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# Context, Intention and Historical Understanding



## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to indicate how a version of intentionalist theory of linguistic communication can be adapted as a part of a contextualist methodology of the history of ideas. In other words, we attempt to clear up the way of harmonizing the theory that communication takes place when a hearer/reader grasps an utterer's intention with the methodological conception according to which a historian of ideas must concentrate his attention on the context in which in his past author was writing. This article argues that a plausible solution to this problem is suggested in some influential methodological essays by Quentin Skinner. Therefore we shall discuss, on the one hand, the place of an intentionalist model of communication in Skinner's methodology by providing a brief outline of the main theses of contextualism and intentionalism. On the other hand, we deal with some epistemological problems raised by the application of contextualist method. In particular, we consider the questions that can be raised about the manner in which a historian can grasp an author's intention.

## KEYWORDS

Quentin Skinner, intentionalist theory, linguistic communication, historical understanding

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## INTRODUCTION

The term ‘contextualism’ refers to the method whereby a historian of ideas concentrates his attention on the context in which a past author was writing. The defining tenet of an intentionalist theory of communication is that communication takes place when a hearer or a reader grasps some sort of intentional state (intention, belief, desire etc.) that is distinct from the utterer’s words expressing it. Now, one of the most important methodological questions of the contextualist theory of historical understanding is whether the contextualist method can be harmonized with an intentionalist conception of linguistic communication.

A possible answer to this question, we think, is suggested in some well-known methodological essays by Quentin Skinner, one of the founders of the ‘Cambridge School’ of the history of political thought.<sup>1</sup> Quentin Skinner is one of the world’s most influential and philosophically sophisticated historians of ideas. His influence can be derived *inter alia* from the fact that he attempts to revise the major methodological tools with which the history of ideas has been tackled to now by formulating his contextualist conception in terms of an intentionalist analysis of linguistic communication that can place some traditional epistemological hypotheses about the historical understanding in a fresh and illuminating context. In short, what makes Skinner’s contextualist methodology novel and influential, we think, is the adaptation of a special version of the intentionalist theory of linguistic communication. Thus, in our view, in order to understand the methodological issues of Skinner’s historiography of ideas, we must consider the version of the intentionalist theory of communication which appears most strongly to have influenced his thinking. Now, the main task of our essay is to indicate how the topic of historical understanding might involve, or why should it involve, an analysis of intentional states expressed and grasped in communicative acts. Our investigation, therefore, include two stages. Firstly, we shall discuss the place of an analytical model of linguistic communication in Skinner’s methodology by providing a brief outline of the main theses of contextualism and some important versions of the intentionalist theory of communication. Secondly, we shall deal with some epistemological problems that can be raised about the manner in which historian can infer a past author’s intention from the author’s words.

## 1. TOWARD A CONTEXTUALIST THEORY OF HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING

Let us begin by clearing up the methodological conception which Skinner refers to as ‘contextualism’. What is usually thought to define the ‘Cambridge School’ of the history of political thought founded by Skinner, Pocock and others is a commitment to a form of linguistic contextualism: the thesis that historical texts can only be understood correctly by locating them within their intellectual context and, in turn, that this intellectual context can only be properly understood in terms of the language available to the individual past authors.<sup>2</sup> What Skinner regards as contextualism is the view that to understand what a past author meant by a text it is necessary to grasp what he was doing in writing it in a given historical context. In other words, contextualism, Skinner

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion of the epistemological background of Skinner’s methodology see e.g. SKINNER 1969, 1978, 1983, 1988, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> For the discussion of historical contextualism of ‘Cambridge School’ of the history of political thought, see SKINNER 1969, 1978, 1983, 1988, 2002, POCKOCK 1985, 2004, DUNN 1968, 1996.

claims, is the method whereby the historian concentrates his attention on the context in which his author was writing. This means, in Skinner's view, that to understand what a past author meant by a text, a historian must concentrate on the conventions of the type of society in which author lived, the kind of person he was, the people whom he was addressing and trying to persuade, and so on. As Skinner notes, we must be ready to read each of the classic text "*as though it were written by a contemporary*" (SKINNER 2002. 57). The relevance of such a contextualist method, for Skinner, can be pointed out especially in the cases where the reasons people had for holding their beliefs do not seem to be reasons for us, and where the beliefs themselves seem unintelligible. As Skinner claims, in such cases "*we discharge our tasks as interpreters if we can explain why say, Aquinas believed that God is at once three persons and an individual Being*" (SKINNER 1988. 256). "*We need not suppose*", Skinner writes, that "*we have to able in addition to perform what may be the impossible feat for explaining what exactly it was that Aquinas believed*" (SKINNER 1988. 256).

