The Idea of a Text and the Nature of Textual Meaning

Anders Pettersson

John Benjamins Publishing Company
The Idea of a Text and the Nature of Textual Meaning
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by Anders Pettersson
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https://vk.com/readinglecture

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Series editor’s preface

The Fédération Internationale des Langues et Littératures Modernes (FILLM) is UNESCO’s ceiling organization for scholarship in the field of languages and literatures. The Federation’s main aim is to encourage linguists and literary scholars from all over the world to enter into dialogue with each other.

During the twentieth century, linguistic and literary studies became steadily more professional and specialized, a development which significantly raised the overall standard of research, but which also tended to divide scholars into many separate and often smallish groupings between which communication could be rather sporadic. Over the years this became something of a handicap. New ideas and findings were often slow to cross-fertilize.

Given the rapidly globalizing world of the early twenty-first century, the relative lack of contact between scholars in different subject-areas became a more glaring anomaly than ever. Against this background, FILLM decided to set up its own book series, in the hope of fostering a truly international community of scholars within which a rich diversity of interests would be upheld by a common sense of human relevance.

Books appearing under the label of FILLM Studies in Languages and Literatures deal with languages and literatures world-wide, and are written in a jargon-light English that will be immediately understandable and attractive to any likely reader. Every book presents original findings – including new theoretical, methodological and pedagogical developments – which will be of prime interest to those who are experts in its particular field of discussion, but also seeks to engage readers whose concerns have hitherto lain elsewhere.

Roger D. Sell
Preface

Text and meaning are old research interests of mine, and I have published on these themes for a long time. The present book was written between 2013 and 2016 and began as an attempt to argue for my view of the concept of a text from a new angle. The manuscript successively broadened into a comprehensive account of text and textual meaning, an account which is in line with my previous work but, I believe, goes deeper into the problems and also improves on my earlier ideas on important points.

During the period of writing I had occasion to present some of my new thoughts at conferences or seminars in Beijing, Prague, and Vienna, and also in festschrifts for Eva Hættner Aurelius, Gunilla Lindberg-Wada, Torsten Pettersson, and Petr Kot’átko. The feedback I received during this time was of great value to me.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to Roger D. Sell, the editor of the FILLM Studies series. He did very much for the book, offering frank but friendly criticism and good and concrete advice regarding both style and content. I am happy to have found such an editor. Thanks also to the editor-in-charge at John Benjamins, Isja Conen, for her kindness and efficiency, and to Susan Hendriks and the production team.

The photo of the Meldorf fibula in Chapter 2 is reproduced with the generous permission of Hirzel Verlag, Stuttgart. An agreement with the Financial Times made it possible to reprint the article by Jonathan Soble found in Chapter 4.

Gothenburg, September 2016
Anders Pettersson
A theory of text and textual meaning

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The main aim of this book is to present an analysis of what a text is. Since meaning is a principal aspect of texts, I will also offer an analysis of textual meaning.

By a “text” I mean a linguistic composition or utterance, short or long, oral or written, literary or non-literary – an utterance of “Good morning”; a political speech, an e-mail message, a poem, a newspaper article, a novel, an undergraduate textbook in psychology, and so forth. My analysis is meant to apply to all such entities, even though differences between the oral and the written, and between the literary and the non-literary, will certainly have to be taken into account at many points.

The concepts of text and textual meaning are central to the understanding of verbal communication, and like many concepts fundamental to our thinking they are, in a way, simple, but at the same time complex and puzzling. I will argue that there is an ordinary conception of what a text is, a conception implicit in the way we speak and write of texts. A text is produced by a sender and addressed to a receiver or receivers. A text consists of words and carries meaning. A text can be copied; in that case, the copies are not new texts but, so to speak, avatars of the same text: each correct copy plays the role of the text, giving access to the same words and the same meaning. That is the pattern of thought underlying the ordinary conception of texts, but complications and variations are possible. I will give a fuller description of the ordinary conception of a text in Chapter 1, basing myself on authentic examples of how names of texts are used and on certain analyses by linguists.

The ordinary conception of what a text is makes perfectly good sense in everyday contexts and even in most scholarly or scientific discourse. In my view, however, the ordinary conception has intellectual flaws that show up in theoretical contexts where the nature of language and verbal communication is at stake. My book is, first of all, an attempt to point to those flaws and present a way of removing them.

The heart of our conception of a text is the idea of an utterance, and there is a deep problem with our traditional way of thinking and speaking about utterances.1 Physically speaking, an oral utterance of, say, “Good morning”, is a body

1. The concept of an utterance will be commented on more formally in Chapter 2. I will take an utterance to be, approximately, the original of a text: a text minus its possible copies.
of sound. That remains true even if such an utterance is meant to represent the English words "Good morning" produced as a greeting and is automatically understood in that way by its receiver. It is easy to object, and in a way quite correct, that the physical utterance can be truly described as a verbal structure. But being a verbal structure is not an internal property of the physical utterance. It is a relational property: the physical utterance is only a verbal structure relative to an interpretation, relative to the understanding of it by some individual human.

When interpreted, the body of sound used to utter "Good morning" can be truthfully described as a text in English, a formulaic greeting. In itself, however, the body of sound is "just" physical. It is common to speak as if we could utter words or write down sentences, but what we literally produce when making an oral utterance is physical sound, and what we literally create when forming a written utterance are physical marks on some kind of physical surface. In themselves, utterances are "just" physical entities. After interpretation, they can be characterized as being both physical entities and verbal structures.

The deep problem to which I referred above consists in the common conflation of utterance-after-interpretation with utterance-before-interpretation. Think of the communication model in its simplest form, featuring a sender, a text (for example, "Good morning"), and a receiver. The text must be supposed to be the utterance before interpretation, since it is pictured as a physical something produced by the sender and existing outside sender and receiver, meant to be accessible to the receiver. Ordinarily, however, the text existing outside sender and receiver is at the same time conceived of as if it were the utterance after interpretation. The text is thought to be not only physical, but also a verbal structure, as if the physical utterance were interpreted before interpretation, somehow carrying words and meaning incorporated into its physical body.

Does that matter? Yes. I am convinced that the traditional supposition that texts are, in themselves, physical and verbal at once, has extensive intellectual ramifications. Several problems caused by the ordinary conception of texts will show up during the course of the book, and it is important for me to point them out, for there would be less reason to mend or supplement the ordinary conception if no problems resulted from it. Still, my project is constructive rather than fault-finding: I will be engaged first of all in developing and defending a positive theory of text and textual meaning that overcomes the problems which I perceive in the ordinary conception. Cataloguing those problems is not my highest priority.

Overcoming the problems is, at bottom, very simple. The trick is to respect the important distinctions that the ordinary conception of a text ignores in the interests of superficial simplicity. When we are speaking or thinking of texts, we can be said to be referring, on closer inspection, to one or several of the elements in a cluster of objects. The cluster includes the physical copies – which I will call
“physical exemplars”, since the original utterance is itself one of those exemplars, and it sounds odd to me to call that original a copy. The cluster also contains the sequence of words or sentences – which I will call “the complex of signs”, since other signs than words or sentences are normally also involved, and since the signs do not necessarily form a sequence. Last but not least, the textual meaning also forms part of the cluster. Together, the individual physical exemplars, the complex of signs, and the textual meaning constitute a group of interrelated objects. That group of interrelated objects is the text, according to what I call “the cluster conception of the text”, which I am recommending instead of the ordinary conception, in contexts where clarity and precision are particularly needed, for example in theorizing about verbal communication.

It is worth emphasizing that the cluster conception of a text has not only advantages but also drawbacks. The cluster conception may be more intellectually coherent than the ordinary conception but is more cumbersome to use. The ordinary conception is illogical but handy, and I am certainly not suggesting it should be replaced with the cluster conception across the board. Such a recommendation would be highly impractical – and of course entirely unrealistic.

The cluster conception of texts breaks with one quite fundamental traditional idea about texts: that they are unitary objects. According to the cluster conception of a text there are “only” physical exemplars, a complex of signs, and a textual meaning. There is nothing that could be called the text itself, except for the cluster as a whole. For that reason, references to texts-as-ordinarily-conceived cannot simply be replaced with references to cluster texts. For example, we are used to thinking of texts as forming part of the simple communication model: a sender produces a text and makes it accessible to a receiver. That mode of thought fits the text-as-ordinarily-conceived but not the cluster text: one can read or hear a text as ordinarily conceived, but not a cluster text. Not the cluster text as such, that is, but naturally the physical exemplars.

I still find it reasonable to call a cluster text a text. For me, the idea of an utterance is at the heart of the ordinary notion of a text. An utterance as ordinarily conceived is in reality something quite complex: a physical entity (sound, or marks), signs, and meaning. A text as ordinarily conceived can also comprise copies of the utterance in the form of other physical entities. The idea of a belonging-together of all the entities just mentioned appears important for our understanding of verbal communication, and that belonging-together is preserved in the cluster conception of a text. As will be shown more graphically in the next chapter, the cluster conception contains the same components as the ordinary conception but structures them differently.

The belonging-together of the exemplars, the signs, and the meaning is essential in my conception of the cluster text. The word “text” is not essential, but I find
the designation informative rather than misleading and am not intent on giving it up. I do not in fact simply abolish the ordinary conception of a text; I rethink it. Indeed, my theory of what a text is should be construed as including not only the concept of a cluster text but also the ideas of how the ordinary conception of a text is constructed, what its strengths and weaknesses are, and how the cluster conception of the text overcomes those weaknesses.

Meaning is of course an absolutely crucial component of a text: conveying meaning is the very raison d’être of an utterance. The problem I have referred to as a deep problem with our way of thinking and speaking of utterances affects the idea of textual meaning to a high degree. If the exemplar that a receiver encounters is thought to be not only something physical but also something that contains words and has a meaning, textual meaning must be something objective in the sense of something already in place in the exemplar when it reaches the receiver. But that cannot be true. Let us think of a poem. The author will typically have produced a physical manuscript and will no doubt have had an idea, vaguer or more precise, about the interpretation of that manuscript with respect to the signs intended to be represented and the meaning intended to be conveyed. A reader will read the poem – some physical exemplar – and develop an understanding, vaguer or more precise, of its meaning. The sender’s meaning and the receiver’s meaning may not coincide. But there will be no objective meaning to refer to. How could there be? Where would such objective meaning come from? The most immediately appealing alternative might be to suppose that linguistic conventions, or language itself, can supply the text with objective meaning, whether determinate meaning – as philosophers often think – or indeterminate meaning – as literary theorists often believe. That linguistic conventions or language itself supplies objective meaning is something I shall be denying. But the question of the possibility of objective meaning will emerge, and be discussed, again and again in my book.

What I have said here about texts and textual meaning needs much elaboration before it can be called a concrete and graspable theory. I will use the next five chapters to provide such clarification and detail. I will further explain the ordinary conception of a text and, at much greater length, take a closer look at the cluster conception of a text, its constituent elements, and their interrelations. Chapter 1 will refine my description of the ordinary conception of the text and adduce evidence for the adequacy of the description; I will also further explain the relationship between the ordinary conception and the cluster one. Chapters 2–5 are devoted to more in-depth discussion of the components of cluster texts: physical exemplars; complexes of signs; textual meanings. The main theory is presented in Chapters 2–3. In Chapters 4 and 5 I comment on the meaning of three authentic texts.
Many texts get mentioned in my book, but only a few become the subject of closer scrutiny. I will use a small number of texts as key examples for illustration – and for reflection, since many theoretically important complications in connection with texts only become visible when concrete texts are given sustained and thoughtful attention. There will be examples of both oral and written texts, and of both literary and non-literary ones. Two written texts are quoted in full and discussed carefully: Emily Dickinson’s poem “I heard a fly buzz when I died” (Dickinson 1998a, Dickinson 1998b) and a news story from the Financial Times about the Japanese town Namie, which was abandoned after the Fukushima disaster (Soble 2013). I also discuss an electronic text, Edward Falco’s Chemical Landscapes Digital Tales (Falco 2016). My fourth really important example of a written text is the inscription on a Germanic fibula from around 50 CE: four letters or four runes whose interpretation is uncertain (see Düwel and Gebühr 1981).

While my key examples of texts in writing are authentic, my major examples of oral texts are not: I introduce a couple of invented oral one-sentence utterances, much in the way that linguists often do, and provide them with possible interactional contexts. The reader coming to this book from literary studies may complain that more texts, and texts of yet more types, should have been drawn in, but I cannot really find that necessary for my purposes. My aim is to present and defend a theory about texts and textual meaning. Making interesting comments on many authentic texts of different types does not necessarily contribute to a general theoretical understanding of what a text is, or of textual meaning; instead, loss of focus is an obvious danger. Analyses of texts that somehow contradict or modify my theory would be of real interest, but not analyses of further texts that do not.

The second part of my book, Chapters 6–9, has a different character. My view of texts and my view of textual meaning both diverge from currently prevailing analyses in linguistics, philosophy of language, analytic aesthetics, and literary theory. I need to explain those differences and meet the main arguments that are raised, or can be raised, against theories like mine. Broadly speaking, linguistics and the philosophy of language are close in their understanding of these phenomena, while analytic aesthetics comes to the problems from a different angle, and contemporary literary theory, with its markedly poststructuralist background, diverges radically from the standpoints that dominate in linguistics and philosophy. I will discuss the approaches and arguments of linguistics and the philosophy of language in Chapter 6 and those of literary theory in Chapter 8. Where texts are concerned, analytic aesthetics deals, in principle, only with literary texts. As already indicated, however, I will see literary texts as sharing the general nature of texts with non-literary ones. Analytic aestheticians have advanced sophisticated ideas about the meaning of literary texts and about their ontology, and those theories deserve extended consideration in my context here. Chapter 7 deals with
analytic-aesthetic approaches to textual meaning and Chapter 9 with analytic-aesthetic views of what kind of thing a text is.

My ambition in Chapters 6–9 is to defend my theory against the most important arguments that are, or can be, directed at such theories from the differing vantage points of those different disciplines. It is important for me to show that the arguments discussed reflect influential and widespread standpoints, so throughout these chapters I will refer to representative sources in which one can find those standpoints expressed. Furthermore, in order to make the arguments fully comprehensible, I will also sketch the general theoretical background that underlies them. All this may give the impression that I actually attempt a comprehensive survey of contemporary thinking about texts and textual meaning in linguistics, philosophy, and literary theory, but that is not the case. Complaints that the thinking of such-and-such important figures is missing, would therefore be out of place. What would be relevant would be references to other really important objections against my standpoints, objections that I may have overlooked.

The overall structure of my book, then, is that of a successively developing argument. I introduce a theory of text and textual meaning, elaborate the theory in more detail, and defend it against foreseeable objections. At the very end, some concluding remarks sum up the main points of my argument.

I said that my theory of text and textual meaning departs from dominant ways of thinking about these matters, and in its concrete shape my theory is, I believe, original. But there are, of course, vitally important sources of inspiration behind the theory: certain aspects of linguistic, philosophical, and literary-theoretical thinking in general, but also quite specific analyses by individual thinkers. The first to refuse to view texts as unitary objects was Richard Rudner in a now classical article from 1950. Michael Reddy (1993) has offered a well-known analysis of the system of metaphors underlying our ordinary way of thinking and speaking about communication, a system which he calls “the conduit metaphor”. Roy Harris (1998) has emphatically maintained that textual meaning can only be sender’s meaning or receiver’s meaning. Further, John Searle (1995) has argued that one should distinguish clearly between brute and institutional facts, and that our description of the world is subject to what he calls conceptual relativism. His ontological ideas are important for me not least when I defend my theory against arguments designed to prove that texts must be unitary objects. I will come back to the four analyses just mentioned in due course.

2. It is also worth emphasizing that the history leading up to today’s situation, e.g., the history of hermeneutics, does not really form part of my subject. I am writing about contemporary theories. However, I feel free to refer to their prehistory whenever that seems called for.
The question of what a text is has been a standing interest of mine since the mid-1970s – first mainly as the question of what a literary text is – and I have written about the problem many times: in a monograph in Swedish (Pettersson 1981) and then, in English, in chapters of other monographs (Pettersson 1990, 2000, 2012) and in articles from the 1980s (Pettersson 1984) until the present (for example, Pettersson 2009 and 2015). While my points of departure have remained largely similar over the years, my views have also developed in significant ways. This book is a comprehensive account of my present understanding of the problem.
PART I.

The theory explained
CHAPTER 1

The ordinary conception of a text and the cluster conception

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This chapter offers a more comprehensive introduction to my theory of texts. The focus will be on the ordinary conception, but I will also have more to say about the cluster conception and the relationship between the two ideas. Ontology will form a third theme. I will explain in what sense I believe that texts exist and in what sense I do not.

It is helpful to have a specific text at the back of one’s mind when theorizing about the properties of texts. Emily Dickinson’s “I heard a fly buzz when I died”, a poem written in the early 1860s, will play an important part as an example in my book. “I heard a fly buzz when I died” is simply the poem’s first line – the text is untitled, and from now on I will refer to it as “Dickinson 591”, following R.W. Franklin’s numbering of Dickinson’s poems (Dickinson 1998b: 587). This is the version of Dickinson’s poem that I will use:1

I heard a Fly buzz ‒ when I died ‒
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air ‒
Between the Heaves of Storm ‒

The Eyes around ‒ had wrung them dry ‒
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset ‒ when the King
Be witnessed ‒ in the Room ‒

I willed my Keepsakes ‒ Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable ‒ and then it was
There interposed a Fly ‒

With Blue ‒ uncertain ‒ stumbling Buzz ‒
Between the light ‒ and me ‒
And then the Windows failed ‒ and then
I could not see to see ‒

1. The version can be described as a synthesis of R.W. Franklin’s text (Dickinson 1998b: 587) and that of Thomas H. Johnson (Dickinson 1998a: 223–224). My reasons for choosing this compromise solution will be explained in the next chapter.
In Chapter 2, and particularly in Chapter 5, I will pay closer attention to Dickinson’s poem as physical utterance, signs, and meaning. In this chapter, “Dickinson 591” will function mainly as a more or less substitutable example of a text, an example helping to make my reasoning easier to grasp.

**Two conceptions of what a text is**

When I observed that Dickinson wrote “Dickinson 591” in the early 1860s, and that the poem’s first line reads “I heard a fly buzz when I died”, I made use of the ordinary conception of a text. I described Dickinson as creating a specific object, her poem “591”, an object containing words and meaning and potentially available to a reader or readers, as in Figure 1.

![Figure 1](image1.png)

**Figure 1.** A simple communication model; “Dickinson 591” viewed according to the ordinary conception of a text

But the situation can also be accounted for in more elementary terms. What Dickinson was materially doing was to produce ink marks with her pen on a piece of “laid, cream, lightly ruled” paper (see Dickinson 1998b: 588), thus modifying that physical object. True, Dickinson must have had ideas about what letters and other signs she meant those ink marks to represent. She will no doubt also have had ideas about what she wanted to describe through the resulting linguistic formulations and convey to a potential reader. Yet all those ideas remained in her mind, and necessarily so: being purely mental entities, ideas cannot literally be attached to a piece of paper.

If one emphasizes these material circumstances, one arrives at a different perspective on what Dickinson did, and that is the perspective I adopt when building up the cluster conception of a text. On the cluster-conception account, what Dickinson prepared for a possible reader was not a text as ordinarily conceived, but a physical exemplar of a text, as in Figure 2.

![Figure 2](image2.png)

**Figure 2.** A simple communication model; “Dickinson 591” viewed according to the cluster conception of a text

According to the ordinary conception, one can find the words and the meaning of “Dickinson 591” contained in the box in the middle. Viewed in the cluster-conception perspective, however, the box in the middle is a physical object, and the
words and the meaning figure as ideas in the heads of Dickinson and her reader – ideas of words and meaning are consequently found in the box on the left and in the box on the right. It is easy to see that Figures 1 and 2 present considerably different pictures of what goes on in verbal communication.

The text as such, “Dickinson 591”, is manifestly present in Figure 1 but conspicuously absent from Figure 2 – a physical exemplar of “Dickinson 591” is naturally not the same as “Dickinson 591” itself. According to the cluster conception, what we are used to regarding as a text is in fact not a unitary object but a cluster of objects. All physical exemplars of the text form part of the cluster, as does the meaning of the text and the complex of signs associated with the text. Figure 3 offers a basic overview of what a text is according to the cluster conception.

Although distinct, the objects in the cluster are closely related: with some simplification one can say that the meaning is the meaning of the complex of signs, and that the complex of signs is the one represented by each of the physical exemplars.

One may think that the talk of a cluster text tacitly builds on the ordinary conception of a text and presupposes that conception, but that is in fact not so. The cluster text can be defined wholly independently of the ordinary idea, for example by taking the original physical utterance, whether extant or not, as its point of departure and defining the other physical exemplars as the copies of (the copies of …) that original, the complex of signs as the complex of signs represented by the original, and the meaning as the meaning represented by that complex of signs.

The ordinary conception and the cluster conception both include the physical exemplars, the signs, and the meaning, but they do not structure those components in the same manner. The ordinary conception of the text differs from the cluster conception first and foremost by portraying the text as a single, unitary object instead of as a cluster of different objects. One could say that the ordinary conception associates the complex of signs and the meaning and views them both as being integrated with a physical object, as illustrated in Figure 4. Each physical exemplar is a manifestation of the text so conceived. In the ordinary conception physical exemplars, signs, and meaning are thus being fused together rather than being separated, as they are in the cluster conception.
Figure 4. A text according to the ordinary conception

Such as I have just described it, the ordinary conception of the text is clearly illogical. It portrays the text as being at once physical and non-physical, and the possible existence of avatars makes it seem as if the text is potentially both one and many. But the ordinary conception makes up for its lack of logic by being eminently economic and versatile, and that is enough to make it very useful in most contexts.

The ordinary conception of the text in practical use

My characterization of the ordinary conception of the text is original at least in its concrete details and stands in need of further support. In this section I will supply some evidence for my account by commenting on a few actual examples of how texts are referred to in ordinary discourse. That will also give me an opportunity to illustrate the practical usefulness of the ordinary conception in contexts that do not demand any higher degree of theoretical precision.

Consider, first, the following remark by David Damrosch about Orhan Pamuk’s novel Snow (Kar):

Without translation, the novelist Orhan Pamuk would be unknown outside his native Turkey; thanks to translations, his haunting novel Kar can be found in Mexico City airport under the title Nieve, bought in Berlin bookshops as Schnee and ordered from Amazon.com in its English version, Snow.

(Damrosch 2009: 65)

The novel Kar can obviously be found, in its entirety, in many places at once. That illustrates my point that the ordinary conception views every exemplar of a text as an avatar of the text, making the text appear to be one and many at the same time.

It would have been easy for Damrosch to write that copies of Pamuk’s haunting novel Kar can be found in Mexico City airport, et cetera. That would have turned his observation into one about physical exemplars of a text rather than about a text as ordinarily conceived. But the gain in logic would have come at a small practical and stylistic cost: the more logical phrasing consonant with the cluster conception would have been marginally longer and a tiny bit more pedantic.
Chapter 1. The ordinary conception of a text and the cluster conception

My next example is taken from the same book by Damrosch. This time the text under consideration is Voltaire’s *Candide*.

Interestingly, Voltaire actually presented his book as a translation from the outset. Rather than publish his religiously and sexually scandalous tale under his own name, he had the title page declare that *Candide, ou l’optimisme* was “Traduit de l’Allemand de Mr. le Docteur RALPH” (translated from the German of Dr. Ralph). (Damrosch 2009: 68)

In the quote *Candide* comes across as being a physical book: only a physical book can have a title page. (Note the singular: Damrosch is speaking of *Candide* itself, not the many copies of the text, so that he speaks of a title page rather than title pages.) Obviously, Voltaire’s text also contains words (for example, “Traduit de l’Allemand …”) and meaning: what was religiously and sexually scandalous cannot have been the physical book or the linguistic material but the meaning, the contents of Voltaire’s narrative and his authorial attitude towards those contents. This second quote from Damrosch offers a very good illustration of the tripartite nature of the text as ordinarily conceived and corroborates the picture given in Figure 4.

Here, too, the substance of Damrosch’s observations could certainly have been expressed in the more logical terms of the cluster conception, with every reference to *Candide* as a genuine, unitary object excluded. Damrosch’s remarks might have been formulated in some such way as the following:

Interestingly, Voltaire actually presented the cluster text he initiated as a translation from the start. Each correct exemplar of Voltaire’s *Candide* [what makes an exemplar a correct one?] has a title page, and if read as they should be read [according to which principles?] the physical marks on that title page will be understood as representing the French words “Traduit …”. If construed as they should be construed [according to which principles?] the French words and sentences emerging from a reading of the exemplar will produce a meaning that was religiously and sexually scandalous in Voltaire’s times. Rather than figuring openly as the author behind the cluster text, Voltaire therefore had the complex of signs represented on the title page represent a meaning according to which the cluster text was a translation from a German original produced by Dr. Ralph.

But now the cluster-conception formulations have become much more convoluted than the ordinary-conception ones, and they also bring several theoretical complications into view – complications that are altogether real but hardly possible to face in Damrosch’s context.

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2. “Initiated”, or “founded”, but perhaps not “created”, for the cluster text keeps changing over time due to the accretion of new physical exemplars (and also of new complexes of signs and new textual meanings, though that is a matter for later chapters here).
I have been using written, literary texts as examples. Before proceeding, I would like to show that oral texts and non-literary texts can also be referred to in the terms of the ordinary conception. On 28 January 2014 President Obama delivered that year’s State of the Union address, speaking to a joint session of the United States Congress. The next day Paul Steinhauser wrote on the CNN web page:

Less than half of those surveyed who watched President Barack Obama’s State of the Union address reacted very positively to it, a new poll showed.

And while the President emphasized in his speech on Tuesday night that he’s willing to bypass Congress and take executive action to accomplish his goals, a CNN/ORC International survey also indicated that only three in 10 said Obama should make unilateral changes to deal with major issues.

During his address, the President told lawmakers that “I’m eager to work with all of you. But America does not stand still, and neither will I. So wherever and whenever I can take steps without legislation to expand opportunity for more American families, that’s what I’m going to do.”

But two-thirds of those questioned in the poll said that Obama should seek bipartisan compromise when dealing with major issues, with just 30% advocating the President make unilateral changes.

(Steinhauser 2014. I have suppressed a superfluous “a” after “And” at the beginning of the second paragraph.)

The now familiar pattern emerges again. Steinhauser casts the speech by President Obama as a physical event: the speech could be watched, and it had a duration in time. But the speech is also described as containing meaning, like the announcement “in” the speech of the President’s willingness to bypass Congress and take executive action to accomplish his goals. With regard to the complex of signs belonging to the speech, Steinhauser cites three sentences in full. It is clear that he firmly associates those sentences with the physical speech, but it is not explicitly stated that the sentences too were “in” the speech (although such phrasing would have been entirely idiomatic). The content of Steinhauser’s statements can very well be expressed in cluster-conception language, but I trust my readers to be able to construct such formulations themselves at this point. Cluster-conception formulations will inevitably become more circumstantial than those actually used by Steinhauser.

**Reddy on the metaphors structuring the ordinary understanding of communication**

Instead of offering more examples of how the ordinary conception of the text leaves its mark on ordinary discourse, I would now like to place the ordinary conception
in a larger perspective. In this section I will attend to the fact that the ordinary conception of a text forms part of a more comprehensive conceptual framework: the ordinary conception of verbal communication. Then, in the next section, I will note that the illogical character of the ordinary conception of the text is by no means unique: ordinary language makes use of many notions where similar intellectual problems arise – or would arise, if we were to pay close attention. In both cases I will be reviewing analyses by linguists. Apart from placing the ordinary conception in a larger perspective, the two linguistic analyses also underpin my own concrete description of the ordinary conception of the text – not in every detail, and I will comment on that too, but in vital aspects.

Michael Reddy has demonstrated that a small system of metaphors underlies the way of speaking about communication which ordinary language holds in readiness for us (Reddy 1993). Reddy’s analysis concerns communication in general, but he concentrates on verbal communication. He takes care to indicate that he is speaking specifically of English – though his observations clearly have much broader application – and that there are also certain verbal formulas which do not rely on the system of metaphors in question.

To put it simply, Reddy points out that our language portrays senders as conveying mental content (thoughts or feelings, for instance) to receivers by packaging the content in external signals (such as words, sentences, or a text). The signals go to the receivers, who are then supposed to be able to unpack the contents. (Think of locutions like “I have to struggle to get any meaning at all out of the sentence.”)  

As Reddy underscores, the ordinary-language description of verbal communication is obviously metaphorical. We may say things like “It is very difficult to put this concept into words” (Reddy 1993: 190), but of course thoughts cannot literally be put into words. Thoughts are not material entities, and already for that reason they cannot be taken out of our heads. Nor do texts have insides into which thoughts or similar things can be inserted – even if sentences like “Dickinson cram incredible amounts of meaning into her poems” (Reddy 1993: 191) seem to suggest otherwise.

Reddy also observes that the system of metaphors is often used in a vaguer fashion than this. In the variant which he calls “the minor framework” (Reddy 1993: 170) it remains unclear exactly where the thoughts or feelings go when they leave the sender. The mental content then seems to depart into some indefinite space outside sender and receiver: we can say things such as “I feel some responsibility

3. One of Reddy’s examples (Reddy 1993: 192). Reddy offers 141 idioms related to the relevant system of metaphors; the quoted sentence is used to exemplify one of those. The sentences presented as examples are apparently constructed by Reddy himself – in any case, they are not referenced – but are obviously meant to be accepted as altogether normal English sentences.
to get these ideas out where they can do some good” (Reddy 1993: 194), leaving it open where that particular place may be located. It will then also remain unclear by what paths the thoughts and feelings from non-mental space enter the minds of the receivers, as they seem to have the capacity to do – think of a sentence like “Marsha has obviously not internalized these ideas” (Reddy 1993: 197).

Reddy calls the system of metaphors as a whole “the conduit metaphor”, because it makes meaning seem to pass without resistance, as in a conduit or a pipeline, from sender to receiver. In reality, says Reddy, readers or listeners cannot just unpack a content but will have to resort to “reconstruction and hypothesis testing” based on the physical signals addressed to them (Reddy 1993: 186). Reddy is convinced that the conduit metaphor affects our actual thinking about language, instilling in us a fallacious idea about communication, and he believes that this has serious social implications. He also gives examples, taken from information theory, of how the conduit metaphor creeps into serious theorizing, blurring its picture of what goes on when people communicate.

Reddy’s focus is on the understanding of communication at large, and the understanding of what a text is comes in more indirectly, while in my own project the priorities are reversed. But questions about texts, meaning, and verbal communication are of course intimately related, and Reddy’s analysis of the ordinary-language picture of communication places the ordinary understanding of what a text is against a larger background. The text as ordinarily conceived can be said to figure in Reddy’s analysis as the container that the sender fills with mental content to be extracted by the receiver. Reddy’s discussion of the system of metaphors that he has revealed demonstrates that the ordinary conception of the text forms an integral part of an overall understanding of verbal communication.

Reddy’s path-breaking analysis supports my general picture of the ordinary conception of the text. I do not, however, agree with all aspects of Reddy’s analysis. I would like to distance myself from his views on at least three points.

First, Reddy writes about verbal communication as if it were all a question of understanding the sender’s communicative intentions; he does not criticize the conduit metaphor in that specific respect. As I will explain in later chapters, I find such a perspective on textual meaning too narrow.

Second, Reddy apparently wants to counteract the influence of the conduit metaphor by recommending that we stop talking in conduit-metaphor terms. He makes no straightforward statement to that effect, but the general spirit of his essay goes in that direction, and to “discard the conduit metaphor” and “create new language” figures there as a difficult but seemingly positive option (Reddy 1993: 181). For my own part, I am more prepared to think that the metaphor also has important advantages, and I have no qualms about speaking in terms of the ordinary conception of a text when that is clearly an innocent thing to do. What I find
important is to recognize the conventionality of that conception and to be ready to use some other model when needed.

Third, I do not agree with Reddy’s more exact understanding of what a text as ordinarily conceived is. Reddy observes that ordinary language describes a verbal expression, like a poem or a phrase, as being at once a physical signal and a meaning, and I agree. However, he misses the distinction between a physical signal and a complex of signs, speaking of words and sentences as if they were physical entities. He also ignores the fact that texts can exist in many exemplars.4

Cruse on words that allow for facets

Incompatible elements are brought together in the ordinary conception of a text: physical matter, abstract signs, abstract meaning, the singular and the plural. This is not particularly surprising: everyday language favours the practical rather than the logical. Alan Cruse has described a relatively comprehensive group of everyday concepts in which phenomena with different kinds of being are “somehow fused into a single conceptual unit” (Cruse 2004: 114). His main example is the concept of a book. A book can be a physical book volume, as in “Please put this book back on the shelf”, or it can be, as Cruse writes, “the text which the physical object embodies”, as in “I find this book unreadable” (Cruse 2004: 112; Cruse’s examples). According to Cruse, a book as ordinarily conceived is both things at once. This observation obviously supports my own analysis of the ordinary conception of a text.5

What interests Cruse is not the concept of a book as such, but the fact that in instances like the word “book” we do not have two senses of the word but one composite, illogical sense. Cruse argues that if a word really possesses more than one meaning, we will have to choose between its diverging senses when we en-

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4. See Reddy 1993: 178–181. For example, Reddy considers that sentences like “The poem has five lines and forty words” (178) refer to physical signals, while they obviously refer to complexes of signs; words are not physical, nor are lines when taken in the sense in which the word “lines” is being used in the quotation. Also, in discussing the sentence “We have several poems to deal with today” (180) he reasons as if one must be confronted with several physical texts simply because one is confronted with several physical signals. But different physical signals can of course be physical exemplars of the same text.

5. Note, though, that Cruse’s own term “text” covers both signs and meaning. While Reddy does not distinguish between physical inscriptions and verbal signs when speaking of texts in my sense, Cruse does not, in this connection, differentiate between verbal signs and meanings. Just like Reddy, Cruse is also uninterested in the fact that texts in my sense can exist in many exemplars.
counter the word in an utterance. A chair can be a piece of furniture meant for sitting on, or it can be, for example, a professorship. In the case of an utterance like “I need a new chair” (not Cruse’s example), sender and receiver have to choose between the alternatives, which are mutually exclusive – “antagonistic”, with Cruse’s term. True, both alternatives can be activated in one and the same sentence but then the result, says Cruse, will be a pun. He exemplifies this with the sentence “When the Chair in the Philosophy Department became vacant, the Appointments Committee sat on it for six months” (Cruse 2004: 106; Cruse’s italics suppressed). We can, however, say “Put the book back on the shelf; it’s quite unreadable” (Cruse’s example), speaking, in reality, of both the book volume and its meaning in the same sentence, without giving rise to any humorous effects. This goes to show that the concept of a book is a single conceptual unit here, unlike the various concepts of a chair. Cruse speaks of two “facets” (“tome” and “text”), not of two different senses, in connection with the duality of the concept of a book (Cruse 2004: 112).

The word “book” is far from being Cruse’s only example of a word allowing for facets. Cruse mentions analogous words like “speech” and “CD”, but also words like “bank”, “school”, and “university”. In the concept of a bank, for instance, the premises, the personnel, and the institution constitute a single conceptual unit (Cruse 2004: 114). Designations of countries also allow for facets. Thus Britain is both the geographic area (“Britain lies under one metre of snow”), the population (“Britain mourns the death of the Queen’s corgi”), and the political entity (“Britain has declared war on San Marino”). Cruse thinks, correctly, I believe, that such different aspects of a country can be activated in the same sentence without creating the impression of a pun: “Britain, despite the fact that it is lying under one metre of snow and is mourning the death of the Queen’s corgi, has declared war on San Marino” (Cruse 2004: 115; all the examples are Cruse’s). Britain, as portrayed by ordinary language, is then a fusion of terrain, people, and political institutions.

I have reviewed Cruse’s analysis here because I believe that it, too, helps put the ordinary conception of a text into perspective. In my opinion, it would be quixotic to want to ban concepts like “book” or “Britain” from our language. On the other hand, it is important not to take those concepts too seriously. The strange fusions which they denote should not be thought of as really existing objects of a particularly intriguing kind. The same observations could be made about the ordinary concept of a text.

It should be mentioned that Cruse himself does not in fact view names of texts in my sense as allowing for facets. “David Copperfield can be loosely described as the name of a book“, he writes, “but strictly speaking it is the name of a [TEXT], not of a [TOME]” (Cruse 2004: 113). On that point I disagree with Cruse’s analysis. It is true, of course, that David Copperfield is not to be identified with any single book
volume. Nevertheless, *David Copperfield*, as ordinarily conceived, certainly has a physical side and does not consist solely of words and meaning. See, for example, the following quotation, in which Philip Collins reflects on the fact that *David Copperfield* was first published in serialized form.

A serial novelist’s basic strategy must, obviously, include inducements to the reader to buy the next instalment: and this was no bad discipline for a Victorian multi-plot storyteller, and was one reason why experienced serialists like Dickens developed a strong narrative thrust. These features of serialization help also to explain why *David Copperfield* has the “blending”, the variety, indicated above – for a final point about this form of serialization was that the novel had to be lengthy. Dickens was sticking here to the pattern he had invented and popularized in his first novel, *Pickwick Papers* (1836–7), twenty Numbers with 32 closely-printed pages each.

(Collins 1977: 25–26)

According to the ordinary conception, texts do have physical manifestations. We have seen that Pamuk’s *Nieve* can be bought in Mexico City airport and that *Candide* has a title page. *David Copperfield*, too, has pages: the twenty Numbers with 32 pages each is a pattern found “in” *Pickwick Papers* and repeated in the case of *David Copperfield*. Only physical objects can have pages – while the blending and variety are of course aspects of the novel’s meaning.

**The complementarity of the ordinary conception of the text and the cluster conception**

This chapter has mainly concerned the ordinary conception of the text. I have described a text as ordinarily conceived as being physical and non-physical at once, a characterization supported by the analyses I have reviewed by Reddy and Cruse. In finer details I diverged from Reddy and Cruse: I insisted on distinguishing between physical exemplars, complexes of signs, and textual meanings. Given a physical utterance, it is still not clear what complex of signs the physical utterance represents. Given the complex of signs represented, it is still not clear what textual meaning the complex of signs represents. That is why distinctions between physical exemplars, complexes of signs, and textual meanings have important applications. But for the ordinary conception, of course, the text is simply the text, having its physical and non-physical aspects. I have also noted that the possibility of copying introduces an extra layer of complications in the ordinary conception: the possibility of many different physical entities all “being” the same text in different manifestations. We have seen all these features of the ordinary conception reflected in actual usage.
The cluster conception can dissolve the inner contradictions in the ordinary conception by making the important distinctions not observed by the latter. However, simply discarding the ordinary conception does not seem to be an option. The ordinary conception is not only firmly rooted in ordinary language but also genuinely helpful because of its intellectual economy and its versatility. On the other hand, as we will see later, ignoring its lack of logic will be costly in theoretical contexts. I have suggested that the obvious choice is to go on using the ordinary conception, while at the same time being aware of its peculiarities and ready to shift to a more logical alternative, like the cluster conception, when serious theorizing is on the agenda.

This may sound like a disappointingly relativistic recommendation. Many readers may want to ask why I do not seek to establish what a text really is. In my opinion, however, there is nothing that a text really is in the absolute sense implied by that question. Neither the ordinary conception, nor the cluster conception, nor any other conception offers the one and only true picture of the underlying communicative realities. Many different descriptions can be given of the realities in question, and the descriptions can all be true, taken on their own terms.

To make this claim understandable, I would like to draw an analogy with maps. We all know that there are many ways of mapping one and the same area, and that the different cartographic representations may all be true to the facts. Take the representation of a city like Gothenburg (Göteborg), the place on the Swedish west coast where I am now living. If I look at the map of Sweden in the encyclopaedia in my private library, I find Gothenburg represented as a small grey circle with the name “Göteborg”, boldfaced, beside it. In my big city map of Gothenburg, however, there is nothing remotely like the grey circle. Central Gothenburg is represented as consisting of a network of streets, waterways, squares, blocks of buildings, bridges, industrial areas, parks, et cetera, all those entities being associated with their separate names or street numbers. The grey circle has disappeared in favour of a huge cluster of more specific entities.

My intended analogy is no doubt already clear to my readers, but I will still spell it out in order not to be misunderstood. Gothenburg depicted as a grey circle is somewhat like the text according to the ordinary conception, and Gothenburg as represented in the city map is somewhat like the text according to the cluster conception. Neither representation is wrong – as far as I understand, both the encyclopaedia and the city map have got things entirely right, each after its own fashion – but the two representations are very different. They are different because they were made to fulfil different purposes. The map-of-Sweden representation is excellent if you wish to understand the general geographic location of the city. It is useless, however, if you want to move around in Gothenburg: then you will need something like the city map with its richness of detail. It would be pointless to ask
what the real representation of Gothenburg on a map is like. There is no one and only true way of representing Gothenburg on a map. Very many different maps of Gothenburg can be constructed, each of them true or untrue when taken on its own terms and each of them suited more or less well to the particular purpose motivating it.

Similarly, there is no one and only true representations of the realities to which we are referring when thinking, speaking, or writing about texts. The ordinary conception of the text and the cluster conception are representations suited for different purposes. The ordinary conception works wonderfully well as long as no special precision is asked for; in such situations its very superficiality is positively helpful. But if theoretical accuracy is needed, the ordinary conception will be a liability. A more detailed representation of the phenomena, something like the cluster conception, will be required.

I am not certain that these remarks are enough to lay to rest the question of what a text really is. Perhaps they should not be, for there is certainly more to that question than I have so far acknowledged. The question points towards ontology, towards the metaphysical theory of what ultimately exists.

Ontological questions play a slightly ambiguous role in my book. On the one hand, I do not regard my theory of texts and textual meaning as being intimately related to ontological questions, and I believe that the points I make can be understood and appropriated by people with very different ontological beliefs. On the other hand, ontological considerations cannot justifiably be kept out of the book. My theory of texts and textual meaning does rest on certain ontological or meta-ontological suppositions, and highlighting those suppositions can help to make my theory clearer. Also, purely ontological arguments have in fact been directed against theories of texts or of textual meaning of the kind I propose, and I will take up such objections for discussion later in the book. Some ontological background will be needed in order to make the assumptions behind the objections understandable and explain why I do not share the assumptions. For such reasons, I will now embark on a brief discussion of ontological matters.

Ontological considerations and the question of how texts exist

Ontology is the theory of what exists. It has been customary to suppose that three kinds of entity make up that which exists: physical entities, like stones; mental entities, like thoughts; and abstract entities, like numbers. A physical entity, for example Table Mountain, can be found in time and space and is, in principle, accessible to everybody. A mental entity, such as a daydream, is found in time and space but is located in some individual person’s mind and, in principle, private
to that person. An abstract entity, like the number eight, cannot be found in time and space. It makes no sense to ask where the number eight is located, or when it came into existence. The nature of the physical, the mental, and the abstract are all disputed. Nor do all thinkers agree that all three kinds of entity exist. Some deny that there actually are abstract objects. Some maintain that the mental is, ultimately, material.

The distinction between two kinds of existence, brute existence and mentally constructed existence, will play an important role in my book. Mentally constructed entities such as, for example, traffic rules, are the products of human conventions or human fiat. One could say that they are figments of the human imagination, although many mentally constructed entities are of huge practical or social importance – traffic rules certainly are. Many other things, like Table Mountain, have brute existence. Entities that enjoy brute existence are mind-independent: they exist no matter what humans think or say. If humankind were suddenly wiped out while everything else remained the same, the formation that we now call Table Mountain would still be there, but traffic rules would no longer exist.

I will take it for granted that physical entities enjoy brute existence, and that the same goes for mental states and processes. (The latter statement can sound as if it contradicted what I just said about the mind-independence of the brutally existing, but it does not. The processes going on in human brains or minds produce and sustain mental constructs but are not, in themselves, figments of the human imagination.) Regarding abstract objects I will neither affirm nor deny that they enjoy brute existence: I cannot see that it should be necessary to enter into their ontology in my context. Nor will I have anything really specific to say about the deeper nature of the physical or the mental.

My distinction between brute and mentally constructed existence is inspired by Searle’s distinction between brute and institutional facts (Searle 1995: 1–2). Unlike Searle, however, I am also interested in mentally constructed entities which are not the products of institutionalized human agreement, for example, in a linguist’s analysis of the meaning of a linguistic construction or a textual critic’s construal of some specific text.

