

Internet: Medium and Text

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Please note that this text has NOT been proof read by a native speaker. Please excuse my way
of treating the English language.

A THEORETICAL APPROACH

My work about the internet is — above all — a theoretical work. I try to put on the agenda some of the theoretical questions that, in my view, one has to ask "before" doing internet research.

I have started by calling two fundamental concepts to question: The concept of medium and the concept of text. Later on I intend to set to work on the question of genre. In my opinion the concepts of *medium*, *text* and *genre* are the most important concepts to "re-interpret" when the object of analysis is the internet. In a way it is my intention to contribute (modestly) to a critical re-reading of these three concepts: What are their range when the object of analysis is the internet? I have started this work recently, and today I will just point out a few of the possible "paths of thought".

I am asking myself the following question: Does the website constitute a text? And if "yes": How? As these questions indicate, I am talking exclusively about the website, and not about all the other things that are taking place on the internet — usegroups, emails, chat etc.; I am only focusing on the part of the internet that is using the protocol "http" and the language "html", that is: The www.

Unlike what many hypertext theorists maintain, I would argue that the webtext is not on the point of "dissolution"; on the contrary, in most cases all the many pieces of writing, sounds and images are kept together — as a text. So, instead of insisting on the "dissolution" of texts, I would like to stress the cohesion between the textual elements — even though the text might incessantly be in danger of dissolution.

This perspective raises — at least — two questions that condition each other mutually:

- What keeps the website together as a text?
- And how can one delimit the website as a text?

On the one hand I insist on the *cohesion* of the text. On the other hand I am emphasizing the *limits* of the text. In my discussion of these two issues I shall try to combine two theoretical elements:

- On the one hand text linguistics
- On the other hand Gerard Genette's reflexions on paratexts.

I asked myself the following question: Does the website constitute a text? And if "yes": How? I guess there is — at least — three possible criteria if one wants to discuss the cohesion and the limits of the webtext. First, the materiality of the medium internet "in" or "on" which the text is; second, level of the content, the signification, the semantics; and third, the level of expression, the forms of expression. All three criteria plays a role if one intends to answer the question: The website, is it a text?

THE MATERIALITY OF THE INTERNET

In my perspective the internet is a medium "in" or "on" which elements of content and/or expression can figure — elements that can constitute a text. As a medium the internet has a certain concrete materiality: It is made of what I call a "substratum" and a "material content", that is:

- The substratum: The screen, the keyboard, the speakers, etc.
- The material content: What is "on" or "in" the substratum (light, colors,

forms, sounds)

These concepts are developed in my article "Theoretical Reflexions on Media and Media History", which can be found on the address http://imv.au.dk/~nb/djh/NB_Theoretical.pdf

Can the materiality of the internet be of any help to us when we want to know what constitutes the website as text? In other words: Does the exterior limits of the medium delimit the text? My answer is short: No. The materiality of the internet does not delimit the text. Electronic media do not in themselves set up — by their materiality — the exterior limits of the analytical unit: The text.

This is different from media where the substratum is paper. For instance the newspaper delimits the text in a material sense, and this in two ways:

- First, the exterior limits of the medium are also the limits of the substratum and of the material content
- Second, the material content is inseparable from the substratum — the material content is fixed by and on the substratum (the ink on the paper)

The exterior limits as well as the "fixed" relation between substratum and material content that characterizes, for instance, the newspaper is not there within electronic media. With the internet the substratum (the screen, the speakers etc.) delimits partially the text, but the material content does not; the light, the colors, the forms and the sounds are not "fixed" to the substratum; on the contrary, they come when they are asked for, when they are *actualised*.

This leads to a "banal", but important conclusion: In so far as the materiality of the medium "internet" does not mark the exterior limits of the text — the website is not delimited as text by the exterior limits of the medium — we are forced to delimit it by other means. And this can be done either by the content (the signification), or by the forms of expression — or by the two at the same time.

THE WEBSITE AS TEXT: COHESION AND THRESHOLDS

COHESION

In order to answer the question "Does the website constitute a text? And if "yes": How?", my point of departure will be text linguistics. What can text linguistics tell us about the phenomenon "text" when the text is a website?

