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Text and Function*

Yu. M. Lotman and A. M. Piatigorsky

THE AIM of this article is to examine two concepts fundamental for the study of culture, “text” and “function,” in their mutual relationship. The concept of text is defined in accordance with an article by A. M. Piatigorsky.¹ Particular attention is given to such features of a text as its expression [*vyrazhennost'*] in a given system of signs—its “fixation”—and its capacity to perform in a certain relationship (in the system of signals functioning in a community) “as an elementary concept.”² The function of a text is defined as its social role, its capacity to serve certain demands of the community which creates the text. Thus, function is the mutual relationship among the system, its realization, and the addresser-addressee of the text.

If one considers three categories such as text, function of the text, and culture, at least two general approaches are possible. With the first approach, culture is seen as a totality of texts; in relation to the texts function then appears as a kind of metatext. With the second approach, culture is seen as a totality of functions, and the text will then be seen historically as deriving from a function or functions. In this case the text and the function can be seen as objects to be investigated on one level while the first approach necessarily presupposes two levels of study.

Before making an investigation of this kind, however, it should be remarked that, in principle, we have to do with different objects of study. Culture is a synthetic concept, the definition of which, even a working one, is fraught with difficulties. Text may, however, be defined—if not logically, at least for working purposes—by pointing to a concrete object having its own *internal* features which cannot be deduced from anything else apart from itself. Function, however, seems to us to be a pure construct and here one in the sense of which a given text may be interpreted, or in relation to which some features of a text can be examined as features of the function.

The concept of *text* in the sense in which it is used in the study of culture is different from the linguistic concept of text. The point of

* First published in *Letnyaya shkola po vtorichnym modeliruyushchim sistemam* [Abstracts for summer school on secondary modeling systems] (Tartu, 1968), pp. 74-88.

departure for the cultural concept of text is precisely that moment when the fact of linguistic expression ceases to be perceived as sufficient for the utterance to become a text. As a consequence of this the masses of linguistic messages circulating in the community are perceived as nontexts against the background of which stand out a group of texts which reveal features of some supplementary expression significant to the given system of culture. Thus at the moment when written culture arose, the expression of the message in phonological units began to be taken as nonexpression. To it was opposed the graphic fixation of a certain group of messages which were accepted as the sole ones, from the point of view of the given culture, to exist. Not every message is worthy of being written down, but everything written down takes on a particular cultural significance, becomes a *text*. (See the identification of writing with sacredness in terms such as “writing” [*pisanie*] and phrases such as “for it is written,” “to speak from the writing” [*pisano bo est', glagolati ot pisaninya*] which were common in Russian medieval literature.)

Connected with this is the scale of cultural values where the *written text* takes the highest place after the supreme divinity. Thus in many ancient and medieval cultures, religious initiation is *initiation to a written text* (the permission to read a certain text)—as in lamaist Buddhism; in more ancient cultures, however, initiation is the *oral communication of the meaning* of a writing—as in the Upanishads.

The opposition “oral—written” may correspond in some cultures to “not published typographically—printed,” and so on. Expression may also appear as the demand for a certain long-lasting material. What is *engraved* on stone or metal is considered a “text” as distinct from what is *written* on perishable materials—the antithesis “durable/eternal—transitory”; what is written on parchment or silk as distinct from paper—the antithesis “valuable—not valuable”; what is printed in a book as distinct from what is printed in a newspaper or what is written in an album as distinct from what is written in a letter—this is the antithesis “intended to be preserved—intended to be destroyed”: it is indicative that this antithesis works only in systems where letters and newspapers are not intended to be preserved and is not operative in opposing ones.

The particular “expression” of a cultural text that distinguishes it from general linguistic expression is not, however, found only in the various forms of written culture. In a preliterate culture the distinguishing feature of a text was a supplementary, supralinguistic organization on the level of expression. Thus in oral cultures, texts—legal, ethical, and religious, and those containing scientific knowledge about agriculture, astronomy, and so on—were endowed

necessarily with a supraorganization in the form of proverbs, aphorisms with definite structural features. Wisdom is not possible except in the form of a text, and a text implies a certain organization. Hence, at this stage of culture the distinguishing feature that divides truth from nontruth is a supralinguistic organization of the utterance. It is indicative that with the change to written and then to printed stages of culture, this demand fell into abeyance (see the rendering of the Bible into prose in the European cultural tradition) and was replaced by others. Observations about preliterate texts acquire further significance when the concept of text in modern culture is analyzed, since as a result of the development of radio and other speaking mechanisms, the obligation for a text to be graphically expressed has again been lost.