Another point on which I am deeply influenced by Searle concerns our descriptions of realities, not the realities themselves. According to Searle, the fact that our languages and other systems of representation are human creations carries with it a specific kind of relativity: a given piece of the real world, like

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6. I do not believe that one can consistently maintain, as many people in the humanities and the social sciences have sometimes done, that also the outer world is a social construction. Paul Thagard has offered what is, to my mind, a particularly good explanation of why one cannot very well doubt the mind-independent existence of an outer world (Thagard 2000: 88–89).
Gothenburg, can be truthfully described in very many different ways. In Searle’s words: “Systems of representations, such as vocabularies and conceptual schemes generally, are human creations, and to that extent arbitrary. It is possible to have any number of different systems of representations for representing the same reality.” (Searle 1995: 151)

Searle calls this position “conceptual relativism.” He emphasizes that conceptual relativism is entirely compatible with belief in brutely existing entities (“external realism”).

Think of the relation of realism and conceptual relativism like this: Take a corner of the world, say, the Himalayas, and think of it as it was prior to the existence of any human beings. Now imagine that humans come along and represent the facts in various different ways. They have different vocabularies, different systems for making maps, different ways of counting one mountain, two mountains, the same mountain, etc. Next, imagine that eventually the humans all cease to exist. Now what happens to the existence of the Himalayas and all the facts about the Himalayas in the course of these vicissitudes? Absolutely nothing. Different descriptions of facts, objects, etc., came and went, but the facts, objects, etc., remained unaffected. (Does anyone really doubt this?) (Searle 1995: 164)

As we will see later, conceptual relativism is far from being universally accepted. Many prefer to think in terms of what could be called “conceptual objectivism”. They reason as if reality in itself were divided into objects and aspects of objects, irrespective of what humans think or say. Or they reason as if there were, at least on fundamental points, some specific one and only acceptable way of describing the world. I will address such ideas later, in their relevant contexts.

The ontological remarks in this section will play a role again and again later in the book. More immediately, however, the discussion can be used to add a few features to my theory of the two conceptions of the text. In my view, neither cluster texts nor texts as ordinarily conceived enjoy brute existence. Physical exemplars do, but complexes of signs and textual meanings can be mental constructs. And the ways of combining these three kinds of entity, the structural solutions which are at the heart of the two conceptions, are certainly mentally constructed. Thus cluster texts and texts as ordinarily conceived share the character of mental constructs.

7. I believe that Searle’s distinction between brute and institutional facts is largely original, but Searle is by no means the first to advance the idea of conceptual relativism. I will not attempt to trace the prehistory of the two ideas here; what is important for my exposition are the two conceptions in themselves, such as I describe them.

8. Complexes of signs and textual meanings exist in both brute and mentally constructed varieties, as I will explain in the next two chapters.
The ordinary conception of the text and the cluster conception are both conceptualizations of brute realities, but conceptual relativism is involved in the representations they effect: neither conception is a simple reflection of reality such as it is in itself. I would say that what is brutally real in connection with verbal communication are the physical sounds and marks that make up physical utterances and the associated mental contents and processes in senders and receivers. These are the kinds of realities which theories of verbal communication ultimately have to model or refer to. The ordinary conception and the cluster conception form part of different systems for accounting for these realities, systems with differing strengths and weaknesses.

Rudner and Cameron on what a text is

It is widely believed that texts are separate, genuine, unitary objects. This is a key element of the ordinary conception of a text and an idea which seems to be almost universally accepted. Indeed, the idea is taken for granted to such an extent that thinking of texts in any other way appears absurd to many.

The view that texts are genuine, unitary objects is sometimes called “realism” about texts. The opposite view that no such genuine, unitary textual objects exist is often referred to as “eliminativism”, particularly by realists about texts, for whom eliminativists appear to wish to eliminate texts and deny them existence. I will be using these more or less established terms in my book on many occasions, even though I am not happy with them and even though the thinking behind them does not reflect my own understanding of the problems concerning the existence of texts.

Eliminativism is not an often held position (compare section 3.2. in Livingston 2016). The most noted contributions from the eliminativist camp come from Richard Rudner and Ross P. Cameron. Rudner took an eliminativist stance regarding musical and literary works in the article from 1950 to which I referred in my introduction. Cameron has propagated eliminativism in a series of publications, starting with an article from 2008 in which he claimed that musical works do not exist. I will comment briefly on Rudner’s and Cameron’s analyses in order to make it clear in what ways my own basically “eliminativist” theory about texts differs from their mutually different versions.

In “The Ontological Status of the Esthetic Object”, Rudner distinguishes between two questions in connection with artworks such as Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony: we may ask what our aesthetic response is directed at, or we may ask
what object the name of the artwork designates (Rudner 1950: 386). Rudner also suggests answers to the two questions. What interests me here is his answer to the second question.

Rudner holds that the name of an artwork does not, as previously believed, designate any single, actually existing, obviously abstract entity. He can see no need to posit such entities and suggests that names of artworks actually stand in for, and can be replaced by, longer and more complex formulations which do not presuppose the existence of abstract entities being artworks. Rudner offers two examples of such reformulations:

“Two renditions of the *Fifth Symphony*” can be interpreted as an ellipsis for “two musical renditions which are similar in a group of important respects”. There is here no necessity for multiplying the types of ontological entity which shall be admitted to an Esthetic. Again, the sentence “Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* is good but this is a bad rendition of it”, could be taken as an ellipsis for “there is a musical rendition called Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* which is pleasing esthetically but this musical rendition, while similar to it in important respects, is esthetically displeasing”. Here, too, there is no necessity for the manufacture of abstract entities. The problematic locutions are simply recognized as convenient shorthand.

(Rudner 1950: 385)

Rudner is speaking of artworks in general. Thus he also implies that texts like Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* (his literary example; Rudner 1950: 387) are in fact not single, unitary objects. He is also suggesting that speaking of literature without ever referring to literary texts as single, unitary objects will not prevent us from making whatever valid statements about literature we might wish to make. These two ideas, generalized to all kinds of text, form core components of my own cluster analysis of the concept of a text. Rudner was the first to adopt and express such views, and I still find his nine-page article brilliant.

At the same time, however, there is much in Rudner’s article with which I disagree, including some of what he says about the reference of the name of a work of art. For one thing, I find his translations of the two sentences about the *Fifth Symphony* unconvincing.

For Rudner, our aesthetic responses are directed at aesthetic objects. What Rudner and some later thinkers call the aesthetic object I would call the relevant intentional content of an aesthetic experience. I believe that in a literary situation that content is produced by the reader in the act of reading, and I would find it strange to say that my literary experience is directed at the contents of my own reading experience. My view is, rather, that when I am reading literature my reading experience is, in itself, a literary experience. My reading experience does not reflect any preexisting reality; it comes into existence through my reading of the physical exemplar before me and my further processing of the content arising during reading. (Rudner, too, actually suggests that the aesthetic object can be identified with phenomenal contents of an aesthetic experience; see Rudner 1950: 387.)
**Symphony** fundamentally inadequate. For two musical performances to be of the same work, more is required than important similarities. Also, we should be able to speak of good musical works which have never been performed. These are just two rather trivial insufficiencies; many quite basic problems remain untouched in Rudner’s examples. Most importantly, in an application to literature references to physical objects will not be enough: complexes of signs and textual meaning cannot very well be construed as physical entities. If one does not want to work with the ordinary conception of a text, one has to have recourse to an alternative mode of expression. The cluster conception is meant to provide such an alternative. I would say that, despite its simplicity, the cluster conception definitely offers a workable way of speaking, while Rudner’s alternative language does not.¹⁰

I also do not believe that ordinary discourse about texts is to be understood as convenient shorthand – as I will explain in Chapter 9, I consider it a serious mistake for an eliminativist to try to offer direct paraphrases of ordinary talk of texts. And further points could be raised as well. For example, I take Rudner to be a conceptual objectivist, aiming to point to the true way of understanding the entities we are used to describing as works of art, while I am a conceptual relativist.

Cameron, for his part, focuses on the distinction between what I call brute existence and mentally constructed existence: he points out that musical works can be thought of as existing without being conceived as fundamentally existing. According to him, it is true in ordinary English that musical works exist, but not in what he calls “Ontologese” (Cameron 2008: 300–301). Formulated in my terminology: Cameron denies that musical works have brute existence. For him, there are eternal, brutely existing sound structures which are abstract objects, but which are not, in themselves, musical works. Composers can indicate such abstract sound structures, and then we say that a musical work has come into existence. But the composer has not created anything with brute existence (see Cameron 2008: 305–306).

I support Cameron’s insistence on the importance of the distinction between brute and constructed existence. However, in his article from 2008 Cameron’s concern is music, and tenable or not his analysis of musical works can hardly be carried over to literary texts or texts in general: texts cannot very well be conceived of as eternally existing abstract verbal structures indicated by senders, since languages and the expressions they comprise are obviously historical phenomena. More recently, Cameron has wanted to rethink the ontology of the relevant kind of structures, but without yet being able to offer a clear solution to that problem (see Cameron 2013: 182, note 2, and 192–193).

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¹⁰ Rudner himself knew that more was needed: see Rudner 1950: 388, note 6.
In Cameron’s case, I am largely in agreement with the main ontological point that he wishes to make. However, his various remarks about the ontology of music and of literature are very far from being translatable into a general analysis of what a text is or how it exists.

**Concluding remarks**

In this chapter I have looked at the ordinary conception of a text and the cluster conception from different angles. In particular, I have described the characteristics of the ordinary conception, its strong and weak points, its association with the standard understanding of verbal communication, and the ways in which the ordinary conception is similar to quite a few ordinary-language concepts covering other areas. I have also explained how I understand the ontology of texts, whether ordinary-conception texts or cluster texts, and commented on two earlier examples of analyses in the so-called eliminativist vein. My next step will be to develop the cluster conception further, first by saying more about physical exemplars and complexes of signs.
Texts in the cluster-conception sense consist of physical exemplars, signs, and meaning. In this chapter I will develop the skeletal image of the cluster conception offered in Figure 3 by saying more about physical exemplars and complexes of signs.

Physical exemplars and complexes of signs are often regarded as something unproblematic. When one reads a book or an electronic text, there is normally no need to wonder what the relevant physical aspects and the relevant signs are. Standardization and conventionalized expectations make the underlying complexity invisible. But the complexity is there and has important consequences. We will now be taking a close look at some very basic textual phenomena.

Physical utterances and physical exemplars of texts

Linguists and philosophers often speak of both oral and written pieces of discourse as “utterances” (see, for example, Lyons 1977: 26–27 and Grice 1989: 92). They treat utterances as being, in effect, the kind of tripartite units of matter, sign, and meaning depicted in Figure 4 in the previous chapter. The cluster conception of a text has no use for such units, but their physical part, the physical utterance, is of great importance for the cluster text.

Behind a text, there is always a physical utterance.1 By a “physical utterance” I mean the physical product of a specific act of language use in speech or writing. A physical utterance is a complex of physical features, including a body of sounds or marks, produced by a sender at a specific time and addressed to a receiver – whether to a definite, individual receiver or to a non-specified audience. One would not speak of a physical “utterance”, of course, if there had not been a sender intending that body of physical features to represent signs and meaning, but the signs and meaning still do not form part of the physical utterance.

Utterances can be copied in various forms. For example, oral utterances can be quoted orally, or videotaped, or written down. Written utterances can be read

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1. In the rest of the book, I will be referring both to texts in the ordinary sense and to texts in the cluster-conception sense when using the word "text" without further qualifications.
out aloud, or copied in handwriting, or printed, or photographed, and so on. Both the physical utterance and its copies will be physical exemplars of the corresponding text, but they do not have exactly the same status. The physical utterance represents, so to speak, the concrete basis of the cluster making up the cluster text. Granted, the physical utterance can disappear, as everyday oral utterances immediately do, and this can be of great practical importance for the production of copies. But this does not change the theoretical picture.

The concept of a physical utterance could be problematized further. One could ask, for instance, whether there is really any wholly specific physical utterance in connection with printed matter rather than just a multitude of physical exemplars of equal standing. Such complications arise with the emergence of complex communication technologies and will, to some extent, be commented on later. For the moment, however, I will disregard this kind of question and turn, instead, to a very simple example of a physical utterance.

Imagine that Belinda meets Alan one morning and says to him: “Good morning.” The piece of behaviour Belinda produces is an example of a physical utterance. The sounds she makes represent a complex of linguistic signs, a sentence in English, and they form part of a specific, individual act of linguistic communication: Belinda is saying good morning to Alan on this particular day. Sounds standing for the sentence “Good morning” have certainly been emitted on countless other occasions by various people, but those were other physical utterances associated with other specific, individual acts of verbal communication.

Belinda’s communicative act may comprise a good deal more than her making the sounds representing the sentence “Good morning.” Spoken verbal communication typically also includes so-called paralinguistic signs – such as tempo, pitch, volume, and voice quality – and non-linguistic signs, such as gestures (see, for example, Cruse 2004: 8–9). Belinda’s body language and her tone of voice may carry implicit communicative content, and to the extent that they do, I would regard the relevant paralinguistic and non-linguistic features as aspects of her physical utterance. It may arguably be part of the meaning of Belinda’s utterance that she expresses condescension towards Alan, or that she expresses friendliness and kindness, for example, and if she does, she must be doing so by paralinguistic or non-linguistic means.

2. Jacques Derrida has criticized the very idea of “singular and original event-utterances” (Derrida 1988a: 18; Derrida 1972a: 389: “énoncés-événements singuliers et originaux”). It should be obvious, however, that Belinda’s saying good morning to Alan on this particular day is the production of a physical utterance in the sense I described, that it is a singular and original event (even if the uttered phrase is, in another sense of that word, unoriginal), and that it lets itself be interpreted from that point of view if one chooses to do so. I will discuss Derrida’s criticism in Chapter 8.
The possible relevance of paralinguistic and non-linguistic elements creates a problem if one wants to specify what a given physical utterance consists of. It will simply not be possible to say exactly what features of Belinda’s behaviour form part of her act of verbal communication and under what description they form part of it. How could one determine, for example, whether the angle at which Belinda is holding her head on issuing her utterance is to be counted as a meaning-carrying element of her posture or not? And if it is to be so counted, how could one determine whether it is the exact angle at which Belinda is holding her head that matters or some more general aspect, for instance, that Belinda is putting her head on one side?

For such reasons the conception of a given physical utterance will very often be, to some extent, indeterminate, and for that reason so will the conception of a physical exemplar of the corresponding text. It will not be possible to say exactly what physical features make up the physical utterance. This will be so regardless of whether one thinks that the delimitation of the physical utterance should depend on what the sender intended to include, or on what the addressee perceived as being included, or on some other type of consideration.

I have referred to an oral physical utterance as an example, but of course physical utterances are often in writing. Imagine that Belinda sends Frank a Christmas card. She picks a folded card – a four-page card featuring a wintery image on its front page – and writes on its blank third page a line of marks intended to represent the greeting “Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!” and, below that, marks intended to represent her name, “Belinda”. She then places the card inside its envelope and mails the card to Frank. The Christmas card, too, is a physical utterance, and once again it may not be obvious exactly what features form part of the utterance and under what description. For example, is the image on the front page of the card to be considered part of her utterance, and if so, under what description?

Many written texts are longer and more impersonal – for example, newspaper articles, novels, or on-line encyclopaedias. In print media, the uncertainty with respect to the limits of the physical utterance has typically been minimized as far as possible. Nevertheless, what I have just said about physical utterances and physical exemplars applies, in principle, to such cases too.

Speaking of physical exemplars, it is also worth noting that textual critics – specialists in the establishment of “texts”, that is, of complexes of signs associated with texts in my sense – usually hold that the material aspects of a physical exemplar will always affect the meaning of the text. In their view, then, each materially different physical exemplar will differ somewhat in textual meaning even if they all represent the same complex of verbal signs. Thus D.C. Greetham writes that “every act of copying, mechanical or otherwise, produces a ‘different’ text”, and Sukanta
Chaudhuri maintains that “the material medium of the text contributes materially to its meaning – hence each new material embodiment alters and extends that meaning” (Greetham 1999: 390; Chaudhuri 2010: 5). I will come back to such claims in Chapter 4.

Sounds, marks, and signs

The Belinda examples were fabricated, but I mainly want to consider authentic cases when theorizing about texts. “Dickinson 591” will continue to be of particular significance – my hope is that my many comments on different facets of the poem will in the end make my reader feel that no aspect of what a text is remains hidden from view.

Figure 5 on the next page is a facsimile of the only exemplar of the poem in Dickinson’s own hand, a manuscript now in the Amherst College Archives and Special Collections (2016: 31). The manuscript takes up the inner right-hand page of a folded letter-paper with traces of ink from Dickinson’s pen (Franklin 1981: xi and Dickinson 1981: 587–588). The folded sheet has been bound into a fascicle by the author herself together with other folded sheets, all containing Dickinson poems in autograph (Dickinson 1981: 587–592; Franklin 1981: xx). It seems reasonable to me to consider all the third page of the sheet in question as the portion of the fascicle making up the physical utterance behind “Dickinson 591”.

A physical exemplar of a text does not, strictly speaking, contain any words. What we have before us in the case of the Dickinson manuscript is a physical sheet of paper with physical traces of the poet’s handwriting on it. It is true that we are used to thinking and talking as if there were actually words on the page – looking at Figure 5, you will no doubt want to say that you can quite concretely put your finger on the word “heard” in the top line. Yet an element of interpretation is always involved when one moves upward in abstraction from the sight of paper with traces of handwriting or print to the identification of a sequence of words. It is one thing to be a trace of handwriting displaying such and such an appearance, but something actually different to be an instance of a specific English word, for we cannot automatically conclude, just by looking at a written page, what textually relevant signs it represents. (See, for example, Nelson Goodman’s instructive discussion of the relationship between physical markings on the one hand and letters on the other; Goodman 1969: 137–138.) This holds true even when we are confronted with a neatly printed page but becomes more evident when we are reading a manuscript. For example, in the case of the Dickinson holograph we will also have to decipher Dickinson’s handwriting (what words are being represented as spelled with an initial capital letter and what words are not?) and decide what to
make of the elongated dots that are clearly not meant to represent letters but perhaps rather dashes. It is therefore important to distinguish between marks, like the roughly J-formed trace of ink at the top left corner of Dickinson’s manuscript in Figure 5, and signs, like the letter <I>, which the trace of ink obviously represents.

Signs can be non-verbal, like a conventional or non-conventional sign represented by a verbal gesture, or verbal, like a letter or a word. When I speak of a
“linguistic” sign or a “linguistic” entity, I am referring specifically to a verbal sign or entity as construed in linguistics.3

A piece of paper covered with writing is a physical thing, while a letter, word, or sentence is not. I classify words in abstracto, words understood as general linguistic entities, as abstractions of a special kind – “cryptomental” abstractions – as I will explain later in this chapter. But I do not view words or other linguistic expressions as abstractions across the board: on my analysis, the words of an utterance as intended by the sender and the words of an utterance as perceived by a receiver are both mental entities. I find the same multiplicity in textual meaning, and I will have more to say about the sender’s perspective, the receiver’s perspective, and the third-party commentator’s perspective in Chapter 3.

An example from a different domain can serve as a graphic illustration of the difference between physical marks on the one hand and signs on the other. In 1979, a Germanic fibula – a kind of brooch – from the first half of the first century CE was discovered near Meldorf in northern Germany. The fibula carries markings that may represent an inscription. (See Figure 6 on the next page, from Düwel and Gebühr 1981, and Figure 7, from “Meldorf fibula” 2014.) The physical markings are definite and undisputed, but researchers still discuss whether or not these markings represent writing (the markings might be simply ornamental), and if they do, what verbal signs they stand for and what meaning they carry. Things are not made any easier by the fact that it is disputable what is “up” and what is “down” on the marked surface and whether the possible inscription should be read from left to right or from right to left (Odenstedt 1989: 79–80). Note that the “text” in Figure 7 is turned upside-down with respect to the “text” in Figure 6!

According to one hypothesis the markings, visualized as in Figure 7, represent the four runes HIWI, meaning “for Hiwi” (a female). Others have suggested that the markings, visualized as in Figure 6, stand for the four Roman letters IDIN, meaning “for Idda” (a female) or “for Iddo” (a male). Readings in the light of the Greek and Etruscan alphabets have also been considered (Düwel 2004: 139). To reflect on the Meldorf fibula and the possibilities of its interpretation is a good way of interiorizing the fact that physical marks are not signs. There are physical traces on the Meldorf fibula, but those physical traces are not in themselves letters or runes. The physical traces may be interpreted as letters or runes, but that is something different.

3. It is worth pointing out that I do not employ the Saussurean notion of a sign, according to which a linguistic sign consists of a sound-pattern (“signifiant”) and a concept (“signifié”). For me, a sign is, so to speak, only a form, not a form-paired-with-a-meaning. It must be possible to associate some meaning with a sign, otherwise it would make no sense to speak of a “sign”, but I do not incorporate the meaning into the sign itself.
Chapter 2. Exemplars of texts and complexes of signs

The distinction between, on the one hand, marks or sounds, and on the other, signs, is crucial for my cluster conception of texts. It is a simple distinction, but one that is very often neglected, also in scholarly contexts. For example, Chaudhuri writes, in his book on the metaphysics of text, “We speak (and hear) words, or we write (and read) them” (2010: 11), and William Lycan asserts, in an introduction to the philosophy of language: “I hear or see words and I understand them” (Lycan 2008: 72). Yet that is not literally what happens. What speakers and writers physically produce, and what listeners and readers then hear or read, are not words but physical sounds that stand for words, or physical marks that represent words. To think otherwise is to conflate the text before interpretation, the physical sounds or marks, with the already interpreted text in the way I described in the introduction. As we will see later, overlooking these distinctions in serious theorizing may prove fatal for one’s argument.

Figure 6. Photo of the Meldorf fibula

Figure 7. Line drawing of markings on the Meldorf fibula
The cryptomental nature of linguistic entities

It can seem strange to conceive of the letter <I> or the word “I” as abstract objects, even when the letter and the word are taken entirely in abstracto, as general linguistic entities. According to standard ontological theory abstract objects, like the number eight, are in a sense eternal, since they do not exist in time and space. The letter <I> or the word “I” cannot very well be like that: the Roman alphabet came into being at a more or less definite time, and so did the English language, and they may both disappear some time in the future.

I would suggest that there is a very large category of non-standard abstract entities, and that linguistic expressions and discourses belong to this category. I view non-standard abstract entities as the products of generalizations or idealizations concerning physical states of affairs or mental facts. The present average height of 25-year-old American men is an abstract entity of a kind, but statements about the present average height of 25-year-old American men are clearly, in substance, about contingent physical facts which they generalize or idealize. Objects like the present average height of 25-year-old American men are not standard, supposedly brutely existing and eternal abstract entities, but could be called “cryptophysical” abstractions. Similarly, letters and words are generalizations or idealizations of contingent mental facts. Such objects could be called “cryptomental” abstractions: they are clearly abstractions, but not of the standard kind, not the kind of thing which can be supposed to enjoy brute eternal existence. It is easy to see that words cannot be eternal. To say that the English word “I” exists is, in substance, to make a generalization about specific contents of the minds of speakers of English. Competent users of English link the corresponding sounds or inscriptions to a certain meaning or function and know, or believe, that every other competent user of English does the same.

It is important to note that linguistic signs and linguistic expressions are cryptomental abstractions, not abstract objects in the paradigmatic sense. However, my main point in this chapter remains unaffected. I am arguing that signs should be distinguished from physical marks or physical sounds, not that some signs are paradigmatic abstract objects.

4. This is in fact a more or less standard assumption. Compare, e.g., Hale 1987: 1–2 and Mag Uidhir 2013: 140.
The complex of signs associated with a text

The Dickinson manuscript rendered in Figure 5 represents a sequence of letters and other signs. When reading a text one normally pays little attention to the signs as such – they simply serve as a means of accessing the text’s meaning. But before moving on to the concept of meaning, it is important to consider the notion of a complex of signs.

What happens in verbal communication is that a speaker or writer, or a collective sender, produces a physical utterance addressed to one or many listeners or readers. The receivers are expected to perceive the physical utterance, identify the signs that it represents, and associate a meaning with the signs.

In order to understand a physical utterance, it is obviously crucial to be able to identify the complex of signs represented. Identifying the signs is also of fundamental importance for the making of copies of the physical utterance. For physical utterances can, in principle, be copied: one can produce new physical objects providing, in principle, equally good access to the meaning associated with the physical utterance as the original object that was produced directly by the speaker or writer. If the new object is taken to represent exactly the same complex of signs as its original and is taken to relate to the same act of verbal communication, then the copy will be equivalent to the original at least as far as its literal meaning is concerned. Copying is of great consequence, since it means that a text can be disseminated widely in time and space. The possibility of coming into contact with the text will not have to depend on the accessibility of some individual, entirely specific physical object.

Normally, textual critics specify the relevant complex of signs by implicit means: simply by producing what they take to be a good copy and attempting to make that copy unambiguous with respect to the signs represented. Where “Dickinson 591” is concerned, a critical edition will offer copies in which the uncertainties introduced by features such as the poet’s capitalization and her elongated dots have, in practice, been resolved one way or the other.

All this can appear relatively simple and straightforward. However, specifying the complex of signs associated with a text raises theoretical problems. We saw that there is a measure of uncertainty regarding what physical features enter into the physical utterance and under what description; such uncertainty will naturally spill over into the specification of the complex of signs. In addition, it is not always clear what sign a given sound or mark should be taken to represent.

Given the strategic role of the complex of signs associated with a text, it may seem surprising that such complexes are typically defined only implicitly, through the production of what aspires to be a good and clear copy. In principle, one could attempt to specify in words what signs form part of the complex and in what
constellation. For instance, the description of each constituent sign could be given in square brackets, and a comma between two such sign-descriptions could signify that the two signs are to follow upon each other in a linear sequence. Then one could define the complex of signs by describing it rather than showing it, at least as long as the signs form a sequence. In the Dickinson case, the description could begin like this: “[capital Roman i], [space], [lowercase Roman h]” and so on.5 One would also need other terms when defining complexes of signs, in this case also expressions such as “[end of line]”, “[end of stanza]”, and “[‘n-dash’]. The point of defining rather than “showing” a sign-sequence would be to make it explicit instead of implicit what signs one considers to form part of the sequence and under what description.

In cases like “Dickinson 591” not much extra clarity would be introduced by the cumbersome explicit definition. But the thought experiment in which every requirement on the complex of signs is made explicit is interesting for another reason: the demand of explicitness makes it obvious how relatively unclear the requirements on the relevant complex of signs really are. For example, it should obviously be added to the requirements that the complex of signs, defined as above, must be rendered in an “ordinary” fashion if the copy is to be a correct physical exemplar of Dickinson’s poem. Even if every letter, line-break, et cetera were in place according to the plan suggested above, a copy in very large Gothic letters, some green and some red, printed on transparent paper, would not be a correct copy. This is because the reader would be led to believe, wrongly, that the Gothic font, the green and red colours, and the unusual paper quality were features carrying part of the poem’s meaning. Yet it is unclear where the limits of the “ordinary” should be supposed to go.6

Analogous considerations are relevant in connection with oral texts. Non-linguistic features like gestures, and paralinguistic features like pauses, tempo, tone of voice, and pronunciation, are often significant elements of the relevant structure of signs, as I already noted in connection with Belinda’s “Good morning”. An oral linguistic utterance can be videotaped and copied in that form, but the video will

5. This is in effect to place the description of the complex of signs at the level of graphemes, which appears to me to be the most fundamental level. At higher levels of interpretation the complex of signs will appear as a sequence of English words and a sequence of English sentences. The relationship between the various levels is of no immediate significance for my argument, and I will not comment on it.

6. In other cases than the Dickinson poem, non-linguistic or paralinguistic features can very well form part of the complex of signs associated with a text. Texts may make use of coloured letters. The font can carry meaning, and so can the size of the letters. It could be part of the specification of the signs making up the complex of signs that copies of the text have to be printed on paper of a specific quality – carton, say. And so on.
not define the complex of signs, and it may be impossible fully to record important aspects of the event, such as the speaker’s interaction with the listeners.

Let me now return to “Dickinson 591” for some extra reflections. With few exceptions, Dickinson’s poems went unpublished during her lifetime, and after her death her early editors felt it necessary to normalize some of her formal eccentricities, such as her punctuation and capitalization, and to make her diction more conventional. Thus Mabel Loomis Todd introduced several significant changes in the text of “Dickinson 591” when she first published the poem in 1896, and most of those changes were retained in the version presented by Martha Dickinson Bianchi in her 1924 edition of Dickinson’s poems (see Johnson 1955: xlvi and Dickinson 1955: 359). Later editors and critics largely abstain from attempts to improve Dickinson’s poems but still often correct certain details in her spelling and grammar. For example, for almost all her life Dickinson wrote “opon” instead of “upon” and “it’s” instead of “its”. Researchers tend to change this to “upon” and “its” (see, for example, Vendler 2010: xiii). However, they do not nowadays replace her equally idiosyncratic elongated dots with more normal punctuation. Apparently, most critics regard Dickinson’s elongated dots as aesthetically motivated, but her “opon” and “it’s” as largely unintentional aberrations. Alfred Habegger writes, about “the apostrophes that Dickinson regularly inserted in possessive pronouns and occasionally in plural nouns”, that “such errors are as unrelated to her meaning as they are annoying” (Habegger 2001: xvii).

At least four non-identical versions of “Dickinson 591” have appeared in print in various editions of Dickinson’s poems prepared by different editors (see Franklin’s information in Dickinson 1998b: 588). The latest version, in R.W. Franklin’s critical edition from 1998, differs from the preceding one, prepared by Thomas H. Johnson in 1955, by rendering Dickinson’s elongated dots by free-standing hyphens or mini-dashes instead of by the n-dashes used by Johnson, and also by registering an elongated dot before the word “stumbling” in the first line of the last stanza. I follow Franklin on the latter point, but not with respect to the dashes. I find it reasonable to think of Dickinson’s elongated dots as dashes, and certainly understand her way of using dashes as being unconventional, but do not want to imply that Dickinson intentionally sought to produce an unconventional form of dash.

The elongated dots remain a problem for every editor of Dickinson’s poems – not a key problem, of course, but not an insignificant problem either. Even though the dots are probably best understood as dashes, they have no exact, obviously correct representation in conventional typography. The dots also differ perceptibly in length, and it is difficult to know whether this always has to do with the amount of space available in the line or other irrelevant factors or whether the length in itself may sometimes carry meaning. Representing them all uniformly as dashes of one and the same kind may be reasonable, but every such solution can
The discussion of Dickinson’s elongated dots shows how even a not very peculiar manuscript may leave us unable to specify exactly what signs the marks represent. A further limit is crossed when purely sensory elements are introduced, as is by no means unusual. For example, written texts often include illustrations. This is particularly true of non-fiction texts; yet many literary texts, not least many poems, incorporate specific visual shapes. Some classic instances from modern Western literature are found in Guillaume Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes* (Apollinaire 1953). Today, electronic literature offers excellent examples; I will introduce one such text in Chapter 4.

With oral texts, the presence of purely sensory features is the norm. The complex of signs associated with Belinda’s “Good morning” or, to take an authentic example, Barack Obama’s 2014 State of the Union address clearly cannot be defined with any confidence. This does not make the corresponding texts incomprehensible in any way but introduces an ineradicable element of openness or uncertainty.

**Concluding remarks**

On concluding this chapter on physical exemplars of texts and the complexes of signs that they represent, I would like to emphasize two things that I find particularly important. First, physical exemplars do not come to us already provided with signs and meaning: the exemplars are, precisely, physical, and the signs and the meaning perceived are the results of receivers’ interpretations. Second, neither a physical exemplar of a text nor the complex of signs which it represents has the clear and objective contours which are often supposed to be there in the theorizing about texts, at least in theorizing outside of professional textual criticism. The sender’s perception of what goes into the physical utterance and the complex of signs does not necessarily coincide with that of the receiver or receivers, and third parties, like textual critics, inevitably adopt their own perspectives. In addition, all such perspectives are no doubt typically imprecise, at least in details. Neither Belinda nor Alan will have been certain about the exact identification of the communicatively relevant paralinguistic and non-linguistic features of her utterance of “Good morning.” A third-party observer would be in no better position.

Much more could be said about physical exemplars of texts and the complexes of signs that they represent, and many readers may have expected me to answer
a whole range of further questions. How can the concept of a physical utterance be formally defined? What is the definition of a sign? How far can a copy deviate from its original and still be an acceptable copy? Are translations to be regarded as physical exemplars of the translated text? Even though I shall not answer such questions, I find it important to explain why not, particularly since a similar reluctance to go further in precision will appear in other cases later in the book.

First of all I would like to say that questions like the ones just mentioned do not, in my view, have true or false answers. Conceptual objectivists will think that such things as utterances and texts are there independently of what humans think or say, as part of the structure of the universe, and that there is a truth about their nature and their borders. Or they will think, at least, that there is, in the final instance, not more than one valid way of delimiting utterances or texts. For conceptual relativists like me, this is to misunderstand the nature of concepts and of language. I certainly reckon with a brute reality, but the descriptions of that reality are human creations, formulated with the aid of human-made conceptual tools. And how reality is to be described is, to an important extent, a practical question: what features do we need to concentrate on representing, and why? As N.J. Enfield has put it, “language is not a means for reflecting how things are, but rather a means for portraying it in certain ways, depending on a speaker’s communicative goal” (Enfield 2015: 2).

My own communicative goal is to further the understanding of what we call verbal communication by offering a partly new perspective on what we call texts and textual meaning. However, to revert to the analogy with maps, I am not like a person constructing a detailed map of an area meant to answer the needs of a relatively specific practical purpose (like a street map, or a topographical map, or a subway map), but rather like a person offering a general verbal overview of an area meant to improve our orientation in it. If my purpose had been much more specific, I could very well have constructed formal definitions of the concept of an utterance, the concept of a sign, and the concept of a physical exemplar of a text. But such definitions would have had to be stipulations, normative delimitations imposed on an area not in itself pre-divided, stipulations making divisions, not reflecting pre-existing ones. Such making of divisions can only be rationally motivated by a purpose underlying the drawing of boundaries. My own purpose is so general in nature that it does not require, and indeed does not warrant, detailed stipulations.

Take the question of translations. I would not say that there is a truth about whether, for example, a physical exemplar of a Swedish translation of “Dickinson 591” is also a physical exemplar of “Dickinson 591”. This is a matter of decision, and decisions should be made for a purpose. When discussing the verbal meaning of “Dickinson 591” in Chapter 5, I will base myself on the version of the complex of
The Idea of a Text and the Nature of Textual Meaning

signs presented in Chapter 1, but not exclude the versions established by Johnson and by Franklin. One could say that I will only regard physical exemplars representing one of these complexes of signs as true exemplars of the poem. This is because I am interested in coming as close as possible to what I regard as the most original and authentic version of the utterance, which makes it necessary for me to consider first and foremost the complex of signs which Dickinson arguably attempted to represent. In other contexts I might well draw the boundaries differently. We saw in Chapter 1 that Damrosch also regarded translations of Pamuk’s *Kar – Nieve*, and *Schnee*, and *Snow* – as being *Kar*, in effect thinking of physical exemplars of those translations as physical exemplars of Pamuk’s novel. I have no quarrel with that. Damrosch adopts another point of view because his communicative goal is different: he wishes to make it obvious how translations help authors to get across to new readers. Therefore he activates other aspects of our flexible understanding of what a text is. Only a conceptual objectivist can expect there to be a true, context-independent answer to the question of whether a copy of a translation is also a copy of the corresponding text. Cases like this will appear several times in later chapters.
One extremely important component of the cluster text remains to be accounted for: the meaning of the text. In this chapter I will present a theory of textual meaning. The introduction of the theory will be supplemented, in the next two chapters, by discussion of the meaning of three authentic texts.

My key contention in these chapters will be that, at bottom, textual meaning comes in two varieties: sender’s textual meaning and receiver’s textual meaning. Both are mental phenomena. What has brute existence in linguistic communication are the mental processes in sender and receiver and the physical marks or sounds brought forward by the sender. When Belinda says “Good morning” to Alan, producing the sounds and other behaviour that make up her physical utterance, there is something Belinda means and something Alan understands. Belinda’s meaning is a mental content in her head; correspondingly, Alan’s understanding is an interior psychical phenomenon. When Dickinson produces “Dickinson 591”, there is something she means by the marks she puts on paper, and that meaning is lodged in her mind. Readers of her poem understand and experience her text; their understanding and experiences arise inside their own brains. In the present chapter I will, first and foremost, explain this perspective on textual meaning and introduce a way of describing the structure of sender’s and receiver’s textual meaning.

My approach to textual meaning is largely untraditional. According to the dominant ideas in linguistics and the philosophy of language, such meaning is not even mental but, instead, abstract in nature. There are also many who think that the meaning of a text is determined by the words and sentences used and by the situation of utterance, so that textual meaning is to be kept apart from what the sender means and from what various receivers understand. The discussion of competing perspectives on textual meaning will begin in this chapter and then form a recurrent theme in Chapters 4–8.

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1. I will employ the singular term “receiver’s meaning” when speaking of this variety of textual meaning in a generic sense, and also when speaking of the meaning perceived by an individual receiver. The plural expression “receivers’ meanings” will only be used in cases where I am referring to different meanings perceived by different receivers.
Sender’s textual meaning, receiver’s textual meaning, and the question of a higher court of appeal

One afternoon in London, Belinda considers calling up her friend Martin in Baltimore. However, she worries that it may be too late in the evening for him, and so she asks Karen, who is with her, “What time is it now in Baltimore?” Karen consults her watch and answers “Ten o’clock.” Belinda takes Karen’s reply to mean that it is now 10 p.m. in Baltimore and gives up the idea of calling Martin. But of course Karen meant 10 a.m., not 10 p.m. To get a first, loose grip on sender’s meaning and receiver’s meaning we can say that when Karen answered Belinda, Karen’s sender’s meaning was that present time in Baltimore is 10 a.m. Misunderstanding Karen, Belinda construed Karen as meaning that present time in Baltimore is 10 p.m. That was Belinda’s receiver’s meaning.

It may be tempting to ask what Karen’s “Ten o’clock” really meant: did it mean that present time in Baltimore is 10 a.m., or did it mean that present time in Baltimore is 10 p.m., or was her utterance genuinely ambiguous? Indeed, most theorists seem to believe that there is a correct, positive answer to the question of what a given utterance means. As we will see in later chapters, linguists typically maintain that the meaning of an utterance is the meaning intended by the sender. So do most philosophers, although analytic aestheticians tend to take a more complex view of the problem, combining several factors. Literary theorists differ by typically believing that language decides what a given utterance means, and that language creates a meaning that is radically indeterminate. For all three parties there is something an utterance really means, although the typical literary theorist would regard that real meaning as being impossible to pin down because of its ineradicable indeterminacy.

The linguist Roy Harris is one of the relatively few thinkers who have refused to believe in something which objectively determines the meaning of a text. For Harris, there is the sender’s understanding of the meaning and the receiver’s understanding, and if they do not coincide there is no supreme authority to appeal to. “The signs that occur in first-order communication are those that the participants construe as occurring”, he writes, “and what is signified is what the participants construe as having been signified. There is no higher court of appeal.” (Harris 1998: 145)² Harris is thus not prepared to invest either sender or receiver with the power to decide what an utterance means. He holds that “where two or more participants are involved a message must be open to two or more interpretations.

². As far as I understand, Harris opposes “first-order communication” to meta-communication about language.
And these cannot be guaranteed to coincide. Furthermore, where they conflict, no one interpretation holds a privileged position *vis-à-vis* another.” (Harris 1998: 84)\(^3\)

I share Harris’s view of the matter. It is true that the receiver normally attempts to understand what the sender meant, and that is particularly obvious in simple, practical, everyday situations like the one in which Belinda and Karen find themselves. But senders can of course make mistakes and express themselves in ways which make their actual meaning difficult or impossible to recover. Just saying that an utterance means what the sender meant would be to make the sender infallible. Analogous observations can be made about the receiver. I would also like to add that, in my view, receiver’s meaning can justifiably be conceived as something wider than merely an attempted reconstruction of what the sender meant.

Some have argued that language and linguistic habits determine what a text means. The philosopher Monroe C. Beardsley once insisted that the meaning of an utterance “depends … upon public conventions of usage that are tied up with habit patterns in the whole speaking community” (Beardsley 1981: 25), and some theorists, sometimes called “conventionalists”, still rely on that kind of thinking.\(^4\)

If conventionalists are right, the production of a text brings into being not only a physical utterance, but at the same time also an abstract textual meaning, determined by the complex of signs represented by the physical utterance and by the public conventions of usage that are in force.

I can see several reasons not to subscribe to conventionalism. The most immediately striking argument against the position may be its relative emptiness. Conventionalists never offer us a list of the relevant public conventions of usage (and can one really imagine such a list?), so that we do not know exactly what

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3. Literary specialists emphasizing the role of the experiences of readers have sometimes come close to the views later advanced by Harris. I am thinking, particularly, of Gunnar Hansson, who speaks of a poem as being either the author’s poem or a reader’s poem, or, in some situations, a critic’s poem (Hansson 1975: 23 and 106). Where the ontology of poems is concerned, Hansson holds that a poem exists as a physical object – “words on paper” (“ord på papperet”), he writes –, as a series of psychological processes in the poet in the situation of creation, and as other series of psychological processes in individual readers at the moment of the respective reader’s experiencing of the poem (Hansson 1969: 115; my translation). Cf. Hansson 1959, esp. 23–31.

4. Beardsley was speaking of the meaning of sentences, but it is evident from the context that he was actually referring to what I call texts. Robert Stecker’s analysis of interpretation in Stecker 2003, which will be discussed in Chapter 7, also presupposes that public conventions can possess that type of determinative power, although Stecker’s theory is considerably more complex than Beardsley’s. One more example: in a recent book Richard Gaskin emphatically subscribes to the idea that the meaning of a (literary) text is determined by “the linguistic, cultural, and artistic conventions operative at the time” (Gaskin 2013: 219; the formulation appropriated from an earlier book by Stecker).
conventions of this kind there are supposed to be. Even if we had such a list, we would also have to possess a mechanism for applying it: public conventions of usage may conceivably pull in different directions, and if we are not told how to resolve such conflicts the list of conventions will not, ultimately, be very helpful.

Another problem for conventionalism is the importance of the context in which a text is produced. The interpretation of an utterance of “Ten o’clock”, or the interpretation of “Dickinson 591”, will arguably be affected by knowledge of the broader situation in which the linguistic act was performed, and it appears impossible to decide beforehand, or to decide in any mechanical fashion, what features of the world will have to be brought in as being relevant to the interpretation of a text.

It is true, though, that many elements of a text’s meaning normally appear indisputable. For example, as far as I know all readers have been convinced that “Dickinson 591” is about a dying person and that a buzzing fly appears in the poem. Are not those observations, in fact, simply true? And if the observations are simply true, does not that circumstance show that there is a core of textual meaning in the poem that is objective and is independent of what Dickinson may have meant and her various readers may have perceived?

I do not think so. What we are confronted with in such very common cases is simply consensus among sender and receivers. Dickinson no doubt wanted her readers to form imaginings about a dying person and a buzzing fly and composed her poem accordingly, and forming imaginings about a dying person and a buzzing fly is precisely what readers have consistently done. Thus the person and the fly are no doubt elements of Dickinson’s sender’s meaning but also constant constituents of the receivers’ meanings of her readers. There is no need to postulate the existence of some kind of more objective, impersonal textual meaning to account for the relevant facts.

The idea that there is objective, impersonal textual meaning seems to be almost universally shared. It appears obvious to me that the idea exists in symbiosis with the belief in the existence of texts-as-ordinarily-conceived. If one thinks that there actually are texts-as-ordinarily-conceived, and that such texts actually possess meaning, then one will have to conclude that there must be objective impersonal textual meaning about which true or false statements can be made. In fact, I regard the belief in objective impersonal textual meaning as the most consequential theoretical illusion bred by the ordinary conception of a text.

In my view, then, the question of what Karen’s “Ten o’clock” really meant has no true answer. It is of course still possible to consider what would be the

5. Compare Richard Shusterman’s remark that seemingly true descriptions of a text’s objective meaning “are simply whatever we all and strongly agree upon” (Shusterman 1992: 87).
most reasonable interpretation of Karen’s utterance. Thus one might argue that Karen’s utterance was such that a sensible person could interpret it either way. Or one might argue that Karen’s utterance was clear enough: every competent person knows that North America is behind, not ahead, with respect to Greenwich Mean Time, so that in the given situation every competent receiver should be able to interpret Karen as referring to ten o’clock in the morning. Such argument could have practical importance if it were a question of apportioning blame for the misunderstanding. But there would be no brute facts for the argument to be true or false about. Both positions would construct meaning, not identify already existing meaning.

