Reading Between the Lines: The Use and Limitations of Linguistic Context in Historical Methods

Rachel E. Wiedman
St. Ambrose University

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Rachel Elise Wiedman

St. Ambrose University

Abstract

Previous approaches in the philosophy of history for contending with linguistic context in historical analysis have centered around whether it is absolutely necessary or absolutely unnecessary, ignoring the differences that might exist in different historical projects as well as the goals of historical analysis. Likewise, they have considered linguistic context in a narrow frame, overlooking many uses for linguistic context within historical interpretation. Further, these approaches only focus on linguistic context in the historical interpretation of philosophical texts, ignoring the wide range of linguistic acts that historians, especially intellectual historians, regularly use. This paper proposes that a more fruitful method for establishing the place of linguistic context in historical analysis is to first consider what linguistic context is, what it can achieve, and how it is used by historians, and then to consider its necessity or lack thereof within the wider framework of the goals of historical analysis.

Keywords: Linguistic context, philosophy of history, Quentin Skinner, Peter Steinberger

I.   Introduction: Textual Interpretation in the Philosophy of History

As a field dealing in the abstract currency of ideas, intellectual history has forced historians to contend with equally abstract problems of methodology. Most prevalent of these issues

within recent philosophy of history has been the thorny issue of the use of linguistic context in textual interpretation. Historian Quentin Skinner has dominated this debate, arguing that textual interpretation necessitates understanding what the author intended to do in taking the act of writing their work, or the *illocutionary force* of a text, which in turn requires an analysis of the *linguistic context* of the statement at hand ("Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," 46-47). Contrary to this approach has been the work of Peter J. Steinberger, who argues that the concept of illocutionary force applies only to improvised linguistic acts and not written linguistic acts, making it both superfluous and incorrect to adopt linguistic context via illocutionary force as a method of interpretation (138-139). Instead, Steinberger asserts that the goal of textual interpretation should be a "rational reconstruction" of the text, focusing on explaining a text's original argumentative structure (141-143). Debate on textual analysis within intellectual history thus focuses on if linguistic context should be excluded as a method or if it is actually necessary to the task.

A large part of the dissension between Skinner and Steinberger is caused from the fact that both exclude any type of "meaning" in a text besides that which each considers vital, as if the historian could only have one possible goal when interpreting a text. Michael Rosen does partially address this, distinguishing between meaning as the actual content or argument of a text (Steinberger's view) and meaning as illocutionary force (Skinner's view) as two different but legitimate objects of study to which linguistic context may not be necessary (707-708). Despite this qualification, Skinner, Steinberger, and Rosen all fall into a similar pitfall, for in focusing their arguments on whether or not linguistic context is necessary, they neglect considering in depth what specifically linguistic context can actually demonstrate, and they

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divorce this from the diverse range of historical projects a historian may undertake. They also focus exclusively on written treatises, excluding a host of other types of evidence that can contribute to an understanding of intellectual history, like debates in and out of government, official state papers, speeches, sermons, pamphlets, and newspapers amongst many others. In doing so, each overlooks aspects of linguistic context that are commonly used by historians in their work as well as the varied purposes for which a historian may then apply that linguistic context within their historical analysis. Likewise, Skinner, Steinberger, and Rosen all examine the "necessity" of linguistic context to textual interpretation without placing this inside the larger frame of the goals and limitations of historical knowledge, causing them to improperly frame the question of whether or not linguistic context is an appropriate historical approach. Further than this, when discussing the necessity of linguistic context in textual interpretation, they fail to distinguish between the *explicit analysis*, or the argument presented by the historian, versus the *implicit analysis*, or the series of judgements used in evaluating sources which may not be overtly discussed in the final, explicit analysis.

In this paper, I propose that a more fruitful method for establishing the place of linguistic context in historical analysis is to first consider what linguistic context is, what it can achieve, and how it is used by historians, and then to consider its necessity or lack thereof within the wider framework of the goals of historical analysis. This method not only reveals a much wider use of linguistic context beyond illuminating intended illocutionary force but also produces a more nuanced understanding of what epistemological claims that evidence can produce. Adopting this approach, I propose that linguistic context can be understood as the collection of settings or circumstances shaping a linguistic act, or their written or verbal communication.

