

Critical Issues: The Concept of the Text

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الاستلام ٢٠٢٥/٠٨/١٠ القبول ٢٠٢٥/٠٩/١٠

النشر ٢٠٢٥/١٢/١١

Abstract

Ferdinand de Saussure's foundational contributions to modern linguistics sparked a profound epistemological shift in how human discourse, in its diverse forms and intentions, is analyzed within the humanities. This paradigm shift was characterized by the adoption of a contemporary intellectual approach aimed at rigorously defining terminology. Prior to this linguistic revolution, the undifferentiated use of terms like "text" and "discourse" had led to significant conceptual ambiguity and flawed interpretations. Saussurean linguistics introduced a more precise conceptual framework, meticulously distinguishing between deeply intertwined concepts. This analytical rigor, emblematic of the modern and contemporary linguistic revolutions, progressively led to the obsolescence of traditional scholarly interpretations or inspired novel reconceptualizations.

Given these developments, a critical inquiry arises concerning the modern understanding of "text" within the framework of contemporary linguistic studies, particularly regarding the inherent autonomy granted to the overarching structure of text and discourse. Investigating the implications of this autonomy for the broader intellectual landscape of communication necessitates establishing logical connections for this conceptualization by exploring key epistemological stages that define this linguistic trajectory.

Keywords: Text, Issues, Discourse, Dialectics, Conceptual Apparatus

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Introduction

Defining "text" within modern critical thought has proven to be a significant challenge in textology, largely due to its interdisciplinary nature, overlapping with fields such as sociology and genetics. This intersection has enriched the term, lending it a flexibility that has positioned it among the most widely debated scientific concepts in contemporary criticism.

When examining the term as used in literary criticism, which often draws from biology, we observe a clear application of concepts related to organic relationships and molecules, treating the text as an organic entity. Indeed, these organic relationships can ultimately be characterized as critical criteria that serve as "the objective analytical boundary separating literature from non-literature, or art from non-art."

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Here, textology also involves describing the internal and external relationships of textual structures at all their levels, explaining communicative phenomena, and analyzing language use across various disciplines. From this perspective, numerous diverse fields—such as linguistics, stylistics, semiotics, and grammar—converge to form textology.²

It therefore seems natural that a single, universally agreed-upon definition of text remains elusive, given its inherent complexity. A text is often described as "a vast, intricate, and complex world, and a creative message that concludes upon its completion."³

2.The Concept of Text in Ancient Arabic Lexicography

When text linguists start to define their subject, the concept of "text" is central. But what exactly did the word "text" (نص - nass) mean in ancient Arabic?

In old Arabic dictionaries like *Lisan al-Arab*, the root word for "text" generally meant to raise, elevate, or make something visible. For example, "he raised the discourse" meant he presented it or attributed it to someone. Anything that was made apparent was said to be "raised." The term was also used to describe a gazelle raising its neck or placing an object on a platform to be seen, like a bride. It could also mean stacking things on top of each other.⁴

Other lexicons, such as *Mu'jam Maqayis al-Lughah*, confirm this core meaning of raising, ascending, or reaching an endpoint. For instance, "I thoroughly questioned the man" implies seeking to reach the end of his knowledge.⁵ Similarly, *Taj al-Arus* defines the origin of "text" as raising and making something clear, and also noted its use to mean moving something.⁶ Al-Zamakhshari further emphasized that the primary meaning of "text" is raising or standing upright, with any other uses being figurative.⁷

Interestingly, there's a strong consistency across these ancient Arabic dictionaries regarding the core meaning of "text." Scholars from different centuries, like Al-Zamakhshari (d. 1143 CE), Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani (d. 1449 CE), and Al-Zabidi (d. 1791 CE), all agree on these fundamental definitions. Al-Zabidi even included a common phrase from his time, "the jurists stated," which he clarified as "providing proof," based on the specialized, legal meaning of "text" in Islamic jurisprudence.

In ancient Arabic, the word "text" referred to a literal, verbatim rendition, whether spoken or written. It's worth noting that the closest term to "text" for early scholars was "matn" (the main body of a document), which was contrasted with "isnad" (the chain of narration) used by Hadith scholars.

For Islamic legal theorists, there was a close connection between the term "text" and the relationship between words and their meanings. They described this relationship with precision, categorizing texts based on their clarity or ambiguity. The clearer the meaning, the more it was considered "apparent," a "text," "explained," or "unequivocal." The more ambiguous it was, the more it was classified as "hidden," "problematic," "general," or "allegorical."⁸

The discussion here focuses on "texts" whose meaning isn't immediately clear from their surface. As mentioned, ancient scholars had various terms for these.