Sender’s textual meaning

I will say that the sender’s textual meaning is the wish to achieve a certain aim. When saying “Good morning” to Alan, Belinda wanted to greet him. When replying “Ten o’clock” to Belinda’s question, Karen wanted to inform Belinda of something. When producing “Dickinson 591”, Dickinson undoubtedly wanted to offer potential readers a specific material fit to form the basis of a literary experience.

Very often, the sender’s aim includes the conveyance of representations. By a “representation” I mean a picture, in words or images, of a state of affairs, real or imagined. Karen’s “Ten o’clock” was meant to introduce the representation that it is at present ten o’clock a.m. in Baltimore and also meant to vouch for the truth of that fact. “Dickinson 591” was no doubt meant to introduce many representations, among them the fictional representation that a certain person heard a fly buzz when that person died. In connection with some texts, like utterances of the greeting “Hi” or the interjection “Ouch”, the sender’s aim will not include the introduction of a representation at all. Belinda’s “Good morning” is an intermediate case; her utterance can be analyzed as being in essence just as un-representational as “Hi” or as introducing the representation that Alan will have a good morning and expressing the wish that actual facts will come to correspond with that representation.

6. In Dickinson’s poem, the state of affairs is introduced as viewed from a first-person perspective (“I heard a fly buzz when I died”), not from a third-person perspective (“A certain person heard a fly buzz when that person died”). The spatial, temporal, and attitudinal perspective worked into the representation, the “point of view”, is an aspect of what could be called the “form” of the representation. I regard such perspectives as being part of the representations and as helping to articulate the speaker’s or writer’s attitudes, but for reasons of space I do not make much of spatial or temporal aspects of representations in this book, not even when dealing specifically with “Dickinson 591” in Chapter 5. For my views on literary form, see Pettersson 2000, Chapter 9.
A third factor in sender’s meaning is the mental attitudes that the sender wishes to express. Let us develop the Belinda-and-Alan example a little. Imagine that Belinda and Alan are colleagues but do not know each other very well. Belinda finds Alan attractive and would like to see more of him. Meeting him this morning in one of the corridors of their university department she says “Good morning” to him in a warm and friendly way, accompanying the friendliness of her tone with corresponding body language. Belinda does not want to seem flirtatious, but she wants Alan to understand that she finds him sympathetic and perhaps even attractive. In this case, I would find it possible to regard the warmth and friendliness towards Alan as part of the sender’s meaning.

In my theory, then, the sender’s meaning is the intention to achieve a certain aim, an intention that normally includes the introduction of representations and the expressing of attitudes. That substantive intention is wrapped, as it were, into a larger package: the intention to communicate that content to a receiver. Senders realize that larger, communicative intention by displaying verbal behaviour – often also non-verbal behaviour – meant to enable receivers to understand what the sender’s communicative intention consists in. In other words, senders try to find ways to disclose their communicative intentions and make their senders’ meanings possible to retrieve and react to.

Let me be a little bit more formal. The typical structure of a communicative intention, as I understand it, is this:

The sender wishes to make it obvious to the receiver that the sender wishes to present to the receiver those-and-those representations with those-and-those attitudes and with that-and-that overarching aim.

The italicized parts of the structure are what I call a sender’s textual meaning.

I have now given a broad and largely untechnical explanation of what I take a sender’s meaning to be. My explanation falls within the general tradition of philosophical pragmatics and owes obvious debts to Gricean theory of meaning and Searlean speech-act theory. Thus according to Paul Grice’s classical analysis of meaning (1957) the core of sender’s meaning is the intended realization of a certain aim (see Grice 1989: 213–223, especially 220). In Searle’s theory of speech acts, such acts consist of a proposition (roughly equivalent to what I call a representation) introduced with a specific force (roughly equivalent to what I call an overall aim).
It is worth emphasizing, though, that my understanding of textual meaning is not identical either with Grice’s or Searle’s, nor, as far as I can see, with that of any among the large number of later theorists that could have been drawn in. However, I see no need to review the extensive post-Grice and post-Searle discussion here, or to go into philosophical detail with respect to my own proposal. I have indicated a way of describing the sender’s communicative intentions that I find useful for my purposes in this book, and also pointed to a mechanism by means of which the sender’s communicative intentions can be “conveyed” to the receiver: the sender produces overt behaviour from which it should be possible to draw conclusions about the sender’s communicative intention.\(^8\)

It may seem that many further questions need to be asked about sender’s textual meaning. Does sender’s textual meaning have to be a conscious phenomenon? Should it be thought of as being formed before the text is produced or in the very process of forming the text? What about the fact that a sender’s textual meaning may be spread out in time and vary over time? (Dickinson may have been working on “Dickinson 591” for quite some time, producing several drafts, before her one remaining clear copy came into being. If her sender’s meaning is to be conceived of as mental states with brute existence, at exactly what time would she be in these mental states?) And what about the sender’s meaning of texts with multiple authors?\(^9\)

My answer to such questions is open and inclusive. I think of the sender’s meaning as the sender’s meaning at the time of the production and authorization of the utterance, but apart from that I consider every aspect of the sender’s meaning to be of potential interest (and I also accept that different interpretations can be put on the formulation “the time of the production and authorization of the utterance”). To my mind, the real question is not what sender’s meaning is, for I am not a conceptual objectivist and do not believe that the sender’s meaning associated with a given text is a pre-existing formation in brute reality. In connection

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8. The idea that receivers have to actively draw conclusions rather than operate a code in a basically mechanical fashion is found already in Grice’s “Meaning” and reflected in very many later contributions. We saw in Chapter 1 how Reddy underlines that the receiver has to rely on “reconstruction and hypothesis testing” in order to retrieve what the sender meant.

9. Poststructuralists, generally wary of psychologizing and particularly wary of sender’s meanings, may also dispute that sender’s meaning is at all relevant to textual meaning and view the talk of sender’s meaning as the symptom of a mistaken belief in the unity of the subject. I will address objections of this kind in Chapter 8.
with a given physical utterance, there are brute facts that can reasonably be called elements of the communicative intentions of the sender. This is a rather comprehensive material with flexible delimitations. The real question is what, in that material of brute facts, one wishes to study, and from what angles, and for what purposes. That is what should determine one’s approach to the sender’s meaning in a given situation.

In the present investigation, I can see no reason to define “sender’s meaning” more formally than that. I repeat that my purpose is so general in nature that it does not require, and indeed does not warrant, detailed stipulations. My communicative goal is to further the understanding of what we call verbal communication by offering a partly new perspective on what we call texts and textual meaning. I am describing a landscape, not constructing a map of that landscape meant for some highly specific purpose.

**Receiver’s textual meaning**

Before proceeding further, I would like to make one thing about my concepts of sender’s meaning and receiver’s meaning more explicit. I have defined utterances in a way that automatically makes an utterance part of a communicative act. Not every case of language use is obviously communicative. If a sleeping person in the grip of a nightmare screams “No!”, one may not want to characterize the screaming of that word as a communicative act. In that case, nor should the sounds made be characterized as a physical utterance in the sense that I have defined. A related distinction can be made with respect to the receiver. When addressed by a sender, a receiver is of course expected to behave as a normal partner in communication. But the receiver is an independent agent. Faced with a written utterance addressed to oneself – say, a sheet of printed paper – one could naturally refrain from reading the physical utterance and trying to understand it. One could, for example, play a game with the text, picking out every tenth word to see if they make sense together considered as a kind of cipher. That would not be to engage in communication, and one’s experiences would not form a receiver’s meaning in my sense. I am interested in communication, communication in the sense that includes senders disclosing communicative intentions and receivers retrieving those intentions and reacting to their contents.

That said, we can go on to concentrate on the role of the receiver. While the sender is the initiator of the communicative act and its driving force, the act is aimed at the receiver, and the receiver’s uptake and reaction represent the goal of the act and its immediate motivation. The receiver is naturally expected to understand the sender’s meaning, but as my reference to the receiver’s reaction suggests,
I would like to include one more element in my overall conception of receiver’s textual meaning. The sender’s act is part of a larger context and makes certain implicit demands on the receiver. For both reasons, the normal receiver also forms what I call “a wider perception” of the sender’s act. In order to know how to take the sender’s utterance, in order to know what to make of it, the receiver needs an idea of what drives the sender and of how the sender’s strategies affect the receiver’s own ideas or wishes or plans of action. This is what I call a wider perception of the sender’s act. The content of a receiver’s meaning can be construed in a broader or narrower manner. When adopting a broad perspective I would identify a receiver’s meaning with the receiver’s understanding of the sender’s meaning plus the receiver’s wider perception of the sender’s utterance.

Let us use Belinda and Alan again. When Belinda says “Good morning” to Alan, Alan can be expected to register and interpret many of the verbal and non-verbal aspects of her physical utterance, identifying the two English words “Good morning” and understanding Belinda’s communicative act as a demonstratively friendly act of greeting him. This can all be taken to fall under what I call “understanding”. However, Alan will also have to form a wider perception of Belinda’s act. Belinda’s act is a move in a game of social interaction, and the next move is Alan’s, and he has to decide, on the spot, what to do. To respond adequately, Alan will need an overall understanding of the situation, not just a purely linguistic comprehension of what is meant by the phrase “Good morning.” Belinda’s greeting him is by no means out of the ordinary, for they know each other at least superficially and have not yet met on this day. Her demonstrative friendliness is more in need of an explanation. If Alan concludes, correctly, that Belinda wants him to understand that she finds him very nice, he has to enter that understanding into his overall perception of the situation and the act and evaluate the demand implicitly put on him. He needs that wider understanding and that evaluation as a basis for his decision about how to react. I imagine that Alan is filled with pleasure by Belinda’s perceived stratagem and answers with a warm and lively “Hi”. The pleasure forms part of Alan’s instant evaluation of Belinda’s communicative act and also, one might say, part of Alan’s receiver’s meaning: Alan finds Belinda’s greeting pleasant. I am thus prepared to let receiver’s textual meaning include not only the receiver’s understanding of the sender’s meaning, but also the receiver’s wider perception of the sender’s act.

It would be more traditional to restrict the concept of textual meaning across the board to what I just called the “purely linguistic”. However, as my reader already knows, I am not very interested in drawing precise borderlines around text and textual meaning. Different ways of delimiting textual meaning can be productive for different purposes. What I want to insist on, though, is the communicative importance of the senders’ and receivers’ wider strategies, their understanding of
the other party’s goals, and their own decisions about how to act. Communication is woven into human action, and if that dynamic perspective is missing something essential for the understanding of verbal communication has got lost.

**Commentator’s textual meaning**

Comments on the meaning of a text are inevitably made from a vantage point outside of the communicative transaction. The sender’s communicative intention and the receiver’s understanding and mental reaction are transient mental states. Even when senders and receivers themselves describe their own intentions and perceptions, they find themselves in a new role: not that of undergoing their experiences but that of describing them as things of the past. Also, a description of an experience, no matter how true, is naturally a different thing from the experience itself, much as a map is something very different from the terrain that it maps.

A linguistic pragmatician commenting on the meaning of a one-sentence utterance used as an example, or a literary critic presenting an interpretation of a poem or a novel, also find themselves outside the respective communicative acts, looking in, even though the critic will of course have read the poem or novel more than once as an ordinary reader, forming reading experiences, reader’s meanings, in the process. The fact that discussions of textual meaning inevitably adopt a third-party perspective may create the impression that the third-party perspective is the “true” perspective on communicative acts. I do not find it so. The third-party perspective is merely a different perspective on a communicative transaction from those of the sender and receiver actually engaging in it. I would also want to underline that the third-party perspective is a secondary one. The communicative transaction itself has logical priority. The sender’s communicative intention and the receiver’s understanding and mental reaction, and of course the physical utterance, must be there first. Otherwise there will be no communicative transaction to observe from the third-party perspective. Senders’ intentions and receivers’ understanding and perception are the bedrock of meaning. The meaning ascriptions of ordinary bystanders and of linguists or literary critics or others relate to those fundamental facts in one way or another, sometimes in a highly indirect and complicated manner.

*Textual meaning as formulated from the third-party perspective is what I call “commentator’s meaning”.*

10. I will employ the singular term “commentator’s meaning” when speaking of this variety of textual meaning in a generic sense, and also when speaking of the meaning constructed by an
have all inevitably been carried out from a third-party perspective, and the few interpretative remarks I made produced commentator’s meaning. To better understand the nature of commentator’s meaning, let us look again at one of my remarks about the Belinda-and-Karen example.

When commenting on Karen’s utterance of “Ten o’clock”, I wrote: “It may be tempting to ask what Karen’s ‘Ten o’clock’ really meant: did it mean that present time in Baltimore is 10 a.m., or did it mean that present time in Baltimore is 10 p.m., or was her utterance genuinely ambiguous?” If you understood me, one of the things I succeeded in doing was to convey – via the mechanisms described in this chapter – three ideas about possible textual meanings of Karen’s utterance. Take the idea that Karen’s utterance meant that present time in Baltimore is 10 a.m. That is a simple example of a commentator’s meaning. After you have read and understood my remarks, both you and I know about that specific idea as to what Karen’s utterance might be taken to mean. That idea is in a sense shared by you and me. Not literally shared, of course: the idea forms part of my mental contents and also forms part of your mental contents, but my mental contents are entirely separate from your mental contents. Yet we can trust that you and I have a relevantly similar representation of that specific idea about what Karen’s utterance might be taken to mean. Since that is the case, it becomes possible to speak of the idea that Karen’s utterance meant that present time in Baltimore is 10 a.m. not as something that is specifically in my mind, or specifically in your mind, but as something more general: the idea as such, the idea we share.

Perceived like that, the idea is no longer something mental but something abstract. The idea about the meaning of Karen’s utterance is not abstract in the classical, paradigmatic sense of something eternal outside time and space, for it certainly did not exist before I began to write this book. Yet the idea is not mental ether, not in the classical, paradigmatic sense of something located in the mind of a specific individual. The idea is a cryptomental abstraction, in this case something which can, metaphorically speaking, be located in the minds of several people in a (supposedly) relevantly similar form. This is the general ontological status of commentators’ meanings; they are, so to speak, public facts, not private mental facts. It should now be easy to see how and why.

Commentator’s meaning can be several different things. This can be said of sender’s meaning and receiver’s meaning as well, but it is true of commentator’s meaning in a far more radical sense. That is because there are, in reality, many different matters for commentators to occupy themselves with. Commentators on a given text’s meaning no doubt often want to say something about the true meaning...
of the text – the true meaning which they, but not I, suppose exists. But commen-
tators can naturally also explicitly focus on the sender's meaning, or some indi-
vidual receiver's meaning, or generalize about the textual meaning as perceived by
a specific group of receivers. And there are more options. For example, a literary
critic may suggest a reading of a poem that seems aesthetically rewarding without
necessarily presenting it as the one and only true interpretation. The possibilities
are in fact many and varied; there are many purposes for which one may want to
comment on the meaning of a text. And even when they have the same general
objective, commentators' meanings can differ in thickness and scope. Going into
these various complexities would carry us into the theory of interpretation, which
I do not find it necessary to say very much about in this book. What is truly im-
portant for my present purposes is to characterize the nature of what we in reality
refer to when we speak of textual meaning, and commentator's meaning forms an
important part of that complex.

Concluding remarks

In these last two chapters I have gone into more detail with respect to the elements
making up a text: the physical utterance and the other physical exemplars, the
complex of signs, the textual meaning. My ambition has been to open a partly new
perspective on what a text is, in conscious opposition to what I call the ordinary
conception of a text.

According to the ordinary conception, a text is a unitary object. For that
reason, an analysis of what a text is will automatically be expected to produce a
concrete, positive characterization of some unified, independently existing entity.
Textual meaning, the presumed meaning of the ordinary-conception text, is like-
wise thought to be a definite body of meaning, whether that meaning is considered
to be determinate or indeterminate. I have been arguing that the ordinary-con-
ception text is a contradiction in terms: something both one and many, and both
physical and abstract. To me, the ordinary conception is an intellectual construct
that is useful in everyday talk but ultimately illogical. Nor do I find the ordinary
conception of a text innocuous. In my view, the conception distorts the theoretical
understanding of verbal communication. The problems it creates have only been
touched upon thus far but will become more prominent in later chapters.

I have contented myself with commenting relatively briefly and simply on the
nature and the complexity of a physical utterance, a complex of signs, and textual
meaning. Formal definitions of such entities can of course be stipulated, defini-
tions singling out the phenomena of specific interest for a special research project.
But such definitions will be, precisely, stipulations. It is also possible to offer more
ambitious descriptive definitions than I have done: more detailed and differentiated descriptions of how the concept of a text and the concept of textual meaning are ordinarily conceived. This would be an interesting project in itself, but the ordinary conception of a text and the ordinary conception of textual meaning do not, of course, possess normative status. In my view, they are both superficial everyday ideas and represent obstacles, not aids, when one is looking for a viable theoretical understanding of verbal communication.
Chapters 4 and 5 explore the textual meaning of three authentic texts. My main aim is to make the theory presented in the previous chapter more concrete by applying it to texts of various characters, but the discussions will also offer opportunities to make some further points about textual meaning.

The textual meaning of a poem, “Dickinson 591”, will be treated in some depth in Chapter 5. In the present chapter, a news story and a work of electronic literature will be taken up. I have found it important for many reasons to include a good example of a text of a factual, informative character and have chosen, as already mentioned, a news story from the *Financial Times*. The work of electronic literature, in its turn, exemplifies how texts can display a complexity of structure far greater than that of traditional texts, and also gives me a chance to comment on a text incorporating, or existing in interplay with, a non-linguistic medium, in this case with images.

### Soble’s “Japan Quake Victims ‘Tour’ Damaged Homes via Google”

Jonathan Soble’s “Japan Quake Victims ‘Tour’ Damaged Homes via Google”, a news story related to the aftermath of the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, was published in the *Financial Times* on 28 March 2013. Soble’s article is reproduced in Figure 8 on p. 61, but I also quote the main body of the text here for the reader’s convenience.1

A Japanese town abandoned after the Fukushima nuclear accident has turned to Google’s Street View service to allow its 20,000 evacuated residents to “tour” their ghostly former home.

Working with the town’s mayor, Google surveyed the normally off-limits area this month using one of the camera-mounted vehicles it deploys to capture rotatable street-level images.

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1. Soble’s article is used under licence from the *Financial Times*. All rights reserved.
The results show the town of Namie’s eerily empty streets, debris-lined seashore and earthquake-damaged buildings – all untouched since residents were ordered out a day after the quake and tsunami, which struck in March 2011, triggered melt-downs at the nearby Fukushima plant.

Tamotsu Baba, the mayor, told the Financial Times he hoped that seeing images of Namie would help residents maintain emotional ties to the town. “The townspeople are scattered all around the country,” he said.

“This way they can remember, and maybe hold on to some hope of returning.”

Google’s technology and ubiquitous approach to documenting the world have made it a widely used source of disaster-related information. Google Earth satellite photos showed how the earthquake transformed Japan’s northern Pacific coastline, and environmental activists used Google Maps to track radiation hotspots.

Four or five elements of the text in Figure 8 are missing in the block quote (and even the black-and-white figure, faithfully rendering the original typography, does not include the signature pink of the pages of the Financial Times). The final, boldfaced line in the figure obviously gives the name and location of the author: “Jonathan Soble, Tokyo.” Another omitted element is the headline, “Japan quake victims ‘tour’ damaged homes via Google”. The “subtitle”, “Street View”, with the thin lines framing it, yet another such element, could perhaps be said to offer a supplementary indication of the theme or topic of the story. Last but not least, there is the small photo, rather tenuously associated with the main story, with its boldfaced caption, “Repair work is carried out at the Fukushima plant”. Most probably, the headline, subtitle, photo, and caption are editorial material, not Soble’s contributions. In any case, we have here an example of a text with a collective sender, who could be said to be the Financial Times. Soble has provided a report which has then been edited by the newspaper’s editorial staff. The staff may have made editorial changes in Soble’s text and will, at the least, have integrated his discourse with elements of their own choice or making (headline, photo et cetera) before using the resulting physical matrix in the production of newspaper copies.

The various components do not come together without some friction.

The headline is in fact slightly misleading, and the photo and caption only appear marginally relevant to the story. But of course this is nonetheless an integral text. There is a physical utterance – this time in the form of a large number of physical exemplars of equal status, one in each copy of the issue of the newspaper – representing a complex of signs that allows for coherent interpretation.

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2. If what the evacuated residents saw were “images of Namie”, “their ghostly former home”, it is not entirely correct to give readers to understand that what they toured via Google Street View were “damaged homes”.

Chapter 4. A news story and a work of electronic literature

Figure 8. Part of newspaper page with Jonathan Soble’s “Japan Quake Victims ‘Tour’ Damaged Homes via Google”
Already because of the picture, this is a physical utterance that one cannot copy adequately without reproducing aspects of its visual appearance. A comparison between my citation and Figure 8 should make this obvious. It is particularly worth noting that the illustration has no fixed place in a sequence of signs. The photo with its caption is simply not included in the sequence of sentences and paragraphs building up the main body of the text. The photo and caption constitute a wholly different part of the text, as it were, even if that part is clearly subordinate. Together, the two parts (and additional editorial bits of text) make up the article, forming the input that is there for the reader to react to.

Let us now consider the sender’s meaning. The overall aim of Soble’s text could be described as the offering of information. Soble knows things that are of potential interest to a possible reader, and he lays out that information in his article in the form of a series of interrelated representations. Thus in the first paragraph readers are confronted with the representations that there is a certain Japanese town that was abandoned after the Fukushima nuclear accident (we are later told that its name is Namie), that the town has 20,000 evacuated residents, and that the town has asked Google’s Street View service to allow those evacuated residents to “tour” their ghostly former home. And so it goes on. Soble introduces representations and implicitly guarantees that the representations answer to actual states of affairs. The assumption is that potential readers might want to know. The picture, with its caption, can be taken in the same spirit: simply as introducing more representations, one of them in visual form, whose veracity is being guaranteed. The web of representations could be described more or less thickly, that is, with varying degrees of detail. Attitudes are no doubt also communicated, but those attitudes are hardly remarkable: they are largely uncontroversial and expressed very discreetly. For example, I would say that Soble intentionally communicates the attitude that what happened at Fukushima was something negative and the present state of Namie deplorable.

One aspect of the communicated attitudes deserves special mention, however. A text usually has a more or less discernible dominant theme: a main topic or main point. It seems to me that the theme, in this case, must be said to have to do with Google’s Street View technology and its surprisingly wide applicability. Google is mentioned in the first paragraph of the article and serves, even more conspicuously, as the sole focus of its conclusion. The title and, particularly, the “subtitle”, tend to strengthen the impression that Google’s Street View technology and its usefulness is the article’s most prominent theme.

3. For brevity’s sake I continue to speak of “Soble’s text”, even though, strictly speaking, the text should no doubt be said to have a collective sender.
When sender’s meaning and receiver’s meaning are discussed and compared, it is often assumed that they have the same structure, so that the receiver’s meaning could, in principle, mirror that of the sender. On my analysis, however, the sender’s meaning is a wish to achieve a certain aim – to greet the receiver, or inform the receiver, or ... – and that is not true of the receiver’s meaning. I see the communicatively cooperative receiver as attempting to understand the sender’s meaning and, over and above that, as mentally reacting to the perceived sender’s meaning, forming a wider perception of the situation and a mental response.

In the case of Soble’s article, it should not be difficult for a receiver to reconstruct the sender’s meaning fairly successfully. The text is neutral and factual. The information is conveyed in a largely unambiguous fashion, leaving little room for misunderstandings concerning what is said or implied (apart from the mismatch between headline and article already commented on). The only point on which I can detect a source of potentially important confusion is the rendition of the statement by Tamotsu Baba, the mayor of Namie. Soble’s quotation marks can be taken to imply that the two sentences attributed to the mayor were uttered by Tamotsu Baba in precisely that form. Yet journalists normally feel free to edit the utterances by their interviewees while, for better effect, still presenting the utterances as coming verbatim out of the mouth of the person interviewed. Probably Tamotsu Baba never said “The townspeople are scattered all around the country” or “This way they can remember, and maybe hold on to some hope of returning”. I suspect that he actually used Japanese in his oral or written communication, and that Soble distilled some of the mayor’s words into the two sentences rendered as Tamotsu Baba’s direct speech. But that is a detail.

A receiver’s meaning is by definition an individual thing, and every receiver’s meaning will be, to some extent, different. Receivers’ perceptions of the sender’s meaning will differ, but even more their wider conceptions of the sender’s communicative act and its background. One cannot, therefore, give a unitary characterization of “the” receiver’s meaning in the sense that one can give such a description of the sender’s meaning. Still, something can be said about what will naturally, or possibly, go into a reader’s wider perception of Soble’s text.

One element appears inevitable. I said that Soble’s overall aim must be to impart information, and his article is clearly full of seriously meant statements. It would be very odd if a reader just noted those statements without believing or disbelieving them. The normal thing to do would no doubt be to assess their credibility, find them trustworthy or untrustworthy, and if they are found trustworthy...

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4. Thus, when Hansson speaks of the author’s poem and the reader’s poem (see Chapter 3 above, note 3), he is in effect thinking of the poem as experienced by the author and the poem as experienced by the reader – two meanings that could, in principle, coincide.
integrate the corresponding information into one’s system of beliefs about the world, learning something from the article. Such assessment may well be more or less automatic: there is no obvious reason to distrust anything that Soble writes. But I would say that a person who reads the article without even implicitly believing or disbelieving the things said will have read the article only in a purely technical sense, without responding to the article in the way presupposed when we speak about communication. Soble’s article has a purpose, and one cannot really enter into the communicative transaction initiated by Soble without engaging with that purpose.

The attitudes of the sender are, I believe, another factor that always plays a part in receivers’ wider perception of a communicative act. I am no longer referring, now, to the *communicated* attitudes of the sender. The sender also has a more overarching strategy, of which the individual communicative act forms just one integral part, and an overall way of going about things. Receivers will also be sensitive to this. In face-to-face communication, like in the Belinda-and-Alan example, the attitudes of the speaker, and the personality shining through, will be important implicit considerations when the receiver decides how to respond. In the case of a newspaper article, no overt response is expected from the receiver. The typical receiver will probably still form a tacit impression of the attitudes, or even the personality, of the sender. For me, that impression will form part of the receiver’s meaning. As in the Belinda-and-Alan example, too, the receiver may well evaluate the personal importance of the communicative act and the perceived strategies behind it, assessing the significance of the information, the acceptability of the attitudes, and so forth.

What receivers focus on and what evaluations they make will often be a highly personal matter. Just as an example: I myself am slightly reluctant, in reading Soble’s article, to focus on Google’s technical achievements. For me, the human interest of learning more about how people’s lives were affected by the Fukushima disaster comes more into the foreground, and also the possible human consequences of the use of nuclear technology. I also note that the problems associated with the use of nuclear power seem to be played down here: the events at Fukushima are called an “accident”, not, for example, a “disaster”, and the evacuees are cast as the victims of an earthquake, not of nuclear radiation. (It is certainly true that the town was hit by the tsunami caused by the earthquake, but what now makes it impossible for its former inhabitants to return is clearly the radiation spread from Fukushima.) Other readers of the *Financial Times* may react differently.

The sender’s habitus becomes visible not only in the representations introduced. In connection with an oral utterance every aspect of body language, far beyond intentional gestures and intentionally arranged facial expressions, may influence the receiver or become objects of the receiver’s reflection. In connection
with a written utterance, its visual appearance will have some importance. It is worth remembering the words of Greetham which I quoted in Chapter 2, that “every act of copying, mechanical or otherwise, produces a ‘different’ text”, and Chaudhuri’s contention that “the material medium of the text contributes materially to its meaning – hence each new material embodiment alters and extends that meaning”. There is, indeed, an important difference even between reading Soble’s article in Figure 8 and reading it in the original in the issue of the Financial Times. In the newspaper issue, the article forms part of a larger structure of news reporting, and it is arguably marked, by means of its placement and the size of its headline, as a not too important news item, something which is likely to affect the reader’s wider perception of the story. There is also a big difference between reading the article years later in this present book and reading it in the Financial Times on the day of publication, with the sense of potentially urgent information that accompanies the confrontation with today’s news and also with the pink of the newspaper page reminding one of the special character of the Financial Times. Those differences do not, of course, affect the verbal material as such, nor the overall aim or the expressed attitudes. But the differences are likely to influence readers’ sense of the article’s importance to themselves and thus what I call their wider perception of the story. A receiver’s meaning may well be affected by such things as the pink of the pages, the placement of the article, the size of its headline, and the implicit idea behind the text that it is primarily meant for more or less immediate reading, not for eternity.

I will leave Soble’s article at that point. I have commented on its textual meaning: on its sender’s meaning, and also on possible, sometimes almost inevitable, elements of a receiver’s meaning. It is worth emphasizing that we have

5. I share the view that the “material embodiment” has the capacity to influence readers’ impressions and so their receivers’ meanings. It is worth noting, though, that only aspects of the physical exemplar made obligatory by the complex of signs are strictly speaking relevant for the sender’s meaning. The style of Dickinson’s handwriting will influence the overall impression of a reader of her manuscript for “Dickinson 591”. Yet the forms of the traces representing letters are not included in the complex of signs associated with the poem, at least not according to my understanding. I would therefore say that the style of Dickinson’s handwriting no doubt influences a reader’s impression of that physical exemplar of “Dickinson 591” but is not really of importance for the sender’s meaning of the poem and should not form part of the reader’s reconstruction of Dickinson’s meaning. Visually or materially different versions of a text are, in that respect, a little like different performances of a drama. (The figure and the facial features of an actor playing Hamlet will no doubt influence the viewer’s impression of that performance of Hamlet but is of no relevance for the sender’s meaning of Shakespeare’s play.) In the case of Soble’s article, however, I am inclined to regard several aspects of the original’s visual appearance as being made obligatory by the complex of signs and consequently relevant for the sender’s meaning, for example the colour of the page and the relative size of the headline.
not encountered the sender’s meaning or any receiver’s meaning directly. They were filtered through commentator’s meaning: what I offered was commentator’s meaning intended to chart the actual sender’s meaning and aspects of the possible meanings realized by receivers.

**Chemical Landscapes Digital Tales by Falco and associates**

*Chemical Landscapes Digital Tales* was published, on the Internet, in 2006 in the first volume of the Electronic Literature Collection. The work consists of eight separate pieces of discourse by Edward Falco, combined with eight photograms by Mary Pinto. The overall design was created by Will Stauffer-Norris. The photograms, produced in a darkroom with chemicals and flashlights, come across as abstract landscapes (“chemical landscapes”). One of the landscapes doubles as a navigation page. Clicking on various points of the navigation page brings a receiver to one or the other of the eight landscapes. After a moment writing appears, grows in size, then recedes and vanishes before one has quite had the time to read it, after which the navigation page reappears. These pieces of discourse, different for each picture, are Falco’s “digital tales”. According to Falco, the tales are “suggested by the particular chemical landscape”. He writes about his collection of tales:

> My hope is that the reader will recognize the necessity of jumping around in the text, picking up pieces of the tale to read and ignoring other pieces, thereby creating a different experience with each reading. If you think of reading a traditional story as a journey with a beginning, a middle, and an end, then reading a hypertext is like walking through a field: readers begin at any one of several different starting points, wander around as long as they like, and then exit wherever and whenever they choose.

The navigation page can be found reproduced in Figure 9 on the next page. One of the eight frames of picture and discourse is represented in Figure 10 in one of the seamless stages of appearance/disappearance of its writing.

Soble’s news story was a relatively simple text to account for in terms of meaning. Its sender’s meaning could defensibly, albeit reductively, be described as a weave of representations whose correspondence with actual facts was being guaranteed by the writer. *Chemical Landscapes Digital Tales* is a far more complex case. Thin and narrow descriptions of its sender’s meaning will seem beside the

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6. All technical information about the work, and all quotations in this section, are taken from the work’s homepage (Falco 2016).
The same can be said about literary texts generally (even though *Chemical Landscapes Digital Tales* is certainly untypical in many respects). In connection with literature the importance of being able to adopt a wider, dynamic perspective on verbal communication is very evident.

The word “tales” does not seem to me to be an entirely adequate description of Falco’s creations. His tales could in a way be characterized as prose poems which take Pinto’s images as the starting-points for chains of associations formulated in a
The idea of a Text and the Nature of Textual Meaning

dreamlike language vaguely reminiscent of surrealist automatic writing. For most of the time that a given frame is exposed, Falco's tale is inscribed on Pinto's landscape, somewhat like an ekphrasis actually covering the object of art that it relates to. This can be seen in Figure 10. To give an idea of Falco’s tales, I quote the tale glimpsed in Figure 10 in its entirety:


Depths midnight blue, dark slate blue.

Where sky touches sea light seablue

Where the depths rush upward olive green drab olive green.

Color of fury under color of sickness under color of serene.

Sickness, sea, serene

Rush upward push pressure upswell surge claws scratch darkclaws.

Like Soble’s article, Falco’s tales have a sender’s meaning obviously built around representations. The tale just quoted consists of representations from start to finish (there are rough seas; there are upswells; there is seething), but those representations are strangely indeterminate. The tale may be full of characterizations, but it is very often not clear what is being characterized – to what object the characterizations refer.

In part, the tale just quoted lets itself be understood as an imaginative description of Pinto’s landscape. Pinto’s image can be seen as representing sky and the surface of a rough sea; the colours referred to by Falco can be found in the image; the “claws” that are mentioned can probably be identified with features on the left of Pinto’s landscape. Still, as a whole, Falco’s description rather gives the impression of a fantasy sparked by Pinto’s image than of a characterization of the image, since the latter part of Falco’s tale, from the words “for me at night in sleep” onwards, turns to the inner world of the speaker during sleep, when the speaker
is entering the described seascape. Anyway, it should be obvious that we are being offered material for us to read and view and experience, not information about the content of Pinto’s image or the writer’s inner life in his dreams. The obvious differences in purpose and in openness to diverging interpretations are striking dissimilarities between Falco’s work and Soble’s news story.

I have been looking at one specific tale in *Chemical Landscapes Digital Tales*, but as already mentioned the work consists of eight tales forming a whole, each tale being coordinated with an image. Falco’s words will no doubt affect readers’ experiences of Pinto’s images, and vice versa. Most obviously, specific visual features found in the images are likely to affect readers’ understanding of specific formulations, as in the case of “midnight blue” and “claws” in the tale rendered above. But there will also be more subtle and global effects. The image on the navigation page doubling as one of the eight emerging landscapes is the most serene of the eight. Falco’s corresponding tale begins with the words “Placid. Idyl[l]ic. Still”.7 The constant departure from, and return to, this anchorage point – alluded to in the corresponding tale as a “piece of peace” – may also influence readers’ experiences of the work, as may the dynamics created by the swelling, then waning, of the lines on the screen when a tale is being exposed. These electronic and multimodal effects are not purely verbal occurrences, but they cannot seriously be thought to be without consequences for the textual meaning of *Chemical Landscapes Digital Tales*, not even for the textual meaning, sender’s and receivers’, of its tales.

My comments on *Chemical Landscapes Digital Tales* should have made some of the points made earlier even clearer than before. For one thing, the structural differences between sender’s and receiver’s textual meaning become very visible. According to his own testimony, which I can see no reason to doubt, Falco’s aim, his sender’s meaning, was for the receiver to form an experience on the basis of the visual and verbal material that he presents. The receiver is expected to take in the material and work on it cognitively and emotionally, forging a necessarily individual experience in the process. The content of that experience will be the receiver’s meaning. The sender’s meaning and the receiver’s meaning cannot, then, ever be mirror images of each other.

It should also have become clearer than before that it makes sense to think of textual meaning, whether sender’s or receiver’s, as something that cannot really be captured in words. It is no doubt possible to render the representational contents of Falco’s digital tales in words, and to some extent also to characterize the attitudes being expressed. However, if one stops at that one will clearly miss the point of Falco’s communicative act. The whole visual and verbal complex of *Chemical

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7. Falco’s tales are not free from what must be typos, but the word “idyllic” is consistently misspelled one way or the other, and that feature may well have been introduced intentionally.
Landscapes Digital Tales – all the coordinated but not sequentially structured images and discourses – is intended to form a ground from which the receiver’s experience can take off. The work will only come together, to the extent that it will do so at all, in the receiver’s actual experience. The receiver’s experience will to a large extent be non-verbal and generally speaking part of the individual receiver’s unique system of interrelated and biologically anchored mental contents. If one wishes to reduce the textual meaning to what can be formulated in words one can do so, but then one will ignore what is meant to be of main importance in the communicative act. That remains true even if one restricts the discussion to Falco’s digital tales, ignoring the larger whole of which they form part.

Reflection on Chemical Landscapes Digital Tales also raises new questions. Soble’s news story included visual elements, but Falco’s work is more radically visual and actually intertwined with visual art. So far I have operated with discourses that could without any hesitation be called texts. Faced with Chemical Landscapes Digital Tales one may wonder whether this is really a text, or what part of it can be called a text. In a book on text and textual meaning this is of course a matter of some interest.

As usual, however, I am not really concerned to draw lines in the sand. I do not believe that the question of what is or is not a text has any answer that is at once definite and generally applicable. There are no special formations in the structure of reality demanding to be called texts. We can stipulate more or less exact answers to the question of what a text is, but such stipulations will be largely arbitrary if made in abstracto and without a specific research purpose in mind. My real concern in this book is with the understanding of verbal communication and with the problems caused by the use of the ordinary conception of a text in theoretical analyses. I am certainly intent on discussing the kinds of matter usually referred to when we are speaking of texts, but I do not believe that ordinary usage is clear or precise, nor – more to the point – do I believe that ordinary language should be normative for scholarly thinking and scholarly terminology. I can get by with a quite rough definition of what a text is.

A really precise definition would even risk becoming obstructive. Concerning visual elements in texts, I would say that there is a continuum rather than a single sharp break. The complex of signs associated with “Dickinson 591” contains no visual elements. That of Soble’s article contains some, and in Chemical Landscapes Digital Tales visual elements are very prominent. I would say that visual elements dominate even more in some of Apollinaire’s calligrammes. The real challenge for me is not to formulate a precise definition of the concept of a text, but to find analytic frameworks also fit to deal with works such as the ones mentioned. I regard it as an important merit of my analysis of text and textual meaning that it can in fact cope with more experimental texts as well as with quite traditional ones.
“Dickinson 591” is being used throughout this book as my chief example of a text, and a close look at its textual meaning is essential for full familiarity with the poem. My discussion of the textual meaning of “Dickinson 591” will be structured largely like my remarks on Soble’s article: as a characterization of the sender’s meaning, such as I understand it, and an argument about the structure of possible receivers’ meanings, in this case with particular attention paid to the special situation in connection with literary texts. However, my analysis of the sender’s meaning will be much more detailed, much “thicker”, and in the later parts of the chapter I will also draw in the critical discussion about the poem. Critics produce commentators’ meanings, and that fact will lead me to also reflect on the question of what commentators are actually commenting on when interpreting the meaning of a text. Just like Chapter 4, this chapter will contain a few extra theoretical observations, including general remarks about the nature and meaning of texts.

The sender’s meaning of “Dickinson 591”

Earlier, I gave a very brief characterization of the overall aim of Dickinson’s poem: the offering of material for a literary experience. One may wonder what a literary experience is, more concretely, and how it comes into being, but I will put such questions aside until later in the chapter. I will begin, instead, with a line-by-line commentary on Dickinson’s text intended to describe in some detail the representations that she introduces.

Dickinson’s poem opens with an extraordinary statement: that the “I” of the text heard a fly buzz when she, or he, died.¹ The “I” appears to be communicating after its own death, and how could that be possible? The sentence making up the

¹. The gender of the speaker is left unspecified. Susan Lanser has argued that in such cases we normally understand the speaking persona as being of the same gender as the real author (Lanser 1981: 151). That may be a correct observation, but I still regard such a norm, if it exists, as weak and defeasible, and I am not convinced that Dickinson intended the dying person to be definitely female. To me, it is meaningful that the poem has a lack of precision, an openness, in
opening line is of a kind that a linguist might provide with an asterisk signaling “ungrammaticality or extreme semantic abnormality” (compare Cruse 2004: ix). Since it is clear that we are not dealing with purported real-world information but with material meant to give rise to a literary experience, we still have every reason to take the sentence literally and seriously despite its semantic abnormality. Nevertheless, the oddity of the state of affairs described should not be ignored – the conflict between what we are being told and our presumed knowledge of the world. The poem opens with a very simple and still very surprising statement.

There is also another pragmatic peculiarity in the first line. Dickinson lets her main person produce an abstract of the narrative that is to follow, and what is emphasized as being noteworthy in the narrative is not dying itself but hearing the fly buzz at the moment of dying. The moment of dying marks a momentous transition, and to present hearing a fly buzz as the really remarkable feature of that moment breaks with established expectations (compare Vendler 2010: 266).

The rest of the first stanza is taken up with a simile: the stillness in the room is compared to the stillness in the air between the heaves of storm. Since the definite article marks the room as something already known it is reasonable to assume that this is the room in which the dying persona is located, and since no new point in time is being mentioned it is reasonable to think that we are at the extended moment “when I died”. Since the stillness in the room is said to be like the stillness in the air between the heaves of storm, there is a suggestion that at least one (metaphorical) heave of storm has preceded this moment and at least one (metaphorical) heave of storm can be expected to follow.

The second stanza contains other linguistic abnormalities. Eyes cannot “wring”, and the word “them” appears to stand for “themselves” – we have here another sentence which is a candidate for a linguistic asterisk, and pragmatic considerations are needed in order to make sense of formulations which would be nonsensical if taken literally. In the text, we find ourselves in a room where a person is dying. Abduction – an inference to the best explanation – makes it reasonable to take “The Eyes around” as a metonymy for the persons surrounding the deathbed. Their eyes are now dry, but were earlier wet, no doubt from tears: the tears have been forced out under considerable pressure (“wring” out) so that there is now no moisture left. The language in the second stanza makes a twisted and tortured impression, and the creation of that formal effect may or may not be viewed as part of the sender’s meaning.

Just as it makes no literal sense to say that eyes can wring something, it makes no literal sense to say that breaths can gather firm. The sender’s meaning of the line

many places, and the lack of precision with regard to the dying person’s sex seems to me to form part of that larger pattern.
“And Breaths were gathering firm” should probably most reasonably be conceived of as a small cluster of approximate senses rather than as one precise meaning. Judging from the context, the breaths are those of the people around the deathbed, and possibly also that of the dying person, but the indefinite formulation makes it possible to sense that other breaths than those of the people in the room are also, mysteriously, involved. (This ambiguity is not prominent, but I find it difficult to ignore, once one has perceived this possible reading.) It is less clear what it means that the breaths “were gathering firm”. Are we to understand that firm breaths are gathering, or that breaths are gathering firmness? And what does “gathering” mean here? The ideas of breaths, of gathering, and of firmness are clearly being invoked and clearly forming part of the sender’s meaning, but it appears uncertain whether it is possible to be more precise than that. It is my impression that the line is designed to suggest the idea of people breathing in unison (“gathering”) and more or less holding their breath (with the firmness in the breast occasioned by that), but that may well be nothing more than a personal perception.

The breaths are gathering firm for that last onset when the King is expected to be witnessed in the room. The word “onset” can mean an “attack”, and that is no doubt the main sense here, but it can also mean a “beginning”. Once again, I find the hint of ambiguity difficult to neglect. Death can be thought of as the beginning of a new state, perhaps a new kind of existence.

More ambiguities, or more indefiniteness, are to follow, for, at the last onset, “the King” is expected to “Be witnessed” in the room. The first interpretation of “the King” to offer itself is no doubt “God” or “Christ” – reference to a “literal” king seems excluded for cultural, pragmatic reasons. It is worth noting, though, that no explicit reference to God or Christ is being made, so the identity of the king must be said to be left somewhat open. Also, the presence of the king might be “witnessed” in various senses, and again no specific possibility distinguishes itself as the only credible alternative. God might be expected to manifest himself personally in the room in some more or less obvious manner, or perhaps the dying person might be expected to bear witness in some form about his or her faith in God.

From the third stanza onwards, the bystanders and their reactions begin to disappear from view, and the focus comes to rest firmly on the dying person. The person wills his or her keepsakes away. The reference to signing makes it sound as if the signing of a will is taking place, which seems faintly odd from a pragmatic point of view (compare Vendler 2010: 266–267), and the only possessions being willed are mere keepsakes. It is possible to imagine that the “signing” is more like making one’s wishes known than like signing a document: the dying person indicates how he or she wishes to dispose of the last of his or her emotionally significant earthly belongings, cutting another tie to human realities. But the important thing here may be the fact that a last will is being formulated and the minimizing
of the importance of the earthly “keepsakes”. It is worth noting that the keepsakes, the remaining material possessions, are the only portion of the dying person that are “assignable”, possible to set aside for a specific purpose. The word “assign” can also be used in connection with classification, as when you assign rocks to different categories, and that sense, too, may be relevant – the person remains undefinable, unlike the keepsakes.