In order to give you an impression of what I am aiming at I shall take a classic of the tradition as my point of departure: *Introduction to Text Linguistics* by Beaugrande & Dressler, published in 1981. I have chosen this book because it can be considered a text of reference for a theoretical discussion; whether it can be used for making concrete analysis is another question. And, of course, one could have chosen other texts.

For Beaugrande and Dressler a text is "a communicative occurrence which

meets seven standards of textuality" (p. 3).

These seven standards of textuality are:

- Cohesion
- Coherence
- Intentionality
- Acceptability
- Informativity
- Situationality
- Intertextuality

Can one use these seven constitutive traits of textuality for the phenomenon "website"? In my view the most obvious traits for an analysis of the website are *cohesion* and *coherence*. That is: How does the website create and maintain a coherent world of significations?

In relation to this issue I would like to introduce a distinction between (at least) three levels of analysis on the website:

- First, the single page/each URL
- Second, the group(s) of single pages
- And third, the totality of single pages, that is the whole site

The single page

The group(s) of single pages

The whole site



One has to ask the question of textuality on these three levels. First concerning each single page: What is the cohesion, the coherence, the intentionality, the acceptability etc. on each single page? And so forth for the other two levels: What is the cohesion, the coherence etc. within the group(s) of pages, that is between pages? And what is the cohesion, the coherence etc. between all the pages, that is on the whole site?

I guess one should examine the cohesion and the coherence on these three levels — the page, the group of pages and the site: How is each "world" (or "worlds") of coherent signification created and maintained on each page, within the group of pages, and on the whole site?

THE FORMS OF EXPRESSION

But one question still remains. The forms of expression, are they not

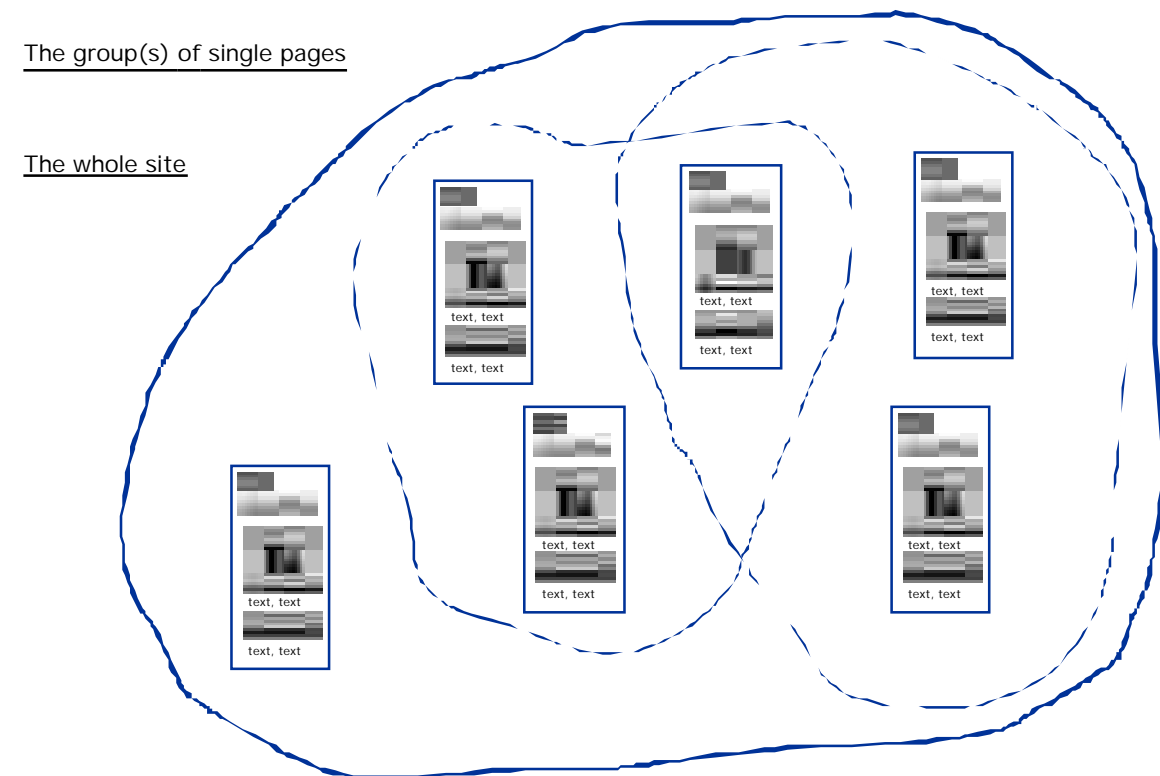
forgotten by Beaugrande & Dressler? Maybe they have not forgotten the forms of expression, but they do not reflect much on them — probably because they imply that the forms of expression of the texts are writing. And probably because they imply that texts can only be "found" on paper. In their view texts are obviously: a) Written texts, b) Texts written on paper

