and reading technologies don't imply that there's a single way the future of reading will play out" (p. 14), rather it is under transformation with the emerging media.

Interaction with a text is an engaging process inviting conscious and critical reflection for cognitive understanding of linguistic representation; however, if done without reflection it loses its purposefulness. Reading task defines the trajectory leading to the comprehension of the textual representation. Since, the 'reading' mechanism and processing vary for different texts and readers, therefore, it seems unwise to describe the phenomena through some universal parameter. Furthermore, "reading is a complicated affair made more difficult to understand by its basic invisibility" (Marshall, 2005, p. 6), and it provokes the *Reading* researchers to look into these processes. Therefore, reflexivity prompts a competent reader to create an analytic distance to know how far s/he is achieving the reading objectives. Taylor (1991) elucidates the process in her words:

> [R]eading is inherently a reflective process. Readers are constantly asking themselves whether what they are reading is interesting, relevant or useful, in order to make decisions about whether to continue reading or not. In other words, self-monitoring is an integral part of reading. (p. 311)

Hence, the meanings of some text emerge during the interaction between the text and the reader. The field where the act of meaning making occurs, happens to be the mind. So, whatever we come across we actually *read* it. Parr (2001) very comprehensively puts it by saying: "Reading is not either an affective experience or an interpretative/cognitive act. Reading is not either an act of immersion or reflection from a distance. It is all these things" (p. 231).

Thus, Parr construes the act of reading as a multidimensional phenomenon that deals with the literal meanings of the language along with the intricacies of implications represented through the text. The nature of this interactive phenomenon manifests that *reading* is a very broad term and should be treated in a wider perspective for meaning making purposes.

3- How book/classical text is facilitating and thus superior

Technological progression has impacted every sphere including the way texts are written, and the language (verbal, visual and oral) within those texts is interpreted. Theorists are divided in their opinion whether printed texts, alone, are sufficient for the meaning making purpose or the emerging digital representations have enriched the phenomenon of reading and improved our understanding processes.

If there are diehard supporters in favor of printed textual medium, there is an equal number of theorists who are staunch believers of the superiority of digital representational forms. Begeman and Conklin (1988) though acknowledge the new communicative forms that emerged with the advent of hypertext, yet are of the view that book would adjust itself with the changing times and new modes of communication do not pose a danger to the classical print expression. For both Begeman and Conklin (1988):

> Traditional linear text provides a continuous, unwinding context thread as ideas are proposed and discussed — a context that the writer constructs to guide you to the salient points and away from the irrelevant ones. Indeed, a good writer anticipates questions and confusions that you may encounter and carefully crafts the text to prevent them. (p. 126)

Even Hayles (1997) is apprehensive of the conversion of print-based language into digitized language as it may lead to an end

to the materiality of printed texts. Miall (1998) also considers books as a preferable means to meaning making using language without employing explicit images that actually destroy the imaginative human faculties (p. 6) because of the instantaneous impact on the cognitive processes which may constrict other possible meanings.

Sharply contrasting with what Miall has said, Forester (2000) disfavors classical printed texts for meaning making on the grounds that it employs verbal language that does not engage reader's interest, and for him:

> As a medium, it does not engage human senses to the same extent as daily experience does since, in reading, the visual channel is employed almost exclusively and there is rarely motion or rich visual stimulation. Reading is difficult and requires many years schooling and practice to become proficient. Print is often not the best medium for learners who favor direct experience over abstract linguistic representations. (p. 1220)

So, for Forester, linguistic representation through print medium may not suit for some learners' preferred reading styles. Since readers distinctly vary in their interaction with the text because of the reading goals that they are required to achieve and consequently, it differentiates their preferred reading style (cf. Graff, 2005, p. 93). Another well-known hypertext theorist, Foltz (1996) focusing on the index of printed books observes that they are "inadequate and unwieldy to use" (p. 18). And Tuman (1992), a famous critic, considers printed medium very restrictive for the purpose of a dynamic and interactive communication. Such a medium lacks the inspiration that is required for a rich meaning making process, and thus, it would impact negatively on the understanding and knowledge production of the reader as well.

According to Tuman (1992) as quoted in Green (2001):

> [P]rint literacy may not be just too difficult but too narrowly focused, too removed not just from oral language but, in its

> sole appeal to the imagination, too abstract, too puritanical, too removed from the full range of sensual experience that life affords. (p. 126)

For these reasons, Tuman discourages the use of traditional medium as it is unable to impart broad-base knowledge to those who interact with it. However, his observations seem too sweeping to do away with the print medium.

4- Conclusion

Thus this short study based on the review of theorists' stance on text highlights the textual features and the emerging trends that are new to textuality yet qualify for this construct which is fluid and ever expanding. It seems safe to argue that fixing the definition of text once for all is not appropriate as the technological advancement has provided more space to the authors and text designers. Therefore, the tradition of text and textuality would remain a part of human learning and intellect in whatever form it may be and cannot be done away with for good.

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