When classifying cultures according to the feature distinguishing text from nontext, it should be remembered that these concepts may be reversible as far as the limit in each given case is concerned. Thus, with the opposition “written—oral” one could imagine both a culture where only written messages are considered texts and a culture where writing is used for everyday, practical purposes while texts (sacred, poetic, ethico-normative, etc.) are handed down as fixed norms. The utterance “He’s a real poet; he’s published” is just as possible as “He’s a real poet; he’s not published.” See Pushkin’s lines:

Radishchev, foe to slavery, avoided the censor,
And Pushkin’s verses did not appear in print.³

If you started to write stupidly
Then you would surely slip
Through our tight censorship
As you would enter the kingdom of heaven.⁴

Appearing in print is a criterion both when it is said—“If this were valuable (true, holy, poetic), it would have been printed”—and when the opposite is affirmed.

In relation to a nontext, a text has supplementary meaning. If one compares two utterances identical on the linguistic level, of which one fulfills the concept of a text in the system of the given culture and the other does not, then it is easy to define the essence of text semantics. One and the same message (a written agreement, for example, affirmed by oath, or simply by a promise, coming from a person whose utterances, thanks to his position in the community, are texts, or from a simple member of the community, and so on) will be differently evaluated from the point of view of its authoritativeness

even though linguistically there is coincidence. In the sphere in which the utterance is received as a text (a poem is not received as a text for the definition of the scientific, religious, or legal position of the community, but is taken as a text in the sphere of art), it has the meaning of truthfulness ascribed to it. An ordinary linguistic communication, well-formed according to all the lexical and grammatical rules—that is, “correct” in the linguistic sense—and not containing anything contradicting the possible in its content, may nonetheless turn out to be a falsehood. But this cannot happen with a text. A false text is as much a contradiction in terms as a false oath, prayer, or law. It is not a text but the violation of a text.

Since a text has truthfulness ascribed to it, the existence of texts presupposes “a text point of view”—the position from which the truth is known and from which falsehood is impossible. A description of the texts of a given culture gives a picture of the hierarchy of these positions. There are cultures with one point of view common to all texts, or with a hierarchy of points of view, or with a complex paradigm of them, to which will correspond the value relationships between types of texts.

If one admits the parallelism of the oppositions “text–nontext” and “truth–nontruth,” then every culture can be ascribed to one of two types according to how it views *itself* in a historical perspective (given, of course, the particular time-section in which we examine the culture). “Culture of the closed type” sees itself as continuing according to tradition, from the time (“time” is here meant conventionally) when there existed “fullness of truth,” i.e., a “full text”; while “history” is the history of the gradual loss of this fullness which lies at the sources of the culture. “Culture of the nonclosed type” sees itself as arising “from zero,” “from nothing,” and as gradually accumulating elements of “truth” whose fullness is believed to lie in the future.

Culture of the second type, when observed from outside, seems more *functional*, and culture of the first type more *textual* in the literal sense of the word. It is obvious, moreover, that the same values will occupy different places in the value scales of these different types of culture:

(1) In cultures of the “closed type” (for example, in Tibetan Buddhist culture) the text is significant (“sanctified”) because it is a text.

(2) In cultures of the “nonclosed type” the text is significant because it has a particular meaning which determines its functional value.

(3) Following from what has been said, in cultures of the second type there occurs (or “takes place”) the absolutization of historical

experience, while in the first type there is the absolutization of prediction (and hence eschatology).

The separating out of a certain quantity of texts from among the mass of general linguistic messages may be seen as a feature of culture that appears as a particular type of self-organization by the community. The pretext stage is the preculture stage. And the state where all texts revert to their linguistic meaning only corresponds to the destruction of culture.

For the study of culture there exists only those messages which are texts. All the others, as it were, do not exist, and the investigator leaves them out of account. In this sense it may be said that culture is the totality of texts or one complexly constructed text. If the structural code of the culture to which the describer belongs is applied to the material being studied (the study of ancient culture by our contemporaries, or the study of the culture of one social or national type from the position of another), this may lead to the shift of nontexts into the category of texts, and vice versa, according to their distribution in the system being used for the description.