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Linguistic context includes the particular historical, schematic, and personal contexts which shape that linguistic act; overall linguistic context can be used to clarify meanings, to recreate thought and trace its lineage, and to provide insight into the subtexts within statements. With this wider definition of linguistic context, and with an understanding of history as a dynamic process of forming and refining suppositions based upon available evidence, linguistic context in a historian's *explicit* analysis can be considered merely one type of historical evidence which may augment or be augmented by other types of historical evidence, and which is not in all cases necessary but may or may not be used depending upon the historian's argument. In a historian's *implicit* analysis, linguistic context is likewise not technically necessary to make a judgement on the character of language of a linguistic act, but it is extremely valuable in establishing an informed judgement of that linguistic act.

II.   Linguistic Context: Historical Context

Since linguistic context is defined more broadly and particularly in this essay, a more precise definition of this term and its constituent parts must be provided before an evaluation of its use can be made. Linguistic context, as stated, is *the collection of settings or circumstances shaping a linguistic act*. The various types of settings or circumstances that may shape a linguistic act are here split into historical, schematic, and personal contexts. These respective contexts form the wholistic linguistic context that may shape a text.

The first of these, historical context, may be understood as *the particular location in place and time in which a linguistic act is produced and the state of affairs at that time*. This refers not only to the events contemporaneous to a linguistic act but also to the events that preceded that time. When linguistic context is understood in terms of its historical context, it

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provides a means for understanding internal references made about events in a linguistic act, as well as an understanding of the intended meanings of terms.

A few examples can demonstrate the practical use of historical context of a linguistic act for the historian. While there are many instances where an author or speaker refer explicitly to current events, there are many other instances where these references are vague and unclear. These instances can matter, especially when an argument is crafted around particular events. Take, for instance, the case of an excerpt from the *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* by John Dickinson, in which he noted that "little notice has been taken of an act of parliament, as injurious in its principle to the liberties of these colonies, as the Stamp Act was: I mean the act for suspending the legislation of New York" (4). With no prior context, looking off the text alone, the reader would only be left with a vague idea of the specific act Dickinson argued against. The reader could receive a slight tip-off if they were familiar with the Stamp Act, which Dickinson mentions in passing, but without this prior knowledge (which is itself part of the historical context), the reader would have no more specific detail towards the events or acts Dickinson referred to throughout his argument and thus would only have a limited understanding of what Dickinson even argued against. If the reader, however, knows that Dickinson, a colonist and politician, published his *Letters* in the wake of the passage of the Townsend Acts in 1767, which included the New York Restraining Act of 1767, it becomes clear that Dickinson was responding to the Townsend Acts, despite the fact that he never referred to any of the acts by name throughout the entirety of his *Letters* (Middlekauff, 161). The historical context thus provides a meaning to the phrase that would not be evident from the text itself.

If the historian were trying to establish this information from scratch, it would be necessary to use both the content of the *Letters* as well as the historical context to determine what Dickinson was specifically responding to. This is a task historians do actually undertake, particularly with rediscovered, long-forgotten linguistic acts which may refer to events that were evident to their intended audiences but remain obscure to the modern reader. Jane E. Calvert of the John Dickinson Writings Project applies this to a different letter of Dickinson's rediscovered in Delaware's archives, using the content and the known historical context to establish that the letter must have been written before January 6th, 1764 and that it was likely in response to the Paxton Boys, a group of Pennsylvania frontiersmen who had killed nearby Conestoga Indians (475). Without using the surrounding historical context, the events which the letter referred to would remain ambiguous. In this way, the historical context of a linguistic act can help clarify internal references to events that otherwise would remain obscure.

Far more pervasive in application than this use of historical context is its application to language itself, which is a historically bounded entity. The meanings of words can change over time as their usage alters, as is true of grammatical or rhetorical conventions as well. To properly understand what is being said by a writer or speaker, it is necessary to understand the historical meaning of the words used, or its historical context, lest an inappropriate definition lead to an incorrect interpretation of what is being said. As an example, consider the usage of the term "republican." In eighteenth-century America, the term "republican" would simply refer to either that which has a character befitting a republic or a person who supports a republic as a form of government, as it did in the writings of John Dickinson, Henry Richard Lee, and Alexander Hamilton (Dickinson, 50; Lee, 89; Hamilton, 14). After the rise of the Federalist

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and Democratic Republican parties, however, the term "republican" sometimes was used to refer exclusively to the Democratic Republicans, despite the fact that in the broadest sense both parties could be considered "republicans" (Wood, 154, 161-162). Likewise, the word again adopted new meanings and associations after the formation of the modern Republican party in the 1850s (Howe, *What Hath God* Wrought, 597). Somewhat ironically, the word "republican" has become so intertwined with the modern political party which adopted its name that the average American today likely is only familiar with this usage of the term rather than its original meaning. Yet at different points in history, the term had alternate meanings, which a conscious historian must be aware of in order to accurately understand the meaning of the word within a work. While this example of changing meaning may seem rather obvious, many other terms have undergone changes that might be unnoticed by the typical modern reader. This underscores the importance of understanding the historical context of language, as heeding the historical context of language can help readers evaluate what words might have mean in their original context.