Revisiting the linguistic definition, "text" implies making something clear, explaining it, or elevating it, and its outward form carries certain rules. This means "what becomes clearer than its apparent form due to the speaker's intention, where the speech is crafted for that specific meaning... A text is something that can only have one meaning, or as some say, it cannot be interpreted." ⁹

Based on this, "text" can be seen as two types: one that allows for interpretation (similar to what is "apparent"), and another that does not allow for interpretation, which is a plain or explicit text, like the word "five." ¹⁰

In summary, the linguistic meaning of "text" in Arabic revolves around raising, making apparent, combining things, and reaching the extreme or end point of something.

Raising and making apparent relate to the author's effort to elevate and present their text so the reader can understand it.

Combining things refers to the coherence and connection between sentences.

Reaching the extreme or end point signifies the text as the largest complete linguistic unit.

Thus, we find many overlaps between dictionary definitions and specialized linguistic definitions. However, some researchers have tried to assign meanings to "text" that it doesn't quite support. For instance, linking the linguistic meaning to the modern technical meaning by interpreting "(the matter) became intense" from *Lisan al-Arab* to imply "complete thoroughness and linguistic economy." ¹¹

It's quite difficult to prove that "intensity" inherently includes the meaning of "economy," as there's no clear connection, even a subtle one.

Perhaps a more accurate connection would be to relate the meaning of "text," as understood by Arabs, to its origin as the creator's original speech. This would explain the text's connection to its author within the context of how language is used and understood.

Furthermore, the idea of "weaving" might not be a natural equivalent to the "interconnectedness" of words within a text. While words are certainly connected, the original linguistic root of "text" in Arabic doesn't support a link to weaving, unlike its Latin counterpart.

Ancient linguistic studies offered scientific insights. If we seek a concept that aligns with coherence, it would be Al-Jurjani's "theory of Nazm" (compositional order). This theory is akin to weaving, composing, formulating, building, embellishing, and similar processes that require considering how all the parts relate to one another¹².

3. The Concept of Text and Reading Methodologies

The definitions of text can be determined by the types of reading methodologies, whether contextual or systemic. We can conclude that the concept of "text" has two major aspects: one static and the other dynamic. Analysis can track both phenomena, noting that textual conceptions do not all exist on the same level; rather, there are various degrees of intertextuality that textual analysis can reveal.¹³

However, Tzvetan Todorov offers a more profound and comprehensive perspective through a series of thoughtful ideas, the essence of which is that "a text can correspond to a sentence or a complete book. The text speaks with its independence and self-containment (although some texts are not self-contained)."¹⁴

If the idea of insistent implications or suggestions is highlighted, it will, in turn, lead to the impossibility of a single reading. This might ultimately converge with the view of Louis Hjelmslev, who considers "the utterance, spoken or written, ancient or modern, long or short—even the word 'stop' is a text."¹⁵ Here, the aim is to rely on the criterion of benefit derived from speech—which is at the core of the communicative process—without needing other speech whose purposes might seem remote.

As for Roland Barthes, he, as previously mentioned, focuses on the idea of "texture," aligning with Al-Jahiz, who viewed poetry as a form of weaving where structures intertwine to create a form with content.

Perhaps his characterization of text as a multi-layered space opened avenues for critical perspectives that later profoundly influenced modern literary criticism. Among its most significant outcomes was the rupture between the author and their text, thus ending the "filial" bond between them. The text is not merely an absence that disappears between visible words; rather, it is a "talisman." This "talisman" desires the reader and seeks the "text's" affection through a complete arrangement of invisible screens and selective interaction connected to vocabulary, references, and readability. The author is always lost within the text (not behind it like a *deus ex machina*). The author has died, as an institution: their civil, romantic, and biographical persona has vanished, and stripped of all possessions, they no longer exert that marvelous paternity over their work which literary history and education have ensured its narration and renewal: yet I desire the author in some way within the text: I need their image.¹⁶

Another dimension can be added: the multiplicity of textual levels and the non-subordination of meaning to any single layer. Here, the reader plays a role in imbuing the text with multiple interpretations, as it never settles on a definitive meaning but rather continuously practices an act of deferral.

Roland Barthes also presents criteria for an "immortal text" from his perspective, which can be described as building bridges of communication with the reader, transcending a single meaning. Perhaps Barthes's insistence that the "text" possesses no inherent meaning, but rather the reader bestows meaning upon it through constant reproduction, is key. This was Roland Barthes' conception of the text after its completion, deeply influenced by Nietzsche's theory of the "death of God."