So, in this view, to interpret a past author's text, we need to know something about the historical context in which text was written. If we attempt to surround a past author's text with its appropriate historical context, Skinner claims, we may able to create a more plausible conception of what the author was doing in writing the text in question. For to understand what questions a past author was addressing, and what he was doing with the concepts available to him in a special historical context, is equivalent to understand some of his basic intentions in writing his text. So, as Skinner writes, when "*we attempt in this way to locate a text within its appropriate context, we are not merely providing historical 'background' for our interpretation; we are already engaged in the act of interpretation itself*" (SKINNER 1978. xiv).

In arguing for this contextualist methodology of the history of ideas, Skinner offers his criticism of the view that concentration on the text is sufficient in itself for the understanding of the ideas contained in it. This so-called textualist view, Skinner points out, is wrong, since it assumes the existence of "timeless truths" which the historian hopes to distil from a past author's text. This erroneous assumption about "timeless truths", he argues, occasions that meanings which historians ascribe to the past authors might have very little or nothing to do with the authors' intentions. Some historians, for example, say of Machiavelli and Rousseau that by writing what they did, Machiavelli laid the foundation for Marx, and Rousseau provided the philosophical justification for the totalitarian as well as the democratic national state. Skinner argues, however, that description such as "*Machiavelli laid the foundation for Marx*" cannot be action descriptions, because they are not descriptions "*which the agent himself could at least in principle have applied to describe and classify what he was doing*" (SKINNER 1969. 29). For Skinner, the main problem with such descriptions is that they unapologetically avoid any reference to the intentions of the author in question; rather, they merely engage in philosophical criticism or moral judgment such that "*history becomes a pack of tricks we play on the dead*" (SKINNER 2002. 65). So those historians of ideas who to tend to form such descriptions simply assume that the same word employed by different authors indicates the same meaning and intention on the part of each. Ideas thus treated "historically", Skinner claims, are in fact abstracted from the past author's writing and, therefore, they cannot tell us anything about the role it originally had in the arguments and doctrines of the various authors concerned. The only way to settle the matter is to explore the dominant intellectual context of the time "*by paying as close attention as possible to the context of [a particular] utterance, we can hope gradually to refine our sense of the precise nature of this intervention constituted by the utterance itself*" (SKINNER 2002. 117).

So what leads Skinner to form his critical statements in the general assumption that the past authors were merely concerned with specific problems occurring in their own quite unique historical circumstances, and that they all conceptualized and expressed these problems by following the rules of a specific linguistic tradition. Thus, on Skinner's view, in interpreting a historical text, we must regard this text as a definite set of utterances formulated by a past author with the intention to communicate a certain meaning to a given group of the past hearers or readers. Consequently, according to Skinner, the main task of the historian's investigation is to ascertain the intention of the past author in writing his text. If that is so, a historian must presuppose, above all, a certain set of linguistic tools (words, expressions, phrases etc.) that alone makes it possible for a past author to express the intention which is ascribed to him by the historian. To understand a text, therefore, the historian must firstly determine the range of description available to the author of a text; and secondly he must elucidate, within these limits, what was the author's actual intention. In other words, clearing up what the past author could have intended, the historian then determines what the author must have intended to utterance; that is, the historical study of the texts and contexts relating to the past authors must be a study of intentions which the authors' words express.

Having said this, Skinner's argument on this score would certainly appear to us to be resting on an influential analytical conception of linguistic communication. However, in contrast to the generally accepted assumption, we believe that this conception cannot be regarded as a part of the theory of speech acts associated with the Oxford analytical philosopher, John L. Austin. Rather, we think, it is a special version of the intentionalist theory of communication. In other words, Skinner's contextualist conception of the interpretation of the past authors' text seems to be based on an intentionalist theory of the intentional structure and mental conditions of communicative acts. Thus, to clear up the basic assumptions of Skinner's methodology I turn now briefly to the main theses of the theory of communication that appears most strongly to have influenced Skinner's thinking.