This is not, of course, to claim that every word has some special or unique meaning lost to time. Some words or phrases have fairly regular meanings and usages even across large stretches of time. When Andrew Jackson referred, for instance, to the Bank of the United States as "the Monster," the meaning of the term "monster" is largely the same today, around two hundred years later, as it was back then (quoted in Meyers, 26). However, whether or not a term can be taken in the same sense as the modern usage or if it differs can only be determined if the historian first looks to the historical context of the language itself. From this context, the

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historian can determine what sense of the word might have been meant, and then apply that to the larger meaning of the phrase or sentence at hand.

III.   Linguistic Context: Schematic Context

Moving on from historical context, the second subset of linguistic context defined here is the schematic context of a linguistic act. Understanding a schema to be *a framework which individuals or groups use to perceive, interpret, and interact with the world*, the schematic context of a linguistic act is *the set of schemas through which that linguistic act might be filtered*. These schemas can refer to local, regional, or national culture, to religion, or to intellectual traditions amongst other things. Schemas are important in establishing linguistic context, as a certain vocabulary or a manner of expression might be particular to a certain culture or school of thought. Having a knowledge of what language is connected to which schemas can then be used to help identify the sources which an author or speaker might be referring to or drawing from, even without an explicit reference to the source of those schemas. Likewise, by identifying what language is associated with particular schemas, it can clear up undefined terms or reveal unspoken premises that are defined or identified in the larger schema itself. This can be of immense use to the intellectual historian, who often seeks to trace what cultural attitudes, religious outlooks, or intellectual traditions influenced an author or speaker's own views, as well to establish as what implications or assumptions were made by the use of certain phrases.

Intellectual historians studying Jacksonian America have actually already utilized schematic context to aid their understanding of the period's political parties. Marvin Meyers' *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* seeks to explicate the underlying beliefs—

political, moral, and otherwise—that Jacksonian Democrats held. In taking on this ambitious

project, Meyers notes how important heeding "political talk" is to this goal, as it indicates the

schema or, to use Meyers' phrase, the "persuasion" that they operated under, defined by

Meyers as "a broad judgement of public affairs informed by common sentiments and beliefs

about the good life in America" (vii-viii). While Meyers' main purpose is to uncover the

Jacksonian "persuasion" or schema, as well as the language associated with it, his method also

demonstrates how schematic context can illuminate the ideas or influences acting upon a

speaker or an author's linguistic act. When explaining the importance and ideology of "the

people" in Andrew Jackson's rhetoric, Meyers' notes that the way Jackson describes "the

people" as hard working laborers and independent farmers closely matches the rhetoric used

earlier by Thomas Jefferson of the yeoman farmer, the simple stronghold of republican

independence and virtue (11-12, 19-22). Likewise, Jackson's juxtaposition of "the people" or

the honest yeoman farmer against the "moneyed power" or "moneyed aristocracy" also

matches the language utilized by Jeffersonians (22-23). By heeding the use of language so

strongly identified with Jefferson's school of thought, Meyers is able to establish the influence

of particular Jeffersonian ideas of government upon Jacksonian thought. Thus, the schematic

context of this linguistic act, embedded in the Jeffersonian tradition or schema, becomes a

means to identify that strain of thought in others, like Jackson. Meyers applies this approach

himself, for after identifying the specific rhetoric associated with the Jacksonian schema, he is

able to identify those who were influenced by Jacksonian ideas based upon the language they

used, like novelist Fenimore Cooper (57-61). By utilizing schematic context of a linguistic act,

Meyers is better able to trace the lineage and spread of ideas between thinkers.

