



The History of Transtextuality and Theoretical Approach to Literary Analysis

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Abstract: This article includes a brief introduction of the history of the meaning behind the term transtextuality. Since the term meaning is contested, this article will focus on discussing the concept of transtextuality and present theoretical point of view of literary theorist such as Bakhtin, Allen, Barthes and Kristeva.

Key words: The concept of transtextuality, aspect of transtextuality, theoretical approaches, communication, relational meaning, textual analysis.

Introduction. In order to understand transtextuality it is important to understand the history behind the term and to clarify exactly what it means. Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure is credited for being the first to divide *the sign* into two parts, namely the *signified* and the *signifier*; the *signified* represents the *concept* while the *signifier* is regarded as the *sound-image*. According to Saussure, meaning is derived from the intersection of these two parts, which is significant because it shows that: "Signs are arbitrary, possessing meaning not because of a referential function but because of their function within a linguistic system as it exists at any one moment in time" (Allen). This observation by Saussure is critical in understanding one of the fundamental principles within the concept of transtextuality because it showed that *the sign* is non-referential, which means that its meaning does not only stem from the sign itself but from the sign's placement within a larger system. This system is dynamic as opposed to static, which means that it changes over time and through social constructions. This in turn implies that transtextuality contains social elements in addition to its linguistic ones. It is here the work of Russian literary theorist M. M. Bakhtin and his writings on the concepts of *dialogism* and *heteroglossia* comes in. *Dialogism* refers to the inherent referential nature of communication, for which Bakhtin argued that all acts of communication, written or other, exist in a perpetual dialog with former acts of communication. *Heteroglossia* was Bakhtin's term for the differentiated modes of discourse society layers onto communicative acts, examples of which are numerous; suffice to say, vernacular, vocabulary, dialects, etc., all play a part in acts of communication, to the point where what is negated from a communicative act can also be analysed as part of the mode of discourse. If the Bakhtinian aspect of dialogism is important in understanding the referential nature of transtextuality, heteroglossia is crucial for understanding the aspect of culture and social status within the realm of transtextuality; heteroglossia can be described as the social perspective from which one sees the world, and this perspective perpetuates the system which the social aspect of transtextuality stems from. Julia Kristeva first coined the term *intertextuality* when she during the 1960's set out to unify and elaborate upon the theoretical work of Bakhtin and Saussure. Saussurean semiology and Bakhtinian dialogism and heteroglossia became merged and re-articulated in a way that, for Kristeva, replaced the preexisting notion of intersubjectivity; this is because meaning is not so much *exchanged* as it is *decoded*.

According to Kristeva, *poetic language*, her term for language that express the duality often associated with transtextual discourse, contain *significance* - a way of representing and communicating that which is not present in the text. Kristeva's take on Bakhtin's work show that the referential nature of language automatically subsumes that the word or utterance is in fact double-voices - possessing a meaning at the same time as it possesses another meaning. This can be illustrated by using the word *healthy* - someone who is healthy is well and not suffering from any illness. Based on this, the word healthy has two relational meaning, namely *someone who is well* and *someone who is not sick*.

The relationship between linguistics and relational meanings is well articulated within some of the work by Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette. Furthermore, they both serve as prime examples because they focus on two different aspects of transtextuality in relation to critical analysis. In 1967, Roland Barthes published his highly influential essay *The Death Of The Author* which arguably can be said to have given birth to the concept of *the reader*, which it accomplished at the detriment of *authorial intent*. By arguing for increased agency on behalf of the reader, Barthes was able to successfully argue the importance of the preexisting notions and ideas a reader brings with them when engaging with a text. As a consequence, Barthes' essay enabled a shift in emphasis from that of the long-standing idea of *authorial intent* towards the more contemporary idea of *reader participation*. Due to the important nature of allusions within the realm of intertextuality, reader-participation becomes a crucial element in decoding transtextual references. Additionally, this theory of transtextuality dictates that texts lack independent meaning, i.e., all texts are transtextual, and thus one must trace the transtextual relations within a text in order to properly interpret the text. Based on this, logically all texts contain at least two relational meanings depending on whether or not one views a text in isolation or in relation to all other texts; the latter of which is actually a basic element of linguistics. Barthes asserts that there are two types of readers, namely *consumers* and *readers*, where the latter also becomes a sort of *writer*.

Monotheistic in this context is related to a notion of *absolute truth/meaning*, which would imply that there is a *correct* way to interpret a text. However, as the theories of transtextuality along with the relational aspect of language demonstrates, such a reading could never hope to be comprehensive due to the *plurality of ways* any given text can be read in relation to itself or in relation to culture as a whole. A good example of this type of formalistic approach can be seen in Russian folklorist and scholar Vladimir Propp's investigation of the morphological composition of folktales.

