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**Is There a Context-Free Way of Understanding Texts? The Case
of Structuralist Narratology
(Abstract)**

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This paper investigates the question of whether it is possible to talk about aspects of the meaning of literary texts in a context-free manner. Its starting point is a detected discrepancy between the assumption that some (not purely formal or quantitative) approaches to literature operate in a context-independent manner, and the thought that processes of understanding are necessarily interpretive and/or context-dependent. The exemplary field of investigation is (structuralist) narratology, which is often said to be a »context-free« approach to literature.

To determine whether narratology actually is context-independent, I first offer an explicative definition of ›context‹ applicable to the field of literary studies, based on aspects of the meaning of ›context‹ in everyday use. According to this definition, ›context‹ in literary studies is to be understood as a sum of additional extra-textual facts that may be consulted in order to foster the understanding of a text. This definition implies that neither the text itself nor any of its parts may be properly regarded as possible contexts for a given text; consequently, neither the sentences which a text consists of nor the propositions these sentences express are possible contexts of that text. A more general upshot is that any reference to the propositions expressed by the sentences of a text qualifies as a context-free approach if said propositions can be *accessed* without drawing upon contexts. The question of whether this is possible is subsequently investigated with the help of a three-stage model of grasping linguistic meaning, fit to analyze the processes which are involved when understanding linguistic utterances. As it turns out, linguistic meaning is indeed accessible without drawing upon contexts in many, but not all cases.

The next step of the investigation involves a close examination of the application conditions of two types of narratological categories: categories for the analysis of the *discours* of a narrative, i. e. the presentation of a story, and categories for the analysis of the *histoire*, i. e. the elements of the story itself.

Two major results emerge from this investigation. First, as it turns out, the question of whether an approach to literature requires reference to contexts should be distinguished from, on the one hand, the question of whether an approach is *interpretive*, and, on the other, the question of whether an approach puts forward a theory of »work meaning«. For while questions about whether an approach is contextual are determined by whether additional »input material« is used in order to foster the understanding of a text, whether the approach is interpretive concerns what type of inference method is used to understand a text. Whenever non-necessary inference methods are used, i. e. inference methods that, in contrast to deduction, can produce more than one legitimate result from the same input material, an approach is *interpretive* in a broad sense of the word. Similarly, whether the approach puts forward a theory of work meaning concerns whether specific input material is mandatory for fostering the correct understanding of a text. This mandatory input material may be of contextual nature, but it can also consist of (parts of) the text itself. Consequently, processes of understanding a text that involve non-necessary

inference *and* aim at discovering »the one correct meaning« of a text are to be qualified as interpretive in a narrower sense of the word.

Second, in addition to the knowledge of which kinds of textual features a narratological category aims to grasp and the process of subsuming a specific textual feature under a category, the application of both *discours*- and *histoire*-categories requires the understanding of the linguistic meaning of parts of the text. Since both the reconstruction of linguistic meaning (in many cases) and the process of subsuming a textual feature under a category (in every case) involve non-necessary inference, narratological categorization always is interpretive in the broader sense. Now, concerning the question of whether narratological categorization requires the inclusion of contexts, we have different answers for the two types of categories. While both require the inclusion of contexts in some cases, simply in virtue of the fact that linguistic understanding sometimes requires the inclusion of (extra-textual) contexts, *histoire*-categories depend on contexts in far more cases than *discours*-categories. This is because, in comparison to *discours*-categories, the application of *histoire*-categories generally presupposes many additional processes (like the (re)construction of the fictional world), which in turn requires the integration of common world knowledge (and sometimes other types of knowledge as well). So while both types of categories can in theory be applied without drawing upon contexts, the proportion of cases in which *discours*-categories can be used context-independently is much higher than for *histoire*-categories.

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