This perspective does limit the range of their concepts when we are dealing with different forms of expression within the same medium. That is when writing is supplemented by images and sounds, and when the substratum of the medium is no longer paper. This is not said in order to "disqualify" Beaugrande & Dressler's concepts in advance, but rather in order to question their range if one tries to use them on the level of forms of expression.

The single page

The group(s) of single pages

The whole site



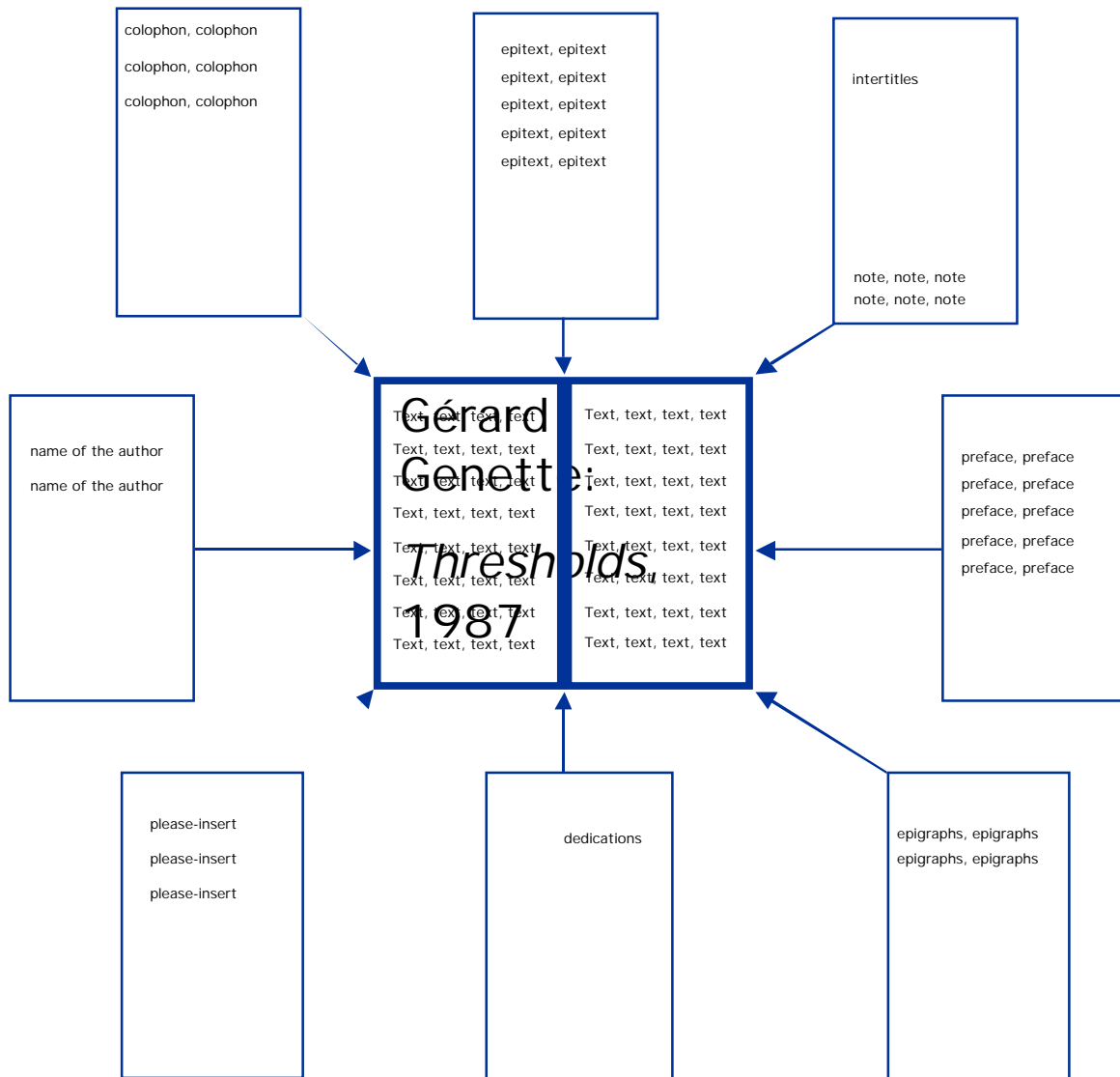
In other words: On the level of expression, is there:

- Cohesion, coherence etc. on each single page?
- Cohesion and coherence in the group(s) of pages?
- And cohesion and coherence between all the single pages, that is on the site?

THRESHOLDS

After having emphasized the cohesion of the website — with text linguistics as point of departure — , I shall now take another way in the attempt to encircle the phenomenon "website". Closely related to the issue of cohesion, I guess one should also discuss the limits of the website; and in order to do that, my point of departure will be a theory that originates from literary theory: Gérard Genette's reflexions on paratexts.

In his book *Seuils, Thresholds* from 1987, Genette maintains that on the "borderlands" of a text there are several small texts, the paratexts — texts that are situated "around" the "actual" text, around the text "properly speaking".



According to Genette these paratexts can be:

- The name of the author
- Titles
- The please-insert
- Dedications
- Epigraphs
- Prefaces
- Intertitles
- Notes
- Epitexts

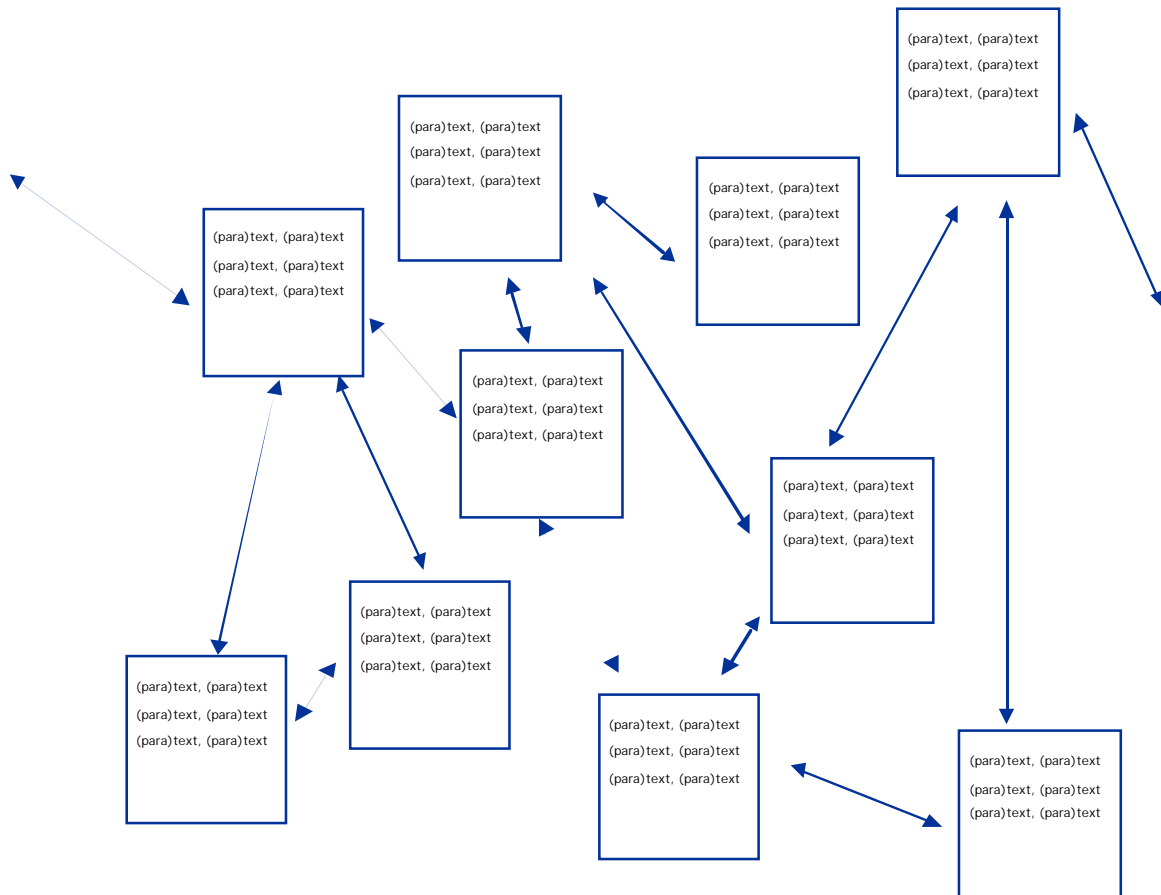
All these small paratexts are vestibules to the "actual" text, to the text "in itself".