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Another intellectual historian, Daniel Walker Howe, undertook a similar project to Meyers' in *The Political Culture of the American Whigs*, looking instead at the Jacksonian Democrats' rival political party. In this work, Howe attempts to identify the "political culture" or schema of the Whig party, and in doing so, he uses the schematic context of the language they used to identify what intellectual influences acted upon them (2-3). In the chapter entitled "The Language and Values of the Whigs," Howe discusses at length how Whig rhetoric was largely shaped by the Scottish Common Sense school of moral philosophy, adopting and adapting the language of this schema in their political speech, particularly in evaluations of human nature (27-32). Even more strongly than this schema, Whig rhetoric borrowed from the language of the "country-party tradition" of England, lauding a "balanced" or "mixed" government and specifically criticizing the "dangers of anarchy and the pressures of despotism" (76-77). As is well recognized by historians, the very name of the Whig party indicated their affinity to the country-party tradition or schema by invoking the name of the English Whig party, known well in America for resisting monarchical tyranny and for supporting the American Revolution (Howe, *Political Culture of the American Whigs*, 88; Holt, 29). When criticizing Presidents Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren, and John Tyler, Whigs would often employ the rhetoric used by the original Whig party to warn against the ills of an overactive, usurping executive (Howe, *Political Culture of the American Whigs*, 87-88, 91-92). By heeding this rhetoric, Howe traces the intellectual influences of the American Whig party and thus the argumentative framework which they implicitly referenced in using this language. Understanding this influence in turn provides a more nuanced understanding of the Whigs, for their identification with the country-party tradition shows them not to be a "continuation of the Federalists," as is often

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claimed because of their economic policies, but rather an extension of the Democratic

Republican party, who also strongly identified with the English Whigs. Specifically, their rhetoric

emphasizing the encroachments of the executive and on the need for balanced

constitutionalism while simultaneously urging national projects identifies them with the

thought of leading Democratic Republican James Madison, who was the "patron saint of

Whiggery" (Howe, *Political Culture of the American Whigs*, 90-91). By noting the schematic

context of Whiggish vocabulary and rhetoric, it is possible to trace their influences more

accurately. With a knowledge of the vocabulary used by a certain schema, the historian can

thus trace the influence of that schema by identifying others who take advantage of its

vocabulary and terms. Without a knowledge of both the larger ideas of a schema as well as a

knowledge of how those ideas were expressed, the significance of that language might

otherwise be lost.

　　While the schematic context of a linguistic act can be a very valuable tool for the

intellectual historian, it is also a tool that must be wielded with great care, for a mere

coincidence of vocabulary could lead a historian to draw connections that did not exist. The

schematic context of a linguistic act is best applied for pointing a historian in a particular

direction; it can indicate what a speaker or author *may* be referencing, but it might not be

explicitly clear in all cases if that possibility is actually correct. Corroboration with other sources

can provide greater strength and legitimacy towards the claims based upon the schematic

context of a linguistic act. Likewise, the other subsets of linguistic context—the historical

context and the personal context—might be used in conjunction with schematic context.

Knowing what ideas were being popularly discussed during a historical time period or what

events were occurring—the historical context—can help clarify which schema are most likely being referenced. By the same token, knowing what education, religion, or upbringing individuals had—part of their personal context—can help confirm what schematic context they truly referenced in their language. While using criteria based upon likelihood might be less certain than Skinner's criteria, it also provides a more realistic, useful model for historians, while still requiring more than mere similarity of terms.

IV.   Linguistic Context: Personal Context

Proceeding to the final subset of linguistic context, the personal context of a linguistic act can be defined as *the events, attitudes, character, or experiences particular to an individual that may shape the language and rhetoric they used*. The personal context of a linguistic act can often help reveal the subtext of a linguistic act, or the underlying meaning or tone that was intended but might not be apparent from the explicit words alone. This type of linguistic context helps fill a gap left by Steinberger's method of rational reconstruction, which, as he admits, only deals with texts that avoid "nuance, indirection, allusion, implication, insinuation, metaphor, [and] flouting" (140). Even if, as Steinberger claims, philosophical texts are scrupulously planned and always try to avoid these types of ambiguity—which in itself is an extremely dubious claim—this excludes the many other types of linguistic acts used in intellectual history which purposefully utilize these techniques (140). For historians who must contend with ambiguity in language, considering the personal context of a linguistic act can help reveal potential subtexts that would otherwise be unclear from the content of the text itself.