## 2. INTENTION, COMMUNICATION AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It is a familiar view, suggested by the commentators of Skinner's works, that Skinner has standardly formulated his methodological conceptions in terms of Austin's analysis of communicative acts.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Skinner's admiration for Austin goes so far that he protests against those who write of his theory of speech acts as if there is scope for alternative theories. For Austin, Skinner claims, carried the attitude of disinterested curiosity about the workings of language farther than anybody in the analytical philosophy of language, and, therefore, he could provide "*a way of describing*" a fundamental aspect of understanding (SKINNER 1988. 262).

The "*way of understanding*" that Skinner regards as Austin's most important contribution to a general theory of speech acts is the illocutionary description of communication that has been widely discussed and employed conception in the analytical philosophy of language in the years since Austin coined the term 'illocutionary act'. As it is well known, an illocutionary act on Austin's original account is an act which is performed in saying something. It is, in this view, to be distinguished

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<sup>3</sup> See e.g. POCKOCK 2004.

both from acts of saying something (the making of noises, or marks, belonging to a language), and from acts bringing something about as a consequence of saying something. In brief, illocutionary acts are to be distinguished from locutionary and perlocutionary acts. So in terms of Austin's model of illocutionary acts, the meaning of a word would appear as being inextricably tied down to specific activities in the context of which they enter into usage.

Now Skinner argues that a proper understanding of the concept of illocution gives us grounds for offering plausible accounts about the way of interpreting the texts of the past authors. For the main task of the interpretation of a past author's text, Skinner claims, is to illuminate the illocutionary force of the text. But how can the awareness of illocutionary force contribute to understanding of a past utterer's meaning? Although this question has been formulated by using Austinian terms, the answer suggested by Skinner is based on an intentionalist conception of communication rather than on Austin's original doctrine of speech acts. In answering the above question, Skinner emphasizes that to illuminate the illocutionary force of a past author's text, a historian must determine the author's intention expressed by the author's words in a given historical context. So, in Skinner's view, in order to grasp the illocutionary force of a past author's text, a historian, having found out what the author could have intended in a given historical context, must determine what the author has intended to utter. This means, accordingly, that in illuminating the contribution of the awareness of the illocutionary force to our understanding of the historical texts, Skinner argues for a version of the intentionalist theory of linguistic communication. As we have seen, the defining tenet of an intentionalist conception is that communication takes place when a hearer/reader grasps some sort of intentional phenomenon that the utterer's words express.

In contextualist view, a plausible account about the context of a past author's text would enable us to understand some of his basic intentions in writing, and to elicit what he might have meant by what he uttered. To suppose this view on interpretation, however, an exponent of the contextualist-intentionalist methodology must explain the manner in which a historian can grasp an author's intention. Skinner suggests the following solution of this epistemological problem: in order to understand a past author's basic intention in writing, we must see, *inter alia*, what questions he was addressing and trying to answer, and how far he was accepting and endorsing, or questioning and repudiating, or perhaps even polemically ignoring, the prevailing assumptions and conventions of political debate. But what exactly does enable a historian to grasp an author's basic intentions by studying the ideological context of the author's text? How can a historian infer and individual mental state from the special features of the context of an author's text? And what exactly does a historian need to be aware of to grasp an author's message?

As far as we can see, Skinner does not offer plausible answers to these questions. Some versions of the intentionalist theory of communication, however, suggest possible solutions to these problems. As we have seen, for example, Davidson claims that a reader's grasp of an author's intention is mediated by the reader's knowledge of the truth-conditions of the reader's language (DAVIDSON 1980, 1984, 1990, 2001). That is, in Davidson's view, what enables an author to realize his basic intention in writing is the reader's knowledge of the truth-conditions of sentences in the reader's language. Other exponents of the intentionalist theory of communication, however, give other accounts of the manner in which a hearer/reader can grasp an utterer's intention. For instance, David Lewis emphasizes the essential role of two conventions in communication that he calls

conventions of “truthfulness” and “trust” in a language.<sup>4</sup> Jerry Fodor thinks of these conventions in communication as “recipes” for communicating specific messages.<sup>5</sup> Still other exponents of intentionalism stress the role of the so-called creative hypothesis formation. Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, for example, argue that a hearer/reader must infer an utterer’s intention by inventing hypotheses concerning the utterer’s possible intention and then selecting from these by means of a presumption that the utterer’s sentences are “*optimally relevant*” (SPERBER–WILSON 1986. 163–171).