PARATEXTS AND WEBSITE?

But what about the paratexts of the website? Unlike literature, printed on paper, we are almost always on a threshold within the website, always in the vestibule — always entering or leaving "the text". In many cases it is not very clear what "the actual text" is — the "text in itself" to which the paratexts are "para".

Of course there are websites that are very close to the printed book and review — with chapters, articles etc.; they are often "copies" of books or reviews (for instance in the format pdf); here, the difference is not that big, although one must not forget that in their digital versions these texts are surrounded by other paratexts than in the printed book or review.

But in all other cases, I guess that a revised version of Genette's idea of paratexts could give us the theoretical tools to analyse the website as: *A text that is nothing but a dynamic collection or mosaic of (para)texts.*



Or, in other words: Paratexts that are mutually one another's "actual" texts; the website as a text that forms a network of (para)texts who are conditioning one another mutually. Thresholds or vestibules that become much more important on the website than in the book, because we are always on or in them — because the materiality of the medium does not mark any exterior limit for the text.

But what keeps all these (para)texts together, when they do not have the "actual" text to which they are normally "para"? The answer to this question might, again, be found within text linguistics, because here we find the theoretical (and analytical) tools that makes it possible to know if — and how — these texts are kept together. Once again, I guess that the concepts of coherence and cohesion become important. Even if the website is always oscillating on the thresholds, in most cases we find one — or more — coherent "world(s)" in or on it (either on the level of

semantics or on the level of expression).

On the website one is almost always confronted with this tension between two movements; two movements of opposite directions, complementary and co-existent.

- On the one hand a movement that "pulls" the textual elements inwards, and that creates cohesion.
- On the other hand a movement that "pulls" the textual elements outwards, and that elucidates the thresholds.

Of course one has to stress that inwards/outwards should be put into quotation marks, because the very distinction between inside and outside is the whole question on the website.

A THEORETICAL PROJECT

These reflexions lead towards a theoretical project where the purpose is to undertake a critical re-reading of text linguistics as well as of the theories on paratexts.

TEXT LINGUISTICS

The range of the concepts in general for the website

Forms of expression	writing	writing, sound, images (moving or not)
Types of media	print	internet

THEORIES ON PARATEXTS

The range of the concepts in general for the website

Forms of expression	writing	writing, sound, images (moving or not)	TEXT
Types of media	print	internet	MEDIUM
Genre	literature	all genres	GENRE

1)

The re-reading of text linguistics should have three aims:

- To discuss the range of the concepts in general, if one wants to use them in relation to the website
- To discuss the possibility of extending them, and this in two ways:
 - To what extent can the same concepts be used for other *forms of expression* than writing, for instance sounds and images (moving or not); in this work the theoretical interlocutors could be theories on radio, film, television and images in general
 - to what extent can the concepts of text linguistics be used for other *types of media* than print media, for instance the internet; maybe general theories of medias can be helpful in this part

2)

And for the theories on paratexts it is almost the same. Here the project should have four aims:

- To discuss the range of the concepts in general, if one wants to use them in relation to the website
- To discuss the possibility of extending them, and this in three ways:
 - To what extent can the same concepts be used for other *forms of expression* than writing, for instance sounds and images (moving or not)
 - To what extent can the concepts of the theories of paratexts be used for other *types of media* than print media, for instance the internet
 - Is it possible to extend the idea of paratext from one *genre* — literature — to all genres?

In other words, a theoretical work that stresses the three concepts that in my view are the key concepts for an understanding the website as text, that is:

- The concept of text
- The concept of medium
- And the concept of genre

A theoretical work that does not not only emphasize these concepts in themselves, but also — and especially — their relations and their mutual conditioning.