At the end of the third stanza and the opening of the fourth, the poem’s finale begins with the first of the three “and then’s that lead up to the poem’s ending (a pattern emphasized by Vendler 2010: 268.): “and then it was / There interposed a Fly – // With Blue – uncertain – stumbling Buzz – / Between the light – and me –”. To “interpose” can mean to place oneself between two things, but it can also be to make a comment in an ongoing conversation. In the poem, the situation is being viewed from the perspective of the dying person, whose eyesight and grip on reality are obviously beginning to falter. The blue darkness emerging is interpreted by the dying person as caused by the interposition of the fly – an interposition understood, illogically, both as the making of an acoustic intervention and the occupation of a space: the fly’s buzzing “comment” is perceived as having placed itself between the person and the light.

Taken as an interposition in the “comment” sense, the fly’s buzzing has no discernible meaning. It is metaphorically called “blue”, “uncertain”, and “stumbling”, which creates the impression that the fly is making a partly unsuccessful attempt to find a good direction in which to move, perhaps also an impression of melancholy (“blue”). There is no doubt some measure of identification with the fly on the part of the dying person (Cameron 1979: 115, Vendler: 210: 268; to my mind, however, both commentators overstate the point).

The perception of the fly’s buzzing as an interposition in the “placement” sense is of course entirely illogical – the sound cannot come in the way of the light – and suggests that the dying person’s understanding of reality is becoming distorted. Moreover, light is not in a specific place but all around, so the talk of an interposition “Between the light – and me” is doubly illogical.

The poem ends with two more “and then’s: “And then the Windows failed – and then / I could not see to see –”. The two lines continue the description of the coming of darkness, perceived from the perspective of the now disoriented dying person. The darkness is interpreted by him or her not as a diminishment of his or her own mental or bodily abilities but as a failure on the part of the windows – a bizarre interpretation of course, since many things can happen to windows but they certainly cannot “fail”. At the end, the person has the experience of being unable to “see to see”. That is a peculiar formulation: it may be the case that it is so dark that one cannot see to read, and so dark that one cannot see, but what can it mean that one cannot see to see? It is as if the dying person feels that she or he is in possession
of eyesight and other necessary capacities but is being prevented by darkness from using them. Yet at the same time the strange expression “see to see” seems to reflect a perception of the situation as something out of ordinary experience.2

The poem has nothing to say about the situation after the events just described, that is, about the position from which the first-person narrator is now recounting the events in the past sense. Helen Vendler (2010: 268) has commented that the “voice is speaking posthumously, positioned nowhere”. In fact, the situation is even less definite. Nothing is said about a voice speaking – it is not made explicit by what kinds of channel the person’s narrative is supposed to reach us – and the present position of the “I” is left open rather than being specified as being nowhere.

I have now given an overview of the representations introduced in “Dickinson 591” such as I myself understand them. I have concentrated on the descriptive aspects, leaving aside most of the attitudinal, non-descriptive meaning, for example, most of the attitudes expressed indirectly through what could be called formal elements. Thus I have said nothing about verse and rhythm, or about Dickinson’s use of capitalization and dashes, all features that help articulate or colour the descriptive meaning and make the sender’s meaning richer. Nor have I really commented on the overall organization of the poem, with its efficient introduction of the theme in the first line and the skillful preparation of an ending by means of the three “and then’s that mark stations in the dying person’s loss of sight and understanding. The first full rhyme in the poem, “me” – “see”, completed by the last word of the text, no doubt strengthens the sense of closure.

If these are the representations that Dickinson wished to introduce, and if she wished the representations to form the point of departure of a literary experience, one may ask what she intended that experience to focus on. I am far from sure that Dickinson ever asked herself that question in a similar form, consciously or unconsciously. But I would suppose that she implicitly felt the representations to be important to her and, by extension, possibly important to other conceivable readers. My guess would be that, attempting to come to terms with the phenomenon of death intellectually and emotionally, she also experienced the question of what death means as a question about what it is like to die, and that “Dickinson 591” represents an imaginative attempt to view dying from the inside, with the wider repercussions that may have for an understanding of death. I do not imagine that

2. Louise Rosenblatt, too, draws a parallel to the expression “see to read”, but she develops her observation in a different direction: “The last line, ‘I could not see to see,’ parallel to the homely ‘I could not see to read,’ seems to distinguish between the act, the effort to see, and the actual seeing, and thus enhances the felt value of the mere physical senses that are being extinguished.” (Rosenblatt 1978: 64) Like so many other commentators, Rosenblatt does not appear to think of the dying person as being confused at the end of the poem.
Dickinson consciously or unconsciously intended any definable message to be read out of her poem, but that she rather created a complex of imaginings that she herself found intriguing and enlightening (and, implicitly, possibly intriguing and enlightening for other conceivable readers).

With that I conclude my attempt at a thick reconstruction of the sender’s meaning of Dickinson 591. In reality, nothing specific is known about that meaning except what can be surmised on the basis of Dickinson’s original manuscript and what we know about Dickinson from her other poems, from her correspondence, or from sources like her family or friends. In my rather cautious reconstruction I did not knowingly include any elements that I believe to be alien to Dickinson’s sender’s meaning, but I am nevertheless convinced that a corresponding description from Dickinson herself would have differed palpably in tone, conceptual and emotional approach, and special emphases. That appears inevitable.

“Dickinson 591” and receivers’ meanings

On my analysis, receivers attempt to identify the sender’s meaning and form an adequate reaction to it. A receiver’s meaning, broadly conceived, consists of the receiver’s reconstruction of the sender’s meaning plus the content of the receiver’s wider perception of the text.

My own reconstruction of Dickinson’s meaning was given in the previous section. I will not make any real attempt to give a rounded description of my own literary experience, or experiences, of “Dickinson 591” by adding a description of my wider perception of the text. I will only say that I concentrate on the dying person’s experience of dying, which I find strangely comforting in its similarity to a falling asleep with consciousness fading and dispersing. Not being a religious person I take no real interest in the question of a hereafter. But when discussing critical interpretations of the poem later in this chapter, I will add a few further details about my own experience of “Dickinson 591” as a reader.

It is well known from studies of readers’ responses to literature that different persons may experience one and the same text quite differently (see, for example, Richards 1929, Hansson 1959, Holland 1975, Pette 2001). Concerning “Dickinson 591” specifically, I have no empirical material with respect to reader responses to report. Louise Rosenblatt, who has obviously used the poem many times in her teaching, tells us that the understanding of the fly was key to the different overall responses to the Dickinson poem that she encountered among her students, “graduate and undergraduate”, over the years. For some, the fly was “an insignificant, weak creature”, while others viewed it as being strongly associated with “filth, germs, and decay”, something which determined two different ways of
experiencing the poem (Rosenblatt 1978: 64). Rosenblatt does not offer empirical evidence of her students’ reactions, but as we will see later in the chapter a similar split can be found among professional critics. Even if these critical commentaries represent commentators’ meanings, and cannot be taken as intended simply to report the respective critic’s spontaneous receiver’s meaning, they certainly offer evidence of how differently one can understand the Dickinson poem.

**Receivers’ meanings in literary contexts**

Before proceeding to critical interpretations of “Dickinson 591”, I would like to comment on two special questions concerning receivers’ meanings in connection with literature. First, critics often deny that sender’s meaning is at all relevant in such contexts. Second, it may seem unclear what goes into a reader’s wider perception of the text when the text is a work of literature.

In connection with literature, many doubt that it is at all relevant for receivers to take account of the sender’s meaning: why can receivers not just restrict themselves to understanding the text they encounter, a text which should be able to stand for itself? That was Beardsley’s position and the philosophy behind the extremely influential criticism of the so-called “intentional fallacy” (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1954a); as we will see in Chapter 8, contemporary mainstream literary theory also firmly believes in the irrelevance of the author’s intentions, although for different reasons than Wimsatt and Beardsley. My general answer holds for both literary and non-literary texts: the sender has put together material meant to be of interest to a receiver, and in order to get into contact with that material and make use of it the receiver must try to reconstruct the sender’s meaning. In the case of “Dickinson 591”: Dickinson’s material consists of representations meant to be conducive to a literary experience; if one ignores her sender’s meaning one will not be confronted with that material.

Many theorists fail to be impressed by that kind of answer because they think that textual meaning can be arrived at without attempting to reconstruct the sender’s meaning. The meaning of the text may seem obvious, and the detour via the sender’s intentions unnecessary. To me, this idea seriously overestimates the power of semantics and underestimates the role of pragmatic inference in the making sense of a text. I am convinced that grasping the “obvious” textual meaning typically involves an implicit attempt to grasp the sender’s meaning.

Of course, nothing can stop a receiver from disregarding the sender’s meaning, since nothing can stop one from reading a text exactly as one pleases. However, as I defined receiver’s meaning in Chapter 3, this would be to refrain from engag-
The Idea of a Text and the Nature of Textual Meaning

ing in a communicative act. On my definition, a receiver’s meaning necessarily includes an attempted reconstruction of the sender’s meaning.

This is not just a normative definition. I believe that we are socialized into using language for communication, and when we are confronted with language we assume a communicative position by default. I am thus convinced that receivers of utterances, also readers of literature, as one part of their meaning-making activity typically attempt to understand what the sender meant. This is a firm belief of mine, but I would nevertheless like to add two reservations.

To the best of my knowledge, we have no really convincing empirical evidence about whether or not receivers of literature implicitly consider what the sender might have meant. It may seem reasonable for the receiver to do so, as I just pointed out, and it may seem obvious that knowledge about the author, and what it would have been normal or possible for the author to mean, does play a role for readers’ constructions of textual meaning. For example, if “I heard a fly buzz when I died” had been known to be written not by Dickinson but by a prominent member of the English court under king Edward VII, the words about the king expected to be witnessed in the room would have taken on one more plausible meaning. Still, the strategies actually employed in the more or less automatic basic processes during reading are not easy to trace with confidence, and one should of course bear that in mind.

Also, it seems clear to me that the importance of accurately reconstructing the sender’s meaning is something that varies between texts – and sometimes from receiver to receiver, depending on the receiver’s interests. There is every reason to believe that the sender’s meaning typically plays a less dominant role in connection with literature. Literary texts do not have that direct practical importance for receivers which makes attention to the sender’s meaning paramount in non-literary contexts. Furthermore, literary texts typically have an intended openness to personalized ways of experiencing them, and a reliance on suggestiveness rather than exactitude, which makes the sender’s meaning less definite in some important respects. Having said that, I still uphold the idea that even the receiver of literature implicitly seeks to register the communicative intentions of the sender.

Anyway, the reconstruction of sender’s meaning is far from constituting the whole story of the normal processing of a verbal utterance. The receiver is expected to react: to perform mental or overt acts in response. In connection with information or requests, it is relatively easy to perceive the main elements of the

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3. Many would contend that this would be due to the poem’s different context, not to attention to the sender’s meaning as such. However, as I will argue in Chapter 8, context cannot produce any direct effects on textual meaning: the influence of the context will by necessity have to be mediated through senders and receivers.
receiver’s processing of the text above the level of mere understanding. The receiver will typically believe or disbelieve the information and integrate the result with his or her body of knowledge about the world. Or the receiver will typically assess the situation and decide whether or not to comply with the request. Where literature is concerned, however, specialists differ about what should be in focus for a receiver: the literary form, or the emotional experience of the text, or cognitive aspects. Ordinary readers, for their part, clearly differ in what they want to get out of literature (consider, for example, the readers studied by Holland 1975, Radway 1987, Kramer 1996, and Pette 2001).

I have said that the dynamic perspective on communication gets lost if one limits one’s interest to the purely linguistic meaning of a text, and that this becomes obvious in connection with literature. What I had in mind was the fact that the reader’s creative contribution seems particularly difficult to ignore in literary communication. In “Dickinson 591”, the occurrences narrated and the person ostensibly producing the text are both patently fictitious. Knowing about the feigned communicative acts of a non-existing sender cannot, in itself, be of much human value. Nevertheless, there is much in the text of obvious potential interest to a receiver. There is a description of what it can be like to die, and it would only be natural for a receiver to reflect, implicitly, on the credibility and implications of that account – its fictionality does not necessarily detract from its interest in that respect. Moreover, there are human attitudes being expressed – the fictive attitudes of the fictive dying person and also, deeper in the background, the attitudes, genuine or assumed, that are being expressed by Dickinson, the real sender responsible for the real communicative act. As always, human attitudes are of potential interest to us – they arouse sympathy or its opposite, and we can learn from them, positively and negatively, about possible ways of looking at the world. But this requires substantial and independent cognitive and emotional engagement from a reader.

The receiver of a text will be sensitive to the presumption of relevance implicit in the communicative act and assess the validity of that presumption. The reader of an informative piece of writing like Soble’s will react to the underlying

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4. Not surprisingly, straightforward formalism plays only a minor role in literary aesthetics, but the formalist tradition has nevertheless produced well-known contributions like Jakobson 1960. The current emphasis on empathy and imagination highlights the reader’s emotional response to literature, as in the theory of the role of imagination sponsored by, not least, Gregory Currie in a number of monographs beginning with Currie 1990. Cognitive aspects of literature are also often strongly stressed; see, e.g., Gaskin 2013. The theorists just mentioned are linguists (Jakobson) or philosophers. Literary specialists are usually less explicit in aesthetic-theoretical matters, but over the last decades several theorists have tended to understand the encounter with high-quality literature not least as a cognitive and emotional confrontation with otherness; see, e.g., Attridge 2015.
aspiration to truth and relevance by implicitly assessing the credibility and interest of the story. If the reader finds the text credible and interesting, that verdict and its motivation will form part of the reader’s wider perception of the text: the reader will view the text as being credible and interesting. Analogous observations can be made about other types of non-literary discourse, like Belinda’s greeting of Alan and her question to Karen, and also about literature. The reader of a text like Dickinson’s will react to its implicit aspiration to literary interest by implicitly assessing the text from a literary point of view, and if the reader finds the text meaningful and interesting, this verdict and its motivation will form part of the reader’s wider perception of the text.

I have said that the receiver’s active role is very noticeable in connection with literature. This is reflected in the fact that meaning in literature, as analyzed by literary specialists, usually has to do with what I call the wider perception of a text rather than with the text’s purely linguistic meaning. This will be amply illustrated when we turn, now, to the critical response to Dickinson’s poem.

Critics on the theme of “Dickinson 591”

Understanding the theme of a text – what the text is about, what the sender expects the receiver’s interest to be focused on – is of strategic importance in reading or listening to a text, and also in commenting on it. Different critics have understood the theme of “Dickinson 591” differently.\(^5\) Although everybody regards the poem as being about death and dying, some can be said to conceive of it as centrally concerned with the moment of dying. Such critics move thoughts about what happens after death into the background – a perspective which coincides with my own spontaneous experience of the poem. Others think of “Dickinson 591” as presenting a special view of death or of the possibility of an afterlife. Still others, a smaller group, I believe, attach central importance to the poem’s perceived criticism of certain attitudes towards death and dying that were prevalent at the poet’s time.

The view of the poem as being, first of all, an imaginative description of dying has a considerable tradition. When the poem was first published, in the 1896 edition of Dickinson’s poems prepared by Mabel Loomis Todd, the text had in fact been supplied with the title “Dying” (Dickinson 1955: 359). That way of understanding “Dickinson 591” has since been evidenced many times in different variants. For example, in 1956 John Crowe Ransom spoke of the text as one of the Dickinson poems offering “previsions of her own death” (Ransom 2016), and

\(^5\) I do not claim to have full overview of what has been written about “Dickinson 591”, but I am familiar with a dozen or so of the better-known discussions of the poem.
Robert Weisbuch has described “Dickinson 591” as one of her “two finest poems of dying” (Weisbuch 1975: 99).

While some critics have thus seemed to perceive an imaginative entering into the experience of dying to be the poem’s central ambition, others appear to have viewed the poem as revolving primarily around the question of an afterlife. I will give a couple of examples.

According to Gerhard Friedrich, the dying person is characterized by “inner calm” and “resolute expectancy” in the early part of the poem, but the intervention of the fly becomes a distraction and the dying person “falls from a higher consciousness, from liberating insight, from faith, into an intensely skeptical mood”. That change demonstrates that “the earlier pseudo-stoicism” had no firm foundation, so that the poem, in the final analysis, presents “the perennial conflict between two concepts of reality, most carefully delineated” (Friedrich 1955).

In a slightly different vein, Cynthia Griffin Wolff considers that the poem is principally occupied with the nature of life and death and encourages one to define life in a way that is meaningful to oneself and others before that final loss of autonomy that death represents. “Thus the poem offers a counsel to the living by strongly implying the crucial importance of daring ‘to see’ while life still lasts, and one way in which the poet can be Representative is by offering a model of active insight that is susceptible of emulation” (Wolff 1987: 227).

Paula Bennett, for her part, finds “Dickinson 591” much more pessimistic. For Bennett, the fly stands for death and decay and comes to occupy centre stage in the poem, acquiring symbolic dimensions. As a consequence, Bennett understands the poem as saying that all we know about death is that it means decay. She finds that position nihilistic and hypothesizes that it is a standpoint with which Dickinson was just experimenting, “an extreme position”: “Abdicating belief, cutting off God’s hand, as in ‘I heard a Fly buzz’ (a poem that tests precisely this situation), leaves us with nothing.” (Bennett 1990: 78 and 78–79)

Vendler (2010) comes close to Bennett’s understanding of the poem but inverts Bennett’s evaluation of the impious features they both find in Dickinson’s text. “The poem,” Vendler writes, “in its replacement of the King with the Fly, is in one sense entirely blasphemous – but in another sense (as generations of readers have felt) true. Mortality, in the person of the monumentalized and actual Fly, possesses the grandeur of Truth defeating Illusion” (Vendler 2010: 268).

“Dickinson 591” has also been understood as criticizing specific attitudes towards death and the hereafter. In Charles R. Anderson’s book on Dickinson from 1960 the text is viewed primarily in terms of such criticism. Anderson writes:

As the poet dramatizes herself in a deathbed scene, with family and friends gathered round, her heightened senses report the crisis in flat domestic terms that
bring to the reader’s mind each of the traditional questions only to deny them without even asking them…. To take this poem literally as an attempted inside view of the gradual extinction of consciousness and the beginning of the soul’s flight into eternity would be to distort its meaning, for this is not an imaginative projection of her own death. In structure, in language, in imagery it is simply an ironic reversal of the conventional attitudes of her time and place toward the significance of the moment of death. (Anderson 1960: 232)

Claudia Yukman’s reading is on a similar track. Yukman finds that Dickinson demonstratively departs from a Christian framework of eschatological understanding in her poem:

The Christian narrative recognizes a self that has a body and a soul. Dickinson’s text recognizes a subjectivity that cannot be split into this dichotomy…. Dickinson uses the convention of the deathwatch as a way to consider the self at a moment when its culturally-assigned significance is weakest, and she does so in order to escape the Christian narrative frame. (Yukman 1992: 88–89)

Two critical cruxes in “Dickinson 591”

Critics can differ perceptibly in their overall take on “Dickinson 591”, as we have just seen, but also in their understanding of many specific elements in the poem. It would not serve my purpose to try to go through all contentious issues, but I will highlight two important points in the text on which not all critics appear to be of the same mind.

One of the two issues relates to the fly. For some, the fly is just a fly, an everyday occurrence; if the fly stands for something other than itself, it is as a representative of the everyday. For others, however, the fly has a sinister symbolic dimension. By and large, critics who principally perceive “Dickinson 591” as offering an imaginative experience of dying are content to think of the presence of the little insect as something in itself trivial. Ransom, for example, speaks of the fly’s interposition as “one of those homely inconsequences”. According to him, death is described as “homely and easy” in the poem, and the buzzing fly introduces an

6. More possibilities exist. Clark Griffith has suggested that the fly can be understood as an aesthetic device used (through its final disappearance) for marking how the everyday world of sense is being lost, or as foreboding the body’s coming decay, or as offering the dying person the relief of being liberated from “disturbance, discomfort, and nastiness” (Griffith 1964: 135–137; quotation from 137). Weisbuch has argued, similarly, that the fly fulfils multiple functions. He views it as a dramatic disappointment; as associated with death; as an annoyance; as representing natural vitality; and as externalizing the dying person’s uncertainty (Weisbuch 1975: 101).
element of “comic or Gothic relief” (Ransom 2016). John Ciardi – writing in reaction against Friedrich’s interpretation of the poem as contrasting two concepts of reality – suggests that Dickinson lets the fly represent “a last dear sound from the world as the light of consciousness sank from her” and speaks of the sound of the fly as “the last kiss of the world, the last buzz from life” (Ciardi 1956). In my own experiences of the poem – my reader’s meanings – the fly tends to be even less charged with embodied meaning: the fly appears as something in the room, a minute living creature, to which the attention of the dying person hooks on at the very moment of dying.

There are, however, those who find the fly ominous. Bennett, who associates the fly with death and decay, notes that the fly takes over the dying person’s “entire field of perception” and comments that “the only sure thing we know about ‘life after death’ is that flies – in their adult form and more particularly, as maggots – devour us”. In effect, Bennett makes the fly into the poem’s negative answer to an underlying question of whether or not there is an afterlife (Bennett 1990: 78).

Vendler who, as we saw, speaks of the fly as a “symbol of the Truth of mortality” has even more to say about the inauspicious aspects of the fly.

> When the Fly appears where the King was expected, and blocks the light; when its carrion-haunting presence is imposed on the death-room; when the fly’s stumbling without the possibility of exit matches the impossibility of the exit of any putative soul; when Dickinson deliberately rhymes “me” with “Fly” over the last two stanzas, everything changes. The dying speaker realizes the insignificant Fly is herself. Her death-emblem is no winged Psyche-soul rising like a butterfly from the discarded body, but rather the Fly, a mocking (and songless) sign of mortal dissolution. (Vendler 2010: 268)

Since the fly is just a fly in my own experience of the poem, I cannot see eye to eye with Bennett and Vendler. I agree with Vendler that the fly appears in the room where the King was expected, and that there is an implicit irony in this. However, I would object that the fly does not block the light – how could it? In my reading, it is instead the case that the dying person confusedly believes that the dimness that comes over his or her vision is the somehow visible, opaque buzzing of the fly. It also appears exaggerated to me to call a single buzzing fly in a room with several people a carrion-haunting presence, even if the room is one where someone is dying. I would also like to point out that we are not being told in the poem that the fly has no exit, much less that this also applies to the possible soul. And to the extent that there is rhyme in the last two stanzas, the rhyming words are “be”, “Fly” // “me”, “see”, so to allege that Dickinson “rhymes ‘me’ with ‘Fly’ over the last two stanzas” seems to me to stretch the facts. Finally, I would also regard the dying per-
son’s affinity with the fly as a case of partial projection rather than straightforward identification.

The last line of the poem represents another problem. What should it be taken to mean that the dying person cannot “see to see”? Where Bennet and Vendler are concerned, they both understand the word “see” as carrying different meanings in the two instances in which it occurs. They can be said to maintain that in the one place “see” means, roughly, “visually perceive” and in the other something like “understand”.

For Bennett, it is the second “see” that relates to understanding: Bennett thinks that the “I” of the poem is left in darkness – in death, in ignorance. She cannot ‘see’ to ‘see’ (understand)” (Bennett 1990: 78). Bennett’s explanation is elliptical, but I suppose Bennett means that the dying person finds that she (for Bennett, as for many critics, the dying person is female) has no eyesight, so that she cannot understand. That may sound odd, since vision is not normally a requirement for understanding and Bennett does not seem to conceive of what is said in the last line as influenced by a state of confusion in the poem’s “I”. However, Bennett may mean that the “I” – who, in Bennett’s reading, is already dead when we come to the last line – considers that if she could have visually perceived her surroundings, she might have understood more about her situation.

In Vendler’s interpretation, it is the first “see” that means something like “understand”. Vendler writes: “Dickinson italicizes the moment of death with the two successive meanings of ‘see’: the first, intellectual one means ‘to manage to make out the form of’; the second, physiological one means to have eyes that still function” (Vendler 2010: 268). That too may sound odd, since understanding is hardly a requirement for having eyes that still function. Just like Bennett’s interpretation, Vendler’s is elliptical: she does not explain how her suggestions concerning the two “see”s are supposed to translate into a concrete reading. Perhaps Vendler holds that the “I”, at the moment of dying, senses that she cannot visually perceive anything because her intellect is failing, but there is actually no clear indication that Vendler thinks of the dying person as being mentally reduced at any time. Indeed, as the block quote from her account of the poem shows, Vendler believes that the dying person has just realized something fundamentally important about her life.

Friedrich, for his part, reads both occurrences of “see” as meaning “understand” but, apparently, in two different senses of profound understanding. As already mentioned, Friedrich considers the theme of the poem to be the tension between belief and disbelief in “possible spiritual life beyond death”, and he regards the buzzing fly as derailing the dying person’s composed anticipation of eternal life. Friedrich offers an explicit paraphrase of the poem’s last line: “Waylaid by irrelevant, tangible, finite objects of little importance, I was no longer capable of that deeper perception which would clearly reveal to me the infinite spiritual
realities.” (Friedrich 1955) It seems as if Friedrich takes the first “see” to mean, approximately, “perceive profoundly”; and the second “see” to mean something like “perceive infinite spiritual reality”.

More interpretations of the line could be adduced, but I might as well stop at this point. In my own understanding of the line, presented earlier in this chapter, the two occurrences of “see” both refer to visual seeing. However, I have nothing against letting the idea of a lack of deeper insight accompany that meaning as a symbolic overtone. Nor am I certain that one should insist on an absolutely exact interpretation of the last line, no matter what variety of textual meaning one has in mind. For me, the line reflects the consciousness of a temporarily confused mind and ends a poem about dying without any definite perspective on what happens after death. In that context a certain lack of clarity can even appear fitting.

On commentators’ meanings

The critical interpretations just reviewed introduce commentators’ meanings. As I observed in Chapter 3, commentators’ meanings are a diverse category: commentators can comment on just about anything concerning a communicative transaction. It is often not stated what, more precisely, the comments are supposed to be about. Thus it is not customary in literary studies to explain how one’s statements about a literary text are meant to be understood in that respect, and none of the critics cited in the last section makes this very clear. References to Dickinson herself and her presumable intentions appear in many places, but I doubt that the critics would want to say that their interpretations are to be taken as true-or-false statements about how Dickinson actually intended her poem to be understood.

Nor do I believe that the critics think of their statements as true-or-false assertions about their own experiences of the poem as readers. My spontaneous understanding is that the critics are explaining what they take the poem to really mean. Pressed on this point they might well have extra clarifications to make regarding how they view textual meaning and the possibilities of establishing such meaning with certainty. But I still find it reasonable to understand them as speaking not specifically about Dickinson’s intended meaning, nor specifically about their own personal experiences, but about what the poem really means.

In my view, of course, it is a theoretical mistake to believe that a text has a true, single body of meaning, whether definite or indefinite, a mistake clearly occasioned by the belief that a text is a single, definite object. The theoretical mistake

7. Friedrich’s opponent Ciardi counters with a competing paraphrase of the last line: “And then there was no more of me, and nothing to see with.” (Ciardi 1956)
has further consequences. To me, the core problem is that it is at bottom not clear what the critics are talking about: the critics do not make what I see as necessary distinctions between possible objects of interpretation. At least they do not do so explicitly, and many critics may well have no more specific idea about what they are doing than that they are writing about the meaning of the text. If so, this does not make their statements meaningless – they do project possible ways of understanding Dickinson’s words – but I would say that the lack of precision about what is the object of interpretation blurs critical thinking and makes genuine argument impossible. For example, in my review of interpretations of “Dickinson 591” I had reservations about several comments on the expression “see to see” in the last line. Yet my own verbal understanding of the words is based on how I think Dickinson wanted her readers to construe the formulation. If other critics are tacitly speaking of something different – perhaps rather aiming at suggesting an aesthetically rewarding way of taking the expression – we are talking past one another.

Related but not identical problems arise for many varieties of commentators’ meaning also outside of literary studies. Linguists commenting on the meaning of one-sentence utterances of their own making ordinarily seem to think that they are speaking about the textual meaning of the corresponding sentence as uttered (its “utterance meaning”), the sentence understood as a very short text conceived along ordinary-conception lines. (I will discuss linguistic perspectives on text and meaning in the next chapter.) I regard this, too, as an illusion, but the consequences are different since, in typical cases, the linguist, but not the literary critic, is speaking of a commonsense, purely linguistic meaning: in my analysis, the linguist’s commentator’s meaning is usually in effect a description of the imagined consensus meaning that could be expected to be shared between a possible sender and a possible receiver. Other types of interpretation of texts – such as discourse analysis, legal interpretation, and the interpretation of holy texts – raise other problems. But bringing up such issues would lead into the theory of interpretation, which is not my subject in the present book.

It is of course controversial to claim that a text does not have an objective meaning, determinate or indeterminate, for commentators’ meanings to be about. But where would such objective meaning come from? The sender cannot, so to speak, impregnate the physical utterance with immaterial meaning. Nor can linguistic and other conventions be expected to supply a text with meaning, at least not with a more or less determinate meaning. Apart from affording more insight

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8. It is, in principle, well known that different interpretations of a literary text can seek to establish many different circumstances in connection with the respective communicative transaction and be subject to different logics (Hansson 1975: 103 and 106, Hermerén 1984, Stecker 2003: ix, Pettersson 2003).
into “Dickinson 591” and its textual meaning, this chapter should also have made it easier to understand this second claim. It seems quite incredible to me that one could apply a set of relevant linguistic and other conventions to “Dickinson 591” and derive a relatively determinate meaning as a result. How would it be possible to deduce the theme of the poem from those conventions? Or deduce an answer to the question of what, if anything, the fly is symbolic of, or an answer to the question of what “see to see” means? As I pointed out earlier, no sets of such relevant linguistic and other conventions have ever been specified, let alone mechanisms for deriving determinate textual meanings from such conventions, taken as sets. Some very general conventions have been proposed – see, for example, the sixth chapter in Culler 1975 – but nothing that could serve as a basis for generating concrete textual meaning.

It might be objected that linguistic and other conventions can clearly supply material for arguments about textual meaning. They naturally can, and I used alleged conventions in that way myself when presenting my hypotheses about Dickinson’s sender’s meaning. Thus I argued that the special expectations surrounding literature explain why the first sentence of the poem, which presupposes that the “I” of the poem is communicating after death, should not be rejected as nonsense, and also that the existence of locutions like “see to read” sheds important light on the “see to see” of the poem’s last line. But those arguments were local and ad hoc, not conclusions based on a specified system of conventions and specified mechanisms for bringing that set of conventions to bear on individual texts. It goes without saying that one can argue for or against specific interpretations, and that one’s arguments may be of a linguistic or artistic character. That is not what I deny when distancing myself from conventionalism.

“Dickinson 591” and the nature of texts

“Dickinson 591” should be very familiar to my reader by now. The material constitution and visual appearance of the original manuscript were presented earlier, as well as the main complications surrounding the identification of the complex of signs that the original represents. In this chapter I have followed that up by looking closely at the poem’s textual meaning.

Much more could be said about “Dickinson 591”, but I am certain that no wholly new dimensions would appear. And if one understands what “Dickinson 591” is, then one understands, basically, what any text is. There is a cluster of interrelated entities about which we are thinking or speaking when thinking or speaking of texts: there are physical exemplars, and those exemplars are intended to represent, and perceived as representing, a complex of signs and a meaning. Each
person can construe the signs and the meaning differently, and there is no objec-
tive truth about what those signs and meanings are. The sender’s perceptions here
are not likely to coincide completely with those of the individual receivers, and re-
ceivers are likely to differ among themselves. Commentator’s constructions of sign
and meaning represent a third, even more diverse category. There will typically be
a large area of agreement between all parties, a large portion of consensus about
what the relevant signs and the relevant meaning are. Still, the scope of that con-
sensus should not be overestimated. There may also be much disagreement, and
not only over insignificant details. That should have been clearly brought home by
my comments on the meaning of “Dickinson 591” and my review of some of what
has been written about it.

Texts are often regarded as elusive objects. I am convinced that this has much
to do with the puzzles created by the ordinary conception of the text. A cluster
text, as described above, is certainly a complex formation, but a text as ordinarily
conceived is something strictly speaking incomprehensible. It is supposed to be a
definite, unitary object, but that object is nowhere to be found. True, there are cop-
ies of the text, or oral presentations of the text, but those physical manifestations
are thought to be merely concrete phenomena providing a means of access to that
other supposedly independently existing object, the text. The nature of that text
itself remains something of a mystery.

Literary critics often seem to celebrate that mystery rather than try to see
through it. For example, Wolfgang Iser has written – and I believe many critics
would agree with him – “that the reader comes closest to the play of the text where
he sees himself played by the text” (my translation; see Iser 1991: 472 and com-
pare Iser 1993: 275).9 Iser understands the meaning of a literary text as being in
movement, in “play”; impossible to fixate except in an authoritarian move that lays
a dead hand on the text, and he regards it as the role of the reader to enter into
that play. He even portrays the text as an independent subject able to act on the
reader on its own. One does not have to believe that Iser means this literally, but
on the other hand he does not mark his statement as being metaphoric. I suppose
it would be fair to view Iser’s formulation as based on his personal experiences of
dealing seriously with literary texts, and as a reflection in which he is quite content
to leave it open what a literary text, the supposed object of a literary experience,
might actually be.

Considered from the standpoint of the cluster conception, the situation to
which Iser is referring appears in an entirely different light. The reader does not
encounter a text as ordinarily conceived but a physical exemplar of a text. The

9. In Iser’s original formulation: “daß der Leser dort dem Textspiel am nächsten kommt, wo er
sich selbst vom Text gespielt sieht” (Iser 1991: 472).
“play” of which Iser is speaking does not, of course, occur in the physical object. Nor does the physical object somehow conduct the reader into some other undefined sphere where the text itself can be encountered. The construction of meaning out of the physical object has to be performed by the reader, and the “play” must inevitably take place not in some separately existing object, but in the reader’s own mind. Readers can let themselves be “played” by the text only in the sense that they can refrain from attempting to subordinate the wealth of cognitive and emotional impressions arising in the processing of the text too easily to the models of understanding already at their disposal. It is true that the author whose acts are ultimately behind the physical exemplar has had meaning intentions, but those intentions cannot be found in the physical exemplar. It is also true that the physical exemplar is a signifying object in the sense that it is meant to represent a complex of signs and, through those signs, a meaning. But the signs and the meaning, both non-physical, are not in the physical object. They have to be constructed, or reconstructed, by the reader.

As a trained reader one certainly has the feeling of being confronted with a physical object containing words and meaning when reading: while one is looking at the white paper and the printer’s ink, following the printed lines with one’s eyes, words and meaning emerge more or less effortlessly, as if they were already there, waiting to be perceived. But to believe that that impression mirrors the facts is to commit what I call “the phenomenological fallacy”: it is to think that reality is such as we spontaneously experience it. In our spontaneous experience, a text emerges before our eyes, and that experience probably underpins our belief in the ordinary conception of the text, but all that is actually there is white paper and printer’s ink. The experience of words and meaning is produced by ourselves. The experience is not produced randomly, of course: the physical object was purposely shaped in a way that should make such an experience possible. Nevertheless, all that is there with brute existence is the physical exemplar and our own mental contents.

I have said that texts are often regarded as elusive objects. It might be felt that, unlike Iser’s formulations, my own account of texts and textual meaning does not quite do justice to the widespread impression or intuition that texts are enigmatic entities. I do indeed believe that the impression of an enigma is unjustified at least in part, since I am convinced that the impression is in part caused by a failure to understand the nature of texts and textual meaning. Yet I do not deny that I, too, find something unexplained, and perhaps ultimately unexplainable, in connection with texts, not least in connection with literary texts. In my view, what remains unexplained and perhaps ultimately unexplainable here are certain subtle psychological mechanisms. I am thinking of the mechanisms that make senders form their representations, but also of the mechanisms that help receivers get a significant experience from their recreation of the content of the sender’s act.
and their cognitive and emotional processing of that content. I have written about this aspect of literature in other monographs (particularly Pettersson 2000 and Pettersson 2012), but the nature of literary experience is another of those important topics that do not really form part of the subject of this book.
PART II.

The theory compared with other theories
The standard linguistic perspective on text and textual meaning

My own views of text and textual meaning differ significantly from those of contemporary mainstream theory. The aim of the second part of my book is to look at what are arguably the six most important points of divergence between my own analysis and the views currently held in linguistics, philosophy, and literary studies. I will introduce six key ideas about texts or textual meaning irreconcilable with mine and explain why I do not subscribe to them.

One of the six ideas concerns my sharp distinction between physical utterances and complexes of signs. Many believe that physical utterances are not just physical but at the same linguistic expressions.

Four of the ideas importantly diverging from mine focus on textual meaning. First, according to the standard view in linguistics, textual meaning (“utterance meaning”) is the sender’s meaning. I do not make that identification, but view the sender’s meaning as being one variety of textual meaning. Second, linguists and philosophers mostly consider all meaning in connection with language as something abstract and certainly not as something mental, while I regard sender’s textual meaning and receiver’s textual meaning as being mental entities. Third, analytic aestheticians tend to think that there are truths about what texts mean, and some have offered arguments designed to show that this must in fact be the case. For my part, I do not believe that, in any strict sense, there are truths about what texts mean. Fourth, according to modern mainstream literary theory language and context determine what texts mean, and textual meaning is inevitably indeterminate and contradictory. In my view, language and context cannot have that function, nor can textual meaning be said to be inevitably indeterminate and contradictory.

The last influential idea incompatible with mine regards the nature of texts. The standard view in analytic aesthetics, a view also endorsed by several ontologists, is that texts are single unitary objects, namely, a type of verbal structure. On my analysis, however, texts cannot rationally be construed as unitary objects.

I do not want to simply take the six ideas diverging from mine and go through them one by one, treating them as separate convictions unrelated to any larger intellectual themes. The six standpoints are in fact robustly grounded in characteristic frames of interest and habits of thought. I plan to see them against that wider
background, and will therefore also, to a greater or lesser extent, consider the re-
search paradigms sustaining and motivating them. In the present chapter, I will be
dealing with the first three ideas just mentioned: that physical utterances are also
linguistic expressions, that textual meaning is sender’s meaning, and that meaning
cannot be mental. These views are associated, first and foremost, with arguably
dominant approaches within linguistics and the analytic philosophy of language.
Also in this chapter, I will attempt to make clear how the three standpoints on
which I focus are symbiotic with, and support the ambitions of, the larger disci-
plinary project of standard linguistics.

Expressions like “standard linguistics” and “modern mainstream literary the-
ory” are of course problematic if taken as ambitious diagnoses of the contempo-
rary situation in the respective disciplines. Although I find the expressions actually
warranted in my context, I will make no real effort to defend them. What is most
important for me is to insist that the six ideas to which I keep referring are in fact
widely and influentially held convictions in contemporary theory.

The idea that textual meaning is sender’s meaning

Linguists usually refer to the meaning of what I call a text as its “utterance mean-
ing” or “speaker meaning” (for linguists, language is first of all spoken language). It
is customary in linguistics to identify utterance meaning with the meaning intend-
ed by the sender. For example, Cruse characterizes utterance meaning as “roughly,
everything the speaker intends to convey by standard linguistic means” (Cruse
2004: 263), and Betty Birner tells us that speaker meaning is “the meaning that
a speaker intends, which usually includes the literal meaning of the sentence but
may extend well beyond it…. Speaker meaning is also sometimes called utterance
meaning” (Birner 2013: 24). True, some linguists disagree with this way of think-
ing. We saw in Chapter 3 that Harris attaches equal importance to the receiver’s
meaning. In a similar spirit, Winfried Nöth observes that “[i]f there is speaker
meaning there should also be hearer meaning” and goes on to problematize the
concentration on speaker meaning in linguistic theory (Nöth 2011, quotation
from 187). Still, the idea that the sender’s intended meaning is the meaning of the
text (utterance) is clearly the dominant one in contemporary standard linguistics.
For my part, I do regard sender’s meaning as a variety of textual meaning but do
not identify textual meaning exclusively with sender’s meaning.

Actually, the idea that a text means what its sender intends it to mean seems
very difficult to defend. Speakers may make mistakes. I may intend to say that I
would like to see you on Tuesday but happen to say that I would like to see you on
Monday. Will my utterance of “I would like to see you on Monday” then mean that
I would like to see you on Tuesday, since that was what I intended my utterance to mean? If one really identifies utterance meaning with the meaning intended by the sender, that consequence is unavoidable, and senders are free to make utterances mean whatever they choose. One could of course identify textual meaning with sender’s meaning by stipulation, but it is hard to see what would be the point.

However, Cruse and Birner and other linguists do not actually believe that texts mean what their senders intend them to mean. They may express themselves as if they did, but in fact linguists tend to look at slips of the tongue and other infelicities in the use of language as disqualifying an utterance from serious consideration. They tend to think that to say “Monday” when one means “Tuesday” will transform one’s utterance of “I would like to see you on Monday” into something that does not really count, regarded from the point of view of linguistic theory. There is a concentration on what can be seen as “the system” in the standard linguistic study of the use of language, and hence a “normative approach to the study of conversation” (Nöth 2011: 188) according to which only utterances which linguists consider correct are deemed to be of real interest. These correct utterances are thought to be the only ones that reflect the nature of the linguistic system.

Linguists cannot, then, be accused of really holding the somewhat absurd idea that texts mean what their senders intend them to mean. On the other hand, that leaves them without any definition of utterance meaning. True, standard linguists typically discuss one-sentence texts, and they suppose that the semantics of the language already provides a grammatical sentence with a sentence meaning. However, as we will see, it is commonly accepted that the utterance meaning is something different from the semantic meaning of the sentence uttered. If utterance meaning is not, after all, the sender’s meaning, and not simply the semantic meaning of the sentence uttered, then what is it?

I do not know of any mainstream linguistic answers to this question, but to me the real object of linguists’ references to textual meaning seems clear enough. In my view, the linguist is in reality characterizing the supposed consensus meaning of an utterance. For example, the linguist would probably say that the textual meaning of an ordinary utterance of “I would like to see you on Monday” is, approximately, that the sender expresses the wish to see the receiver on Monday. That content will be something that both sender and receiver can be expected to understand the utterance to have, something of a lowest common denominator with respect to the meaning of the utterance. Formulated in the terms of my own theory of textual meaning: what linguists in reality view as a text’s meaning can be characterized as a commentator’s meaning, namely, the supposed consensus meaning of the text.

That is my best attempt at reconstructing the actual standard linguistic view of textual meaning. According to my reconstruction, linguists typically use “textual
meaning”, or “utterance meaning”, to stand for something very much more restricted than I do: only the supposedly consensual parts of senders’ and receivers’ meanings fall under the concept. The restrictedness is easy to understand when viewed in the light of the general project of standard linguistics, and I will come back to that.

My own definition of “textual meaning” differs from the linguistic one. However, I can see no disagreement about realities behind the divergence in definition. I just mean something different by “textual meaning” from what linguists mean. I do not deny that one can speak of the probable consensus meaning of an utterance – as, on my analysis, linguists de facto do. And I suppose that linguists would not deny that one can speak, as I do, of a sender’s actual meaning intentions in connection with an utterance, and of the understanding and wider perception of the utterance in the receiver or receivers.

Textual meaning as typically conceived by linguists is easily accommodated in my theory of textual meaning as one special variety of commentator’s meaning. Yet someone may want to object that textual meaning as typically conceived by linguists is simply what textual meaning is: that the linguistic definition must be the right definition. I do not agree, and meeting that objection will be part of the aim of the next few sections.

The idea that meaning cannot be something mental

The difference in definition brings with it other dissimilarities between the linguist’s understanding of textual meaning and my own. On the linguistic definition, the meaning of a text becomes a single entity, while I allow for very many possible meanings: that of the sender, those of the receivers, and those of the commentators, the latter meanings possibly concerning mutually different subjects. Also, on the linguistic definition textual meaning is not in any direct sense mental, not located in any individual mind, but rather something abstract. Those additional differences do not in themselves require further discussion: they simply follow from the divergence in definition on which I already commented. I agree that the meaning of a text, if defined in the linguistic way, must be a single thing and something not directly mental.

