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INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY

In 1976, literary critic Stanley Fish used thus term to describe the unspoken (often unknown) alliances among readers who share similar strategies for determining what a **TEXT** means. This theory of **PRAGMATICS,** he says, "is the explanation for both the stability of interpretations among different readers (they belong to the same community) and for the regularity with which a single reader will employ different interpretive strategies and thus make different texts (he belongs to different communities)" (Fish 1980, 171).

The notion of interpretive community insists upon the primacy of situated readers, and it can be thought of as a theory of creative reading. Fish says that a set of general assumptions on how one ought to interpret a text precedes every act of interpretation; thus, a reader always perceives a given text within an already in-place hermeneutical framework. One does not read the words on a page and *then* decide what those words mean because no temporal separation exists between acts of perception and interpretation. Instead, one's community conditions how its members read those words in the first place. As such, readers actually write a text for themselves as they read, for they have a tool kit of interpretive strategies always at work determining what certain words will mean should they arise in a given context. Readers using the same tool kit belong to the same community.

One can see interpretive communities at work in Christian **TYPOLOGY**, a mode of biblical exegesis that aims to square Old Testament texts with the events recounted in the New Testament. For the typologist, the belief that Jesus was God combines with other assumptions in order to form the exegete's set of interpretive strategies. Other readers who share these strategies make up this exegete's community even if they do not know one another, which explains how two Christians might independently interpret some events in the Old Testament as prophesies of Jesus Christ. Of course, a Jew, Gnostic, or pagan produces a much different meaning of those same Hebrew texts because he or she works from a community that reads/writes those texts differently. And finally, a look at Paul of Tarsus demonstrates how the

same person writes two different texts for himself when reading from different interpretive communities, for he understands the Hebrew texts as prophesies of Jesus Christ only after his conversion at Damascus.

Fish's theory has been criticized for making words have no meaning. He responds with just the opposite: Words always have meaning, in fact many meanings, all of which are constructed by situated readers in various communities. Fish adds that his theory is sociological, not normative, that is, it describes only what people *say* (or think) a text means; it does not prescribe how we ought to interpret texts. Finally, to the objection that some authors use certain techniques to ensure that their texts convey certain meanings, he responds that those meanings come to fruition only if the reader belongs to the same interpretive community as that author.

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INTERTEXTUALITY

Building on Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) discussion of the **DIALOGIC** nature of language, Julia Kristeva (1986) coined the term "intertextuality" for the multiple ways in which texts refer to and draw on other texts. This notion highlights the interconnectedness of texts and challenges deep-rooted literary values, such as autonomy, uniqueness, and originality (Allen 2000, 5–6). An intertextual perspective views text production as a social practice in which different texts, genres, and discourses are drawn upon and text consumption as a process in which readers may bring additional texts – not only those that have shaped production – into the interpretation process (Fairclough 1992, 84–5). The study of intertextuality does not focus solely (or even primarily) on the specific prior texts that are brought into play in a given text; rather, it also examines the implicit texts underlying production and interpretation (e.g., presuppositions, genre conventions) (Culler 1976, 1388). Thus, a newspaper crime report has intertextual links not only to eyewitnesses' accounts and previous reports on the same and/or similar events but also to newswriting conventions, propositions that the journalist takes as given, and even the journalist's/reader's understanding of crimes in general.

Reported speech, a prime example of intertextuality, has been extensively studied in **SOCIOLINGUISTICS**. Reporting speech is always a reformulation of the original act. Even if prior speech is reported verbatim, the reporting speaker may use prosodic features like **STRESS** and **INTONATION** to indicate his/her interpretation of the utterance, or he/she may frame the reported speech in such a way as to manipulate the addressee's perception of the reported speaker. In some cases, material represented as reported speech is not spoken by anyone at all. These observations have led Deborah Tannen (1989) to conclude that reported speech is primarily the creation of the reporting speaker and serves to create a sense of interpersonal involvement between the reporting speaker and the addressee in the reporting context.

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