At this point, however, it is necessary to emphasize that, whether we accept Davidson’s account of the common knowledge of the truth-conditions of utterer’s language, or stress, for example, the role of the creative hypothesis formation in communicative acts, we must keep in view the radical epistemological difference between the manner of interpretation in the oral and literal forms of communication. Although Skinner, like others who intend to argue for a version of the intentionalist theory of communication, fails to consider this difference, it is important to highlight that intentionalism is one of the approaches to communication inviting to rethinking in terms of orality/literacy paradigm.<sup>6</sup> In other words, studying the various kinds of the calculations that hearers/readers use in order to grasp the intentional states which are expressed by the utterer’s words, in our view, we must perceive that these kinds of calculation have quite different bearings in oral communication from those they have written. For we must perceive that while spoken linguistic material, as Bronislaw Malinowski notes, “*lives only in winged words, passing from man to man*”, the meanings of the words are “*inextricably mixed up with, and dependent upon, the course of activity in which the utterances are embedded*”, the statements contained in written documents “*are set down with the purpose of being self-contained and self-explanatory*” (MALINOWSKI 1923. 307, 311). Writing, in this view, intensifies the sense of self and foster more conscious interaction between individuals. In writing, Malinowski claims, “*language becomes a condensed piece of reflection*”, the reader “*reasons, reflects, remembers, imagines*” (MALINOWSKI 1923. 312). So this means, on the one hand, that the language from which a reader can infer the author’s intention is more individualized and more interiorized than the language that is used in oral forms of communication, and, on the other hand, that the way of interpretation is more reflected in literal forms of communication than in oral communicative acts. In this case, accordingly, the manner in which the sentences of the written documents represent an ideological and social context is radically different from the way in which a given context is represented in an oral form of communication. Consequently, the manner in which a reader can infer the author’s basic intention from the author’s words representing the deeply interiorized context of writing is radically different from the way in which a hearer can grasp the utterer’s meaning.

Applying these considerations to the epistemological problems of the history of ideas, we can note, on the one hand, that the historian, as a reader, can infer the past author’s intention by reconstructing a “private” context-representation expressed by the author’s words, and, on the other hand, that the epistemological background of the historian’s inferences is actually constituted by an individual

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<sup>4</sup> For discussion of this conception see LEWIS 1983.

<sup>5</sup> See FODOR 1975, 1987.

<sup>6</sup> For discussion of the orality/literacy paradigm see ONG 1982, HAVELOCK 1986, GOODY 1987.

cognitive representation of the ideological and social context of the interpretation of the past author's text. So these considerations may urge the exponents of contextualism to rethink the methodological role of the context-descriptions in the history of ideas. For the orality-literacy paradigm may suggest them that the historian's account of the ideological and social context of the past author's text cannot be more plausible than his idea of the author's "private" thoughts. In other words, the historian's account of why a past author believed something cannot be more plausible than his hypothesis about what exactly it was that this author believed.

As far as we know, Skinner adapts the intentionalist conceptions without considering these epistemological problems. We think, however, that the adaptation of a version of intentionalist theory can only help a historian of ideas to illuminate some of the connections between a past author's text and its ideological and social context, if he is aware of the basic differences between "*the ways of managing knowledge and verbalization in oral cultures*" and "*in cultures deeply affected by the use of writing*" (ONG 1982. 1). Such an epistemological distinction can enable an exponent of the contextualist methodology to create a plausible conception of the internal relation between an ideological context and its linguistic representation, and hence, in Skinner's words "*of how political thinking in all its various forms was in fact conducted in earlier periods*" (SKINNER 1978. xi). A detailed investigation of the methodological implications of this distinction, however, is altogether another enterprise.

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