There is, however, a tendency among linguists and philosophers of language to think of meaning as being generally abstract in character. Where the ontology of meaning is concerned, they do not normally distinguish between the meaning of words or sentences in abstracto – the meaning of words or sentences regarded as abstract elements of a linguistic system – and the meaning or meanings of actual utterances. They speak of linguistic meaning in general and consider it abstract.
In a recent textbook on linguistics, meaning in language in general is defined as “the information that is inextricably linked to the forms of language, whether these are words (lexical meaning) or constructions (compositional meaning)” (Baker and Hengefeld, eds. 2012: 196). Thus the textbook views meaning as disembodied abstract information, certainly not as embodied thoughts and feelings in specific human individuals. Cruse (2004: 13) remarks, more cautiously, that he finds himself closest to “the cognitive semantic position” according to which “the meaning of a linguistic expression is taken to arise from the fact that the latter gives access to a particular conceptual content”. The meaning would no doubt be that particular conceptual content, clearly an abstract entity. A belief that all meaning in language is abstract is of course not reconcilable with my own theory of textual meaning. For me, textual meaning is, most basically, sender’s meaning and receiver’s meaning, and in my version both those varieties of meaning are straightforwardly mental.

Philosophers of language sometimes offer explicit reasons why meaning cannot be mental. For example, Jaroslav Peregrin (2012: 20) rejects the idea that meaning can be “a mental entity” since “it would seem that meaning, by its very nature, must be something that can be shared by various speakers and hence cannot be locked within the head of any of them”. The talk of sharing is a sidetrack, I believe. Mental contents are certainly among the many things that can be shared, if sharing is understood in a more metaphorical sense: one can be said to share one’s thoughts with one’s spouse, or to share a feeling of political disappointment with many other people. And if one insists, instead, that meanings must be something that can quite literally be shared, one runs into other difficulties, for the only things that can quite literally be shared are physical ones – a room, a sandwich, and suchlike – and nobody believes that meaning is something physical. The real gist of Peregrin’s argument, it seems to me, is that it appears evident to him that meaning must be something not conceptually tied to specific individuals. That is how meaning as conceived by linguists is constituted – hence, perhaps, Peregrin’s feeling of strong conviction – but it is not evident, at least not to me, why everything deserving to be called “textual meaning” should be of that kind.

William Lycan (2008: 68) has made a claim similar to Peregrin’s, using more elaborate arguments.

Meaning is a public, intersubjective, social phenomenon. An English word has the meaning it does for the entire community of English speakers, even if some members of that community happen not to understand the word. But ideas, images, and feelings in the mind are not intersubjective in that way; they are subjective, held only in the minds of individual persons, and they differ from person to person depending on one’s total mental state and background. Therefore, meanings are not ideas in the mind. (One might reply by appealing to what is common to all
Lycan is speaking, here, of the meaning of words in abstracto, of words and word-meanings considered as elements of a linguistic system. Such word-meanings cannot, indeed, reasonably be thought to be located exclusively in some single individual’s mind. (They cannot very well be standard, eternal abstract entities either: the word “dog” and its meaning form part of the English language, which is certainly a historical phenomenon. Word-meanings are no doubt cryptomental abstractions, such as that kind of entity was described in Chapter 2.) But that does not warrant the conclusion that one cannot reasonably conceive of anything deserving to be called meaning, for example varieties of textual meaning, as being in the minds of single, specific individuals.

It seems that Lycan would want to deny this. According to him, there is a truth about what meaning is, and it apparently follows from that truth that meaning is not mental. I believe Lycan would view my theory of textual meaning as being based on arbitrary stipulation. He writes:

> Of course, any philosopher can stipulate anything at any time; but how does that help those of us who are looking around for a credible, indeed correct theory of meaning (as is)? Stipulations have their uses but, when we are trying to come to an adequate philosophical theory of a pre-existing phenomenon, a stipulation is not of much help. (Lycan 2008: 103)

Peregrin and Lycan refer to the “very nature” of meaning, the “correct” understanding of meaning. But is there really a truth about what meaning is? Certainly not, is my reply, not in the absolute sense that Peregrin and Lycan obviously presuppose. I readily agree that there are pre-existing phenomena about which one cannot meaningfully make stipulations, but meaning in language is not one of them.

Think of the coastline of an island – say, the Isle of Man. There is no doubt about what geographic entity we are referring to when speaking of the Isle of Man, and the island is simply there, as a pre-existing phenomenon. Describing the island and its coastline is a factual matter. It would be senseless to try to make stipulations about the coastline. In an analogous manner – Lycan seems to maintain – we should seek a correct description of what meaning is, and not believe that meaning can be defined in many different ways.

In my view, such an analogy does not work. One of the reasons is that there is consensus about what entity we are referring to when we are referring to the Isle of Man, while no such consensus exists when we are referring to meaning...
in connection with language. Different specialists refer to different things when speaking of meaning in connection with language, and those different things differ in nature. Hence there is no single agreed understanding of what meaning is in connection with language.

True, there is probably something of a consensus within standard linguistics and the philosophy of language. Speaking of linguistic meaning, the philosophers Kent Bach and Robert Harnish tell us that “the linguistic meaning of an expression is simply the meaning or meanings of that expression in some linguistic system” (Bach and Harnish 1979: 38). This tallies with the textbook definition quoted earlier, which also fills out the picture by adding that meaning is “the information that is inextricably linked to the forms of language, whether these are words (lexical meaning) or constructions (compositional meaning)”. Formulations consistent with these could be adduced in great numbers, and I do believe that this is an idea about meaning which is widely shared within standard linguistics and also within the philosophy of language. So this is indeed what linguistic meaning is – if “linguistic meaning” is taken to mean “meaning as conceived of by linguists”, not “meaning in connection with language and the use of language”.

I doubt that this concept of linguistic meaning, strongly associated with the abstract entities forming part of a linguistic system, is well suited even for the linguistic study of textual meaning. In any case, the word “meaning” is given other references within other branches of research concerned with language and the use of language. Textual criticism thinks differently about meaning – remember Chaudhuri’s remark that “the material medium of the text contributes materially to its meaning – hence each new material embodiment alters and extends that meaning”. So does literary criticism – think of Charles L. Anderson’s contention about “Dickinson 591” that to “take this poem literally as an attempted inside view of the gradual extinction of consciousness and the beginning of the soul’s flight into eternity would be to distort its meaning, for this is not an imaginative projection of her own death”. Neither Chaudhuri nor Anderson is understanding by “meaning” the information inextricably linked to the forms of language being used. And they have good reasons to work with other conceptualizations than standard linguists, because they are looking for very different things.

Someone might want to argue, in the spirit of conceptual objectivism, that no matter what people think or say there is some pre-existing phenomenon that simply is meaning, the right bearer of the designation – marked as the right bearer by reality itself, as it were. I find it difficult to make sense of such an idea, and I have not seen it explicitly maintained. Lycan’s belief in an objective truth about what meaning is might be taken in this conceptually objectivist spirit, but in fact Lycan might well wish to motivate his belief differently.
But, having said all this, is not linguistic meaning after all the true meaning in connection with language? Linguistics is often portrayed as the science of language. So perhaps the linguistic study of meaning represents the scientific approach to meaning in language? I remain unconvinced. I prefer to see standard linguistics as an intellectual project with much power and value when it comes to the understanding of language, but also as a project with very obvious limitations even where the understanding of language is concerned (compare, for example, Newmeyer 1986: 8–9). Elaborating this suggestion will be the next item on my agenda.

**Standard linguistics and language in use**

Standard linguistics studies natural languages like English with the aim of describing the rules that supposedly underlie the use of the language in question. The rules of the language are considered to be stored, in some form, in the minds of the competent speakers of the language. The linguistic description of those rules is often referred to as a “grammar”.

A grammar includes everything one knows about the structure of one’s language – its **lexicon** (the words or vocabulary in the mental dictionary), its **morphology** (the structure of words), its **syntax** (the structure of phrases and sentences and the constraints on well-formedness of sentences), its **semantics** (the meaning of words and sentences) and its **phonetics** and **phonology** (the sounds and the sound system or patterns).


A grammar, as formulated by linguists, can obviously be characterized as the linguist’s model of the fundamental knowledge that native speakers are thought to have of their language.

For linguistics, the study of how a language is actually used in speech and writing has long been of secondary importance. Ferdinand de Saussure, often regarded as the founder of modern linguistics, laid much weight on a distinction between the actual use of language (“speaking”; *parole*) and the system of language supposed to underlie actual language use (“language”; *langue*). For Saussure, the linguist’s proper object of study was the language system, not language in use (Saussure 1960b: Chap. 3, especially 11–12). It was long supposed within linguistics that senders and receivers use their knowledge of the language as a kind of linguistic code. Senders were thought to encode the mental content they wished to

2. The goal of so-called general linguistics is more comprehensive: to systematize the universal regularities thought to be common to all languages. See, e.g., Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams 2007:17.
convey in accordance with the rules of the language, and receivers were assumed
to decode the message by applying those rules in reverse (see, for example, Chafe
1972: 15–16 and Katz 1972: 24). If that were how a language functions when used,
knowledge of the relevant linguistic code would indeed tell one everything of cen-
tral importance about communication in the language.

However, in the 1950s and 1960s a number of philosophers – notably Paul
Grice, John Austin, and John Searle – demonstrated how human verbal activity is
interwoven with human action in ways which decisively affect the picture of verbal
communication. These developments, whose impact on linguistics was palpable
from the 1970s onwards, successively changed the standard linguistic understand-
ing of language in use (compare Bublitz and Norrick 2011: 2–3 and Jucker 2012:
495–496). Before, language had seemed, in principle, understandable without the
support of a social context, apart from that provided by a community of people
sharing the same linguistic code. Now the importance of pragmatics – “the study
of language use in context” (Birner 2013: 2), or the “study of what speakers mean”
(Yule 2014: 125) – became generally acknowledged within standard linguistics.

Modern pragmatics brought with it many new insights, among them a clearer
understanding of the distinction between sentences and utterances. According to
standard linguistics, people speaking or writing produce linguistic expressions,
typically sentences (think of Karen’s “It’s ten o’clock”). Such expressions are con-
sidered to possess linguistic meanings: words are supposed to have word mean-
ings, and sentences, consisting of words ordered in accordance with the syntax of
the language, are thought to have sentence meanings. The listener or reader who
knows the language is expected to be able to identify the linguistic expressions and
their associated meanings.

In traditional linguistics and philosophy of language, sentences in themselves
were supposed to be capable of expressing propositions, so that sentences in them-
selves could be true or false. With the pragmatic turn, sentences came to be viewed
rather as pure forms, inert linguistic material which speakers can use for perform-
ing communicative actions. In the pragmatic perspective, the sentence “It’s ten
o’clock” in itself expresses no proposition and refers to nothing, and the sentence
cannot be true or false. A sentence is not a living being, and only living beings can
be agents, performing such actions as referring or expressing propositions. Karen
can refer to Baltimore by saying ”It’s ten o’clock” and express the proposition that
the present time in Baltimore is ten in the morning. The sentence “It’s ten o’clock”
itself can do nothing of the kind.

A sentence in actual use, like Karen’s “It’s ten o’clock”, obviously has a partly
different meaning from the same sentence regarded as a linguistic form. In Karen’s
utterance, a concrete time and place are being referred to and a true or false state-
ment is being made; the sentence “It’s ten o’clock” has no such concrete content.
Thus, the meaning of an utterance differs from the sentence meaning of the sentence uttered. Utterance meaning (textual meaning) is not the same as the linguistic meaning of the uttered linguistic expression or expressions.

Standard linguistics certainly accepts this as a fact, but its focus is still firmly on language considered as a system of rules or regularities. Viewed from the perspective of standard linguistics, pragmatics adds something important, but not fundamentally important, to the understanding of verbal communication. When listening or reading, we understand the sentence meanings, and that is primary for standard linguistics. Pragmatics is thought to nuance the picture by showing how the sentence meanings are affected by the wider context in which the text is being produced. The older account of verbal communication is still considered to offer the basic picture, so to speak, but pragmatic considerations are being added to it. Remember Birner’s formulation that the utterance meaning “usually includes the literal meaning of the sentence but may extend well beyond it”: the meaning of an uttered sentence is typically thought to be the sentence meaning plus something more.

Moreover, in standard linguistics even pragmatics is concentrated on the systematic aspect of language, on the rules supposed to govern language. It is emphasized that “the uses made of signs belonging to the language system in interactions among human beings…. are not arbitrary, but follow regular patterns” (McGregor 2009: 133). Standard linguistics tells us that “our knowledge of pragmatics, like all our linguistic knowledge, is rule-governed” (Birner 2013: 2–3), and linguists’ interest in language in use is focused on the description of perceived regularities.

One might think that it would be possible to show that rules also govern the influence of context, so that utterance meaning could be formally derived from knowledge of semantic and pragmatic rules and a knowledge of the specific context. That would be the conventionalist’s belief. However, as I have pointed out repeatedly, nobody has been able to construct such a system. Obviously, in the final instance senders will have to improvise with the linguistic means at their disposal, and receivers will have to resort to what Reddy called reconstruction and hypothesis testing. There is no wholly mechanical way of formulating and interpreting well-functioning verbal utterances.

Some theorists – I among them – have general doubts about the standard linguistic picture of how language in use functions. For example, personally I have little belief in the idea that users of language have grammars stored in their minds.

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3. True, this focus of interest is by no means undisputed within pragmatics itself. For example, Bublitz and Norrick (2011: 3–4) understand pragmatics as “the scientific study of all aspects of linguistic behavior” and regard the concentration on the exact description of linguistic regularities as characteristic of British and American pragmatics.
The widespread idea that verbal communication requires the existence of a linguistic system cannot be correct, for communication is clearly possible without such a system. From early childhood people are confronted with sequences of sounds intended to be linked to meanings, and they learn, through trial and error, about the collective expectations surrounding such practices. They also learn to use, themselves, sequences of sounds intended to be linked to meanings, trying to make their mental states known to members of their community (compare, for example, Enfield 2015: 12–13). The experience with these practices, and the implicit ideas about their content, will vary to a greater or lesser extent from language user to language user, and in each user it will be in constant, if undramatic, change. To me, the linguist’s grammar is rather an idealized codification of perceived regularities in language use than a psychologically realistic idealization of knowledge stored in people’s minds. And I think of the use of language, both the production and the understanding of it, more as a kind of bricolage than as the operating of a code.

However, that is just the declaration of a position. I do not want to enter into a serious discussion of these matters here. Even if linguists’ grammars were “only” idealized codifications of perceived regularities in language use, they would still be extremely powerful and helpful. And my present concern is something much more restricted. I want to make clear why I believe that the standard linguistic approach to textual meaning has important limitations, limitations arising from the very character of the standard linguistic interest in language in use. I will now finally come to that subject.

Limitations in the standard linguistic approach to textual meaning

Standard linguistics views language as governed by rules. Even if that is taken to mean that standard linguistics is focused on linguistic regularities, it remains a fact that the main interest of standard linguistics is to exhibit how linguistic forms

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4. If the use of language had required the existence of a linguistic system, it would never have got underway. Willard Van Orman Quine tells us how, as a child, he used to think that English had been created through an agreement: “a board of syndics, seated in grave convention along a table in the style of Rembrandt” had laid down its rules. He did not ask himself what language they might have used in their deliberations (Quine 1969: xi). David Lewis and P.F. Strawson have offered explanations of how conventions and conventional practices can arise and be kept alive spontaneously by relying on already existing human abilities (Lewis 1969: Chapter 1, Strawson 1971: 174–175).

5. These reservations are largely in line with the more unsparing criticism of standard linguistic theories about the linguistic system voiced by Harris (1981, 1998).
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– phonetic patterns, syntactic structures, and so on – are coupled with conventional meanings or conventional effects on meaning. The meaning of a concrete utterance, like Karen’s “It’s ten o’clock”, will then seem to be fundamentally a function of conventional linguistic regularities: of the meaning of the words and of the meaning-forming effects of the syntactic or idiomatic construction of which they form part. In this case, for a full-blown textual meaning of the standard linguistic kind to be formed, the construction certainly also requires that extra information be brought in from the situational context, information here provided by the fact that the topic of the conversation is present time in Baltimore.

Because of the focus of standard linguistics, only meanings that can be described as conventional, being the effects of existing semantic or pragmatic conventions, will in practice be regarded as forming part of the meaning of the text. My point is that such a perspective will by necessity be blind to very important aspects of what I call textual meaning. I will not go into great detail about this, but just mention two striking examples.

First, standard linguistics will not be able to describe global aspects of texts, for example, what I have called the overall aim of a text. That limitation is obscured, to some extent, by the fact that standard linguistics restricts itself, in practice, to considering one-sentence texts. According to Searlean speech act theory, there are five and only five types of illocutionary act (Searle 1979, Searle 2010:69), and it might be argued that the different illocutionary points of the various subtypes of those five types of act provide the overall aims that I have in mind. Yet whether one agrees with this or not, it should be remembered that Searlean speech act theory concerns one-sentence utterances and has no real means of dealing with texts longer than that. Texts do have global properties, and the global properties of texts like Soble’s news story – the effects of its disposition, the nature of its theme, and so on – are simply beyond the reach of linguistic and pragmatic conventions. (Concerning the establishing of themes, compare the contributions to Louwerse and van Peer, eds., 2002.)

Second, because of its very aims standard linguistics must ignore that which is purely individual, and in that sense non-objective, in language use. Some of these elements are truly important, like the factor that I call the receiver’s wider perception of the text. The consequences of ignoring this factor are perhaps particularly obvious where literary texts are concerned: neglect of the receiver’s wider perception of the text and the sender’s invitation to such perception makes standard linguistics unable to say anything substantial about the literary use of language.6 Philosophers of language are prone to respond to this objection by declaring the

6. Objections of a similar kind formed an important part of Derrida’s criticism of speech-act theory (1988a). I sympathize with his criticism in that respect.
literary use irrelevant for the understanding of language. Austin (1975: 104) famously characterized the use of language in joking and play-acting as being among the “parasitic” ones, the “‘not serious’ and ‘not full normal’ uses”, and Bach and Harnish can be said to follow him in their Communication and Speech Acts by refusing to see things such as stories and jokes as examples of communication (1979: 97–98). I would be prepared to argue, conversely, that the non-conventional linguistic mechanisms employed in literature are things that pervade the use of language, so that a failure to come to terms with their nature blinkers one’s understanding of even the most ordinary and fully normal cases of verbal communication. The non-rule-governed suggestiveness that, on my analysis, is at the heart of the literary use of language, is also at play in such thoroughly non-literary everyday utterances as Belinda’s “Good morning”, said to Alan, and Alan’s “Hi!”, said in response.

It is important to understand precisely what is and is not at stake for me on this point. I am insisting on the importance for the understanding of verbal communication of not ignoring such things as global properties of texts and receivers’ wider perception of texts. Such factors are accommodated in my own theory of textual meaning but not in the linguistic one. Since the linguistic approach to textual meaning has the prestige of representing the science of language, this can cast doubts on the adequacy of my theory. I am now questioning the authority of standard linguistics by arguing that its approach to textual meaning fails to take account of vital aspects of verbal communication.

As I have already made clear, I do not believe in an absolute truth about what meaning is. But the concept of meaning is laden with value: it is assumed that meaning is that in connection with language which is centrally important, other aspects being more marginal. For that reason, my argument with the standard linguistic approach to textual meaning is not just a quibble about the definition of a term but a contention about what is and is not an enlightening overall perspective on real-life verbal communication.

Indeed, I would have no quarrel with the standard linguistic definition of textual meaning (utterance meaning) if that definition were reconstructed in the way I explained earlier: as referring to the presumed consensus meaning of the utterance. Reconstructed in that manner, the definition would clearly answer to the needs of the project of standard linguistics: it would make the meaning of a text into something more or less definite, at least for a given point in time, and into something that could be unequivocally linked with context and linguistic forms in a kind of rule, while the not-directly-mental character of the meaning would harmonize with standard linguistics’ methodical lack of interest in real senders and receivers and their individual psychologies. My point is that such a definition would be wedded to the standard linguistic project and should not be
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regarded as possessing any authority outside standard linguistics. Its limitations should be obvious.

Adherents of the standard linguistic perspective might answer that larger chunks of language and literary aspects of language will eventually come to be covered by their theories (compare Searle 1977: 204–205 and Birner 2013: 235) or perhaps that they already are (see Dancygier 2012 and Gaskin 2013). I would answer that this is the conventionalist’s belief, and I have explained why I find conventionalism untenable. Linguists could also, rightly, point out that linguistics comprises very much more than what I have been referring to as standard linguistics. Discourse analysis, stylistics, and other branches of applied linguistics do not work with the same limitations. But that is not an objection to what I have been saying. What I am doing in this chapter and the following three is to defend my theory of text and textual meaning against the possible criticism that it is incompatible with influential theories in disciplines central to the area. Where no conflict exists, I am just pleased to note that.

Texts as conceived by linguists

While there is a good deal of consensus in standard linguistics regarding textual meaning, there is no really determinate employment of the term “text” (about linguists’ use of the term see, for example, van Peer 1994 and Antos 2009). One can perhaps say that linguists tend to use “text” about objects that are not of central interest to standard linguistics: about pieces of discourse longer than one sentence but not about one-sentence utterances (see, for example, Frawley 2003: 227), or about written discourse but not about oral discourse (see, for example, Malmkjær and Carter 2010: 538). Linguists’ use of the term “text”, then, clearly differs from my own. However, I will not go deeper into this terminological matter, since that would carry me away from my central theme: the conceptual problems of what I call the ordinary conception of a text and the question of how to manage those problems.

Texts in my own sense do play a role in the analysis of language in use in standard linguistics and philosophy of language, but not typically under the designation “text”: as we have seen, linguists often speak of texts in my sense as “utterances”. Utterances are conceived of along the lines of the ordinary conception of a text. For standard linguistics and philosophy of language, mainly interested in one-sentence utterances, the making of an utterance typically consists in the uttering of a sentence, the sentence being a linguistic expression provided with linguistic meaning. “The utterance”, according to Bach and Harnish, “is the act of uttering a certain sentence with a certain meaning” (1979: 89). And Birner has the same
analysis: “A sentence is a sequence of words, that is, an abstract linguistic object. An utterance is a sentence that’s produced in some actual context (whether oral, written, or signed, as in American Sign Language).” (Birner 2013: 15) Naturally, Birner, too, ascribes linguistic meaning to sentences (Birner 2013: 24).

It is true that linguists consider that in utterance meaning something extra, derived from the context of the utterance, has been added to the linguistic meaning, modifying it. But this does not change the overall ontological picture of what an utterance is for linguists and philosophers of language. The utterance must be something physical, otherwise it could not be spoken or heard. At the same time the utterance consists of signs (a sentence) carrying an utterance meaning. What standard linguistics and philosophy of language think of as an utterance, an uttered sentence, is thus in effect a very short text-as-ordinarily-conceived, a tripartite package of physical matter, signs, and meaning. The ordinary conception of a text is of course illogical, in this context no less than in any other.

The idea that physical utterances are also linguistic expressions

Linguists and philosophers do not think that their conception of utterances is illogical. They tend to believe that linguistic expressions, when uttered, are somehow material and abstract at the same time.

Writers in the phenomenological tradition long considered that people could so to speak impregnate sounds and writing with meaning through acts of will. “What in fact happens in communication?”, writes Jacques Derrida, reviewing and discussing Husserl’s theory of meaning. “Sensible (audible or visible, etc.) phenomena are animated by the acts of a subject who endows them with sense, and simultaneously another subject must understand the animating subject’s intention.” (Derrida 2011:32). But how can one possibly “animate” ink or sound? Ink and sound are, inevitably, just physical. Derrida adds that the animation can never be complete, but my point is that the whole idea of an animation of the physical utterance must be mistaken.

Analytic philosophers are traditionally equally convinced that physical utterances are not just physical. According to Searle, for example, physical utterances are infected with duality. He writes: “At one level the speaker intentionally produces a physical utterance, but at another level the utterance represents something. And the same duality infects the symbol itself. At one level it is a physical object

7. “Que se passe-t-il en effet dans la communication? Des phénomènes sensibles (audibles ou visibles, etc.) sont animés par les actes d’un sujet qui leur donne sens et dont un autre sujet doit comprendre simultanément l’intention.” (Derrida 1972b: 41)
like any other. At another level it has a meaning; it represents a type of a state of affairs.” (Searle 2010: 74) But there are no separate ontological levels in a physical object. A physical object is just physical, uninfected by duality. One can describe a physical object in its physical being, and one can certainly also describe the meaning it carries. However, one has to perform an act of interpretation in order to be able to ascribe a meaning to the physical object. The meaning cannot rationally be said to be there before interpretation, to be an intrinsic property of the physical object. There are levels of description or, if one wishes, levels of interpretation, in the description of physical utterances, but physical utterances in themselves are just physical.

Pronouncements like Derrida’s and Searle’s abound, but I will not go through more examples. This way of thinking derives some intuitive plausibility from the ubiquitous conduit metaphor, which pictures a physical message as literally containing or carrying meaning, and from standard locutions making physical utterances seem to be linguistic expressions: we are used to saying that sentences can be uttered, words written down, and so on. Yet this cannot be more than a manner of speaking. As Birner notes, a sentence as conceived by linguistics is an abstract object. One cannot utter an abstract object, something that has no material existence. What one utters in speaking is sounds, and what one produces when writing are configurations of physical marks. The sounds and marks are no doubt meant to represent or stand for words and sentences, but that is something different. To be meant to represent or stand for a sentence is not to be a sentence, just like a drawing meant to represent a tree is not itself a tree.

Linguists and philosophers do know, of course, that speaking consists in uttering sounds. However, the sounds uttered by speakers are apparently thought to form part of language. Bach and Harnish write that utterance acts “involve producing certain sounds belonging to (and as belonging to) a certain language, and are reported by direct quotation” (1979: 285, note 1). But that cannot be so. Physical sounds cannot very well belong to a language, no more than a physical configuration of printer’s ink can do so. And how could one possibly quote sounds? One can quote linguistic expressions, but not physical matter. And the example from Bach and Harnish is not an isolated one. The well-established expression “the sounds of language” implies that physical sound can actually form part of language, and earlier I cited a textbook description according to which one of the elements of a grammar – an abstract linguistic model of the brute realities of language – is “sounds”.

When I maintain that sentences cannot be uttered, the linguist might want to reply that I am confusing sentence-types with sentence-tokens. A sentence-type like “It’s ten o’clock” is something abstract, the reasoning goes, but sentence-tokens, actual utterances of the sentence, like Karen’s, are concrete. Sentence-tokens
can be uttered, but not sentence-types. I am not convinced by this counter-argument. Indeed, I view the belief that sentence-tokens can be uttered as one more example of the confusion permeating both lay and professional understanding of what a physical utterance is.

This is not an easy point. It is necessary to look closer at the concepts of type and token. Let us listen to an explanation from the philosopher Linda Wetzel.

The distinction between a *type* and its *tokens* is an ontological one between a general sort of thing and its particular concrete instances (to put it in an intuitive and preliminary way). So for example consider the number of words in the Gertrude Stein line from her poem *Sacred Emily* on the page in front of the reader’s eyes:

Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.

In one sense of “word” we may count three different words; in another sense we may count ten different words. C. S. Peirce (1931–58, sec. 4.537) called words in the first sense “types” and words in the second sense “tokens”. Types are generally said to be abstract and unique; tokens are concrete particulars, composed of ink, pixels of light (or the suitably circumscribed lack thereof) on a computer screen, electronic strings of dots and dashes, smoke signals, hand signals, sound waves, etc. (Wetzel 2014)

This is no doubt the established way of using the terms “type” and “token” with respect to words and other linguistic expressions, but I have objections to this established way of speaking. In my view, the talk of the “words … on the page in front of the reader’s eyes” rests on a conflation of what is materially there in front of the reader’s eyes (“ink”) and what we more or less automatically interpret that something as standing for (“words”). True, there is no straightforward confusion in Wetzel’s formulations: the marks in question are being univocally characterized as something physical (“ink”; “pixels of light”). But I find it misleading to call configurations of ink or of pixels of light “words”. Words and sentences are linguistic expressions, and patterns of ink or pixels of light are not.

Note that I do not simply reject the Peircean idea that what he calls types are abstract and what he calls tokens are concrete. The idea fits concrete things, like flags. Swedish flags are physical objects, while the flag of Sweden itself can defensibly be said to be something abstract. My objection is, instead, that both Peirce and his followers make a mistake when they believe that what they call word-tokens are physical. Words are abstractions. On my analysis, the configurations of ink to which Wetzel refers are just physical, but they represent something non-physical: an English sentence in which the word “rose” occurs four times. There are four occurrences (“tokens”) of the word “rose” (the “type”) in the line. But in this case both “tokens” and “type” are abstract, for such things as words and sentences are abstract entities.
In sum, I find good reasons to continue to insist that physical utterances are “just” physical, and that in one’s theorizing one needs to keep physical utterances and complexes of signs apart.

Concluding remarks

The main aim of this chapter was to meet three important possible objections to my theory of text and textual meaning: that textual meaning is a single, definite thing, namely, sender’s meaning; that textual meaning cannot be something mental; and that physical utterances are in fact also complexes of signs, so that my sharp distinction between those two categories of entity would be unwarranted. I will not repeat the arguments I put forward in defence of my theory, but I will add a couple of reflections.

My theory is supposed to offer a better understanding of text and textual meaning than existing alternatives. Part of what I contend is that existing conceptions of text and textual meaning have negative consequences for the understanding of verbal communication in the disciplines or sub-disciplines of standard linguistics, analytic aesthetics, and literary theory. In the case of standard linguistics, the difficulties lie not so much in the understanding of what a text is, for close study of authentic texts-in-my-sense plays only a very marginal role in standard linguistics. What is problematic is, rather, the belief that physical utterances are, somehow, also linguistic expressions: that sentences can, quite literally, be uttered, words written down, and so on, so that such locutions do not merely represent a popular way of speaking but reflect sound theory. A deeper diagnosis of the consequences of that belief would require an in-depth discussion of the standard linguistic view of verbal communication, something I cannot really enter upon in this context. I will restrict myself to more tentative observations.

If one does not distinguish clearly between physical utterances and complexes of signs, one reasons as if what the receiver basically encounters is not physical sound or physical marks but already linguistic expressions, which cannot be true. One step in the interpretation of utterances is simply ignored, as if it did not exist. In addition, to regard linguistic expressions as the basic fact in verbal communication is to miss or minimize the non-verbal, material, aspects of the physical utterance, arbitrarily diminishing the picture of what verbal communication is. Admittedly, it is common knowledge in linguistics that paralinguistic features enter into verbal communication. But the paralinguistic should not be seen as a marginal element but, as it were, the very basis of verbal communication. Physical utterances are physical; they are linguistic only after reductive interpretation.
It is also important to understand that such entities as words and sentences form part of the linguist's system for describing language in use, but do not form part of the brute reality of language in use. Physical utterances can be described as representing words or sentences but they do not, in themselves, consist of words or sentences. They consist of physical sound or physical marks. To believe otherwise is to mix up the linguistic model with the reality which it is supposed to model. To return to my analogies with maps: it is to think of a map as if it were a true reflection of pre-existing realities, not a human-made description of those realities. It is to think of the cartographic signs as if they were actually there, in the terrain itself.

Standard linguists like to conceive of language as being governed by linguistic rules, and this requires them to conceive of language, also language in use, as consisting of linguistic expressions. There cannot be linguistic rules for producing or interpreting physical sounds or physical marks: linguistic rules operate on linguistic expressions, not on physical matter. The fact that physical utterances are physical through and through, and are not linguistic expressions, is therefore no minor detail. It makes it obvious that language in use cannot actually be governed by linguistic rules. I believe that a full realization that physical utterances are not in fact linguistic expressions would cut deep into the present standard-linguistic understanding of language in use.
Analytic-aesthetic views of textual meaning

Coming from standard linguistics, one is bound to find analytic aesthetics a different world. Analytic aesthetics is primarily a philosophy of the arts. Where texts are concerned, this means that analytic aesthetics concentrates on literary texts: non-literary textual meaning is mostly dealt with only secondarily or indirectly. Further, analytic aestheticians are not at all concerned with establishing rules supposed to govern language. There is consequently no room for the idea that literary discourse is a theoretically more or less insignificant kind of language use.

The understanding of a literary text requires attention to its every aspect. So just like literary specialists, analytic literary aestheticians picture textual meaning as something much broader than linguists typically do. In a poem like “Dickinson 591” not only the basic verbal meaning would be considered relevant, but also the possible symbolic import of the buzzing fly, and the metre of the poem, and its rhymes. Yet that does not mean that analytic aesthetics is engaged in literary interpretation – such things fall within the domain of literary criticism. Analytic aestheticians sometimes discuss specific literary texts, but then typically in order to illustrate presumed principles of literary interpretation.

The interpretation of the arts is an important subfield of analytic aesthetics, and this is where textual meaning comes in. To establish principles of literary interpretation presupposes an idea about what textual meaning is, for interpretation inevitably involves the ascription of meaning. Textual meaning, or textual meaning in literature, thus becomes central to analytic interpretation theory, particularly the question of what factor or factors determine what a literary text means.

The dominant analytic-aesthetic ideas about textual meaning differ considerably from my own theory. In particular, analytic aestheticians most often believe that there are truths about what texts mean, and they sometimes offer explicit arguments for that view. A key objective of this chapter is to explain why I find those arguments unconvincing. However, I will first paint a rather broad background picture of the thinking about textual meaning in analytic aesthetics. There is an

1. Analytic aestheticians usually speak of “work meaning” or “utterance meaning”, not “textual meaning”, since they most often use “text” to refer to a complex of signs and contemporary analytic aestheticians rightly insist on the difference between works/utterances and complexes of signs.
extensive and articulate discussion of textual meaning in this school of thought, and a number of ideas on which I find it important to comment. These ideas do not allow themselves to be meaningfully synthesized into something like a standard analytic-aesthetic theory of textual meaning; instead, I will offer brief reviews of, and comments on, standpoints and arguments found in some central individual thinkers.

**Beardsley’s conventionalism**

Monroe Beardsley’s comprehensive *Aesthetics* (1958) was an important early summa of analytic aesthetics and also contains influential ideas about textual meaning. While no prominent aesthetcian upholds these views in their original form today, Beardsley’s straightforward conventionalism is still a reference point.

Beardsley was perhaps the first major proponent of the idea that the sender’s meaning is irrelevant to the meaning of a literary text. He had subscribed to this view for some time, and it can be found in two essays that Beardsley wrote together with the literary critic William Wimsatt in the late 1940s (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1954a and 1954b), but in his *Aesthetics* Beardsley formulates the conception more clearly and more concisely.

The core idea is quite simple. Beardsley distinguishes between what a sender means and what the sender actually says, and he insists that what counts in a literary context is what is said, not what is meant. To re-use my Monday/Tuesday example: a sender may say that he would like to see you on Monday but mean that he would like to see you on Tuesday. In everyday, practical contexts, says Beardsley, we are interested in what senders mean: if we suspect that the sender did not manage to express exactly what he or she meant, and the matter is of any importance to us, we want to get behind the formulations to the message that the speaker actually wanted to get across. However, according to Beardsley, things are different when it comes to literary texts. A literary text is expected to stand on its own. It is expected to be read and contemplated in its own right, as an aesthetic object, and the sender’s meaning can be disregarded. Either the sender succeeded in getting his or her meaning into the text – but then we can go to the text for that meaning. Or the sender failed to incorporate his or her intended meaning into the text – but then, too, we can disregard the sender’s meaning. For what we are interested in, as readers of literature, is the meaning found in the text, not the meaning that the author would have wanted to put there but failed to insert.

In my understanding, Beardsley’s theory of interpretation is basically normative. Beardsley advocates a specific kind of interpretation in which authorial intentions are disregarded and sentence meaning viewed as the meaning of the text. In
Beardsley’s opinion, both sender’s meaning and sentence meaning exist, and we should decide which of these to focus on in literary interpretation. Focusing on sentence meaning will give better results according to Beardsley, but he does not appear to believe that there is a truth about what textual meaning is. Rather, he sees a choice between two possible practices, although he is clear as to which one we should prefer.

Even if Beardsley’s theory is normative, his thinking about interpretation rests on a number of factual assumptions. Like so many others, Beardsley takes for granted that complexes of signs (which he calls “sentences”) can be uttered, so that the relevant complex of signs is simply present to us as soon as someone makes an utterance. He also believes that a complex of signs inevitably has a meaning associated with it, a meaning arising from “public conventions of usage that are tied up with habit patterns in the whole speaking community” (Beardsley 1981: 25). Consequently – again, like so many others – Beardsley believes that what comes into being when someone makes an oral or written utterance is not only physical sounds or marks but also a linguistic structure supplied with meaning, in other words, a whole text-in-the-ordinary-sense. Like most thinkers about linguistic communication Beardsley misses the fact that only the sounds or marks are there with brute existence, while the linguistic structure and the meaning are the product of an interpretation of the sounds or marks, an interpretation which is inevitably theory-laden and contestable.

It seems obvious that belief in the ordinary conception of the text must have been one of Beardsley’s background assumptions, inspiring and supporting his view of texts as self-contained packages of matter, signs, and meaning that are automatically created when linguistic utterances are being made. Beardsley does not doubt that there is a meaning in the text. We are supposed to be able to go to the text and find the meaning there. That meaning may or not be the sender’s; in any case, where literature is concerned it is the postulated objective meaning of the text that should count.

Particularly interesting from my point of view is Beardsley’s supposition that an utterance has a more or less determinate conventional meaning because of the existence of public conventions of usage. If that were really so, it would count against my view that non-mental textual meaning must be a construction, since there would be, at least, a serious candidate for the role of brute non-mental textual meaning.

However, in Chapter 3 I called conventionalism vacuous, and that is an objection I uphold. Conventionalists just presuppose the existence of public conventions

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of usage with the capacity to determine meaning, but they never specify what those conventions are supposed to be. In my view, the untenability of conventionalism in questions of textual meaning becomes obvious as soon as one takes the standpoint seriously and attempts to make it concrete. What are we expected to mean by a public convention of usage? What such conventions are there supposed to be, and how, exactly, are those conventions to be spelled out? And how will they apply, together, in the determination of textual meaning? Different conventions may conceivably clash, and how are such conflicts to be resolved? Are there conventions for resolving conflicts between conventions? Also: can public conventions of usage be infringed or played with? Are there conventions for identifying such cases? Is an infinite regress threatening here?

It is certainly possible to invoke various kinds of what could be called conventions when interpreting literature, and this is frequently being done in practice. But it is done piecemeal and ad hoc and with indeterminate results. Concerning the formulation “see to see” in Dickinson 591, some critics have pointed to the ambiguity of the verb “see”, applying, in a sense, conventions of usage to the interpretation of the text. However, different critics have applied those conventions in different ways, arriving at different interpretations. Others have referred, like myself, to the existence in the language of phrases like “see to read” – invoking, if one wishes, another public convention of usage – with still other (varying) interpretations as a result. What would be needed for conventionalism to get off the ground would be the specification of a non-arbitrary system of public conventions that, applied to the interpretation of texts, produces more or less determinate textual meaning. It seems obvious to me that such a system is a chimera, and to my knowledge no one has actually constructed any system of interpretative principles worth the name. It would be interesting to see such a system, and to see its array of principles applied together in the derivation of the textual meaning of “Dickinson 591”.

Beardsley’s conventionalism is no doubt seriously meant, but he lets his belief in the power of public conventions of language remain an unproven supposition. Regarding literary interpretation, his main objective in *Aesthetics* is clearly to argue that what he calls “intentionalistic” criticism should be replaced with criticism that is “talking objectively” – that is, about the aesthetic object” (Beardsley 1981: 26–29; quotations from 29). His real interest is not to work out a concrete version of conventionalism, but to maintain that one should ignore the author’s intentions when interpreting literature. This becomes obvious when he exemplifies his stance with a discussion of the interpretation of a specific passage in a poem.

One of the texts in A.E. Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad* (1896) is a celebratory poem, “1887”, written for Queen Victoria’s fiftieth anniversary as a monarch. The poem, addressed to Housman’s fellow “Lads”, ends with two lines that might
conceivably be taken to be ironic: “Get you the sons your fathers got, / And God will Save the Queen.” (Housman 2016) Faced with sarcastic praise of his mockery of the solemn event, Housman indignantly denied any intent to be ironic. Beardsley asks: “Is Housman’s poem, and particularly its last stanza, ironic?” He insists that we should not take the poem to be un-ironic just because of Housman’s declaration. What we should do is to “have the poem read by competent critics, and if they found irony in it, we should conclude that it is ironical, no matter what Housman says” (Beardsley 1981: 25–26; both quotes from 26). One might have expected Beardsley to show, in connection with this example meant to demonstrate his position more concretely, how public conventions of usage can settle the issue. Instead, Beardsley is prepared to rely on commentators’ meanings without appearing to bother about what principles those commentators may follow in order to arrive at their interpretations.

**Hirsch’s intentionalism**

The anti-intentionalist trend initiated by Wimsatt and by Beardsley was questioned and countered by other theorists, not least E.D. Hirsch. In his *Validity in Interpretation* from 1967, Hirsch advocates a conception of textual meaning according to which a text means what its author meant.³ Like Beardsley, Hirsch expects truth from interpretations. Indeed, both expect there to be one more or less determinate truth for the interpretation of a text to pursue. Hirsch’s main argument against ideas like Beardsley’s is that conventions of usage cannot ascribe a definite meaning to a sign sequence. Hirsch writes, very perceptively I think: “Almost any word sequence can, under the conventions of language, legitimately represent more than one complex of meaning. A word sequence means nothing in particular until somebody either means something by it or understands something from it. There is no magic land of meanings outside human consciousness.” (Hirsch 1967: 4)

For Hirsch, then, textual meaning arises through what senders mean and receivers understand. It can sound as if Hirsch were already holding the view which I am advocating here: there is no brutally existing non-mental textual meaning; all brutally existing textual meaning is either the sender’s meaning or the meanings experienced by receivers. However, Hirsch’s insistence on a single, determinate truth for the interpreter to go after makes it unthinkable for him to view textual

³ Although Hirsch is a literary critic, not a philosopher, his writings on meaning and interpretation have played an important role in the analytic-aesthetic discussion, and it would be strange to leave his views out of consideration in this chapter.
meaning as comprising sender’s meaning and receivers’ meanings. He maintains that only the sender’s meaning can represent the single, determinate entity fit to figure as the true meaning of a text: “For if the meaning of the text is not the author’s, then no interpretation can possibly correspond to the meaning of the text, since the text can have no determinate or determinable meaning.” (1967: 5–6) In addition, when Hirsch holds that a text means what its sender meant, he is in fact not referring to a mental state or a complex of mental states in the sender but to what he calls “the sharable content” of what the sender meant (1967: 219), something which I would classify as a cryptomental abstraction.

It is a complicating factor that Hirsch does not want to identify textual meaning, which he calls “verbal meaning”, with the sender’s meaning simpliciter. He considers that the author is constricted by linguistic practice: authors cannot make texts mean things that the formulations they use do not enable the texts to convey (with my standard example: they cannot make the expression “Monday” refer to Tuesday just by intending it to). In principle, the author’s intentions decide what the text means, but only if the author respects the limits of what the textual formulations can convey. This is how Hirsch expresses his idea:

Verbal meaning is whatever someone has willed to convey by a particular sequence of linguistic signs and which can be conveyed (shared) by means of those linguistic signs. (1967: 31)

This standpoint is reminiscent of the standard linguistic idea that texts mean what the sender means but only if the sender speaks or writes in accordance with the rules of language. Hirsch’s version of the view has the same rather obvious lacuna: what if the sequence of linguistic signs cannot convey the sender’s meaning? Is there no textual meaning at all in such a case? (Compare Davies 2007: 79–80.) And, looking at the matter from a more practical angle than the purely definitional one adopted so far: how can we ever know whether or not the formulations used by the sender actually convey his or her intended meaning? How can we ever know whether or not a given text has verbal meaning in Hirsch’s sense?

Hirsch does not address such problems directly, but he suggests methods for arriving at probable hypotheses about the author’s intentions given the available evidence. Much of his Validity in Interpretation is taken up by such discussion. In a way, the methods for arriving at probable hypotheses fill the lacuna: Hirsch holds that the authorial meaning that appears probable if we follow the interpretive methods he describes will be as close to the verbal meaning as we can get (1967: 17).