Counter-readings to this approach present several objections, including the argument that a text must originate from a credible source with

scientific validity. The phrase "text without an author" is inherently ambiguous, as the attribution of texts is typically fixed.

Conversely, Abdel Fattah Kilito argues that "a certain discourse only becomes a text within a specific culture. The process of defining a text must respect the viewpoint of those belonging to a particular culture, because what one culture considers a text, another might not. Indeed, this often happens. In this context, some semioticians have pointed out that from the perspective of a certain culture, other cultures appear as a mixture of random phenomena existing without a unifying link, making them a coherent and unified system." ¹⁷

In this vein, the critic Salah Fadl notes that "Julia Kristeva defines text as a translinguistic apparatus that redistributes the language system by revealing the relationship between communicative words, pointing to direct data linked by different patterns of preceding and simultaneous utterances." ¹⁸

Halliday and Rukaya Hasan, meanwhile, defined text as a linguistic unit in use, emphasizing that it is not a grammatical unit like a sentence. It could be a word, a sentence, or a literary work. More profoundly, "the text is a semantic unit; it is a unit of meaning, not a unit of form." Meaning and semantics are fundamental aspects of functional theory, of which Halliday is a prominent representative. ¹⁹

Conversely, reader-response theory asserts that the recipient's role is not limited to merely consuming the message; rather, they must contribute to its reshaping and imbue it with concepts originally absent from the text's surface. This is based on the premise that, in reception theory, the "text" is encompassed by a broad range of contextual relationships.

This is because the "text" is a structure embedded within the linguistic system, and this system is based on encoding. That is, the "text" thus transforms into a code, necessitating theoretical and procedural effort to actualize this code in communication. This is achieved through mastery of contemporary linguistic analysis tools, a hallmark of structuralist reading, which formulates meaning through a hidden structure within the text. ²⁰

This openness has led to a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations, allowing for its re-production. It is no longer merely consumed as it was before structuralism. Consequently, the multiplicity of readings, its diverse meanings, and its openness to other texts have resulted in intertextual overlaps, or "intertextuality," which represents semantic and cultural interaction.²¹

This broadly indicates that "the modernist text is a text of complex thought and knowledge, and of multi-faceted culture."²²

Or, as Edward Said states, "The text is presumed to be a compact mass of past subjects that criticism desperately attempts to append itself to in the present. The text is dialectically linked to time and the senses."²³

While systemic approaches aim to illuminate the aesthetic beauty and splendor of the "text," and the speaker's capacity for semantic creation within it through the extraordinary weaving of semantic relations and the expansion of semantic scope facilitated by human communication methods, the "text"—or "the beneficial composite utterance by convention," as Ibn Ajurrum al-Sanhaji termed it²⁴—must carry a cultural, political, or social load.

Therefore, "the text is not merely the communicative language regulated by grammar; it does not simply depict reality and refer to it. Wherever the text is indicative, it participates in moving and transforming the reality it grasps at a moment of closure. In other words, the text does not gather the scattered fragments of a fixed or always illusory reality; rather, it constructs the mobile stage of its movement, in which it participates and of which it is a bearer and an attribute."²⁵

Returning to the perplexing epistemological question: What, then, is a "text"?

The critic Muhammad Azzam offers several characteristics, which can be summarized as follows:

- The "text" is a linguistic corpus.
- The "text" is an event occurring at a specific time and place.

- The "text" aims to convey information and knowledge, and transmit experiences to the recipient.
- The "text" is closed and reproductive: closed under its iconic written characteristic, having a beginning and an end, and reproductive because the linguistic event does not emerge from nothing but is generated from historical, linguistic, and psychological events, from which other subsequent linguistic events proliferate.²⁶

Therefore, amidst this accumulation of definitions and theories regarding the "text," and the right of each perspective to interpret and theorize, cultural or political contexts, among other strong indicators, remain crucial in defining the essence of the text and the extent of its conformity to the data it carries.

Conclusion

In the endeavor to define the concept of "text" within ancient Arabic heritage—especially its lexical aspect—in terms of identifying its essence and fundamental components, and tracking the mechanisms of its production and reception, there are considerable difficulties. Each definition is linked to its originating intellectual background, coupled with the challenge of comprehensively surveying research material within diverse lexicons. Furthermore, the concept of text is sometimes incomplete due to its overlap with other concepts, such as when a lexical meaning is closely tied to a technical term. This necessitates caution in issuing general judgments.

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