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**Theories of Context, Theorizing Context
(Abstract)**

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Theories of meaning, even outspokenly textualist ones, have always dealt with the question of relevant context as well, to some extent at least. In many fields of research, the idea of an encompassing theory of context has surfaced now and then, and there have also been actual attempts at such a theory, some of which are discussed in this article. At the same time the very concept of context is difficult in many ways. The term has been said to be one of the most widely used and widely abused terms in the humanities and social sciences. Brenda Dervin claims that »there is no term that is more often used, less often defined, and when defined defined so variously as context« (Dervin 1997, 13–14). More specifically, its analytical force suffers from the fact that it encompasses such a vast array of different elements. The many concepts that clearly deal with the relationship between text and context, however in a more limited or specific way, are one proof of this.

The focus in the article is on the project character of »explicit« theories of context – that is, theories which are framed and named as such, and where the concept of context is the key term or one of the key terms. The questions are: what kinds of projects are theories of context? What can they offer and can they surpass the limitations of their starting-points, not the least the very distinction between text and context? What kinds of models of context do these theories rely on? On what levels of analysis (ontology, epistemology, ethics...) are the theories operating and having consequences on? And what is the role of texts in theories of context? The theories discussed in more detail are the »contextualism« of Murray Krieger, Teun van Dijk's discourse analytic theory of context, radical contextualism represented by Lawrence Grossberg and others, and the contextualist world-hypothesis as described by philosopher Stephen C. Pepper.

Theories of context provide us with different solutions to the dichotomy problem. Krieger's solution is to bring in some aspects of the context e. g. by way of accounts of reading. A theorist of context may also resort to subsuming both text and context to a wider frame, for instance theory of action (Stierle), or introducing a mediating factor, for instance social cognition (van Dijk). A more radical solution to the problem is to conceptualize both texts and contexts as parts of networks with no obvious centre (Bennett, Hall, Grossberg). In such a configuration, the interpreting subject is also presented not as something apart but as part of a network. In the latter case especially, the concept of context gets heavily redefined.

Even though the text-context distinction is increasingly questioned, it is also obvious that one cannot just do away with the distinction altogether, even by means of alternative conceptualisations. Interpretation is always interpretation of something, and dualism is hard to evade. This has been the problematic point for many scholars advocating a non-dualist approach to meaning. Giving up dualism means giving up some of the answers and perspectives it made possible. This idea of the inherent transitivity of interpretation is very probably deeply rooted in our general modes of perception and supported by both language and our everyday practices, as Stephen C. Pepper pointed out, so that our notions of meaning and interpretation, too, basically follow this assumption. And there is the additional fact that our tacit knowledge of the world lends ample support to this idea.

Why should we keep theorizing context, in spite of the many conceptual problems? First, as Lawrence Grossberg has pointed out, contexts are not »out there« to be picked up – instead, context is both starting point and end of analysis at the same time. Contexts are as much in need of conceptualization as texts. This is a good guiding principle regardless of one’s discipline. Second, contexts are often invisible, especially when they are familiar contexts! They must be teased out, made visible, and this is facilitated by a theoretical contextualist framework. Third, even if we do not aim at and believe in the possibility of an overarching theory of context, we nevertheless cannot avoid dealing with tacit notions of context. These range from notions supported by language and our everyday perceptions and practices to taken-for-granted assumptions often supported by our institutions. This is the reason some scholars, for instance Ansgar Nünning, emphasize the need to theorize context: context theories are always »there«, and if we do not tackle them, they may and will have the kinds of influence on us that we would not like it to have.

What is the role of the text in different theories of context? For Murray Krieger, text is the definite centre. Textualism may be out of date ontologically, but the ›power of the text‹ that Krieger is interested in is something to be paid attention to by theories of context as well. Besides, another reason to keep text in the picture is that, after all, as Pepper and radical contextualists point out, text is context for its contexts! And even in a contextualist framework, bracketing a context has its value: in some cases it may be more fruitful to bypass the most obvious and salient contexts and take up counterintuitive ones, as for instance New Historicists prefer to do.

Is there still need and use for theory of context? Without necessarily aiming at an overarching, systematic grand theory, it is useful to think, with Stuart Hall, that a theory of context as such is not a goal, but to understand meaning-making, we must keep on theorizing context and contextuality.

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