A conscious break with a certain type of culture, or ignorance of its code, may appear to be a denial of the system of text meanings inherent in that culture. Only their content as general linguistic messages is recognized, or if there are no messages at this level, "nonmessages." For example, the sixteenth-century heretic Feodosiy Kosoy refused to see in the cross a symbol with text (or sacred) significance, and ascribed to it only the meaning of the primary message—the weapon of execution. "Kosoy says that those calling themselves orthodox worshipped wood instead of God without finding out what was pleasing to God. Only they do not understand, only they do not want to understand, although they could understand by themselves" [typical here is the denial of the "conventional" meaning given by the cultural code and the acceptance of the "natural," linguistic message, "although they could understand by themselves"], "for if someone beats to death the son of another man could that man love the stick with which his son was killed? In the same way God hates the cross because his son was killed on it."⁵ On the other hand, knowledge of the cultural code system results in the linguistic meaning of the text receding to the background and, indeed, perhaps not even being perceived, being so overshadowed by the secondary meaning. The obligation to be comprehensible may not be applicable to texts of this type at all, and some such texts may successfully be replaced in cultural usage by their conventional signals. In Chekhov's story *The Peasants* the "incomprehensible"

Church Slavonic language is perceived as a signal for the change from an everyday communication (a nontext) to a sacred one (a text). It is precisely the zero degree of the general linguistic message that gives it its high degree of semiotic meaningfulness (*semiotichnost'*) as a text: "Go to Egypt . . . and stay there until I tell you." "At the word *dondezhe* [until] Olga could not restrain herself and burst into tears." The heightening of the meaningfulness of a text as a whole is thus often connected with a lowering of its meaningfulness at the level of ordinary linguistic communication. Hence, the typical process whereby incomprehensible texts become sacred: utterances that circulate in the given community but which are incomprehensible to it are given text significance (snatches of sentences and of texts from another culture, for example; inscriptions left by the departed inhabitants of a particular region; ruins of buildings of unknown purpose; or phrases brought in from another closed social group—for instance, the conversation of doctors for the patient). Inasmuch as a high degree of text meaning is perceived as a guarantee of truthfulness, and text meaning grows inasmuch as ordinary linguistic meaning is obscured, in many instances the tendency can be observed to make texts from which a high degree of truthfulness is expected incomprehensible for the addressee. In order to be taken as a text the message must be incomprehensible or barely comprehensible and must need further translation or interpretation. The predictions of the Pythia, the prophecies of a prophet, the words of a fortune-teller, a priest's sermon, a doctor's advice, laws and social instructions—when their value is determined not by real language communication but by text supracommunication, *all must be incomprehensible and need interpretation*. Connected with this is the urge to partial comprehensibility, ambiguity, and polysemia. Art with its essential polysemia can, in principle, generate only texts.

Since the destruction of the general linguistic message in a text is an extreme example which shows up a latent tendency and, for this reason, is fairly rare, and since the addressee is interested not only in the truthfulness of the information but also in the information itself, then together with the text necessarily arises the figure of its interpreter: the Pythia and the priest, the scriptures and the minister, law and its interpreter, art and the critic. The nature of the interpreter is such that it excludes the possibility of "anyone" becoming it.

Connected with these text features is the tendency to ritualize the more socially significant texts and to make the decoding of the ritual obligatorily difficult. See, for example, the care with which Pestel'

worked out the ritual for initiation into secret societies and the role of ritual in early Decembrist organizations.

The division of all messages circulating within a community into texts and nontexts and the concentration on the former as objects of study by the historian of culture do not exhaust the problem. If one excludes nontexts from consideration (for example, when studying written culture, to make the reservation that oral sources will not be considered), then we are faced with the need to define the complementary features of expression. Thus *within* the sphere of writing, the graphic fixation of a text means nothing. At this level it is equivalent to nonexpression. In its function as a fixator, however, transforming an utterance into a text, there is Church Slavonic, which separates secular writing (in which case and at this level is a nontext) from canonical. But within canonical writing another division is possible (for example, only old books may be texts). Thus a hierarchy of texts is created with a successive growth of text meaning. An analogous example is the hierarchy of genres in the system of classical literature, where the feature "to be a work of art" increases as one moves up the scale of genres.

Cultures with a paradigmatic construction have a single hierarchy of texts with successive growth of text semiotics so that at the top is the Text of that culture with the most coefficients of value and truth. Cultures with a syntagmatic construction have a set of various types of texts which embrace various aspects of reality and have equal value positions. In most actual human cultures these two principles are complexly interwoven.