Hirsch’s theory of interpretation is at bottom normative, something of which he is himself explicitly aware.
Since it is very easy for a reader of any text to construe meanings that are different from the author’s, there is nothing in the nature of the text itself which requires the reader to set up the author’s meaning as his normative ideal. Any normative concept in interpretation implies a choice that is required not by the nature of written texts but rather by the goal that the interpreter sets himself. It is a weakness in many descriptions of the interpretive process that this act of choice is disregarded and the process described as though the object of interpretation were somehow determined by the ontological status of texts themselves. (1967: 24)

Once again I find Hirsch’s remarks very much to the point. However, in my view, there are at least two deep problems with his ideas about meaning and interpretation. To identify textual meaning (verbal meaning) with sender’s meaning, as he wishes to do, carries with it ultimately insoluble theoretical problems. Hence the lacuna in Hirsch’s conception of verbal meaning. Also, commentator’s meanings – that is, interpretations, at least in one sense of the polysemous word “interpretation” – can concern many different things in connection with texts. It seems arbitrary and unfruitful to limit interpretation to the establishing of what the author meant.4

Tolhurst on textual meaning

In his article “On What a Text Is and How It Means” (1979), William Tolhurst presented a new way of thinking about textual meaning, different from both Beardsley’s and Hirsch’s, and his ideas proved influential in analytic aesthetics. Tolhurst, who had assimilated the then still new pragmatic approach to language in use, insisted that textual meaning be understood as utterance meaning, not as sentence meaning. He also presented utterance meaning as the content of an intended receiver’s best hypothesis about what the sender meant. In Tolhurst’s own words: “utterance meaning is best understood as the intention which a member of the intended audience would be most justified in attributing to the author based on the knowledge and attitudes which he possesses in virtue of being a member of the intended audience” (Tolhurst 1979: 11). That definition requires a few words of explication.

4. It is true that Hirsch also discusses the “significance” of a text – the many things related to the meaning of a text (1967: 8) – and commentators can of course also occupy themselves with the text’s significance. But there is clearly a hierarchy here for Hirsch: interpretation concerned with the centrally important thing, the meaning of the text, versus significance-oriented commentary, more peripheral from an interpretative point of view.
The focus on the receiver perspective is a key point in Tolhurst’s analysis. Tolhurst thinks of the receiver as attempting to understand what the sender meant. The content of that understanding is the textual meaning. But it is not a question of receivers’ meanings in my sense, not a question of how actual readers construe the meaning of the text. Tolhurst is referring to a typified receiver’s meaning: the meaning that any receiver who is “a member of the intended audience” is most justified in attributing to the author. Since the receiver is a typified receiver, not an actual individual, the textual meaning in question is not person-bound. Tolhurst’s textual meaning is clearly a cryptomental abstraction, not a mental entity.

The typified receiver is conceived of as representing, in practice, any competent member of the author’s intended audience. The typified receiver shall be construed as having no special, in any way exclusive, knowledge about the author and the author’s intentions, and no special “attitudes”. The basis of the hypothesis about authorial intentions is meant to be the knowledge and the attitudes that any member of the intended audience will have.

Tolhurst’s theory about textual meaning is close to Hirsch’s but at least in one crucial respect an improvement on Hirsch’s standpoint. The lacuna in Hirsch’s theory is removed: if a sender says “Monday” but means to refer to Tuesday, there will still be textual meaning – for the typified reader’s most justifiable hypothesis, all other things being equal, must be that the sender means to refer to Monday. Tolhurst also introduces the new pragmatic distinction between sentences and utterances, and the insights of the pragmatic philosophy of language give more strength and theoretical credibility to Hirsch’s observation that a linguistic sentence can mean very many things.

At the same time, however, the status of Tolhurst’s theory is less clear than those of Beardsley and Hirsch. According to Tolhurst, his definition tells us how textual meaning “is best understood”. On what grounds does he hold that textual meaning is best understood in that way? Is it because there is a truth about what textual meaning actually is (as some theorists, like Peregrin and Lycan, obviously think) and Tolhurst’s definition provides the correct, or the most probable, account of that truth? Then Tolhurst would have to face my objections against the idea that non-mental textual meaning can have brute existence. Or is it because that is how textual meaning is best construed if the concept is to serve the purpose, or some specific purpose, for which we need it? Then Tolhurst would have to face the objection that he does not specify what that purpose might be, or explain how his way of construing the concept fits that purpose better than other constructions. In short, unlike Beardsley and Hirsch, Tolhurst does not make it reasonably clear whether his theory is meant to be normative or fact-stating. Nor does he tackle the inevitable follow-up questions.
We are now in the field of analytic philosophy. Perhaps Tolhurst is thinking of his analysis of textual meaning as a specimen of conceptual analysis, and thinking of conceptual analysis as a non-empirical kind of truth-seeking. I do not believe that this is a tenable way of approaching the question of the definition of textual meaning, but it is a way of understanding analytic-aesthetic reasoning about the matter which sometimes lies near at hand. We will see this already in the next section here.

**Levinson on textual meaning**

I have reviewed Beardsley’s, Hirsch’s, and Tolhurst’s standpoints on literary meaning and literary interpretation and explained why I do not share their ideas. The theories of Beardsley, Hirsch, and Tolhurst are things of the past. Yet it seems to me that contemporary analytic interpretation theory very much has the character of a constant reformulation and refinement of those three principal approaches to textual meaning. For example, David Davies has presented a complex “interpretationalist” theory of textual meaning in the Beardsleyan tradition (compare Davies 2007, especially 88 and 91). Gary Iseminger has defended a position consciously close to that of Hirsch (1992 and 1996, especially 1992: 76 and 1996: 319). Jerrold Levinson, taking his inspiration more from Tolhurst (see Levinson 1992: 252, note 1), has worked out a sophisticated version of what he calls “hypothetical intention-alism” and contrasts with intentionalism proper. I will not go deep into the details of current standpoints and their pros and cons: the general thrust of mainstream analytic-philosophical theory of textual meaning should already have become obvious. I will restrict myself to commenting on views put forward by a few influential contemporary analytic aestheticians and, in the course of that discussion, defend my own theory against arguments to the effect that there are in fact truths about non-mental textual meaning so that such meaning must really exist.

Levinson’s hypothetical intentionalism tones down the intentionalist character of Tolhurst’s proposal; Levinson even characterizes his theory as a “form of non-intentionalism” (1992: 251). Levinson holds that one does have to respect the author’s “categorial” intentions, that is, the author’s intentions as regards the category to which the text shall belong. The author’s “semantic” intentions – the intentions about the more concrete meaning of the words and sentences and the meanings arising from that – are another matter for Levinson. Concerning such meaning, Levinson thinks that we should instead look for the best meaning – the meaning that the author would ideally have intended. The meaning of a literary text (once the text has been assigned to its intended category) is thus, for Levinson, the best meaning that could have been intended in issuing the text. In one of Levinson’s
formulations of the idea: what provide “the key to the central meaning of literary works” are “optimal hypotheses about authorial intention, rather than the author’s actual intention” (2002: 310).

Like many standpoints in contemporary analytic interpretation theory, Levinson’s is intricate and somewhat difficult to get into focus. If applied to “Dickinson 591”, Levinson’s ideas, as I understand them, would amount to the following. We should take the text as a poem, and do so because that was what Dickinson obviously intended. For the rest, we should read the poem as an intentionally created piece of discourse, and a discourse stemming from its actual contemporaneous cultural context, but apart from that we should simply make the most of the text. We can thus go for the aesthetically best reading of the poem – but only as long as we do not depart from what Dickinson could have meant. In any case, we do not have to care about what Dickinson actually intended, and if we were to find a note or letter or suchlike in which Dickinson herself stated something about her intentions concerning the poem, this would not be admissible evidence of the poem’s meaning.

Levinson’s analysis raises questions of various kinds. The question I find most basic concerns the intended status of Levinson’s theory. Is his theory meant to offer a true description of some independently existing phenomenon? Or is it intended to be a normative theory, explaining how literary interpretation should be conducted?

In a representative text from 2002 Levinson writes about hypothetical intentionalism in a spirit that is, to me, clearly normative:

Hypothetical intentionalism does not ultimately rest on an empirical claim about interpretive practices, taken in their full and motley variety, but rather on what are arguably norms underlying the most defensible of such practices, understood as ones that truly answer to our interests in literature as literature. It is on that elusive and highly contestable terrain that the dispute about the merits of hypothetical intentionalism must be conducted, rather than that of statistical conformity or nonconformity with current practice. (Levinson 2002: 317)

To me, hypothetical intentionalism as applied to literature comes across here as a recommendation or prescription of what interpretations of literature should set as their goal: Levinson points to and endorses a specific way of constructing textual

5. For example, Paisley Livingston has cast doubt on the distinction between categorial and semantic intentions – do we need the distinction, and can the distinction even be made in a defensible manner? – and has disputed the idea that known facts about the author’s intentions are irrelevant if they were not publicly known when the text was published (Livingston 2005: 157–165). Levinson has stuck to his guns (Levinson 2007).
meaning. Again, many questions can be asked. In what contexts should literary interpretation be conducted according to these principles? Interpretations of literature – commentators’ meanings – are produced in many contexts and for many purposes, but Levinson does not specify when and where his principles should be followed. (Following them across the board is certainly not a viable option. But I will not go into a broader concrete discussion of the theory of literary interpretation.) There is also, of course, the question of why the recommended principles should be followed in those contexts.

I doubt, however, that Levinson himself would want to say that he is presenting a normative argument. We are back with the analytic-philosophical idea of conceptual analysis. One can get the impression that, for Levinson, certain norms underlie the objectively best practices for interpreting literature when literature is truly understood as literature, and that those norms are accessible through philosophical analysis. For this to be the case, there would have to be, among other things, a true concept of literature and a true kind of literary interpretation, harmonizing with the true nature of literature. I cannot escape the impression that we encounter, here, a kind of conceptual objectivism and, as before, this is a standpoint of which I can make no sense. Specialists associate different things with the word “interpretation (of literature)” and the word “literature” (see, for example, Pettersson 2003 and 2005). There is simply no substantive consensus about what literary interpretation is, or about what literature is. A philosophical analysis of those concepts that is not essentially descriptive will inevitably become, to an important extent, normative.

Understood as a normative position, Levinson’s hypothetical intentionalism is easy to reconcile with my own theory of textual meaning. My theory leaves plenty of room for commentators’ meanings of various kinds, also for pure constructions of meaning. However, understood as a theory about what textual meaning is, in a brute sense of “is”, which is what I rather believe that the theory should be taken to be, Levinson’s hypothetical intentionalism naturally clashes with my own views. I cannot see how there can be non-mental textual meaning that has brute existence, and I do not find that Levinson has offered any explanation of how such meaning could come about.

6. It is true that the question of what textual meaning is, or should best be taken to be, cannot be a question about how current interpretative practice understands textual meaning. Still, Levinson’s statements in the block quote no doubt reflect a lack of interest in empirical perspectives on the issue and also a wish to be absolved from considering how and for what purposes literary interpretation is actually conducted by specialists, that is, in literary studies.
Stecker on textual meaning

Robert Stecker has written extensively and in great depth about interpretation. According to his theory in *Interpretation and Construction* (2003), a text means what its sender meant, but only if the sender managed to convey that meaning in the text. In other cases, conventions at the time of production determine the textual meaning. “The meaning of an utterance”, Stecker writes, “is the meaning successfully intended by the speaker or, if the speaker’s intention is not successful, the meaning is determined by convention and context at the time of utterance” (2003: 4). Stecker’s theory is obviously close to Hirsch’s position. Like Hirsch’s theory, too, it is a general theory of textual meaning, not (like Beardsley’s and Levinson’s) a special theory of the meaning of literary texts. However, Stecker’s theory is meant to be truth-stating, not normative; I will come back to that aspect in the next section.

Stecker identifies the textual meaning with the sender’s actual meaning, not (like Tolhurst) with the sender’s hypothetical meaning. Stecker attempts to avoid problems like senders who mean Tuesday but happen to say “Monday” by supposing that the sender must be successful in conveying the intended meaning: otherwise convention and context take over as determinants of meaning. But that idea appears problematic for several reasons.

Think of “Dickinson 591”. We can know what it seems reasonable to us to assume that Dickinson meant, but we can never know whether that was what she really meant. Hence we can never know whether or not her intentions to mean so-and-so were successful. If we are interested in establishing Dickinson’s intended meaning, we will have to fall back on what it seems reasonable to us to assume that Dickinson meant. Either that was indeed what Dickinson meant, and then our construction of the textual meaning was correct. Or Dickinson meant something different but failed to get her meaning intentions across. In that case, too, her poem will mean that which it seems reasonable to us to assume that Dickinson meant – as long as our assumptions are compatible with what convention and context indicate. If that analysis of the situation is correct, a Stecker-style reference to Dickinson’s actual intentions appears superfluous. True, the reference to Dickinson’s actual intentions specifies what our interpretative efforts should be directed at. But the meaning of “Dickinson 591” must, in effect, on Stecker’s kind of analysis, always be identical with what conventions and context indicate that Dickinson is most likely to have meant.

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7. In fact, Stecker 2003 has a very wide scope and deals with the interpretation of intentionally created objects overall. I am only attending to Stecker’s discussion of texts, literary or non-literary, outside the domain of legal texts.
Stecker discusses this kind of objection to his theory. He denies that the reference to the sender’s intention is superfluous, and he says that the text means so-and-so only if the sender intended the text to mean so-and-so and if “properly prepared” receivers would be able to perceive that (2003: 47). But this new way of formulating his theory goes against the definition quoted earlier, and the new, shifted position looks untenable. If the success of the sender’s intentions is made necessary for textual meaning, a text will have to lack meaning if the sender fails to convey his or her intentions. And since the sender’s true intentions are not accessible to us for inspection, we can never be sure that a given text has meaning. We will never know whether “Dickinson 591” has any textual meaning, since we cannot know whether or not Dickinson succeeded in making her actual meaning intentions recoverable.

This leaves convention and context as determinants of meaning. However, as I have said repeatedly, I do not believe that convention and context can determine textual meaning. I naturally find it legitimate to refer to linguistic or contextual circumstances when arguing about the meaning of a text. Yet such references can cut many ways, and it appears evident to me that one cannot construct any non-arbitrary system of conventions capable of determining the meaning of a text. Like Beardsley and others, Stecker is content with assuming that conventions and context can determine meaning. He does not list the relevant conventions and explain how they are supposed to work together. Nor does he specify what factors in the context are relevant for the determination of textual meaning or how these factors are supposed to cooperate with each other and with relevant conventions.

Stecker on what a text does mean

Stecker is very clear about the fact that what we call interpretation can have different objectives. For him, when faced with an intentionally created object such as a text one can ask different interpretive questions: what the sender meant, or what the text could mean, or what the text does mean, or what significance the text has for oneself (compare 2003: ix). The list could no doubt be made longer, but what is important from my point of view is Stecker’s insistence that there is a true, non-disjunctive meaning in a text, something that the text does mean. Stecker calls it the text’s “utterance meaning” or, when the text is literary, its “work meaning” (2003: 59). As before, I will be speaking of “textual meaning”.

Stecker thinks of textual meaning as being distinct from the meanings perceived by receivers and also, in principle, from the sender’s meaning. A sender can manage to express his or her intended meaning successfully, so that the text comes to mean the same as the sender intended it to mean, and a receiver may
understand what a text does mean. But the textual meaning can also differ from what the sender meant or the receiver understood. For Stecker, the textual meaning is not bound to any person, although actual individuals may have access to the correct textual meaning.

One of Stecker’s main objectives in *Interpretation and Construction* is to disprove the idea that interpretations of a text can create meaning in the text or change the text’s meaning. Some theorists of interpretation have held “constructionist” or “imputational” convictions: they have thought of interpretations as actually or potentially modifying the meaning of the interpreted texts in one way or another. For my own part, I certainly accept that interpretations – commentators’ meanings – can be constructions of meaning and do not have to be representations of entities that enjoy brute existence. So does Stecker. The point he wishes to make – and here I do not agree with him – is that there is a single true meaning in a text. According to him, that true meaning is there from the start, so to speak, and cannot be changed by subsequent interpretations.

How can Stecker be so certain that there is a true non-mental meaning associated with text? As far as I can see, the nearest he comes to an argument for his conviction is this statement (2003: 73):

> When a sentence is used to make an utterance, there is something the utterance does mean.

The assertion is presented as if it says something obviously true and implies that there is something that a text does mean. Apparently, the truth of the quoted statement, in the interpretation of it that I have just given, is supposed to be intuitively evident. If Stecker were right, there would be truth about what texts mean. His assertion is one of the most serious arguments I know of for the existence of such truth.

For Stecker’s statement to seem evidently true, one will have to take the ordinary conception of a text for granted. According to the ordinary conception, a text is a package of matter, signs, and meaning, so that if someone creates such a text (such an utterance), the text will inevitably have meaning, something that the text does mean. The meaning will not be person-bound, for the text and its meaning will be distinct both from what is in the sender’s mind and what is in the receivers’ minds. However, I have argued that texts-as-ordinarily-conceived are contradictions in terms: they are physical and non-physical at once and, in a sense at least, both one and many. The ordinary conception of a text is not fit to form the basis of serious theorizing.

I have presented a different picture of what happens when someone makes an utterance. The phenomenon with brute existence that is being created is a physical utterance. In the case of Belinda’s utterance of “Good morning” it is
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the soundwaves made by Belinda on meeting Alan in the morning; in the case of “Dickinson 591” it is the physical traces of ink produced by Dickinson on a piece of paper. It is true that there must be something that a physical utterance means. That is so by logical necessity: we would not classify something as a physical utterance if we could not associate some textual meaning with it. Yet that does not imply that the meaning is somehow in the physical utterance itself – it takes an act of interpretation to associate some meaning with the physical utterance, so that the characterization of the physical phenomenon as an utterance can only be made post festum, after interpretation. And surely the ordinary criterion for being an utterance is that the sender, the producer of the utterance, means something by what he or she physically brings into being. So, to paraphrase Stecker: when a sender makes an utterance, there is something the sender means – otherwise we would not speak of an utterance being made. There must then, in a sense, always be something that an utterance means – but it does not follow that there must be something that an utterance does mean in Stecker’s technical sense. The sender’s meaning will be an objective fact, but it will be person-bound. Stecker is right in pointing out that meaning is always present in connection with utterances, but wrong in thinking that this proves the existence of non-mental and non-constructed textual meaning.

Levinson and Livingston on truth about what texts mean

It is probably the majority view among analytic aestheticians that a text has true, non-mental meaning. I know of few actual arguments for the idea, but also Levinson and Livingston have formulated reasons for entertaining it. Levinson’s argument is quite straightforward: he offers examples of what he sees as true statements about textual meaning.

One way to firmly establish the ... point [that statements about textual meaning can be clearly true or false] ... is to focus on negative interpretive statements.... For example, “Hamlet does not hesitate because he is waiting to see if he has won the Danish National Lottery”, “Antonioni’s Red Desert fails to embody or project a cheerful, carefree view of life”, “Stevens’s The Emperor of Ice Cream is not about the frozen dessert industry”. Surely no one ... could question the truth of statements such as these...

Levinson’s idea, I believe, is that his statements about the textual meaning of Hamlet and “The Emperor of Ice-Cream” are indeed true, that if a statement is true there must be something for that statement to be true about, and that textual meaning, consequently, simply exists. In essence, I have already discussed such objections
to my theory in Chapter 3. I observed that all readers of “Dickinson 591” seem to have been convinced that the poem is about a dying person and that a buzzing fly appears in the poem, but that this only means that we have here part of the present consensus meaning of the poem – part of what both sender and receivers no doubt understand the text to mean. For me, then, Levinson’s examples do not prove the need to postulate the brute existence of non-mental textual meaning.

This was a somewhat informal and indirect answer to Levinson’s argument. A direct and technical answer becomes more complicated. Take the statement: “‘The Emperor of Ice-Cream’ is not about the frozen dessert industry.” Levinson no doubt intends this statement as an assertion about textual meaning, textual meaning understood as an impersonal entity enjoying brute existence. (And if he does not intend this, there is no conflict with my own theory.) I would say that such a statement is not literally speaking true. The statement rests on a mistaken assumption: that there is such a thing as non-mental textual meaning to make assertions about. In that respect, the statement is like the assertion “The present king of France is not bald.” There is no present king of France to make assertions about.

Note that where statements resting on false presuppositions are concerned, denial of the truth of the statement does not imply that the opposite assertion is true. The non-truth of “The present king of France is not bald” does not imply that the present king of France is bald. Likewise, when I deny that the statement “‘The Emperor of Ice-Cream’ is not about the frozen dessert industry” is true, I do not thereby claim that Stevens’ poem is about the frozen dessert industry. Levinson’s interpretative statement is not true or false but on the wrong track.

This may sound counterintuitive, for Levinson’s statement can ring quite true (unlike the statement about the king of France). Indeed, more comments are needed. I would say that Levinson’s statement, while resting on a mistaken supposition, can also be called “a loose truth”. By a loose truth I mean a statement which is not literally true but can still be entirely meaningful and innocent in an everyday context. A good example of a loose truth would be: “The sun goes up in the east and down in the west.” That is not literally true: the sun does not literally go up or down, and no sound astronomical conclusions can be drawn from this “truth”. But it would sound weird to deny that the sun goes up in the east and down in the west, and the statement could in fact be made, with good pragmatic sense, in situations in actual life. Likewise, “The Emperor of Ice-Cream’ is not about the frozen dessert industry” is not a literally true statement. No sound conclusions regarding textual meaning can be drawn from it. Still, it would sound weird to deny that the poem is not about the frozen dessert industry, and the statement could conceivably be made, with good pragmatic sense, in situations in actual life. Undoubtedly, Stevens did not mean his poem to be about the frozen dessert industry, and few readers will understand it to have that reference. The sentence “‘The Emperor of
“Ice-Cream’ is not about the frozen dessert industry” can be used to refer to those facts, or used in a statement that relies on those facts for its validity.

After these comments I will leave Levinson’s argument and turn to Paisley Livingston. Livingston has criticized the idea that “there is no such thing as determinate work meaning” (Livingston 2005: 144). According to him, there must be such determinate textual meaning. That standpoint is not compatible with my own conviction that there is no wholly specific textual meaning but “only” the sender’s meaning, the receivers’ meanings, and the different possible or actual commentators’ constructions of textual meaning.

Livingston wishes to refute what he calls “the thesis of semantic indeterminacy” (2005: 144) by pointing to its alleged absurd consequences:

This [the non-existence of determinate work meaning] would mean there is no fact of the matter about what any artistic utterances or symbolic artefacts mean: people could neither agree nor disagree over what was said or meant or expressed in a work. This is hard to live with, and self-defeating in the absence of a sharp boundary between the semantics of artistic and non-artistic works or utterances.

(2005: 144)

My standpoint does imply that there is no fact of the matter about what a text means. But why would this idea be unreasonable? Certainly people can still disagree over what a text means: disagreement does not presuppose that there is a truth of the matter. For example, my wife and I might disagree over how much money to spend on the refurbishment of our apartment; yet there is of course no truth about what would be the right amount. Much practical and political and, I would say, ethical disagreement is serious and consequential and based on rational arguments while still being about matters about which there is no real truth. Regarding texts: in my view there is a fact of the matter about what the author intended the text to mean and about how receivers understood it, and there is the possibility of rational disagreement about the value of various conceivable ways of associating a commentator’s meaning with the text. I do not find that situation hard to live with.

Livingston’s second sentence is more elliptical. When I attempt to apply his argument to texts, I understand him as saying that the idea of textual meaning as being indeterminate may have some credibility in connection with literary texts but is patently false when it comes to non-literary texts. Those who believe that textual meaning is indeterminate will then have to be able to draw a sharp dividing line between literature and non-literature, something which cannot very well be done.

Livingston’s argument that literature cannot be separated clearly from non-literature has no real bearing on my theory. I do not need any such sharp distinction, for I have no problem with the idea that non-mental textual meaning is a commentator’s construction also in non-literary contexts. Non-mental textual
meaning can certainly be constructed as being determinate if one so wishes – that is what linguists, in effect, standardly do – but that is not necessary, as we will see in the next chapter. And whether determinate or indeterminate, non-mental textual meaning will have to be a commentator’s construction.

Concluding remarks

The main point of this chapter was to defend my theory of textual meaning against arguments to the effect that there is non-mental textual meaning which is unconstructed and has brute existence. On my analysis, there is something the sender of a text means, and something receivers of a text understand. Those are sender’s meaning and receivers’ meanings, mental entities with brute existence. Also, commentators can construct meaning, which may be intended to represent sender’s or receivers’ meanings but may also be a pure construction of meaning made for some other purpose. But there can be no unconstructed textual meaning that is not a mental entity, not bound to some single person. Many analytic aestheticians – and many other thinkers – reject such an understanding of the matter. We have seen Stecker presuppose that there is non-mental textual meaning as soon as someone makes an utterance, and we have seen Levinson and Livingston argue that there must be truths about what a text means. I have explained why I do not find their arguments convincing.

The idea that non-mental textual meaning simply exists is in my view hugely problematic for the analytic-aesthetic theory of interpretation, for the idea leads theorizing into a maze of misconceived questions. It leads to questions about the nature of that presumed non-mental textual meaning. Is it determinate or indeterminate? Is it, or is it not, a construction by the interpreter? Can it change over time? What factor or factors are constitutive of non-mental textual meaning: the sender’s intentions, or semantic and pragmatic conventions, or the receiver’s experience of meaning? These questions have indeed been important in analytic-aesthetic interpretation theory, and to my mind they are all pointless, resting as they do on the assumption that there really is a non-mental simply existing textual meaning for such questions to be about. For me, textual meaning can be different things. It can be sender’s meaning, receivers’ meanings, or commentators’ meanings of many different kinds, produced for different purposes. On closer inspection, some textual meaning is determinate, some not. Some is constructed, some not. Some kinds of textual meaning change over time, some do not. Some owe their existence to the sender, some to the receiver, some to commentators themselves.

An important factor behind the problematic belief in a single, non-mental complex of textual meaning for each text must be the ordinary conception of the
text. According to the conduit metaphor and the ordinary conception of a text, there is one single object that is the text and one single body of meaning in the text. The firm belief in the brute existence of non-mental textual meaning must be motivated, to a large extent, by a firm belief in texts-as-ordinarily-conceived. If texts, as they are usually conceived, actually exist, separated from senders and receivers, and if texts contain meaning, then it goes without saying that non-mental textual meaning actually exists.

That pattern of belief is clearly visible, I think, behind Stecker’s conviction that there must be something specific that an utterance does mean, and analytic interpretation theory is also pervaded by talk in conduit-metaphor terms, just like everyday parlance. For example, David Davies defines utterance meaning as “the content rightly ascribable to the utterance itself, as the product of the utterer’s action” (2007: 77). In other words, he supposes that the utterance created by a sender contains meaning. For Levinson, the task of interpretation is “the job of allowing a work’s full content to emerge” (1992: 247). Levinson’s formulation implies that there is content in a text, and that the good interpreter can bring that content out, make it “emerge”. The derailing of analytic interpretation theory is another thing that I trace back to the ordinary conception of texts.8

It is true that not all analytic aestheticians believe that there is brute, non-mental textual meaning. There is also the more marginalized constructionist or imputationalist tradition that became a target of Stecker’s criticism in his Interpretation and Construction. For example, Richard Shusterman has criticized the belief in objective textual meaning and explained the fact of seemingly obvious truths about the meaning of given texts by remarking that such seemingly obvious facts about meaning “are simply whatever we all and strongly agree upon” (Shusterman 1992: 87) – an observation which in my view hits the nail on its head and which I have already quoted in a note in Chapter 3. I will not enter into a serious discussion of interpretative constructionism or imputationalism, but merely remark that there is no real agreement between such standpoints and my own either. Typically, interpretative constructionists are just as universalistic about textual meaning as more standard thinkers, although they fill their overgeneralizations with a different content. Where Shusterman is concerned, he understands textual meaning as a correlate of how receivers and commentators approach texts: the meaning is, so to speak, the content of their

8. In actual fact, while analytic aestheticians standardly believe that texts are single, definite objects with a single, definite body of meaning, their version of the view differs a good deal from the view implicit in ordinary language. One could say that the analytic-aesthetic conception of texts is a philosophical reinterpretation of the ordinary one. I will deal with the standard analytic-aesthetic conception of texts in Chapter 9.
understanding of the text (Shusterman 1992: 90). In my view, Shusterman sees an important aspect of textual meaning, but only one aspect of it. He does not consider the differences in character and purpose between different varieties of textual meaning: sender’s meaning, receivers’ meanings, commentator’s meaning of various kinds. He also runs into serious difficulties when he goes on to identify the textual meaning with the text itself (see Shusterman 1992: 93–95 and Shusterman 2002: 69–71).
In literary studies, conventionalism about meaning became a dominant way of thinking. The so-called New Criticism – with which both Wimsatt and Beardsley were connected – was strongly anti-intentionalist, and conventionalism was even more prominent in the linguistically inspired structuralism that largely replaced the New Criticism as the cutting-edge theory of literary meaning in the 1960s. However, whereas traditional conventionalism, like Beardsley’s, concentrated on manifest textual meaning and fairly consensual textual features, theoretically ambitious structuralism sought to unveil deeper structures allegedly underlying texts and to introduce more fundamental and systematic approaches. Structuralism seemed to hold out the promise of a kind of scientific grasp of mechanisms governing literary texts. For a time, the finding of such structures and mechanisms was viewed as an important task in literary theory (see, for example, Greimas 1966 and Culler 1975).

A number of books and articles by Jacques Derrida published in the late 1960s presented new ideas about meaning and were perceived by many as dealing a fatal blow to classical structuralism. During the 1970s and 1980s, the new perspectives established themselves in literary theory and came to occupy a leading position, even if this happened amidst much (enduring) controversy (for critical comment see, for example, the essays in Eddins, ed. 1995 and Patai and Corral, eds 2004). One could say that conventionalism was never given up by this new way of thinking – what was abandoned was the belief in the conventions’ capacity for producing determinacy. Literary theorists began to think that language itself produces meaning, together with context, but that that meaning is inevitably indeterminate.

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1. Neither “New Criticism” nor “structuralism” has a really precise content, and the literary-theoretical changes described did not occur in the same way, or at the same time, or with the same decisiveness, all across the Western literary-theoretical world to which I am in effect referring. Yet I find it obvious that one can meaningfully speak of structuralism as replacing New Criticism as the leading theory in the literary-theoretical understanding of language, then being superseded by poststructuralism.
and fluctuating so that there arise, as Barbara Johnson once put it, “warring forces of signification within the text itself” (Johnson 1980: 5).

I will call the standard contemporary literary theory of text and textual meaning “poststructuralist” without attaching too much weight to precisely that term. Poststructuralist theory of text and textual meaning is incompatible with my own views on several important points. I would say that people, not language and context, create textual meaning, and this basic difference carries with it a number of other divergences with respect to the view of texts and textual meaning. In this chapter I will look closer at standard contemporary literary theory of text and textual meaning and the arguments behind it, and explain why I do not share those standpoints or believe in those arguments. In the final instance, poststructuralist theory of text and meaning depends heavily on the writings of Derrida, so that Derrida’s thinking on these matters will also figure prominently in the chapter.

One should not overestimate the role of the standard literary-theoretical views of text and textual meaning in literary studies. Those views are, to some extent at least, contested within the discipline itself (much more so, I believe, than what I call standard linguistics is contested within linguistics). Also, interest in the kind of theorizing that lies behind them has no doubt waned in literary studies. How deeply poststructuralist theories actually influence its current research practices is debatable. Still, I regard the poststructuralist theory of text and textual meaning as the dominant doctrine in literary studies. It is the perspective usually found in textbooks on literary theory where text and textual meaning are concerned, and it is the perspective on those matters most usually taken vaguely for granted within the discipline. These ideas are certainly influential, and certainly irreconcilable with my own theory.

The poststructuralist view of textual meaning

According to the poststructuralist view, a text is simply a verbal structure. As a verbal structure it is not confined to a given situation of utterance and not dependent on the person who created it for its meaning. The reasons for this way of thinking about texts will emerge later; for the moment I will just note that this is the poststructuralist perspective. Sender’s meaning, then, is more or less disregarded in standard contemporary literary theory. Textual meaning is thought to be constituted by language itself, or by contexts – or, in fact, by readers – and to be radically indeterminate.

Throughout this chapter I will concentrate on what I see as the two cardinal differences between poststructuralist theory and my own perspective: the poststructuralist ideas that language (together with context) creates meaning and that
textual meaning cannot be fixed and definite. These two convictions can be found, in various formulations, in very many places in contemporary literary theory. For example, a textbook in literary theory, Peter Barry’s *Beginning Theory* (1995 and later), offers the following description of how critical theory – as Barry and many others call it – views textual meaning.

The meanings within a literary work are never fixed and reliable, but always shifting, multi-faceted and ambiguous. In literature, as in all writing, there is never the possibility of establishing fixed and definite meanings: rather it is characteristic of language to generate infinite webs of meaning, so that all texts are necessarily self-contradictory…. There is no final court of appeal in these matters, since literary texts, once they exist, are viewed by theorists as independent linguistic structures whose authors are always “dead” or “absent”. (Barry 2009: 34)

To take just one more textbook-like example: in a general introduction to poststructuralism Catherine Belsey lets us understand that meanings “emanate from language” and that one should not expect any “single true meaning” from a text (Belsey 2002: 87 and 78). In poststructuralist theory, then, the meaning of a text is typically thought to be generated by language, not by people, and to be in that sense impersonal. Since I do not believe in the brute existence of non-mental meaning, this conception is in conflict with my way of thinking about textual meaning.

The idea that language itself generates meaning is an original thought and will be the real centre of attention in this chapter. Traditionally, language has been regarded as an instrument used by human agents for the conveyance of meaning. Thus traditional conventionalism of various kinds believes in the existence of a linguistic code, but not in a kind of dictate from language concerning textual meaning: people are simply thought to use the linguistic code in communicating.

The poststructuralist idea that texts have no determinable meaning also differs from my own analysis, but less straightforwardly. I certainly do not ascribe any definite, determinate meaning to a text, since I understand textual meaning as being the sender’s meaning or the receivers’ various meanings or, secondarily, meanings constructed, for various purposes, by critics or teachers or such third-party commentators. But if there is an objectively existing textual meaning, as many varieties of poststructuralism would imply, one that arises from the string of verbal signs and language and context, and if that meaning is never fixed and determinate, each understanding of the text – the sender’s, the receiver’s, the constructing critic’s or teacher’s – must be a kind of failed understanding, since it must fail to grasp the textual meaning as it is in itself, in its own uncontrollable diversity. That is not how I understand the situation. I do not believe in textual meaning as a unified formation, and the different kinds of textual meaning that I perceive can certainly be definite. Sender’s meaning and receivers’ meanings are entirely definite, brutely existing
entities, even if they can be defined in varying ways and, if defined ambitiously, will be partially impossible to reconstruct with any degree of certainty worth mentioning. And there is no reason why third-party constructions of textual meaning cannot be made determinate. Standard-linguistic constructions typically are.

In contemporary literary theory, the language-centred perspective tends to coexist, somewhat uneasily, with a focus on readers. Immediately before the passage quoted above, Barry offers another explanation of how textual meaning arises. He writes that “meaning is jointly constructed by reader and writer. It isn’t just ‘there’ and waiting before we get to the text but requires the reader’s contribution to bring it into being” (Barry 2009: 34). This statement differs a good deal from his later explanation: if language generates meaning, then meaning cannot very well at the same time be constructed jointly by author and reader, particularly not if authors are always dead or absent. Likewise, Belsey, who holds that meanings emanate from language, can also write, in the same context, that sense may be something that readers create (Belsey 2002:78). The idea that receivers create textual meaning does not coincide with my own view either, as I would hold that senders’ meanings, different in structure from receivers’ meanings, should be regarded as a form of textual meaning, and that the mutually different textual meanings potentially constructed by commentators should as well.

Jonathan Culler has argued that textual meaning is both a property of the text and an experience in the reader – not as two different things, but as one and the same thing: the textual meaning. “Meaning is…. simultaneously an experience of a subject and a property of a text. It is both what we understand and what in the text we try to understand.” (Culler 1997: 63) But that, of course, is to make textual meaning into a self-contradictory category. It might be easier for the poststructuralist to contend that language produces the meaning or meanings of the text, while it still takes readers to make the text come alive. This is very much Derek Attridge’s conception. “The reader responds passively to the active work”, he writes, “but the work becomes active only because of the reader’s activity” (Attridge 2015: 60).

Poststructuralist theory of textual meaning contains more than the theses just referred to. Most importantly, it is also a theory about the relationship between language and reality. That aspect will only play a minor role in my discussion. Since I believe in conceptual relativity I largely share poststructuralism’s skepticism about language’s capacity to picture reality as it is in itself. According to Derrida, the thing itself always slips away, and our theorizing necessarily finds itself beyond absolute knowledge (Derrida 2011: 89 and 88). I sympathize with those views or insights.²

². However, I certainly do not sympathize with the idea that brute reality does not exist, that reality is constructed through and through. That is a thought sometimes glimpsed in Derrida
Chapter 8. Text and textual meaning as conceived by standard literary theory

The idea that language generates meaning

I find the idea that language can generate meaning patently untenable. Language is an abstraction, and abstract entities have no causal powers, no capacity to make something happen. Already for purely logical reasons, language cannot create meaning. To create something is to perform an action, and only genuine agents — human beings or higher animals — can do that. Nor can language generate meaning in the physical/causal way of generating something, the sense in which a generator can generate electricity, since language as such, as opposed to physical utterances and their mental processing, has no material existence. In brief, language as such cannot create or generate anything at all. This idea, prominent in the poststructuralist theory of meaning, must be mistaken.

I see this as a very important point. So let me spell out the ontological argument against the generating power of language a little more carefully. According to standard ontology there are, in principle, three kinds of phenomenon: physical, mental, and abstract entities. If language were a physical entity, it would be an individual physical something — say, an individual physical utterance — or an aggregate of such physical phenomena. That does not seem a workable picture of what language is and, more important perhaps for the present argument, it is inconceivable how a physical something, or an aggregate of physical entities, could by itself or by themselves produce meaning. It should be even more obvious that language cannot be a mental phenomenon, for then language as such would be lodged in some specific, individual mind, and whose mind would that be? There is no real alternative to regarding language as an abstract entity, and according to standard ontology it is a defining property of such entities that they have no existence in time and space. They cannot, therefore, exert any causal influence. Hence language cannot create meaning.

True, I have pointed out repeatedly that such things as languages, words and sentences cannot very well be regarded as paradigmatic abstract entities. For example, the English language must be said to have come into being some time during the Middle Ages. Ontologically speaking, natural languages are better understood as non-paradigmatic, cryptomental abstract entities. But that does not change the picture in any relevant way. Cryptomental abstractions are still abstractions, without material existence. Already for logical reasons, they cannot create or generate anything at all.

Does the idea that language can generate meaning let itself be refuted so easily? Yes and no. I find the simple argument just presented entirely decisive, but one

might wish to advance counterarguments. Much of the rest of the chapter will be taken up with the discussion of such counterarguments.

Let me first observe that my argument against the presumed creative powers of language relies on more or less standard ontology. A firm believer in the productive capacities of language might wish to turn the tables on me and maintain that my argument shows, rather, that such ontology is in need of rethinking. I would certainly be ready to discuss other ways of conceptualizing modes of being. However, to the best of my knowledge, no such revisions have been proposed by poststructuralists.

The idea that abstract entities cannot exert causal influence may sound strange and unconvincing, since we are used to speaking as if they could. Consider the following quotation.

“The great increase in available reading matter after about 1650 both resulted from and promoted the spread of education to the middle classes, especially to women.”

(Tucker, Unwin, and Unwin 2016)

“The great increase in available reading matter after about 1650” stands for an abstraction, and so does “the spread of education to the middle classes, especially to women”, and the two abstractions are said to influence each other reciprocally. Such non-atomistic explanations – structural, generalizing – are legion. Is there really anything wrong with them?

There is nothing wrong with such explanations, but there is no causal influence between abstractions in cases like the one in the quotation. There are causal links involved, but those causal links belong to brute reality. For example: in brute reality, after 1650 more individuals than earlier acquired certain mental capacities, including the ability to read, which, ex hypothesi, made more of those individuals want to gain access to physical utterances in print. Causal links of that kind do not supply the meaning of the quoted explanation, but the explanation builds on and generalizes a large body of such imagined or ascertained facts about particular individuals, their actions, and their motivations. Strictly speaking, the two abstractions mentioned in the citation do not cause each other; instead, they highlight a pattern, a complex causal pattern in physical and mental reality.

The same kind of analysis is valid in cases where languages are presented as causally efficient entities. For example, Simeon Potter (2016) has pointed to the fact that United States English influences Canadian English. “The boundary with Canada nowhere corresponds to any boundary between dialects”, he writes, “and the influence of United States English is strong, being felt least in the Maritime Provinces and Newfoundland and Labrador”. Here, too, a statement that is seemingly genuinely causal serves merely to highlight a pattern in brute reality: Canadian speakers of English are genuinely influenced by hearing the English of
speakers from the United States. However, if one states that language creates the meaning of “Dickinson 591”, or of Soble’s article on Namie, there are not even any underlying brute realities to refer to. Poststructuralists do not, as far as I can see, specify what kind of entity they take textual meaning to be. But whatever answer they might give, it seems obvious that abstract words, sentences, or syntactic structures cannot produce textual meaning.

It is true that we often speak as if linguistic expressions themselves could make things happen. For example, Damrosch (as quoted in Chapter 1) tells us that the title page of Voltaire’s *Candide* declares that the book is a translation from the German of Dr. Ralph. But that is clearly just a way of speaking. Damrosch hardly means to imply that the title page can issue declarations on its own. Or, to take a more theoretically charged example: linguists and philosophers often write as if sentences can express propositions. Yet it is fairly commonly accepted among specialists that only people can actually do so (see, for example, Cruse 2004: 21 and Soames 2010: 145).

Many literary theorists are nevertheless reluctant to accept for a fact that language and linguistic expressions cannot generate meaning. Indeed, Culler has explicitly defended the idea that talk of linguistic phenomena as genuine agents can in fact be non-metaphorically true. He writes:

> Saussure’s discussion of motivation adduces many lexical pairs, where one is unmotivated and the other motivated. “*Ormeau* ‘elm,’ unmotivated, *poirier* ‘pear tree,’ relatively motivated, refers to a coexisting term, *poire* ‘pear,’ and also the ending *ier*. It attempts to motivate itself.” We are inclined to think of it as a personification, purely figurative, as if only people, not words, could try to do something; but Saussure repeatedly avers that language escapes conscious control, does things on its own, and Derrida is interested in how the functioning of texts makes irrelevant or problematic the distinction between what might be deliberately chosen and what might not. “Language motivating itself” might well be an apposite description of the play of language. (Culler 2007: 128–129)

But a reference to Saussure is not really a substantive argument. If Saussure had in fact adopted the position ascribed to him by Culler, then Saussure, in his turn, would face the objections just raised. In actual fact, however, Saussure’s talk of words motivating themselves is no doubt just a casual, metaphoric formulation. Saussure hardly meant to imply that the word “*poirier*” can really perform actions on its own.

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3. In a footnote about the neogrammarians (1960b: 5, note 2; French original 1960a: 19, note 1), Saussure criticizes their insistence on the rooting out of “illogical metaphors” (“métaphores illogiques”), a zeal which, to his mind, went too far. Saussure observes that one “no longer dared to say, ‘Language does this or that’, or ‘life of language’, etc. since language is not an entity and
Derrida’s authority has also been invoked, and Derrida does view signs as being capable of signifying in the absence of senders and receivers. He holds that to write “is to produce a mark that will constitute a sort of machine which is productive in turn, and which my future disappearance will not, in principle, hinder in its functioning, offering things and itself to be read and to be rewritten.” (Derrida 1988a: 8). If that were literally true, then language would be generating meaning: the sign itself would function, be productive, independently of any human being. But the physical utterance, the “mark” that the sender produces, is of course just an inert physical thing. The marks on the physical Dickinson manuscript representing “Dickinson 591” do not have meaning inside them, nor does meaning emanate from the marks, seeping out from them as it were. If a reader comes around and reads them, the reader will construe the marks as representing a complex of signs and a meaning. I cannot see any literal way in which the marks could constitute a machine functioning on its own (though I will come back to Derrida’s view of the sign later in the chapter).

One may still wonder whether language cannot create meaning. Many regard the language system as being more fundamental than language in use; for example, Culler writes that the language system makes the use of language possible (1981: 103). If that is true, the language system must be a kind of underlying cause of our actual linguistic behaviour. One might even suspect that the language system can create textual meaning, no matter what ontological arguments are mustered against such a view. I would say that it is both true and untrue that the language system makes the use of language possible – it all depends on what one means

exists only within speakers." ("[On] n’ose plus dire: ‘la langue fait ceci ou cela’, ni parler de la ‘vie de langue’, etc., puisque la langue n’est pas une entité, et n’existe que dans les sujets parlants") Saussure makes it obvious that he himself is less puristic and tells us that he will “in some instances … not hesitate to use one of the expressions condemned at the time” ("n’hésiterons-nous pas à employer à l’occasion telle des expressions qui ont été blâmées à l’époque"). This should not be taken to mean that Saussure believes that language can really perform actions, or really has a life, or anything in that vein. His point is obviously that he feels free to sometimes avail himself of what he still considers to be illogical metaphors. I understand Saussure’s talk of the word poirier as attempting to motivate itself as one of the verbal liberties that he thus grants himself. Cf. Daylight 2011:122 and 126.