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As an illustration, take a statement made by Andrew Jackson during the Nullification Crisis, an event in which South Carolina's nullification doctrine (the right of a state to nullify or void an unconstitutional law) placed the state in direct conflict with the execution of federal law (Freehling, 260, 264). To avoid the potentially violent conflict that could arise from this situation, Jackson issued his Proclamation to the People of South Carolina in an attempt to refute the nullification doctrine and to persuade the people of the state to remove their support from it (267). In the Proclamation, Jackson made the comment that, when asked if strict state sovereignty is consistent with the purpose of the Union, "Every man of plain unsophisticated understanding" would give an answer consistent with the Union, while in contrast, "Metaphysical subtlety, in pursuit of an impracticable theory, could alone have devised [an answer] that is calculated to destroy [the Union]" (*State Papers on Nullification*, 80). On the surface, this statement seems to hold little beyond a passing criticism of "metaphysical subtlety" complicating otherwise plain, straightforward constitutional matters, but a knowledge of the personal contexts of the actors involved reveals it to be a criticism of John C. Calhoun of South Carolina. Calhoun was known by his peers as a skilled logician with a famed reputation as "an abstract, metaphysical thinker," and his contemporaries frequently referred to his arguments as "metaphysical" in nature (Bartlett, 155; Peterson, *The Great Triumvirate: Webster, Clay, and Calhoun*, 85, 222, 224, 275, 407; Remini, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union*, 512, 513, 514, 515). One of the most famous caricatures of Calhoun came from a polemic attack from Henry Clay in the Senate, characterizing the South Carolinian during the Nullification Crisis as "tall careworn, with furrowed brow, haggard, and intensely gazing, looking as if he were dissecting the last abstraction which sprang from the metaphysician's brain"

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(quoted in Peterson, *Olive Branch and Sword: The Compromise of 1833*, 61). Given Calhoun's

well-known and at times infamous reputation for "metaphysical" arguments, and given that he

was well known as the principal author of the nullification doctrine, it seems extremely likely

that Jackson intended his comment to be a direct reference to and criticism of Calhoun and his

nullification doctrine (Freehling, 158-159). The recent and bitter break in Jackson and Calhoun's

personal and political relationship at the time of the comment only reinforces this

interpretation (Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Democracy, 1833-1845*,

14). What at first seemed a general criticism is revealed, through the personal contexts of

Calhoun and Jackson, to be a personal attack.

Such interpretation matters, as it changes the character of the Proclamation. Throughout

the message, Jackson hardly referenced the leaders of South Carolina—at least explicitly. By not

including such an explicit criticism of the South Carolinian leadership, Jackson could claim a

certain level of decorum and better avoid alienating the people of South Carolina, who he

ultimately sought to persuade. Indirect statements like the one observed above allowed

Jackson to still express his opinions on Calhoun and the South Carolinian leaders even while

maintaining the appearance of decorum. Underneath such statements, though, was an

intention to criticize not only the South Carolinian doctrine of nullification but those who

propagated it with such zeal. These determinations help the historian establish what the

statement itself is doing, or the "performance" of the utterance, what Skinner explains may be

termed its "illocutionary force" ("Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," 45).

Adopting this term from the work of philosopher J. L. Austin, Skinner argues that determining

illocutionary force is key to textual interpretation, as it explains what the author or speaker

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meant in taking the action of writing or speaking ("Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," 45-46). For the historian concerned with determining this motive, the personal context of the linguistic act provides a means of establishing the illocutionary force of an utterance.

Such nuances of speech often may matter greatly to the historian, particularly if they are concerned with establishing illocutionary force or with uncovering the tone and character of an utterance. An understanding of the personal context of a historical actor often adds further depth to their linguistic acts, revealing subtexts or significant statements that would otherwise be overlooked. Knowledge of a historical actor's life events, attitudes, character, or experiences provides a means of sorting through indirect language lacking in Steinberger's method of rational reconstruction.

As with the schematic context, there is a certain limitation upon the claims that personal context alone provides. To claim a certain interpretation based on personal context alone is provisional—other evidence would need to be used to further corroborate the argument being made by the historian. For instance, to support the claim that Jackson's comments on "metaphysical subtlety" are meant to target Calhoun a historian might cite the resolution South Carolina introduced in response to the Proclamation accusing Jackson of "personal feelings and retaliations" against their state leaders, like Calhoun (*Gales and Seaton's Register of Debates in Congress*, 81). In such a case, other evidence can substantiate claims made on the basis of personal context. Like with schematic context, the personal context of a linguistic act can be used to point out a possible or even likely interpretation, which is validated by other evidence.