Propp argued that one of the first steps in a scientific investigation is correct classification. He further insisted that such a classification should be based on *structure*. Building on this premise, Propp constructed the *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968). By analysing the narrative of one hundred folktales, Propp came up with a recipe for the folktale. According to Propp, all fairytales follow the same narrative; elements may be omitted or expanded upon, but the sequence of events is always the same. The problem with Propp's morphological dissection of the Russian folktale is that he made no attempt to unify his morphology with Russian culture as a whole, as pointed out by Alan Dundes in the introduction to the second edition of Propp's *Morphology*. Dundes is arguably merely pointing out the closed-structuralist effect of Propp's approach. Dundes does, however, also point out that the type of tales Propp investigates in his *Morphology* conform to what is termed *Aarne-Thompson tale types*, and those tales are not geographically limited to the former Soviet Union. By doing this, Dundes illustrates the two main problem with Propp's morphology: Firstly, Propp assumed that "fairy tales" existed as a special class of stories as an *essential working hypothesis*, and secondly, the morphology Propp comprised was supposed to describe "the tale according to its components parts and the relationship of these components to each other and to the *whole*". Dundes claims that form, i.e., the morphology of the folktale, "must ultimately be related to the culture or cultures in which it is found", which Propp fails to do, and thus illustrate the problem with closed-structuralism. Paradoxically, I would argue that Propp's morphology does exactly what Barthes is advocating for; Propp became a *reader* of the folktale, and thus also a *writer*. Propp, by way of his morphology, thus illustrates the the difference between Barthes' consumer and reader rather nicely. Due to the plurality of potential meanings in a text, most contemporary critics have move away from a strictly formalistic

approach to literary analysis. This is because our contemporary view of the notions of transtextuality would dictate that textual analysis is in fact pluralist, a sentiment captured by Barthes in 1981 with the following statement: “There are no more critics, only writers” (*Theory of the Text*).

The concept of transtextuality and Barthes’ idea of differentiating between *consumers* and *readers* disrupts any *monotheistic meaning* and thus also any *monotheistic reading*. Transtextuality would not be so *disruptive* to textual analysis if one insisted that the text existed in a realm of its own. However, by exploring the notion that multiple realms might exist at the same time and that, more often than not, these realms influence each other would introduce what Barthes termed the “evil of plurality”. This can be interpreted to mean that due to the relational nature of all texts, transtextuality is inherently subjective. The reason for this is the direct correlation between the reader and their subjective *memory* or *knowledge base*, of which the social aspect should not be ignored. As a consequence, all textual analysis are rooted in a subjective interpretation directly linked to the memory or knowledge base of its reader. This interpretation is echoed by Allen who wrote: “For Barthes, literary meaning can never be fully stabilised by the reader, since the literary work’s intertextual nature always leads the reader on to new textual relations”. In addition, structuralist analysis of literature has shown how the *codes of society* modify and influence literature. If one were to look at the lack of prolific female writers thought-out the eighteen-century without taking into consideration the way society often has undermined the authorship of women, one fails to see the correlation between literature and the codes of society, and one need only look at the lack of female authors belonging to the Western literary canon to see this point. In 1979, Barthes articulated that texts “blend and clash,” by which he was referring to the “multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original” are regurgitated by the author, which make the text appear as a “tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture”. This is arguably the notion that Barthes was referring to when he a decade earlier in his 1967 essay, *The Death of the Author*, argued that “the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination”. This means that one of the fundamental principles of transtextuality would suggest that there is never a single or correct way to interpret a text since every reader brings with them a set of expectations, interests, viewpoints, reading experiences, and varying degrees of cultural exposure that they, willingly or subconsciously, project onto the text.

Conclusion. The observation by Barthes differs from the long standing tradition of formalism which focused on analysing texts in a way that would sequence its meaning so that it would conform to a monotheistic reading. As a consequence, all textual analysis are rooted in a subjective interpretation directly linked to the memory or knowledge base of its reader. Consequently, Propp’s *Morphology* should be read in light of this fundamental principle of transtextuality, which should then be enough to raise doubt about the impact of morphology in the unsuspecting reader. Logic would dictate that an unsuspecting reader, one without previous knowledge regarding Propp and the *Morphology of the Folktale*, would not recognise, and thereby not read, any text in relation to such a *Morphology* if (s)he was not aware of the existence of such a system when first engaging with the text.

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