4. Derrida 1972a: 376 : “c’est produire une marque qui constituera une sorte de machine à son tour productrice, que ma disparition future n’empêchera pas principiellement de fonctionner et de donner, de se donner à lire et à réécrire”.

5. Raoul Moati has interpreted Derrida – rightly, I believe – as thinking that the sender imbues the sign with meaning when producing the sign in a communicative situation, a meaning that disappears as the sign becomes separated from the sender (Moati 2014: 35 and 37).
by that statement more concretely. Yet in no case can the language system create textual meaning.

When linguists describe the English language system, what they describe is certain aspects of the knowledge and experience of native speakers of English. Native speakers of English have been exposed, from very early childhood, to sounds that can be coupled with meanings and they have learned to produce such sounds themselves. With time they have developed complex and intricate expectations regarding such couplings between sounds and meanings. They routinely use those expectations to derive meanings from what other people say and write, and to say and write things themselves, expecting other people to derive more or less clear meanings from those utterances. When linguists describe the English language system, what they aspire to describe is the knowledge concerning such couplings that native, adult speakers of English possess. Linguists are very clear about that, as we saw in Chapter 6. In one sense, then, the English language system is a theoretical model created by linguists. In another sense, the English language system is a system of more or less shared expectations among competent speakers of English. Those expectations can be found in the speakers, somehow stored in their minds.

It should be evident that the linguistic model of English is not what makes the use of English possible; things are the other way round. Language can exist independently of its linguistic description, just as the terrain does not depend on the map for its very being. However, it is true that English could not have been a functional language if it had not been for the system of shared expectations among competent speakers. But to use English is not, or only in a loose sense, to use a system of shared expectations. To actually use English in speech or writing, listening or reading is, inevitably, to use one’s own knowledge, experience, and expectations with regard to sounds, marks, and meanings. When Dickinson makes those traces with her pen on her manuscript for “Dickinson 591”, she can only draw on her own linguistic competence in trying to make signs and meanings recoverable to future readers. She could not produce her utterance if it were not for her linguistic competence, her share in a system of mutual expectations, her socialization into a system of linguistic habits. But it is not as if a system of mutual expectations caused her to make those traces and wish to associate those signs and meanings with them. The system of mutual expectations does not create textual meaning. The system of mutual expectations, too, is a cryptomental abstraction.

It may lie near at hand to think of a natural language, designated with a proper name like “English”, as a somehow unified formation enjoying brute existence. That is how language is often conceived by poststructuralists, who also tend to think of natural languages as being invested with causal powers. For me, however, the only things that have brute existence in connection with English are certain physical utterances and certain mental processes associated with those utterances.
The idea that context co-determines meaning

In poststructuralist theory, it is very often supposed that textual meaning is co-determined by the context, that is, by the physical, interactional, linguistic, cultural, and social world surrounding a text. Intertextual influence – the presumed impact of other texts on a given text’s meaning – can also be subsumed under the general concept of contextual influence.

A context stretches out in many directions and dimensions, and poststructuralists tend to hold that contexts cannot be limited or defined except arbitrarily. They often regard this circumstance as an additional reason why the meaning of an utterance will escape definite determination: the textual meaning will be affected by a potentially limitless number of different factors. As Culler aphoristically formulates the idea: “Meaning is context-bound, but context is boundless” (1997: 64).

Yet context cannot very well exert any direct influence on textual meaning, an influence unmediated by senders and receivers. How would such an influence come about? To the best of my knowledge, nobody has ever explained that, or even attempted to come up with an explanation. The problems with the idea that context affects meaning are analogous to those besetting the idea that language generates meaning: there are no conceivable ways in which such influence could occur. To me, the lack of an explanation of how context could have an unmediated effect on meaning is a good reason not to believe that context can affect the meaning of an utterance directly.

My own conception of the role of context for textual meaning differs considerably from the standard poststructuralist version. In my view, the sender of a physical utterance expects the receiver to make use of his or her knowledge and experience in understanding the intended meaning of the utterance, and knowledge of the context forms part of that knowledge and experience. When greeting Alan, Belinda implicitly expects him to know and understand many things over and above plain English. For example, she expects him to be aware of the fact that they have not met earlier that day, and to be aware of the degree of familiarity or unfamiliarity between them and of the vague future possibilities involved in the relationship between them. Alan can be counted on to make use, implicitly, of such knowledge and experience in understanding and processing Belinda’s greeting.

My point is that it is the presuppositions of the human agents that make relatively specific elements of the context important.6 The fact that Belinda and Alan have not met earlier that day is important because Belinda draws on it in her greet-

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6. This is by no means an original viewpoint. I believe it is taken for granted by standard linguistics, as the reference to Mira Ariel in the following suggests.
ing and Alan in his understanding of it. For the same reason, very many other elements of the context, context taken in a wide sense, lack any significance at all for Belinda’s utterance: the meaning of the word “indefatigable”, the opening lines of Samuel Beckett’s *Embers*, the parliamentary situation in the Knesset, the temperature in Beijing, and so forth. Those elements are not merely of minimal significance – they are totally irrelevant. Belinda does not expect Alan to draw on them in his understanding of her utterance, nor does Alan do so. Context cannot, by itself, influence meaning. Instead, certain contextual features come into the picture because sender and receiver make use of certain aspects of their assumedly shared knowledge of the context in their production and understanding of the communicative act.

In a loose sense, of course, context does influence meaning, just like, in a loose sense, the title page of Voltaire’s *Candide* does make a declaration. It is unsurprising to read, in a textbook in linguistics:

> Language is not produced in a vacuum. Linguistic forms must routinely be connected to the interactional, physical, cultural, and social environment in which they are produced. Linguistic behavior is grounded in a particular context, which surrounds, informs, underlies, and shapes a linguistic event. (Ariel 2014: 181)

In this quote from Mira Ariel it may sound as if context can do things on its own, for context is said to be able to inform and shape a linguistic event. But that is not Ariel’s real idea. Her real meaning is that the sender expects the receiver to use their presumedly shared knowledge of certain elements of the context in order to understand the sender’s’ utterance:

> In producing discourse, speakers routinely provide information that allows addressees to make pragmatic inferences. Addressees base their inferences on contextual assumptions that come in part from the content of the speakers’ words, and in part from extralinguistic factors. (Ariel 2014: 180)

That is also my own view of the role of the context. Specific contextual features matter because senders implicitly or consciously expect receivers to be aware of those features and draw on them in their understanding of the utterance, and because receivers routinely make such inferences. Only those specific features of the context are of importance. It is true, but not relevant, that context in the wide sense contains so much that it becomes, as Culler writes, boundless. For the boundlessness of that context plays no role for a given act of communication and the meaning of the corresponding utterance.
On references to psychological states and human agency

I have just denied that language and context can play the explanatory role typically assumed in poststructuralist theory of meaning. I foresee the objection that it is equally questionable to explain textual meaning by referring to human agency. Poststructuralists are generally suspicious of such explanations. Counting on human agency is often portrayed as falling prey to an outdated belief in the autonomy of human subjects (see, for example, Culler 1981: 32–34 or Belsey 2002: 65–67).

However, the degree of autonomy of human subjects is not a topic in my theory. I regard textual meaning as being, basically, meaning intentions in the mind of the sender or meaning experiences in the minds of receivers. All I presuppose with respect to textual meaning, then, is that it is justifiable to speak of humans and of mental states in which humans can find themselves. It is true that my broader description of verbal communication also presupposes that humans can produce and register physical sounds or physical marks. It is not part of my theory, though, that humans have free will – nor, for that matter, that they do not. The degree of autonomy of human agents does not come into the explanation.

But the questioning of human agency can be taken deeper. Suppose that human thoughts, ideas, and wishes are indeed unfree. Then there must be deeper factors causing the thoughts, ideas, and wishes. I fully recognize this, but language or context cannot be cited as such deeper causes. Language itself cannot be said to cause anything, not as long as we remain within the confines of standard ontology, and poststructuralism offers no other ontology to put in its stead. Physical context could, in principle, function as a material cause, but it is inconceivable to me how, say, the floor of the corridor in which Belinda greets Alan could, in itself, materially affect her meaning intentions or Alan’s meaning experience.

I do not want to give the impression that I view human agency as a philosophically unproblematic phenomenon. My position is, rather, that explanations in terms of human agency are, in many circumstances, the best we have. That is certainly true regarding individual communicative acts and individual texts and their textual meaning. Why did Belinda say “Good morning” to Alan? Because she wanted to greet him – that was her intention. (And the description of her relevant intentions, conscious or non-conscious, could be made much richer.) There may be deeper, more fundamental explanations, but at present at least such explanations are not within our reach. The explanation in terms of human agency is the best we have. We will either have to use that kind of explanation or confess that we understand next to nothing.

To my mind, this last observation goes to the heart of the matter. I would say that poststructuralism is not really interested in positive theory but in emphasizing the ultimate uncertainty surrounding human thought and speech.
“Poststructuralism is not a system”, writes Belsey, “not even, when you look at the details, a unified body of theory. How could it be? Its key term is difference.” (Belsey 2002: 56) In principle I have no quarrel with the insistence on difference and on ontological and epistemological uncertainty. As I observed earlier, I altogether accept that the thing itself always slips away and that we necessarily find ourselves beyond absolute truth in our theorizing. Yet, having said that, we still face the task of making sense of the world: of trying to understand, for example, how verbal communication works, constructing the best conceptual model of verbal communication we can. In this perspective, I find references to the meaning-creating power of language and context deficient – I cannot see how language itself or context as such could ever affect the meaning of an individual text. References to human agency raise deep philosophical problems – in fact, all varieties of explanation do – but such references seem to me to be difficult to avoid. How can we, at present, understand verbal communication without relying in part on the notion of humans who are able to think and act?

**Derrida on the iterability of signs**

Even though poststructuralism is not a unified body of theory, certain poststructuralist conceptions function as arguments for the existence of a language-created indeterminacy of meaning. Before proceeding to poststructuralist theory of the text, I will comment on two such conceptions that I find particularly important: first on Derrida’s ideas about the iterability of signs and then on the idea, taken from Saussure, that there are only differences in language.

According to Derrida, signs can inevitably be repeated or, as he often expresses it, “iterated”. A couple of quotations will suggest what he is aiming at.

A written sign is proffered in the absence of the receiver…. In order for my “written communication” to retain its function as writing, i.e., its readability, it must remain readable despite the absolute disappearance of any receiver, determined in general. My communication must be repeatable – iterable – in the absolute absence of the receiver or of any empirically determinable collectivity of receivers. Such iterability … structures the mark of writing itself, no matter what particular type of writing is involved (whether pictographical, hieroglyphic, ideographic, phonetic, alphabetic, to cite the old categories). (Derrida 1988a: 7)7

Let us consider any element of spoken language, be it a small or large unit.... Through empirical variations of tone, voice, etc., possibly of a certain accent, for example, we must be able to recognize the identity, roughly speaking, of a signifying form.

(Derrida 1988a: 10)\(^8\)

this unity of the signifying form only constitutes itself by virtue of its iterability, by the possibility of its being repeated

(Derrida 1988a: 10)\(^9\)

Derrida draws far-reaching conclusions from the alleged iterability of signs. Leaving those conclusions aside for the moment, I will begin by denying that signs are iterable.

As so many times before, let us think of “Dickinson 591”. What is supposed to be the “written sign” in connection with “Dickinson 591”? If we take it to be the physical utterance, we will find that the written sign cannot be iterated. The piece of paper with traces of ink found in the Amherst College Archives and Special Collections is obviously a unique entity. It can be copied – it is numerically, not qualitatively, unique – but that physical thing itself cannot be repeated or iterated. Or think of Belinda’s “Good morning”, said to Alan. The phrase “Good morning” has been uttered innumerable times, so such utterances are not qualitatively unique, but each physical utterance of “Good morning” is a unique entity, a unique and unrepeateable physical body of sound.

We will not be better off if we take the written sign to be the abstract sign, or complex of signs, that a physical utterance represents. Abstract entities cannot be repeated either – which should go without saying, since abstract entities are not to be found in time and space. Redness itself cannot be repeated, even though there are certainly many red things. The number eight itself cannot be repeated, even though one can say, or write, or think “8” over and over again. The English word “I” cannot be repeated, even though “I” has been said and written very many times, for there is only one English word “I”, and that word, in itself, cannot be repeated. There are, certainly, occurrences of the word “I”; for instance, the word occurs twice in the first line of “Dickinson 591”. But the English word “I” (an abstract entity) is not the same thing as the first occurrence of the word “I” in the
first line of “Dickinson 591” (another, separate, abstract entity), and neither the word nor the first occurrence of the word in Dickinson’s poem is the same thing as the physical trace in Dickinson’s autograph representing the first occurrence in her poem of the word “I”. Neither the word itself, nor the occurrence of the word in the given complex of signs, nor the physical trace in Dickinson’s manuscript can be iterated. When Derrida speaks of signs being iterable, I believe that he conflates the signs themselves, their occurrences, and the physical marks or sounds representing occurrences of those signs: he uses “sign” in an undifferentiated sense which glosses over important distinctions.10 (The ordinary conception of the text, which likewise ignores the distinction between physical marks and abstract signs, is no doubt part of the explanation of why he does this.) It is true that a given sign can have many different occurrences, and that many different sounds or marks can represent occurrences of one and the same sign. This is probably what leads Derrida to think that signs can be repeated. But they cannot.

One may question the deeper relevance of my objection. If signs can be repeated only in the attenuated sense that many different physical complexes of sounds or marks can represent the same sign or complex of signs, is not that enough to validate Derrida’s claim that signs can be iterated? Derrida himself denies this: he declares in no uncertain terms that iterability is very different from what I just described as repeatability in the attenuated sense (see, especially, Derrida 1988c: 119 and 127). As one can glimpse already from the quotations above, Derrida thinks of iterability as something far less mundane – something which structures the mark of writing itself, something by which the signifying form constitutes itself – and he thinks that iterability has very significant consequences.

I would say that Derrida needs the idea of iterability first and foremost for his criticism of the traditional picture of communication. Derrida wishes to deny that a text has a given, unified meaning and, even more emphatically, that such a meaning can consist in a true representation of the world, a representation to which the sender has unmediated access (see, for example Derrida 1988a: 6–9). I, too, would deny those two theses, at least in their unqualified form. But I do not subscribe to Derrida’s arguments for his denial, based on ideas about iterability.

Derrida maintains that a text, which he understands as an iterable sign – that is, in my terminology, as an iterable complex of signs – can always appear in different contexts and with different meanings. According to him, even when a sender issues the text in a quite specific context, that text is an iterable complex of signs with a potential of meaning that the sender cannot control. In that way, the text

and the meaning are, in a sense, lifted out of the communicative situation. There are senders issuing signs and receivers understanding them, but essentially, for Derrida, those signs are iterable and possess an unsurveyable and in principle un-ending meaning potential.

There are several things in Derrida’s argument from which I would like to distance myself, for example his understanding of the concept of a sign, whose multiplicity I pointed out above, and his belief that physically manifested signs have meanings independently of people. However, speaking specifically about iterability, my key problem with the argument has to do with the essential importance ascribed to the fact that a complex of signs can in a sense be repeated. The fact as such is uncontroversial, but the conclusions that Derrida draws from it are not. Think of Belinda’s “Good morning”, said to Alan. Nobody would deny that Belinda has certain meaning intentions; in my terminology, those intentions constitute a sender’s meaning. Nobody would deny, either, that Alan understands her greeting in some way or another; in my terminology, his understanding and wider perception of Belinda’s utterance constitute a receiver’s meaning. Why should that sender’s meaning and receiver’s meaning be regarded as something less important, less essential, than the fact that “Good morning” can be said (indeed, has been said and will be said) in many different situations and with many different (sender’s and receiver’s) meanings? Unlike Derrida, I find the sender’s and receiver’s meaning highly relevant for many purposes. One can certainly also take an interest in the general meaning potentialities of the complex of signs represented by every physical utterance of “Good morning”. But why should the latter kind of interest be the privileged perspective?

My own view of the matter is this. I find it obvious that a text like “Dickinson 591”, to revert to that example, can be regarded from different angles and approached in different ways. One of those approaches appears more fundamental to me than the others: the text is clearly meant to be read and enjoyed as a poem; Dickinson invites readers to read her text as a poem and let readers’ meanings emerge. Still, many other types of use of the text can be fruitful for one purpose or another. Most relevant for the present example: literary critics and scholars can interpret the text. They can do this with different aims in mind. For example, speaking with Stecker, they can take an interest in what the text was intended to mean or in what it could mean. (Or they can produce other types of third-party constructions of textual meaning, constructions thought to be valuable for some more or less specific reason.) Taking an interest in what the text was intended to mean, one will have to regard the text as a unique utterance. Taking an interest in what the text could mean, one will have to regard the text as an iterable sign. I can see no reason to say that viewing the text as an iterable sign is the only possible and legitimate way. What are Derrida’s reasons?
At the heart of Derrida’s theory of iterability is the thesis that a sign can always be iterated, and that it would not be a sign otherwise. As I have just tried to show, that cannot be so: the idea rests on an equivocation, on a mixing of different senses of the word “sign”. What is undoubtedly true is that a sign, if taken in its abstract sense, for example as a word (like “I”), can have many occurrences and many physical instances in the form of sounds or marks. For my part, I cannot see that very much follows from this fact where texts and textual meaning are concerned. It seems, though, as if Derrida thinks of this “iterability” as being something of the essence of a sign and something constituting the core phenomenon in connection with an utterance. Where a sign is issued, Derrida holds that the “iteration structuring it a priori introduces into it a dehiscence and a cleft [brisure] which are essential” (Derrida 1988a: 18). I, for my part, cannot see how iteration can be said to structure the utterance a priori, whatever that is intended to mean, or how iteration can introduce a dehiscence and a cleft into the utterance, whatever Derrida means by that. I also miss an argument to back up Derrida’s claim that he is making statements about matters that are essential (in the sense, I suppose, of having to do with essences) and a priori.

In one of his articles criticizing Searle, Derrida writes that it would be “illegitimate and impossible” to view a text as a single, unique utterance, since it would “suppose the self-identity of an isolated element which iterability … divides at once” (Derrida 1988b: 63). In other words, Derrida would argue that a poem like Dickinson’s cannot be identical to itself, since the complex of signs associated with it can always be produced and read again and again: that possibility is thought to affect the utterance itself, “the time and place of the other time already at work, altering from the start the start itself, the first time, the at once” (Derrida 1988b: 62). But what seems evident to Derrida does not seem evident to me. For me, Dickinson’s physical manuscript is not altered by later printings or readings of the poem, nor Dickinson’s intentions regarding the complex of signs represented by the autograph, nor Dickinson’s sender’s meaning. There may naturally be new readers’ perceptions of the complex of signs and new receivers’ meanings. But the body of receivers’ meanings is not the same as the text, and new receivers’ meanings do not really have the power to change anything in the past, even though they may change our perceptions of the past.

11. “[L’] itération qui la structure a priori y introduit une déhiscence et une brisure essentielles.” (Derrida 1972a: 389)

12. Derrida clearly conceives of the utterance or sign in ordinary-conception terms, and one may ask whether the structuring and the cleft are supposed to concern the physical utterance, the complex of signs, or the textual meaning. In any case, the dehiscence and the cleft cannot be literal. The dehiscence and the cleft are evidently metaphorical, and it is not easy to know what more literal realities the metaphors are supposed to point to.
The idea that in language there are only differences

Saussure’s linguistics, as interpreted and radicalized by Derrida, is of much importance for the poststructuralist theory of meaning, not least Saussure’s idea that a language only contains differences without positive terms.

Saussure viewed a language-system as a closed system of signs, each sign being a sound-image (the signifier) coupled with a concept (the signified). For all practical purposes, those Saussurean signs can be taken to be words. Saussure’s thinking about language is of course no longer state-of-the-art linguistics, but I will leave the general merits and demerits of Saussure’s theory out of consideration and focus exclusively on his idea of a language as only containing differences.

Saussure holds – and I agree – that reality in itself, brute reality, is not divided into pre-given objects or into pre-given aspects of objects. There are, consequently, no pre-given entities for the words of a language to refer to: the division of the world into objects and aspects is effected by humans and encapsulated in language. In other words, Saussure is an early advocate of conceptual relativity. Speaking in Searlean terms: Saussure takes language to be a system of representation.

Since language forms a system of representation, its various elements function together. Saussure emphasizes that the meaning and reference of an individual word (like “blue”) cannot be fully understood except via an understanding of the wider system (including the other colour terms as used in the given language: “green”, “violet”, et cetera). That is Saussure’s still accepted theory of “value”.

Within the same language, all words used to express related ideas limit each other reciprocally; synonyms like French redouter “dread”, craindre “fear”, and avoir peur “be afraid” have value only through their opposition: if redouter did not exist, all its content would go to its competitors. (Saussure 1960b: 116)14

Starting from such observations, Saussure arrives at his thesis that a language only contains differences.

Everything that has been said up to this point boils down to this: in language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only

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13. For example, Saussure speaks of language as “a system of signs” (Saussure 1960b: 15; Saussure 1960a: 32: “un système de signes”) and as “a self-contained whole” (Saussure 1960b: 9; Saussure 1960a: 25: “un tout en soi”). For the structure of signs, see Saussure 1960b: 66.

14. “Dans l’intérieur d’une même langue, tous les mots qui expriment des idées voisines se limitent réciproquement: des synonymes comme redouter, craindre, avoir peur n’ont de valeur propre que par leur opposition; si redouter n’existait pas, tout son contenu irait à ses concurrents.” (Saussure 1960a: 160)
differences without positive terms. Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system. The idea or phonic substance that a sign contains is of less importance than the other signs that surround it. Proof of this is that the value of a term may be modified without either its meaning or its sound being affected, solely because a neighboring term has been modified … (Saussure 1960 b: 120)15

Poststructuralists have been prone to quote the first two sentences of this passage and to take it as an established truth that in language there are only differences without positive terms. That helps explain the conviction that, as Barry has it, language generates infinite webs of meaning so that all texts are necessarily self-contradictory.

For my own part, I find it impossible to understand how anything can be made up only by differences. In fact, Saussure himself seems to contradict his statement about language already in the quoted passage, since he takes it for granted – in accordance with his theory of signs – that a sign consists of an idea and a phonic substance. The idea and the phonic substance are both, I suppose, positive contents. How does Saussure get from the unproblematic observation in the first block quote to the strange conclusion opening the second block quote?

Observations like the one in the first block quote form Saussure’s basis for saying that the idea and the phonic substance that a sign contains are of less importance than the other signs that surround it. I find it easy to accept that both the idea associated with a word and the “surrounding” words play a role for the understanding of the conventional meaning of a word. But saying that the idea and the phonic substance are of less importance is not to say that they are without importance. (And why are they even of less importance? Importance for what, and in what respect? And how does one measure that importance?)

Saussure’s next step in his argument is to contend that the intellectual and phonic distinctions in a language system do not pre-exist in brute reality itself but are introduced through the introduction of the system. This is, to all intents and purposes, a formulation of the thesis of conceptual relatvity, a thesis which I

15. “Tout ce qui précède revient à dire que dans la langue il n’y a que des différences. Bien plus: une différence suppose en général des termes positifs entre lesquels elle s’établit; mais dans la langue il n’y a que des différences sans termes positifs. Qu’on prenne le signifié ou le signifiant, la langue ne comporte ni des idées ni des sons qui préexisteraient au système linguistique, mais seulement des différences conceptuelles et des différences phoniques issues de ce système. Ce qu’il y a d’idée ou de matière phonique dans un signe importe moins que ce qu’il y a autour de lui dans les autres signes. La preuve en est que la valeur d’un terme peut être modifiée sans qu’on touche ni à son sens ni à ses sons, mais seulement par le fait que tel autre terme voisin aura subi une modification …” (Saussure 1960a: 166)
fully accept. Saussure then goes on to say that language, therefore, only contains conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system. I agree, but it seems that Saussure overinterprets the observation. That the conceptual and phonic differences exploited by a language are all of them differences resulting from the makeup of the language system in question (and not differences dictated by reality itself) does not mean that in the language system there are only differences. It is one thing to say that the differences found in the language system are all created by humans, but something quite different to say that all the language system contains is differences. I cannot see that Saussure’s argument hangs together and, as I say, I find the thesis to which it leads up impossible to understand.

Be that as it may. In a sense, there was never any need for me to discuss the idea that in language there are only differences. If language does not generate textual meaning, it does not really matter for the question of textual meaning whether or not there are only differences in language. And if language does not generate meaning, it follows automatically that language does not generate infinite and self-contradictory meaning.

Standard literary theory on what a text is

I now move on from the poststructuralist theory of textual meaning to the closely associated poststructuralist theory of what a text is.

It is an important and characteristic feature of the poststructuralist theory of language that it breaks with the communication model. Derrida, like Reddy, criticizes the received way of thinking about communication, what Reddy calls the conduit metaphor. But Derrida does not, like Reddy (and me), want to reform our traditional way of thinking about communication but to reconstruct it radically.

Derrida considers that the text – the “sign” – cannot, so to speak, be contained in a specific communicative context in which a sender produces a physical utterance addressed to a receiver. For Derrida, this is prevented by the iterability of signs and also by the circumstance that a context can never be made definite: a context is never “absolutely determinable”, its determination never “entirely certain or saturated” (Derrida 1988a: 3). The text is thus liberated from its place in the communication model and its subservience to the sender, who is traditionally supposed to provide the text with meaning. According to

16. I am speaking here of the poststructuralist view of what a text in my sense is. The word “text” as such is often used in a much broader manner by poststructuralists: “in wider usages any group of phenomena, and even being itself, may be understood as ‘text’” (Radloff 1993: 639).


Derrida, writing is not “comprehensible in terms of communication”, at least not in terms of communication “in the limited sense of the transmission of meaning” (Derrida 1988a: 3). Communication in the traditional sense is made into a side issue by Derrida.

In this section I will concentrate on the consequences of the poststructuralist view of textual meaning for the image of the text. To put it succinctly, standard contemporary literary theory understands the text as a verbal structure, an iterable sign in Derrida’s sense. For poststructuralists, a text is not grounded in an utterance anchored to a sender and a moment, but is a verbal material independent of any one specific communicative situation. In other respects, the ordinary conception of a text is taken for granted. As usual, the distinction between physical marks or sounds on the one hand and non-physical complexes of signs on the other goes unheeded. As usual, too, a text is supposed to be firmly associated with a body of meaning. But for poststructuralists textual meaning is provided by other forces than the sender: by language, by contexts, by receivers. This view of what a text is I have already criticized at some length: I have elaborately explained why I do not embrace the ordinary conception of the text and do not believe in the iterability of signs.

I will offer two examples of the various forms in which the poststructuralist conception of the text can appear. My first example comes from a literary-theory textbook by Gregory Castle.

In literary theory, a *text* is not simply a book. It is rather a complex, unstable, and unpredictable site, where a number of operations take place: the reader’s engagement with the author’s words, the play of differences in the language apart from any authorial (or readerly) intent, the intertextual connections with other texts, the determinations of social and cultural institutions and traditions. (Castle 2013: 410)

Castle presents a text not as a kind of object but as a kind of place: a site. This must be a metaphorical characterization: it would be pointless to ask where “Dickinson 591”, or Soble’s news story, is located in actual geography. The metaphorical use of the word “site” can sometimes be literally translated: people knowledgeable about computers can explain in concrete software terms what a “website” is and in concrete hardware terms how a website can be stored. But in Castle’s definition of a

18. Derrida 1972a : 369 : “compris sous la catégorie de communication” ; “au sens restreint de transmission du sens”.

19. “Basic to the prevailing contemporary understanding of text is the assumption that phenomena, whether linguistic or non-linguistic, are to be understood as purely conventional elements of a system of signification.” (Radloff 1993: 640)
text, explanation stops at the metaphor. A text is of course not literally a site, but there is no more literal indication of what a text should be thought to be.

I believe that when Castle refers to operations taking place at the text he is speaking of the meaning of the text, and that he maintains that textual meaning arises through (1) the readings of the author’s words by readers, (2) the play of differences brought about by language, (3) the influences of other texts, and (4) the influences of social and cultural institutions and traditions. Castle does not attempt to explain how those four factors interact or fail to interact.

According to my own theory readers are behind one variety of textual meaning, namely, receiver’s meaning, but I deny that language or context (other texts; social and cultural institutions and traditions) can affect textual meaning without the mediation of senders or receivers. However, my focus in this section is on the conception of the text itself. In reality, Castle seems to think of the text as being the author’s words, but the author’s words placed in an undefined space outside sender and receiver, a place where a number of meaning-creating forces affect those words. That is very much like the vaguer version of the conduit metaphor, the “minor framework”, described by Reddy (see Chapter 1), but with the post-structuralist twist according to which language and context and receivers, but not senders, determine textual meaning.

Castle’s description of what a text is can be said to represent the language-and-context-oriented aspect of the poststructuralist theory of the text. A good exponent of the reader-oriented facet is Derek Attridge.

In The Work of Literature (2015) Attridge distinguishes between a literary text and a literary work. He conceives of texts, whether literary or non-literary, on the model of the ordinary conception: for him, a text is a string of words with a conventional meaning, the string of words being embodied in a physical exemplar of the text. Thus a text in general is “the set of verbal signs embodied in a particular object”; and a literary text is “the literary exemplar conceived simply as a string of words” (Attridge 2015: 34). The verbal signs are firmly associated with a body of meaning: the text is a “series of signifiers” that have “conventionally endorsed meanings” (Attridge 2015: 28).

For Attridge, a literary work is grounded in a text, but a literary work can only appear in a concrete, inevitably individual, literary experience during reading. The literary work is “a realization of the text as it is experienced in my reading” (Attridge 2015: 30). Formulated in my terminology: what Attridge calls a literary work is a receiver’s meaning in connection with a literary text. For Attridge, a literary work can also, secondarily, be the construction of the work at which a critic arrives after several readings and aided by critical reflection – something which I would call a commentator’s meaning. Even more indirectly, when speaking of a
literary work we may have in mind the understanding of the work entertained in the culture (Attridge 2015: 30).

Attridge adheres to the ordinary conception of the text. As we saw, a text for him is a physically embodied linguistic structure firmly associated with a body of meaning. The linguistic structure is conceived here as an iterable sign (see, for example, Attridge 2015: 35 and 37). Once again, we encounter the characteristic poststructuralist idea of what a text is, this time in a more consolidated variety. At the same time, however, Attridge maintains that the literary work only exists in the readings of it, and he presents this idea as his reply to the classical question of the ontological status of the literary work (Attridge 2015: 24). Thus Attridge can be said to give a double answer to the question of the nature of a text like “Dickinson 591”. In what he sees as a trivial sense, “Dickinson 591” would be an iterable, embodied linguistic structure with a conventional meaning. In a literarily relevant sense “Dickinson 591” would be that meaningful linguistic structure as it appears to a reader during reading. The supposedly trivial version, Attridge’s view of what he calls the text, has a clearly poststructuralist flavour because of Attridge’s belief in the iterability of signs. The supposedly literarily relevant version – still poststructuralist, because it builds on a poststructuralist understanding of the text – points in several other theoretical directions as well: towards reader-response criticism, phenomenological aesthetics, and philosophical pragmatism. (Attridge is well aware of his affinities with theorists like Louise Rosenblatt, Mikel Dufrenne, and Richard Shusterman: Attridge 2015: 89, 29, and 24.)

Attridge’s views differ from mine on a number of points. My problems with the supposedly trivial version of his answer should be easy to understand, since, as I have already pointed out, I do not embrace the ordinary conception of the text and do not believe in the iterability of signs. The supposedly literarily relevant version requires more comment.

Attridge’s definition, quoted above, identifies a literary work with a competent reader’s realization of the corresponding literary text. That is obviously problematic: there would be as many “Dickinson 591”s as there are readings of the poem, and such a way of viewing the matter would not answer to the intellectual and practical needs that make us think and speak in terms of texts (“texts” in my sense now, not in Attridge’s). It would be reductive to identify a text with a meaning, as I will point out in Chapter 9, and viewing each reader’s meaning as a text would add extra problems.\footnote{Attridge makes an ambitious attempt to explain his position on this point (2015: 32–35), and also tries to neutralize this kind of objection, but my reservations remain.}

It might seem more acceptable to imagine the literary work as being an entity which different receivers perceive, each in their own way, much as different
persons can have different perceptions of, say, one and the same tree. However, in the case of the literary work that entity would obviously be the text as ordinarily conceived – the package of physical matter, signs, and meaning – only seen from the psychological perspective of the experiencing receiver, not from the analytic-bystander perspective that I have been adopting. As before, I maintain that the text as ordinarily conceived is an illusion: unlike a tree, a text lacks brute existence.

It is no doubt true that in our reading experiences we have the impression of encountering a genuinely existing object which is, at the same time, a physical object, linguistic expressions, and meaning. But our experience is not to be trusted. To do so would be to fall prey to what I call “the phenomenological fallacy”: it would be to believe that the world is such as we experience it. Compare the beholding of a rainbow. Rainbows do not have brute existence: what is actually there are sunlight and drops of water. (The existence of rainbows as subjective perceptions is of course not in question.) Likewise, texts, such as we experience them in reading, are illusions. What is actually there is white paper and configurations of printer’s ink. (But our experience of encountering a text-as-ordinarily-conceived is of course a genuine psychological fact.)

My discussion of Attridge’s theory of the literary work was something of an excursion from the theme of the poststructuralist theory of texts, for there is only marginally something specifically poststructuralist about his theory and its problems. I found my remarks well worth making, though, precisely because the wish to make the individual reader’s experience the basis of a theory of the text can be met with in several theorists who otherwise represent quite different approaches to texts.

Concluding remarks

A passage from Belsey conveys, in a condensed form, much of the spirit of the poststructuralist theory of textual meaning:

If language is not ours to possess, but always pre-exists us and comes from outside, and if poems issue from language, not from ideas which are language’s effect rather than its cause, there is no final answer to the question of what any particular example of language in action ultimately means…. But a specific instance of signifying practice can mean whatever the shared and public possibilities of those signifiers in that order will permit…. In practice, some of us will see some of the possibilities, some others, and the text itself keeps its secret about which is ‘right’. Indeed, it becomes unclear just what ‘right’ would mean (though it is still possible, if we don’t know the words, or we don’t pay sufficient attention to them, or we miss a citation or mistake the genre, to be wrong).

(Belsey 2002: 18 [first two parts of the quote] and 21)
To me, it seems clear that accounts like this one cannot work. Language as such is a pure abstraction and cannot cause anything at all, neither poems nor ideas. The conviction that a text can mean whatever its words in their given order can possibly mean is problematic in a more subtle way. Nobody denies that there are many things a given string of words can be used to mean. But Belsey’s point is that a text means all that it is possible to construe as the meaning of that string of words. She obviously views this not as a normative definition of textual meaning but as a fact about textual meaning following from the nature of language. I can see no good reason to hold such a view: I have explained why arguments from the supposed iterability of signs and the supposed pervasiveness of difference within language seem to me to be misconceived.

In this chapter I have attempted to disprove the idea that language and context can create textual meaning, but I have also explained why I do not subscribe to the poststructuralist theory of the text. That theory is based on two beliefs that I have done my best to refute: belief in the ordinary conception of a text and belief in the iterability of signs.

Where the standard linguistic theory of textual meaning was concerned, I suggested that it was evidently shaped to fit the special aims and perspectives of standard linguistics. Something analogous could be said about the standard literary-theoretical theory of textual meaning. Interpretation of literary texts plays an important role in literary studies, and the close and many-faceted interpretation of literature cannot really get by with the analysis of textual meaning as unitary and determinate, or even rule-governed, offered by standard linguistics or mainstream analytic aesthetics. That is no doubt one important reason why poststructuralist theories of text and meaning have enjoyed such success in literary studies.
The previous three chapters dealt mainly with textual meaning. Now the text as a whole will take centre stage again.

The idea that texts are separate, unitary objects is a key element in the ordinary conception of a text. It is also an idea which seems to be almost universally accepted. Indeed, the idea is taken for granted to such an extent that denying its truth appears absurd to many. At the same time, the idea that texts are separate, unitary objects is in direct conflict with my own view that in theoretically demanding contexts texts are most productively conceived as clusters of entities: physical exemplars, complexes of signs, textual meanings. In this chapter I will defend my own view against the idea that there genuinely exist separate, unitary objects which are texts.

The discussion of the nature of texts has only marginally concerned the question of whether or not texts actually exist. Their genuine existence has mostly been taken as a matter of course. The focus of debate has rather been what kind of object a text is, and in what form it exists. Is a text something physical, something mental, or something abstract? This kind of discussion has particularly concerned literary texts: what used to be called the ontological status of the literary work of art is a well-known theoretical problem. The discussion has lasted for more than a century (compare Livingston 2016) and is nowadays primarily carried on within analytic aesthetics. In that context, it forms part of a topic called the ontology of art.

Analytic aesthetics is about all the arts, so that views of what a text is often have to be extricated from statements about artworks overall, or from general statements about what is sometimes called “multiple” works of art: works potentially existing in the shape of many performances or many copies, like musical and literary works. Nevertheless, analytic-aesthetic analyses of the ontology of art typically have clear and thoroughly intended implications for literature.

It is a further complication that analytic-aesthetic analyses of what a text is almost always concern literary works specifically, not texts in general. Yet this is a complication I will simply ignore. There are important differences between literary and non-literary texts, but such differences cannot very well be found in their respective ontology. If literary texts are abstract objects, as most analytic aestheticians think, then texts in general will have to be abstract objects. If, as I maintain,
texts in general are best understood as cluster texts when theorized, literary texts, too, must be best understood as cluster texts when theorized. I will presuppose, as I have done throughout, that literary texts do not differ from non-literary ones in their very mode of existence.

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, the view that there are genuine, unitary objects that are texts is sometimes called “realism”, while views like mine, according to which there are not, are often referred to as “eliminativism”, because “eliminativists” are thought to deny that texts exist and to attempt to eliminate references to texts. Yet, as I emphasized there, my own theory does not eliminate the concept of a text but reanalyzes it. (As we will see, realists, too, in effect radically rethink the ordinary conception of a text.) In this chapter I will defend my cluster conception of the text against analytic-aesthetic realism by attempting to demonstrate the untenability of realism. I will also answer the realists’ main arguments against eliminativism.

The fundamental problem with realism about texts

If one holds that texts are genuinely existing entities, one faces the task of explaining what kind of entity it is that constitutes a text. In my view, this problem has never found a reasonable solution and is in fact insoluble.

The basic problem with realism is very simple. When speaking of texts, we are demonstrably speaking of entities of various kinds: of physical exemplars (“Dickinson 591’ can be found in very many university libraries”), of complexes of signs (“Dickinson 591’ begins with the word ‘I’”), and of meanings (“Dickinson 591’ is about a person dying”). I offered authentic evidence of that multiplicity in Chapter 1. No single object can function as a referent for such diverse statements unless it is, like the text as ordinarily conceived, an illogical amalgam of the physical and the non-physical, the singular and the plural. For practical reasons, concepts such as that of “Dickinson 591” as a unitary, genuinely existing entity are good to have in everyday contexts, yet conceived along the lines of that ordinary conception they are in reality contradictions in terms, just like so many other everyday concepts. (Remember the concepts on which Cruse commented – see Chapter 1 –, for example the concept of a book and the concept of Britain.) Attempts to point to some unitary, logically defensible object capable of fulfilling the role of the referent of our talk about “Dickinson 591” are inevitably doomed to failure.

Realists have suggested various candidates for the role of being the text. It is not possible for me to go through the proposals in this context, but neither should it be necessary, for the decisive problem just indicated affects each and every one of them. However, there is a dominant idea about the text in analytic aesthetics, and I will use that idea as an illustration. According to leading contemporary
analytic aestheticians, a text is an abstract object, namely, a type. More precisely, a text is a type of historically situated verbal structure. Formulated in my terminology, the idea is that a text is a complex of signs as produced by a sender in a specific context. "Dickinson 591" is the complex of signs that we associate with the poem, but not that complex of signs in abstracto, not that complex of signs taken as an iterable sign in the poststructuralist sense. The same complex of signs happening to be produced by someone at the English court around 1905 would be a different poem – for "Dickinson 591" is the complex of signs as produced by Dickinson in that actual originary context.

In analytic aesthetics, the complex of signs is in effect seen as either something that is unproblematically there as soon as a physical utterance is created or (for example in Wolterstorff 1975 and Levinson 2015) something consciously created by the sender. The problem of constructing or reconstructing a complex of signs from a physical utterance is seldom touched upon (but compare Wolterstorff 1975: 140–141). Also, there are no real counterparts to the distinctions I make between the complex of signs as perceived by the sender when engaged in communication (a mental entity), the complex of signs as perceived by an individual receiver when engaged in communication (another mental entity), and the complex of signs as established by a third party like an editor (a commentator’s complex of signs: an abstract entity).

What I have just described is, as I said, a fairly standard analysis. According to Stecker, texts are “[verbal] structures-in-use” (Stecker 2003: 88). David Davies, using the word “text” in the sense of what I would call a complex of signs, notes that a simple way of understanding what a (literary) text is, is to think of it as a “text-type used as an artistic vehicle in a particular generative context” (Davies 2007: 30).

And Levinson, for his part, has characterized a text as “a verbal-structure-as-indicated-by-a-specific-author-in-a-specific-historical-context” (Levinson 2015: 47). The exemplification could go on and on. But a text cannot be a verbal structure. Identifying a text like “Dickinson 591” with a complex of signs would leave out the meaning – there is no dying person in the complex of signs – and the physical aspect of the poem. It would only capture part of what we are thinking and talking about when referring to the poem.

It might seem natural to protest that the complex of signs is instantiated in the physical exemplars and associated with textual meaning, so that the idea supported

1. Note that also senders and receivers are commentators in my sense as soon as they are not sending or receiving the text but making meta-communicative statements about it.

2. David Davies’ own favoured analysis is more complex: he can be said to view the writer’s creative act as a whole as constituting the text (see Davies 2004 and Davies 2007: 30–31 and 190, 18). My general criticism of realism about texts also applies to such a standpoint.
by leading aestheticians would actually cover everything that a text is. It is true that
the other elements in the cluster can be defined using the complex of signs as a start-
ing-point. Yet one can easily begin at any point in the cluster and define the other
components using one’s chosen point of departure. If I wanted to, I could identify
“Dickinson 591” with the original manuscript and say that I cover everything that
the poem is, since Dickinson’s autograph represents a complex of signs which is as-
sociated with textual meaning, while the autograph also stands in an original-copy
relationship to the physical exemplars which are copies of (copies of …) the original.

The complex of signs is indeed related to the physical exemplars and the tex-
tual meaning. The relatedness of these various elements is precisely what is high-
lighted in my cluster conception of texts, for which a text is a cluster or network of
entities. To understand what a text is, we need to be able to account for all those
entities and their interrelations. Pointing to just one of the entities and calling it
the text is an arbitrary move and by no means clarifying.

Nor does the complex of signs occupy a privileged position within the cluster.
It is hardly the most important of the elements: what is in focus for both sender
and receivers is no doubt the textual meaning. Nor is the complex of signs the ele-
ment which is pivotal for the identity of a text. That must clearly be the physical
utterance, which is the text’s anchorage in brute reality and the point of depart-
ture for any attempt to define its complex of signs. In the case of “Dickinson 591”,
Dickinson’s original manuscript is undeniably the basic point of reference for any
discussion of the complex of signs associated with the poem. As we have seen, the
complex of signs has been defined differently by different editors and textual crit-
ics. Its makeup is a matter of decision. But the page of letter-paper with its traces
of ink remains the same.

For the reasons just stated, I do not think it a good idea to identify a text
with a historically situated complex of signs. The concept of a historically situated
complex of signs is one which I myself find important and do use. Yet in my view,
if one identifies a historically situated complex of signs with a text, one has not
understood the concept of a text, its point, and the problems that the concept car-
ries with it. Analogous things can be said when somebody wants to identify a text
with a physical exemplar or a number of physical exemplars, or with the textual
meaning. In my opinion, then, realism about texts is a position which cannot be
successfully defended. No ontologically acceptable unitary object can be success-
fully presented as being a text.

