Complex Webs:

Theories of Context and the Construction of Realities

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A study of the texts that scholars of rhetoric consider relevant to the discipline’s history is a study of the various ways writers and thinkers have attempted to work out the concepts of truth, knowledge, and reality – that is, engage in ontological epistemology, although theory rejects collapsing the terms – each working within the unavoidable constraints of a particular and unique historical and cultural context. Truth for early rhetoricians might be some variation of an absolute: Aristotle’s highest good; Plato’s/Socrates’s plane of perfection that man could only glimpse; the Church’s absolute administration of Truth, its right by divine appointment. On the other hand, rhetoricians from the earliest glimmering of Enlightenment have postulated truth as subjective, unknowable, constructed; knowledge, then, might be comprised of truths or it might *be* truth, and it might be empirical or subjective. Reality is generally considered contingent and constructed; on what it is contingent and by what it is constructed are the questions rhetoric seeks to applies its theoretical tools.

Context is too simple a term for the complex of factors that theorists examine, describe, and present as the “truth” of rhetoric’s epistemological work, yet it *is* context as it is most broadly understood that Foucault calls in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* a “complex web” (p. 1456) and in “The Order of Discourse” a “complex grid” (p. 1461). Since early modernity, cogent treatments of this complex and unstructured structure (“web;” “grid”) have compounded our notions of the interconnectedness of the components of meaning in contexts of reality, bringing the scholar, one hopes, an ever more thorough if never to be final understanding of contextual power in the practice of language and the creation of the real and true.

Francis Bacon in *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) asserts that “the nature of man doth extremely covet to have somewhat in his understanding fixed and immoveable, and as a rest and support of the mind;” and that to that end, men have “hastened to set down some Principles…” (p. 741). Bacon sought to employ language as a medium through which to establish a definition of fixed and immoveable truth – which he stretches into a matrix woven of “invention” (p. 741), “judgment” (p. 741), “memory” (p. 741), and “virtue” (p. 743) that captures and controls “reason” (p. 743) to comprise a kind of moral knowledge, perhaps the ability to discern what is true. His examination of the components of a moral truth or foundation of reality seems to share with the ancients and Schoolmen a conception of something finite – he doesn’t consider the subjectivity of truth, precisely, or the epistemic power of language—yet it advances that finite object beyond an unquestionable, God-anchored, eternal monolith. Bacon was principally an empiricist, although his “scientific writings” are not in the set of readings considered in this paper; here he also warns, as Bizzell and Herzberg note (p. 737), against empiricism giving way to an unwieldy positivism. His construct of a foundational moral knowledge, though, is significant to theoretical development as an attempt to understand the complexity of context. He acknowledges, in *Novum Organum,* that contextual diversions (“idols” of “cave,” “tribe,” “marketplace,” and so on (pp. 745-747) interfere with a man’s understanding of “truth” (745); while his perspective does not extend to recognizing that context is a material *component* of any truth, it represents the relatively new Enlightenment awareness that truth and reality may have subjective aspects.

Locke in 1690 expressed an aspect of contextual theory that echoes in later treatments of semiotic and linguistic “origins”: he notes that “common use regulates the meaning of words … but nobody [has] an authority to establish the precise signification of words, nor determine to what ideas any one shall annex them.” Further, words did not “even in men that have a mind to understand one another … always stand for the same idea in speaker and hearer” (p. 819). Though Locke, in the excerpt of *An Essay on Human Understanding* that is under consideration here, continued to consider words rather than their contexts, modern theorists recognized as he had that meanings and ideas vary within the realms of their signs’ (words’) materiality. In Locke, however, there is still no real suggestion that the communicative act itself plays a role in reality, yet facets of the dynamic are being examined.

The “common sense realism” that ultimately produced the hamstrung rhetorical perspective applied to students as current-traditional composition theory emerged in and in the English-speaking field dominated the discourse in through much of the nineteenth century. In important ways, the human wish to confine knowledge into *organum*, to classify “everything,” including rhetorical practice, into discrete boxes that can be examined and categorized – a positivist motive – placed the epistemological work of rhetoric on hold. Theorists had become preoccupied – again – with how best to use language in the construction and delivery of narrowly defined truth. Finally, late in the century, Nietzsche pointed out the power of the social in so limiting man’s perspective that “finding ‘truth’ within the realm of reason” neither seeks nor finds “a single point which would be ‘true in itself’” (p. 1175), and, further that “it is originally *language* which works on the construction of concepts” (p. 1177). This brought new focus and vitality to discourse on meaning, knowledge, and truth.

As the twentieth century approached and unfolded, rhetoricians again turned to examination of the role of language itself in the very construction of truth/knowledge, and significant insight has evolved through the work, following Nietzsche, of such theorists as Bakhtin, Richards, Foucault, and Berlin, whose term, “social-epistemic rhetoric” is a useful description of the primary twentieth-century discourse concerning the context(s) in which language fulfills its truth-making role. As linguists had taken on the investigation of words and the speech act, their work was a point of departure for these new and perhaps accidental rhetorical theorists. A focus on semiotics became in their hands a focus on words as not *simply* signs, but on words, their speakers, and their hearers, and on the roles each plays in the creation of knowledge.