The tendency to an increase in text meanings properly speaking corresponds to types of cultures with a high degree of semiotic meaningfulness. Because, however, in each text there inevitably arises a conflict between its linguistic and its text meaning, the opposite tendency also exists. When a certain system of truths and values ceases to be perceived as true and valuable, faith is lost in those means which made the given message be perceived as a text by bearing witness to its truthworthiness and cultural significance. Features of the text that were pledges of its truthfulness become signs of its falsehood. In such circumstances a secondary, inverted relationship arises: in order that the message should be perceived as valuable and true (i.e., as a text), it must not have expressed text features. In these circumstances only a nontext can fulfill the role of a text. Thus the teachings of Socrates in the dialogues of Plato are the highest teaching inasmuch as it is not teaching, not a system; the teaching of Christ, which appeared in a

society where the creation of religious texts was restricted to a narrow category of people of a certain caste and high degree of literateness, is a text precisely because it emanates from one who has not the right to create texts. The idea that only prose is truthful in Russian literature at the moment of the crisis of the "Pushkin period" and the start of the "Gogol period," Dziga Vertov's slogan about documentary cinema, and attempts by Rossellini and De Sica to do without studio shots and professional actors—all these instances, when the authority of the text is defined by its "sincerity," "simplicity," "uncontrivedness," are examples of nontexts fulfilling the function of texts.

Since a text is manifested in these cases by its nonexpression, the value of the message is determined by its truthfulness on the level of general linguistic semantic well-formedness and ordinary "common sense." Since, however, the more truthful texts are taken as the more authoritative, it is obvious that here, too, alongside the general linguistic meaning, we have to do with some additional text meaning.

Since as a result of the conflict of two constantly warring tendencies in culture—to semiotization and to desemiotization—the text and nontext may change places in relation to their cultural function, the possibility arises of isolating the features of one kind of text from its linguistic message. Text meaning may be polemically refuted by subtext meaning. Thus the letter of Ivan the Terrible to Simeon Bekbulatovich has all the typical features of that kind of text that is a petition. It begins with a ritual address and the obligatory self-belittling formula: "To my Lord the Grand Prince Simeon Bekbulatovich of all Russia Little Ivan Vasil'ev and his little children Little Ivan and Little Fedor make supplication."⁶

All the text elements carry information about a humble request, while all the subtext elements bear information about a categorical command. The *noncorrespondence* of text and subtext information creates supplementary meanings. Moreover, the authority of the given text principle is undermined. Literary parody is constructed along analogous lines.

The system of text meanings determines the social functions of texts in a given culture. Hence, one can distinguish three types of relationship: subtext (general linguistic) meanings, text meanings, and the functions of texts in the given system of culture. Thus, a culture may be described at three different levels: the level of the general linguistic content of its constituent texts, the level of text content, and the level of text functions. The distinction among these three levels may seem superfluous in those very numerous instances when subtext meanings have a single and invariant correspondence to

certain definite texts and the texts have a single correspondence to certain definite pragmatic functions. The practice of studying cases such as these explains why researchers do not separate these levels. One has but to turn to instances of noncoincidence (of subtext and text meanings, or of text and functional ones) for it to become clear that there must be three quite independent approaches.

Let us consider the most elementary case of divergence—the nonexpression of one of the links.

| | Subtext message | Text semantics | Function in the system of culture |
|----|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. | + | + | + |
| 2. | + | — | + |
| 3. | + | + | — |
| 4. | + | — | — |
| 5. | — | + | + |
| 6. | — | + | — |
| 7. | — | — | + |
| 8. | — | — | — |

Cases 1 and 8 are trivial examples: in the former all three types of meaning are present and coincide. An example could be any one of a number of texts, for example, a fairy tale performed before an audience for whom the direct perception of folklore is still alive. Here there is a language communication which, in order to become a text, needs a particular kind of expression, and inherent in the text is a certain cultural function which can be served by the text alone. Case 8 is introduced only for completeness of the description; it is complete silence when this has no cultural function.

Case 2 is the instance which was discussed above: a general linguistic message can fulfill a particular text function only if it does not have features which, in the system till then in force, were considered essential for a text. In order to carry out the text function the message must be deritualized from its previous obligatory text features. Thus, at certain moments (for example, in Russian literature after Gogol) the literary text, in order to be perceived as art, had to be not poetry (which is a text with expressed features that distinguish it from nonliterary speech), but prose, where this distinction is expressed by a zero index. In this case it is the high value of the subtext content that gives the text its high authoritativeness (“where there is truth, there is poetry,” in Belinsky’s words). A text of this type

does not in principle need an interpreter (the rejection of the church as mediator between text and man—"confess yourselves one to another"; the demand for laws comprehensible without the help of lawyers; a negative attitude towards literary criticism—see Chekhov's remark that one needs only to read his works: "Everything is written there"). The removal of the text from the usual norms of semiotic meaning and its outward desemiotization are conditions for the high semiotic meaning of the text in this instance.