3. Such views, too, are represented today. Thus for Christy Mag Uidhir texts are individual con-
crete objects: he regards each physical exemplar as a separate text. (See Mag Uidhir 2013, esp.
182 and 196–197.) In Attridge’s theory (see Chapter 8), a literary work can be said to be the
meaning perceived by a competent reader.
The idea that a text is an abstract object

My refutation of realism about texts builds on the idea that a unitary object supposed to be a text must be able to function as the referent of what we demonstrably think and say about texts. (I cannot see what other defensible criteria there could be for being the text.) The only object I know of which fulfills those criteria is the text-as-ordinarily-conceived. However, the logical contradictions inherent in the text-as-ordinarily-conceived stand in the way of our theoretical understanding of verbal communication, so that we also need other ways of theorizing the corresponding realities.

Realists about texts approach the question of what a text is from a different angle and make different main assumptions. I would say that realists take for granted that there must be some unitary, credibly existing object that is the text. Finding that object is the problem. As usual, there are three basic domains in which to look: a text might be a physical, mental, or abstract entity. If “Dickinson 591” simply referred to some specific mental object, the text itself would be found in some individual person’s mind and only there, and that is naturally excluded. A common realist move is to also deny that the text can be physical, and so draw the conclusion that the text must be an abstract object. For example, David Davies argues that a literary work cannot be identified with any individual physical copy – any copy can be destroyed without the work being destroyed – nor with the physical copies collectively, since we do not, for example, think that works change with the disappearance of copies or the printing of new ones (Davies 2007: 18–19). This leads Davies to conclude that it would be more reasonable to view the work as an abstract object (compare Davies 2007: 19–20), and to suggest, as noted, that a literary work might be identified with a text-type used as an artistic vehicle in a particular generative context.

The characterization of a literary work as a type requires a few words of comment. We saw in Chapter 6 that a word like “rose” is sometimes thought of as a type having individual utterances or inscriptions of the word as its tokens.

4. Cluster texts can be said to change, in a certain respect, with the disappearance or coming into existence of copies. I cannot see this as creating any problem for the cluster conception. (By the way, I believe that texts-as-ordinarily-conceived can also be said to change in a certain respect depending on the appearance or disappearance of copies.) But it is true, of course, that texts conceived as historically situated verbal structures will remain unaffected by such change.

5. As I indicated there, I believe that it is rather the abstract occurrences of the word that should be seen as the tokens of the type. In actual fact, my skepticism goes further: I believe that the conception of types and tokens seriously misconstrues things and should be revised or abandoned. But to explain why would take me beyond my present scope.
Similarly, one can argue that a species like the dog is a type with individual dogs as its tokens, or that an artifact like the flag of Sweden is a type with individual Swedish flags as its tokens. Many analytic aestheticians have wished to identify a text with an abstract (possibly historically situated) complex of signs, the complex of signs understood as a type with individual copies of the text as its tokens (compare Livingston 2016, secs. 3.2–3.4).

It is worth noting that such an analysis of what a text is radically differs from the ordinary conception of a text which I described in Chapter 1. In ordinary language, texts like Belinda’s “Good morning”, or “Dickinson 591”, or Soble’s article about Namie are spoken of as if they were physical entities also containing non-physical components such as words and meanings. The role of being the text can be played by any of the text’s physical exemplars, so that the text can in principle be found in very many places at once (as is of course very often the case with texts in writing). By no means is a text an abstract type according to ordinary language, a type of which the physical exemplars are merely tokens. For me, the departure from ordinary language is not in itself something that speaks against the idea that texts are types of complexes of signs: my own cluster conception of texts also breaks away from ordinary language. But it is interesting to note that the standard identification of texts with types of complexes of signs is profoundly revisionary too. There is no indication that its proponents are aware of that fact.

David Davies arrived at the conclusion that literary works are abstract entities by excluding ontological alternatives until only one possibility seemed to be left. In my view, that kind of reasoning does not work in the case of texts. Texts as ordinarily conceived do not fit into any traditional ontological category. Any positive statement about which category texts belong to is bound to be contestible, because texts as ordinarily conceived are contradictory entities belonging to several ontological categories at once, or to none. Thus the idea that a text is an abstract object brings its own ontological oddities in its train. According to standard ontology, abstract objects are not found in time and space. They cannot, therefore, possess any physical properties, and they are timeless: there is no point in time at which they did not exist. Thus if “Dickinson 591” is a standard abstract object the poem cannot be read, for one cannot read something which lacks material existence. Also, if “Dickinson 591” is a standard abstract object the poem can never have been created, but will have always existed. I will assess the importance of those objections in the next two sections.
Levinson on the creation of texts

The objection that texts cannot be created if they are abstract objects is not necessarily damaging for those who hold that texts are abstract objects. The objection no doubt proves that texts cannot be standard abstract objects, but it is well known that abstract objects can be of different kinds (compare Livingston 2016, sec. 3.1, and Walters 2013, and the sources cited there). According to my own theory of texts, commentators’ textual meanings and commentators’ complexes of signs become cryptomental abstractions as soon as their originators make them public. Vendler’s interpretation of “Dickinson 591” and Franklin’s version of the poem’s complex of signs are two such entities.

As we have seen, analytic aestheticians tend to think of texts as complexes of signs tied to a context of production. Levinson has supplied an analysis of that kind which also suggests an explanation of how a text, ex hypothesi an abstract object, can in fact be created. Levinson concentrates on music but also applies his theory to literature.

Levinson notes that a “Beethoven sonata would not say the same things, musically speaking, if we thought it to be a work by Brahms, a Jane Austen novel would not communicate the same message if we considered it to be a heavily ironic Woody Allen production” (Levinson 2015: 46), and he then goes on to emphasize the contextual rootedness of musical and literary works.

This is roughly why musical and literary works cannot be pure or eternal structures, but must rather be considered as impure, historically conditioned, temporally anchored, structures. I suggested [in an earlier version of the theory] that such works are really what I call “indicated structures”, which are partly abstract sorts of objects, the result of the interaction between a person and an entirely abstract structure, such as a sequence or series of words or notes. The interaction in question is precisely an act of indicating, and it is this action that creates the link between the abstract structure and the concrete individual human that lies at the heart of such an artwork. A paradigmatic musical work, for instance, Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, is therefore a tonal-structure-as-indicated-by-a-specific-composer-in-a-specific-historical-context; similarly, a paradigmatic literary work, such as Flaubert’s Madame Bovary, is a verbal-structure-as-indicated-by-a-specific-author-in-a-specific-historical-context. (Levinson 2015: 46–47)

Levinson does not picture the relevant verbal structure as something that exists ready-made in the realm of abstract objects. Rather, he thinks of the individual
words as the relevant abstract objects: the author creates a structure of words by indicating which words in which order are to go into the verbal structure (compare Levinson 2015: 49–50).

It is worth pointing out that Levinson’s analysis is somewhat more problematic for literary works than for musical ones. It may perhaps sound plausible to think of tones as existing everlastingly, but words are a different matter. The words associated with “Dickinson 591” cannot very well be timeless: the English language is considered to have developed successively from the dialects of invading Jutes, Anglons, and Saxons from the fifth century onwards. Yet Levinson’s analysis, taken literally, would force us to think of all English words – indeed, of all words in all languages – as eternal phenomena.

For Levinson, texts are obviously not abstract objects tout court, not pure or eternal structures, but objects which are part abstract, part concrete: impure, historically conditioned, temporally anchored structures. That provides a kind of explanation of how literary works can actually be created: they are not abstract objects after all, but “half-abstract and half-concrete entities” (Levinson 2015: 51). A new object is brought into existence when an author indicates a structure, and that object is neither fully abstract nor fully concrete.

But what sort of thing is a half-abstract and half-concrete entity? Standard ontology does not reckon with such things. What does their intermediate status amount to? Is “Dickinson 591” in part eternal, like an abstract object, and in part to be found in time and space (where?) Or is the poem – this is probably Levinson’s idea – to be understood as a mixture of the concrete and the abstract, and if so, how can such a mixture be possible? Levinson offers no further explanations. He suggests that detailed questions about the ontology of indicated structures are beside the point, but such questions cannot very well be irrelevant. It should be important to give a credible explanation of the nature of half-abstract and half-concrete entities, thus demonstrating their ontological viability, for if such entities are not ontologically viable, Levinson’s theory of what a text is will be untenable.

In my view, indicated structures are in fact ontologically unproblematic. When I am writing this, the house code of the housing cooperative in which I live is “3791”. It was created by the cooperative’s chairperson, who can be said to have indicated four numbers – four standard abstract objects, if one wishes – in a specific sequence, thus creating an entity of the kind that Levinson calls an indicated structure. As long as the code remained in the chairperson’s head, it was a mental

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7. To be more exact: Levinson touches on the ontological problem with indicated structures but then shifts – as if he were still discussing the same issue – to the question of whether or not indicated structures should be called types, in effect dismissing the latter question as a purely terminological one (Levinson 2015: 52–53).
fact. When agreed with the board and then communicated to all members of the cooperative, it became a kind of abstract entity. It became a cryptomental abstraction: a non-standard created abstract object existing as a kind of generalization about code-ideas in individual persons’ minds. What I find irremediably problematic in Levinson’s proposal of what a text is, is rather the idea that texts can be identified with verbal structures. That is a serious misconception running through very much of the analytic theory of the ontology of texts.

Wolterstorff on the physical attributes of abstract objects

Texts are not verbal structures, and they are not abstract objects either. If a text were an abstract object, then it could not be read. To read is to decipher physical written marks. If something has no material existence, then it cannot be read, and we certainly expect it to be possible to read things like “Dickinson 591”.

Analytic aestheticians are familiar with objections of this general kind against their favoured analyses of the ontology of musical and literary works, and they believe that the objections can be met. Nicholas Wolterstorff tackled the problem in 1975 in an article on the ontology of art. I will explain his way of addressing the problem but not go through his reasoning in detail or use his own examples.

For Wolterstorff, musical and literary works are types (a kind of type he calls “norm-kinds”). However, musical and literary works seem to have physical properties. Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony* is noisy and triumphant at its close. “Dickinson 591” can be read. This is in fact a more general problem in connection with types: according to the theory of types they are abstract objects, but they appear to possess physical properties. The dog is a type, but it has four legs. The flag of Sweden is a type, but it features a blue field with a yellow Scandinavian cross. How can an abstract object, an object without material existence, be blue and yellow?

Wolterstorff’s answer is that it cannot. The type is not blue and yellow. What we really mean when we say such things as that the flag of Sweden features a blue field with a yellow Scandinavian cross is that nothing can be an adequate token of that type, an adequate Swedish flag, without featuring a blue field with a yellow Scandinavian cross. That kind of explanation can be used about the reading of “Dickinson 591” as well. “Dickinson 591” cannot be read, but nothing can be an adequate token of that type, an adequate physical exemplar of “Dickinson 591”, without having the capacity to be read. Wolterstorff’s explanation has been taken up at least by Stephen Davies (Davies 2003: 168 and 169–170).

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8. Mag Uidhir has made this objection to the idea that texts are abstract objects and emphasized its importance (see esp. 2013: 189–190). See also Pettersson 2015.
Wolterstorff’s analysis may seem to offer a way around the problem that if texts are supposed to be abstract objects then texts cannot be read. However, in reality the difficulty remains. On Wolterstorff’s analysis, it is still the case that one cannot read “Dickinson 591”. One will be able to read copies of the text, but not the text itself. To me, this shows that Wolterstorff’s analysis is profoundly revisionary. We certainly expect texts, whether literary or non-literary, to be things we can read. Not only read in a sense, but quite literally read.

The revisionary nature of Wolterstorff’s analysis does not in itself speak against it. My own cluster analysis of what a text is is profoundly revisionary too, and I am convinced that we do need a revisionary analysis, a working alternative to the illogical ordinary conception of the text. But I believe that mainstream analytic aestheticians are actually unaware of the fact that the idea of a text as an abstract object and the idea of a text as a verbal structure both radically depart from the everyday concept of a text.

The deeper problem with Wolterstorff’s analysis, then, is not its revisionary nature. The deeper problem with the idea that a text is an abstract object is its narrowness. A text is many things at once: physical exemplars, complexes of signs, textual meanings. Some of those things, but only some, are abstract entities: commentators’ complexes of signs and commentators’ meanings. Some things are not. The physical exemplars are physical. The sender’s and receivers’ perceptions of the complex of signs are mental entities, and so are the sender’s and receivers’ textual meanings. Just like the idea that texts are verbal structures, the idea that texts are abstract objects only captures part of what texts are.

On the realists’ deeper motives for realism about texts

I have said enough about my own arguments against realism about texts. It is time to look at the arguments of the other side – at the realists’ arguments for realism and for the supposed untenability of so-called eliminativism.

Direct arguments against eliminativism are relatively few in analytic aesthetics, probably because most theorists consider the inadequacy of eliminativism too obvious to belabour. I will begin my review of realist thinking by reflecting

9. Wolterstorff does not see things that way. He certainly knows that we sometimes speak as if texts had physical properties, but he suggests that we cannot in such cases really mean what we are saying (“one cannot mean this”; Wolterstorff 1975: 125). He no doubt thinks that we cannot mean what we are saying because what we are saying is strictly speaking illogical. But of course the patterns of thought held in readiness for us by ordinary language, and unreflectively employed by us, are illogical on many points. The analyses by Reddy and Cruse, reviewed in Chapter 1 above, should make that evident.
on why that is so, why realism has always dominated in a seemingly self-evident way in the ontology of art. The fundamental reason, of course, is that everyday language, which also forms the basis of the discourse of the sciences and the humanities, treats texts as unitary, unproblematically existing entities. But certain widespread ontological and methodological suppositions also seem to bolster realist convictions.

Thus it is not common in analytic aesthetics to distinguish between different kinds of existence. That makes it easy to understand how eliminativism can be made to sound absurd, for who can seriously doubt that “Dickinson 591” exists? The distinction between brute existence and mentally constructed existence makes it possible to see eliminativism in a new light. On my analysis, of course, the poem as ordinarily conceived exists as a mental construct: there exists an idea of Dickinson’s poem, an idea formed along ordinary-conception lines. It is an altogether different question whether or not the poem as ordinarily conceived enjoys brute existence; I maintain that it does not.

Another, closely related, ontological assumption works in the same direction. Many suppose that if there are true statements about an object, that object must exist. Nick Effingham writes, in a general introduction to ontology: “Generally people sign up to a principle, associated with the logician Alfred Tarski, that if a singular proposition is true, then the things it refers to must exist. And there’s a lot to be said for such a principle.” (Effingham 2013: 172, and compare Hale 1987: 11 and Wetzel 2009: xiii).

There certainly seem to be true statements about “Dickinson 591” – for example, the poem was written by Dickinson and composed in the early 1860s – so that on the principle just quoted the poem would apparently have to exist (simply “exist”). But the principle invoked by Effingham obviously relies on conceptual objectivism. It can only hold true if reality in itself, brute reality, is divided into objects and aspects, so that the nouns and adjectives of human language can correspond to pre-existing divisions in the very structure of reality and true statements be true in the absolute sense of being correct statements about the elements into which brute reality is divided. The possibility of such a situation is what conceptual relativism denies. In my view, the statement that “Dickinson 591” was written in the early 1860s does reflect a truth about the world, but a truth by necessity formulated in the terms of a specific conceptual scheme (a scheme which, with regard to texts, has practical advantages but also theoretical disadvantages).

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10. I noted Cameron’s distinction between English and Ontologese in Chapter 1, but Cameron is relatively exceptional. Distinctions between fundamental and non-fundamental existence play only a marginal role in analytic-aesthetic thought.
It is also the case that analytic aesthetics relies, to a large extent, on analysis of the key concepts of the aesthetic disciplines. Analytic aestheticians do not really like to question the general validity of those concepts, the soundness of the basic ways of conceptualizing the arts that are traditionally used within the aesthetic disciplines. They do not like to perform what is called “revisionary” analyses. For my part, I believe that in the aesthetic disciplines, just as in the sciences, new conceptual approaches, “paradigm shifts”, will in all probability prove necessary as new, more penetrating questions about the field of research become pressing.\(^1\)

But in analytic aesthetics there is a strong bias towards taking the essentials of the existing conceptual framework of the aesthetic disciplines for granted.

David Davies has even elevated such acceptance of the basic structures of the existing mode of thinking into a kind of methodological principle, calling it a “pragmatic constraint” on analytic-aesthetic analyses. “Artworks”, he writes, “must be entities that can bear the sorts of properties rightly ascribed to what are termed ‘works’ in our reflective critical and appreciative practice; that are individuated in the way such ‘works’ are or would be individuated, and that have the modal properties that are necessarily ascribed to ‘works’, in that practice.” (Davies 2004: 18).

In other words: the correct characterization of works of art in our critical practice should be taken as providing the clues needed for an analysis of what works of art are. The formulation clearly presupposes that works of art, as ordinarily conceived, do exist (simply “exist”), and that the analyst’s task consists in establishing how artworks are, implicitly, being conceived of in critical practice. Acceptance of Davies’ pragmatic constraint would amount to a ban on thinking outside the box about what literary texts are.\(^1\)

While that is true, it is also true that Davies hedges his constraint with reservations. He does note that “features of our actual critical practice may be mistaken” (Davies 2004: 19). Yet it is as if that possibility is not quite taken seriously. He writes, interestingly: “Put bluntly, there is no alternative but to start from critical reflection on our actual artistic practice because the very notions of ‘art’ and

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\(^1\) Paul Thagard has offered an instructive discussion of a number of paradigm shifts in the sciences and their backgrounds (Thagard 1992). In my view, a revision of basic conceptual approaches in the aesthetic disciplines is long overdue, and the shortcomings of the ordinary concept of a text represent just one of the indications of that.

\(^1\) I can see more problems with Davies’ formulation of his pragmatic constraint. The talk of properties “rightly” ascribed to works seems to me to be question-begging, and the talk of “our” critical and appreciative practice misleading. In reality, analytic aestheticians pay little attention to actual contemporary critical practice, partly, no doubt, because that practice is heavily influenced by poststructuralism, with which analytic aestheticians tend to disagree profoundly. The phrase “our reflective critical and appreciative practice” will mean, in substance, “mainstream analytic-aesthetic thinking about these matters”.

The idea that texts are unitary objects

Davies’ talk of aesthetic discourse as a practice tends to obscure the fact that assumptions about reality are involved, not just conventions. The exercise of politeness within a given community can be viewed as a practice, but will have nothing to do with truth or falsity: the rules of politeness just are what the community takes them to be. Not so with the nature of works of art. The ubiquity and the common acceptance of a special conception of what a literary text is does not make that conception true or tenable; it only marks the conception as the commonly accepted one.

I would say that Davies’ pragmatic constraint, while certainly not uncontested (compare Livingston 2016, sec. 3.4.2), is representative of a widespread unwillingness among analytic aestheticians to consider radical revisions of structurally important traditional concepts. The two ontological conceptions mentioned initially, and the attitudes underlying the pragmatic constraint, form an intellectual background unfavourable to eliminativism and no doubt help to explain why realism about texts is so widely accepted in analytic aesthetics.

Wetzel’s principal arguments against eliminativism

Concrete and specific arguments against eliminativism about texts have also been put forward. Before concluding this chapter, I will devote two sections to the discussion of such arguments.

The question of whether realism or eliminativism about texts is right is often thought to be part of the debate between realists and nominalists about abstract objects. Those who seem to regard texts, or artworks, as theoretically eliminable are suspected of being “nominalists”: of believing that abstract objects do not exist. It is worth emphasizing, therefore, that I do not take any official stand on this latter issue. The ontology of numbers and other standard abstract entities is not really relevant to my subject. I do reckon with non-standard abstract entities like commentators’ complexes of signs and commentators’ textual meanings, so that I have no problem with introducing abstract entities; on the other hand, I cannot be said to endorse the belief that things like the number eight possess brute existence.

The conflation of the two issues is by no means surprising. The most classical representative of eliminativism is Rudner, on whose ideas I commented in Chapter 1, and Rudner’s eliminativism was no doubt inspired by the debate over
nominalism about abstract objects in the form that was current at the time. Rudner attempted to show, certainly unsuccessfully, that the idea of a text as an abstract object can be eliminated in favour of the idea of a text as a number of physical exemplars. It is important for me to underline that my own form of eliminativism is quite different from Rudner’s, not only in its technical solutions but also in its underlying frame of interests and its background assumptions.

Realists almost invariably regard texts as unitary abstract objects, and the realists’ main argument against eliminativism is that texts conceived as unitary, abstract objects are in fact uneliminable. The best general statement of a realist standpoint about texts that I know of can be found in Wetzel’s book *Types and Tokens* (2009). That work is a general defence of the belief in types as abstract objects, but Wetzel obviously regards what I call texts as types. In what follows, I will apply her arguments specifically to texts.

Wetzel maintains that there are three things eliminativists have to explain, but cannot explain. Why is talk about texts as types so ubiquitous if texts as types are something we can do without? What is wrong with the concept of a text as a type, since we are to get rid of it? And how it is at all possible to eliminate the talk of texts as types? (Compare Wetzel 2009: 28.) In effect, I believe I have already answered these three questions. Texts as ordinarily conceived are indeed the kind of thing that Wetzel and many others call types. I have demonstrated how the concept of such texts is practical to employ in everyday contexts, which explains its popularity, but have also pointed to the inner contradictions in the concept which make it unfit for use in serious theorizing. In Chapter 1 I also gave examples of how statements formulated in the terms of my cluster conception of texts can express what is usually expressed by means of statements formulated in the terms of the ordinary conception. More such examples will be offered in the next section.

Wetzel would not be satisfied by my examples. She requires that the eliminativist produce some kind of scheme for translating statements about texts as ordinarily conceived into statements not presupposing that texts are individual objects. Her argument is that, without such a formula, one can never be certain that all references to texts as individual, unitary objects can be eliminated (compare Wetzel 2009: 22, 54, 83–84). In my own examples, the relationship between the cluster-conception statements and the more or less corresponding ordinary-conception statements was highly variable, and I can certainly not point to a scheme that would make possible mechanical translation between the two systems. If Wetzel’s requirement were sound, my examples would consequently be invalid. But Wetzel’s requirement is not sound. It is an arbitrary stipulation. Why

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13. For instance, Wetzel speaks of such things as utterances and multiple artworks as being types (see, e.g., Wetzel 2009: 8 and 2).
should a system of representation be required to have the capacity to offer me-
chanical ways of translating a given kind of expression existing in some other sys-
tem of representation?

To make the situation more concrete, let us think of Cruse’s analysis of the con-
cept of a book, reviewed in Chapter 1. Cruse points out that the ordinary concept
of a book is a contradiction in terms: a book as ordinarily conceived is both physi-
cal and non-physical. Cruse says that the concept of a book has two facets: that of
a physical book volume, [TOME], and that of a book’s immaterial content, [TEXT].

Obviously, the ordinary concept of a book can be eliminated in favour of the
two concepts of a tome and a text (a text in Cruse’s sense, not in mine). However,
Wetzel’s requirement would make this impossible, for statements in book lan-
guage would necessitate varying forms of translation into tome-and-text language.
Some book-language formulations would be straightforwardly translated as re-
ferring to tomes (“I can’t put that book into my pocket, it’s just too big”). Some
would be straightforwardly translated as referring to texts (“That may be the most
elegantly written book ever”). Some book-language formulations would be am-
biguous (“She really loves books”). Some would require more complex translations
into tome-and-text language because they would refer unequivocally to a book
conceived as something at once physical and immaterial, an entity of a kind that
would not exist in the more logical tome-and-text language (“That book belongs in
the dustbin; it’s just creationist nonsense”). The requirement of a formula, a fixed
structural relationship, connecting book-language formulations and tome-and-
text-language formulations would only serve the purpose of making references
to books-as-ordinarily-conceived impossible to replace. Exactly the same can be
said about the ordinary conception of a text and its cluster-conception alternative.

There is no doubt a fair amount of conceptual objectivism behind Wetzel’s
requirement. Wetzel does not seem to view her talk of types as individual abstract
objects as involving a specific system of representation, one of many possible such
systems, but as simply true. She does not seem to think that genuinely different
systems of representation, descriptions with a significantly different structural
buildup, are at all workable. Apparently, she holds that any suggested alternative
system of representation must somehow reproduce the structure of her own fa-
voured system, so that the formulations of the alternative system, though not iden-
tical, must correspond to those of her own system in a regulated manner. But my
cluster-conception language is an independent system of representation, and its
formulations are not to be understood as paraphrases of the ordinary-conception
formulations – no more than formulations in French are paraphrases of formula-
tions in English, so that the viability of French as a language should be judged by
how well and how systematically French can reproduce the structure of English
sentences. What should count here are not the linguistic forms, but the capacity to
express facts about the world. If there were truths – or, to speak more guardedly: insights – expressible in ordinary-conception language but not in cluster-conception language, that would immediately disqualify the cluster conception of texts. But there are no such truths or insights.

**Allegedly non-eliminable references to texts as unitary objects**

Realists are of a different opinion: they are convinced that references to texts as unitary objects are often unavoidable. Wetzel, who considers attempts to eliminate types as nominalist, feels certain that at least quantifications over types must be beyond the nominalists’ reach. She considers biological species to be types and she quotes, as a hard nut for the nominalist to crack, a statement by the biologist Ernst Mayr in a book published in 1970: “There are believed to be about 28,500 subspecies of birds in a total of 8,600 species, an average of 3.3 subspecies per species.” (Wetzel 2009: 54) Wetzel believes that Mayr’s statement cannot very well be made without recourse to the language of types.

I will not go into the concept of a species, but analogous arguments can easily be constructed with reference to texts-as-ordinarily-conceived. For example, the University of Toronto Press writes on its homepage in 2016: “UTP has published over 6,500 books, with well over 3,500 of these still in print. The Scholarly Publishing division produces approximately 175 titles per year, and the Higher Education division publishes around 25 titles per year.” (University of Toronto Press 2016) Can the substance of those statements be expressed in cluster-conception language?

Certainly. It is important to remember that the cluster concept is a cluster concept of the text. The conception of a text, a grouping together of certain physical exemplars, complexes of signs, and meanings, is there, just as it is in the ordinary conception, only differently structured. One could express the facts about the University of Toronto Press in cluster-conception language by saying that the UTP has published physical books which are the copies of (copies of …) 6,500 different physical manuscripts, that books which are the copies of (copies of …) 3,500 different physical manuscripts are still possible to acquire – and so forth. Facts like these raise no problems for the cluster conception. However, the practical handiness of the ordinary conception is once again evident.

Other alleged examples of the ineliminability of references to texts as unitary objects do not fare any better. Among the topics discussed in Stephen Davies’ overview article “Ontology of Art” (2003) are musical and literary works in their capacity as multiple works of art. Criticizing, specifically, Rudner’s eliminativism, Davies emphasizes that “works of art have properties other than those of all, or
even most, of their correct instances’. “For example”, he writes, obviously referring to musical examples, “the piece can be created in France, performed simultaneously in Germany and Greece, and be the last of its artist’s juvenilia, with none of these things being true of all or most of its well-formed performances” (Davies 2003: 169). Analogous literary examples are not difficult to construe. “Dickinson 591” was created in USA, has been read by many people in many different countries, and is an example of Dickinson’s mature poetic art. Are these references to “Dickinson 591” ineliminable?

The relevant facts may or may not be difficult to express in Rudner’s highly inadequate alternative language, but they can certainly be expressed in cluster-conception language. Dickinson produced the relevant physical utterance in the United States, copies of (copies of …) that original have been read by many people in many different countries, and the reading of such a physical exemplar has the capacity to give rise to a valuable literary experience, more so than the reading of physical exemplars of Dickinson’s much earlier physical utterances meant to function as poems.

Davies continues: “Moreover, a conception of the work has a role in determining what is to count as a well-formed instance, especially where the work is presented and transmitted via an exemplar [in Davies’s terminology, an exemplar is, for instance, an authoritative manuscript or performance]. Without a notion of the work as distinct from its exemplar, we could not judge if renditions based on, but differing in some details from, its exemplar were well-formed instances of the piece.” (Davies 2003: 169) It is true that Rudner’s sketchy alternative language would not be able to capture that fact. However, Davies’s point could easily be made in cluster-conception language, for all that is needed if one wants to speak of correct or incorrect physical exemplars (in my sense of “exemplar”) is the conception of a commentator’s complex of signs which is taken to be authoritative. Correct physical exemplars will then be exemplars representing the supposedly authoritative complex of signs. Nothing here is problematic for the cluster conception.

Lee Walters’s “Repeatable Artworks as Created Types” (2013) is a defence of the idea that such types as artworks can in fact be created despite their being abstract. Walters also presents an argument which, if it were tenable, would show that there are references to unitary abstract texts which cannot be eliminated.

Conan Doyle wrote *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. How are we supposed to paraphrase this into talk eliminating abstracta? Let us suppose that Conan Doyle wrote a single manuscript from which all subsequent copies of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* were generated. Let us call it “MANUSCRIPT”. The following concrete paraphrase is clearly not acceptable: Conan Doyle wrote MANUSCRIPT. This is no good because Conan Doyle could have written *The Hound of the Baskervilles* without writing MANUSCRIPT, that is, MANUSCRIPT need not have been the source of
all the copies of that work, for Conan Doyle could have written a different manuscript in a different medium and still have written *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Nor will a concrete paraphrase in terms of the production of some manuscript indiscernible from *MANUSCRIPT* suffice, since indiscernibility is neither necessary nor sufficient for the identity of novels. So here we see that the obvious ways of paraphrasing away creationist talk about types fails, and it seems that no account will do which does not mention *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, which is, by hypothesis, an abstract object. (Walters 2013: 471)

The basic problem with this argument is that Walters conflates sentences with utterances. He seems to believe that the sentence “Conan Doyle wrote *The Hound of the Baskervilles*” expresses an obviously true statement which cannot be formulated without referring to the text itself, supposedly a unitary abstract object. But sentences do not express statements. Sentences in themselves are just abstract linguistic forms supplied with abstract linguistic meaning. It is true that no sentence can be synonymous with “Conan Doyle wrote *The Hound of the Baskervilles*” unless it contains the name “*The Hound of the Baskervilles*” or some equivalent expression. But that is just a semantic fact, a fact about the English language, and has no bearing on the existence or non-existence of texts as ordinarily conceived.

The sentence “Conan Doyle wrote *The Hound of the Baskervilles*” can naturally be used in real utterances and used to express statements. My claim is that I can express in cluster-conception language all relevant truths or insights normally formulated in ordinary-conception language. So what are those truths or insights supposed to be, in this case? What statement or statements are supposed to be made by means of the sentence “Conan Doyle wrote *The Hound of the Baskervilles*”?

If one wishes to state that Conan Doyle produced the actual original manuscript behind *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (the handwritten manuscript broken up into individual leaves in 1902 and now mainly lost), that fact is easily expressible in cluster-conception language. If one wishes to state that Conan Doyle could equally well have produced some other, equivalent manuscript, that is just as unproblematic from the cluster-conception perspective: I would say that Conan Doyle could have produced some other physical inscription representing the same complex of signs as that represented by the actual original manuscript.

For any truth Walters would mention, I would have to provide a cluster-conception manner of expressing that truth. I feel confident that I could do that, but Walters has not come up with any such truths for me to work on. Of course, if Walters wanted to claim as a truth that Conan Doyle wrote the unitary abstract object that is *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, I could not translate that statement into cluster-conception terms. But then Walters would be presupposing the existence of texts as unitary abstract objects. He would not be presenting an argument for the existence of such objects.
More arguments for the supposed ineliminability of references to texts as unitary objects could be mentioned. However, I do not know of any such arguments more deserving to be taken up for discussion than those above.
CONCLUSION

An informal summary

The simple model of verbal communication with which we are all familiar contains a sender, a text, and a receiver (compare Figure 1 in Chapter 1). To question the unity of the text, as I do in this book, is also to question some of the accepted ways of thinking about verbal communication.

Most people probably understand the simple model of communication as an unsophisticated but indisputably true description of how things actually are. The most difficult task for a critic of the model may be to convince people that it represents a special way of conceptualizing communicational realities and is not just a reflection of the structure of communicational reality itself. What happens in verbal communication can be productively understood and modeled in many different manners. At least, that is how things stand if one believes in conceptual relativity. If, on the contrary, one considers that language can reflect reality in reality’s own terms, reality such as it is in itself, one will no doubt have little sympathy for my ideas. One will look, instead, for an account which is true in an unqualified sense, an account which simply mirrors communicational reality itself. I do not understand how such an account could be at all possible, but I know that this is a point at which some people, conversely, find it difficult to comprehend the conceptual relativist. Maybe my recurrent analogy with maps can be of help. Maps are representations of realities, and they can be correct or incorrect; still, it should be easy to see that they are all conventional. According to conceptual relativism, the same holds for all our representations of reality. Reality does not dictate to us how it should be mapped.

Maps of an area can focus on different aspects, use different symbols, and go into greater or lesser detail. Conceptualization of verbal communication can differ in analogous ways. I want to emphasize once more that I have not downright rejected the traditional model of communication and the idea of the text as a unitary object. I can see its practical usefulness, and I have pointed to that motivation for the idea again and again. But I have described the model as something like a thumbnail sketch on which one should not rely when clarity and precision are needed. My theory of texts, then, has two components. It is both a theory of texts as ordinarily conceived and a theory of texts as being clusters of entities. The two varieties of the theory cover the same underlying realities, each in its own unique manner.
Both varieties of the theory are to some extent original. It is not well understood that texts as ordinarily conceived are physical entities which contain words and meaning and can appear in many places at once. Yet that is clearly what they are, if one looks at how texts are idiomatically spoken and written about, as I attempted to demonstrate in Chapter 1 with the aid of authentic examples of discourse about texts. However, theorists in general pay little attention to how texts are actually referred to. They seem to think that they already have a good enough general idea about what texts are in their capacity as competent users of language, and they apparently take for granted that texts are unitary objects (which they certainly are, according to the ordinary conception) and that texts must have one or another logically and ontologically acceptable character (which, when conceived in accordance with the ordinary conception, they do not). As I pointed out in Chapter 9, analytic aestheticians, the theorists most interested in the actual ontological nature of texts, tend to believe that texts must be a special kind of abstract objects: historically situated verbal structures. However, understood as a theory of how texts are ordinarily conceived, that analysis fails in fundamental ways. Texts as ordinarily conceived are not abstract objects, for texts as ordinarily conceived can be read and must consequently have material existence. Texts as ordinarily conceived are no doubt verbal structures, but they are also physical things, and they are also meanings. One thing I claim for my theory of the text is that it provides a better understanding than before of the ordinary conception of what a text is. My theory is broadly consistent with analyses such as Reddy’s (see Chapter 1), but it is certainly more developed and also departs from Reddy’s analysis in important respects.

The ordinary conception of the text plays a dual role in my overall theory. I describe it as a practically useful but theoretically suspicious conceptualization, but I also let it define the domain which it is relevant for a theory of texts to map. Central to the idea of a text is the idea of an utterance. One could say that it is the utterance that figures in the role of the text in the simple communication model, and I think the idea of an utterance is as difficult to avoid in an analysis of verbal communication as the ideas of a sender and a receiver. However, the ordinary conception of an utterance is the conception of something both physical and non-physical. In the simple communication model, the text or utterance is physical, since it exists as a public, physical entity outside sender and receiver. Yet the utterance is also non-physical, since it contains or carries a complex of signs and a meaning. An extra complication is that the utterance can also be copied, so that new avatars of the utterance can come into existence and be found in many different places and at many different times. The upshot is a complex, practical but illogical, idea of the utterance: the ordinary conception of a text. Despite its illogical character that conception brings together elements that we need to be able to view
Conclusion: An informal summary

as forming a unity of some kind: the group of physical avatars of the utterance, and
the complex of signs associated with the utterance, and the meaning of the utter-
ance. Those phenomena are the ones for which a theory of the text has to account.

The ordinary conception holds together the avatars, the signs, and the mean-
ing by representing them as forming, together, a unitary object, and I resist the
use of that conceptualization in theoretical contexts because of its contradictory
character. The simple alternative that I suggest is to let the ordinary conception
dissolve into more elementary constituents – physical exemplars, a complex of
signs, textual meaning – and to view those constituents as forming, together, the
text. That cluster conception of the text lets us say everything we need to say about
texts without bringing in the practical but intellectually distorting idea of a text
as a unitary object: the logical and ontological impossibilities associated with the
ordinary conception of the text just disappear. As I tried to illustrate in Chapter 9,
analytic aestheticians are on the whole convinced that we cannot say everything
we need to say about texts without having recourse to the idea of the text as a
unitary object. I did my best to make it believable that we can. A second thing I
claim for my theory is that it demonstrates how one can, when necessary, replace
the ordinary conception of the text with a more logical way of modelling the same
realities. On that point I am indebted to Rudner’s idea that there are better alterna-
tives to our customary talk of texts, although my theory departs from his in several
significant ways. And my indebtedness to Searle’s distinction between two kinds
of existence, brute and institutional, can hardly be exaggerated.

As part of my theory of the text I have offered analyses of the concepts of a
physical utterance, a physical exemplar, a complex of signs, and a textual meaning
(Chapters 2–5). I have also attempted to explain the relationships between physi-
cal utterances, physical exemplars, complexes of signs, and textual meanings. I
have produced few formal definitions and have always underlined the possibility
of delimiting these phenomena in different ways depending on the purposes at
hand. Special research objectives may call for exact definitions, but for the concep-
tual relativist exact definitions will by necessity create dividing lines, not reproduce
independently existing ones.

The meaning of a text occupies a special position in my theory. Meaning is
naturally something absolutely vital in connection with texts. But the question of
textual meaning also has important repercussions for the general understanding
of verbal communication.

My theory of textual meaning takes as its starting-point that senders mean
something by the utterances they make and that their receivers perceive a mean-
ing in connection with those utterances. A sender’s meaning intentions and a re-
ceiver’s perception of meaning are mental entities, and what I call sender’s textual
meaning and receiver’s textual meaning are mental phenomena. Following Harris
(see Chapter 3), whose insight has had a profound impact on my understanding of this matter, I contend that there is no independent truth about what a text means. There can be little doubt that receivers normally manage to retrieve senders’ meanings to a large extent, so that there is normally, for a given utterance, quite considerable overlap between the sender’s meaning and the receivers’ meanings; such overlapping meaning is what I call consensus meaning. But where consensus fails there is no objective truth about what the textual meaning is. As Harris puts it, there is no higher court of appeal.

This point may seem hard to accept. We are used to believing that there is some truth about what a relatively normal text means, and professional linguists usually seem confident that they are able to describe the so-called utterance meaning of texts. But how could truth about the meaning of a text arise? How could a true non-mental meaning of an utterance come into being, a meaning independent of what the sender meant or the receiver understood? The sender cannot very well, as is sometimes said, imbue the physical utterance with meaning. Nor – as is more often assumed – can linguistic conventions ascribe a true non-mental meaning to a text. As I have emphasized in several places – particularly in Chapters 3, 6, and 7 – nobody has catalogued the linguistic conventions in force and specified how they are supposed to work together in the determination of the meaning of a text. Conventionalism about meaning is a naked assumption lacking the theoretical support that would be needed to back it up. That one can discuss the meaning of a text, as one can discuss so many other humanly important issues, and that arguments from what can be called linguistic conventions may be used in such discussions on a more ad hoc basis, is another matter.

It appears obvious to me that the belief in true non-mental textual meaning has its roots in an acceptance of the ordinary conception of a text. According to the ordinary conception, a physical utterance contains or carries a complex of signs and a meaning. On the ordinary conception, there is meaning in the utterance as soon as the utterance has been made, and that textual meaning is separate from the sender’s meaning and the receiver’s meaning. The presumed textual meaning is objective in the sense that it is in the object (and the object is conceived to exist); it is neither in the sender’s mind nor in the receiver’s mind. If there is such textual meaning, it must be non-mental, and there must be truth about what the textual meaning is like.

I would say that belief in true non-mental textual meaning distorts the understanding of textual meaning in linguistics, philosophy, and literary studies in important ways. As we saw in Chapter 6, linguists normally maintain that textual meaning is the sender’s meaning, but we also saw that they cannot in fact be said actually to adopt that view. What they take to be the textual meaning is, rather, what I call the consensus meaning of a text. Such meaning is by definition objective
in the sense that people would by and large agree about it, but not objective in the sense of enjoying brute existence. It is a third-party construction: a commentator’s meaning, a cryptomental abstraction modelling, in the final instance, (hypothetical) meaning experiences in senders and receivers.

Consensus meaning is purified of everything individual and hence, in a sense, restricted and artificial. It is no doubt useful for the standard, and highly valuable, linguistic project of modelling an idealized system of linguistic and communicative knowledge. There is no conceivable reason to reject the idea of consensus meaning. Yet for most linguists and philosophers of language what I call consensus meaning seems to be what they take textual meaning to be. They consequently expect textual meaning to be something abstract and mainly cognitive. To me, this is to turn things upside down, as if the linguist’s simplified description of language in use were more real than language in use itself, the abstract language system more real than the brute mental and physical realities of language in use, the map more real than the terrain. I am sure that if it were understood that texts have no true non-mental meaning, this would have to lead to profound changes in the linguistic understanding of language in use. And, as I said, I see the ordinary conception of the text as a key factor behind the belief in the existence of true non-mental meaning in connection with texts.

In analytic philosophy, the dominant belief in true non-mental textual meaning has had other consequences. In my view, analytic aestheticians have produced the most systematic reflection on textual meaning that there is, and they have introduced distinctions of great interest (compare Chapter 7), but much of their discussion of textual meaning and the theory of interpretation suffers from resting on the premise that texts possess true non-mental meaning. That assumption has given rise to baseless questions about what constitutes such meaning and whether it is constructed or unconstructed, determinate or indeterminate, and so on.

In literary theory belief in true non-mental textual meaning has functioned differently still (compare Chapter 8), but there too it has had problematic consequences. In literary theory, it is commonly thought that the meaning of a literary text, while tacitly understood as being really there, is protean and inexhaustible. In practice, the literary reader’s rich and mobile and flexible literary experience has been thought to reflect the nature of the literary text and its rich and mobile and flexible meaning. (I have quoted, repeatedly, Iser’s dictum about the play of the text and the reader played by the text.) Literary specialists have an exceptionally nuanced practical understanding of the complexities of textual meaning, but in my view the belief in the objectivity of such meaning (however indeterminate this meaning may be taken to be) stands in the way of a proper comprehension of what critics are doing when interpreting literature. They cannot in fact be constructing an understanding of what the text really means, as they often seem to believe
themselves to be doing. Instead, they will often, in practice, be recommending ways of approaching the text, or discussing its perceived structure, or making ultimately true or false remarks about its causal background, or be occupied with doing still other things. The real purpose and the real validating circumstances of a given act of interpretation all too often remain obscure to me, and they may well be obscure to the interpreting critic as well, with damaging consequences for the methods and the theoretical understanding of literary interpretation.

I maintain, then, that the inner contradictions in the ordinary conception of the text have important further consequences for the understanding of verbal communication irrespective of which of the disciplines of linguistics, philosophy, and literary studies one is considering – all disciplines central to the understanding of textual meaning. There is much that a cluster-conception-based analysis of the underlying realities can straighten out, and I have attempted to demonstrate this during the course of the book.

Much in my theory is contentious. I have explicitly confronted what I see as the main challenges to my theory: the ideas that textual meaning is the sender’s meaning; that meaning is abstract; that physical utterances are at the same time linguistic expressions (Chapter 6); that there are objective truths about non-mental textual meaning (Chapter 7); that language and context can create textual meaning (Chapter 8); and that texts are unitary objects (Chapter 9). In some other cases, my analysis has touched upon issues which I did not really take up. For example, I could have seriously addressed the question of whether the linguistic system is systematically prior or subsequent to language in use. I could also have gone much deeper into the theory of types and tokens, and could have been more outspoken and argumentative with respect to ontological issues. I have tried to limit myself to a number of closely related matters regarding texts, matters on which I thought I could present and defend a consistent theory within a relatively limited space.
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In his account of text and textual meaning, Pettersson demonstrates that a text as commonly conceived is not only a verbal structure but also a physical entity, two kinds of phenomena which do not in fact add up to a unitary object. He describes this current notion of text as convenient enough for many practical purposes, but inadequate in discussions of a theoretically more demanding nature. Having clearly demonstrated its intellectual drawbacks, he develops an alternative, boldly revisionary way of thinking about text and textual meaning. His careful argument is in challenging dialogue with assumptions about language-in-use to be found in a wide range of present-day literary theory, linguistics, philosophical aesthetics, and philosophy of language.

“I deeply admired and enjoyed this book. Pettersson is a very learned, lucid and careful thinker, often drily amusing. More important, Pettersson actually brings important news, powerfully stated, especially for those of us who have struggled to establish some model of intention in literary texts.”

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