With a literary agenda, Bakhtin set out to apply a formalist critique to the written text; the close reading of formalism and the detailed deconstruction that linguists were applying to words and their meanings became Bakhtin’s enormous contribution to the development of a discourse in social-epistemic rhetoric. He recognized that endless classification of words in sterile isolation offered little insight into language’s functions, and examined the word’s function as a sign that is integral to reality *and* “reflect[s] and refract[s] another reality (p. 1211). He named the primary speech act, which could be a word but might also be a lengthy text, the “utterance.” And instead of describing the utterance as though simply a word, a neutral sign (p. 1213), deployed by a speaker to indicate meaning, Bakhtin found that the utterance’s “organizing center” is “not within but outside – in the social milieu surrounding the individual being” (p. 1220). Situation and audience are not merely conditions and receivers, but co-creators of meaning. they make inner speech – prior to utterance – “undergo actualization into some kind of specific outer expression that is directly included into an unverbalized behavioral context, and in that context is amplified by actions, behavior, or verbal responses of other participants” (p. 1222). Meaning, since it does not reside in the word itself or separately in the mind of the speaker or in the mind of the receiver, is “the effect of interaction between speaker and listener produced via the material of a particular sound complex” (p. 1228). The significance of speech for each individual is “shaped and developed in continuous and constant interaction with others’ individual utterances;” all language is “filled with others’ words” (p. 1245). So for Bakhtin, meaning or truth was continually co-constructed, regardless of genre, in the milieu of the individuals involved in communication. This is an important turn in the discourse about context: Bakhtin had exploded the importance of context (milieu; ideology, by which he meant a body of ideas containing the social values and moral beliefs of a group) to the forefront. Neither truly structuralist nor poststructuralist, because he seems to have seen a coherence in context though it could never be made absolute or static, Bakhtin brought forward the discourse on context as the locus of epistemology.

Similarly to Bakhtin, Foucault locates epistemology in context, but brings higher definition to the action of social context. “Statement” is Foucault’s preferred name for the unit of meaning in a discourse, roughly equivalent to Bakhtin’s utterance. As explained in *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* no two statements are the same, and a statement is not necessarily a sentence; in fact it may not be verbal. A sentence *is* a statement (pp. 1450-1452). A statement cannot operate without an “associated domain” – in a broad sense, a specific context. Its domain is delimited by surrounding domains, as a statement is delimited by surrounding statements. The domain or “associated field” forms a “complex web” comprised of 1)all the formulations to which the statement refers, 2)all the formulations whose subsequent possibility is determined by the statement, and 3)al the formulations whose status the statement in question shares (p. 1456). Foucault refers to this web and its components and determinants as “enunciative coexistence” (p. 1456). Finally a statement “must have a material existence” (p. 1457). The statement has a “certain modifiable heaviness” (p. 1459) – it is effaced and reconstituted in use. If it contains truth or knowledge, that material is never permanent.

But this effacement and reconstitution is not, as it seemed in Bakhtin, neutral or simply natural. In “The Order of Discourse,” Foucault attempts to answer the question of what orders or determines or governs the character of a discourse and of discourse in general in a society. Again, he refers to complexity: in *Archaeology* it was a “complex web;” here it is a “complex grid.” “In every society,” he says, “the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized, and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous formidable materiality” (p. 1461). He approaches the complex ordering from a standpoint of exclusion, identifying “three great systems of exclusion” as the forbidden speech, the division of madness, and the will to truth (p. 1462). The will to truth is the most complex and probably the most powerful of these; a society’s will to truth is the overwhelming constructed web of perspective and tests of truth, and it is so powerful that, according to Foucault, “… all that appears to our eyes is a truth conceived in richness, a fecundity, a gentle and insidiously universal force, and in contrast we are unaware of the will to truth, that prodigious machinery designed to exclude” (p. 1463). Discursively, truth can only be what the will to truth allows it to be.

Since early modernity, theorists have seemed to fight their way out of a Truth-centric sphere of imposed concepts of knowledge and reality, much as Galileo fought to dismantle the Earth-centric cosmos on which the Church insisted. It has been difficult, especially early on: the security of a definitive, immutable reality is a powerful force. Foucault suggests that perhaps the concept of language (discourse) as universal mediation is actually a society’s way of *eliding* the reality of discourse’s power: our logophilia is really only a guise for our logophobia, he suggests, and we may actually be fearful of our powerlessness to organize the contextual power of discourse (p. 1470). Knowledge is power, however, and as rhetorical discourse continues its epistemological work, Foucault’s poststructuralist powerlessness may give way to another reality in a newly formed context.

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