Case 3 is connected with the preceding one and complements it. Where the function of a text can be fulfilled only by a message without text expression, ritualized texts lose the capacity to fulfill the function for which they were intended. The man who holds that God must be addressed in simplicity and sincerity cannot pray in the words of a prayer learned by rote; for Tolstoy, Shakespeare was not art because he was too artistic, and so on. Texts with emphasized expression are perceived as "insincere" and consequently not "true," that is, they are nontexts. Case 3 is complementary to case 7.

Case 4 is the most common instance: it is a message without the supralinguistic features of a text. From the point of view of culture it does not exist, and thus has no cultural function.

Case 5 contains no general linguistic message: at this level it can be nonsense, or a text in another language that is incomprehensible for its audience, or, as in case 7, it may be silence. (See the Romantic idea that only silence can adequately express the poet: "Only silence speaks comprehensibly"—Zhukovsky; Tyutchev's "Silentium"; or Tsvetaeva's "Prokrast'sya"). The supporters of Nil Sorsky believed that the best way of union with God was silent ("mental") prayer.

Case 6 is the opposite instance, when an incomprehensible and insignificant subtext message cannot be a text or acquire cultural value.

Case 7: these are instances where nonsigns function as signs (for example, the burning of Rome as a spectacle, thunder as a sign, etc.).⁷

Another instance of noncoincidence is when the links are displaced and interchanged. For example, only by being *another* text can the cultural function of a certain text be fulfilled. In this displaced system only low texts (ironic ones, for instance) can serve "high" cultural functions, only secular ones can fulfill sacred functions, etc.

The possibility of separating text from function leads us to the conclusion that the description of culture as a set of texts is not always enough for full description. Thus, for example, if, in any culture, one did not find any sacred texts but did discover certain scientific ones (astronomical calendars, for example), one might conclude that the

society being studied did not have, in its set of cultural functions, any religious function but did have a scientific one. A more detailed examination of the question would, however, reveal the need for greater care; the scientific texts may have been used by the community, or part of it, for religious *functions*. For example, a single text, scientific in nature—say, a new and powerful medicine—may be scientific for one part of the community, religious for another section, and magical for a third, thus serving three different cultural functions.

There are many instances in the history of science when scientific ideas, precisely because of their powerful effect, became in fact a brake on scientific development, inasmuch as they came to serve a nonscientific function and became, for part of the community, a religion. On the other hand, such texts as a doctor's advice, whose effectiveness is determined by the degree of unconditional trust, may lose effectiveness if the patient adopts a "scientific" approach (based on critical verification). It is widely known that the spread of medical knowledge among the population does harm, in certain conditions, to medicine by endowing a nonscientific text (the patient's own opinion) with the function of a scientific one.

It follows that the description of a particular cultural system should be made along three levels: (1) the description of subtext messages, (2) the description of culture as a system of texts, and (3) the description of culture as a set of functions served by the texts. After such a description the interrelationships of all these structures should be defined. It will then be obvious that the absence of a text when there is absence of the corresponding function is in no way equivalent to the absence of a text when the corresponding function is maintained.

Two types of culture may then be postulated: one will tend towards a specialization of its texts so that to each cultural function there corresponds an adequate type of text; the other type of culture will tend to obliterate the boundaries between texts in order that identical texts should serve the whole set of cultural functions. In the first type the text is more important, and in the second, the function.

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(Translated by Ann Shukman)

NOTES

1 "Nekotorye obshchiye zamechaniya otnositel'no rassmotreniya tekstov kak raznovidnosti signala" [Some general remarks concerning the treatment of texts as variants of a

signal], in *Strukturno-tipologiceskie issledovaniya* [Structural-typological studies] (Moscow, 1962).

2 *Ibid.*, p. 145.

3 *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* [Collected works], Vol. II, bk. 1 (Moscow, 1937-1959), 269.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 152.

5 "Istiny pokazanie k voproshashim o novom uchenii" [A demonstration of the truth to those inquiring about the new doctrine], Appendix to *Pravoslavnyy sobesednik* [An orthodox companion] (Kazan', 1863), p. 509.

6 *Poslaniya Ivana Groznogo* [The letters of Ivan the Terrible] (Moscow-Leningrad, 1951), p. 195.

7 [This paragraph, which is absent in the Russian text, has been taken from the French version in *Semiotica*, 2 (1969). Tr.]