V.   The Task and Aims of History

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This point leads to a larger characterization of the task and aims of history that sheds light on the role of linguistic context in historical methodology. The project of the historian is not, as is often supposed, the transmission of facts about past actuality; rather, as philosophers of history Charles A. Beard, John Dewey, Alan Bullock, and R. G. Collingwood claim, history is the construction of narratives or arguments based not in past actuality but present evidence from the past (Beard, 140-141; Dewey, 168-169; Bullock, 293-295; Collingwood, "The Limits of Historical Knowledge," 94-95, 98; Collingwood, "The Nature and Aims of a Philosophy of History, 42-44). This is because past actuality is inaccessible to the historian, who cannot conjure up or replay past events; all that is available is the evidence of the past, the traces left behind in various forms of historical evidence (Collingwood, "The Limits of Historical Knowledge," 92-94). This evidence is necessarily limited, since it may be incomplete, inaccurate, or biased, making it unrepresentative of past actuality (92-93). Historical interpretation, then, cannot tell of "what really happened" but only "what the evidence indicates," as this is all that is available to the historian (99). Under this assessment, history becomes, to use Collingwood's metaphor, a "game" which is "won" by the historian able to show that their "view of what happened is the one which the evidence accessible to all the players [i.e., other historians], when criticised up to the hilt, supports" (97).

This is not to say, however, that the historian operates in a vacuum or arbitrarily selects whatever arrangement of evidence they find pleasing, without any reference; the historian still aims towards the ideal of accurately recapturing past actuality, even if a perfect reconstruction is impossible. In doing so, they not only look at available evidence but also at previous historical interpretations, either augmenting, amending, or rejecting past frameworks (Collingwood, "The

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Nature and Aims of a Philosophy of History," 43-44). What the individual historian offers then is

"a probable opinion, based on the available evidence" (Collingwood, "The Nature and Aims of a

Philosophy of History," 43) which represents "thought about past actuality" (Beard, 140), or,

put another way, the "intellectual reconstruction of [past] happenings" (Dewey, 196), which

responds to preexisting historical understandings of the past. The work of the historian is thus,

in its essence, to provide an argument or hypothesis on past events based upon the evidence

available. In doing this, the historian must sift through mounds of evidence to produce "a

selection and arrangement" of the evidence to craft an argument that is both coherent and

convincing to the historical community (Beard, 141; Dewey, 169). Since it is impossible for the

historian to present all of history at once using every single piece of available evidence, it

follows that, as Dewey says, "*All historical construction is necessarily selective*" (Dewey, 167).

VI.   Linguistic Context in Explicit Historical Analysis

With this understanding of the historical process and purpose, it seems folly to declare

linguistic context necessary in all cases to an explicit historical analysis, or *the publicly stated*

judgements of historical evidence and the accompanying argument presented by the historian,

as this will largely depend on the specific argument the historian is attempting to make. Skinner

claims that illocutionary force is necessary to understand the meaning of the text, in the sense

that it reveals what the author or speaker meant in taking the action of "uttering his utterance"

(Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," 46). Yet, this is only one type of

meaning that the historian may wish to analyze; it is completely conceivable that a historian

may wish to engage in the type of "recovery, explication, and evaluation" of an argument that

Steinberger advocates (144). If this second purpose is the goal of the project at hand, the

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historian may find they do not need to reference illocutionary force to make their argument

and make it convincingly, as is their task. For instance, in his book *Prelude to Civil War*, William

W. Freehling devotes a section to expounding Calhoun's theory of nullification, while also

offering brief evaluations of its logic, but he does not in this section enter a discussion of "*how*

what was said was meant" or "what *relations* there may have been between various different

statements even within the same general context," as Skinner would require ("Meaning and

Understanding in the History of Ideas," 47; Freehling, 159-172, especially 159-165). Even

without a discussion of linguistic context, Freehling's explanation of the doctrine in this one

section of the book strikes the reader as quite comprehensive and penetrating. In this case,

Freehling made a selective judgement on whether linguistic context, or in this case, specifically

illocutionary force, was necessary to his narration. Judging it to be unnecessary, he left it out.

The opposite could easily have been true though; in many other circumstances,

historians consider illocutionary force, even when their main purpose is to present the

argument of a linguistic act. This is equally true of linguistic context as more broadly defined

here in this essay. In making their argument, or laying out their explicit historical analysis, the

historian may find it unnecessary to utilize the subsets of linguistic context, namely historical,

schematic, and personal contexts. If the historian makes this selective judgement but is still

able to provide the most compelling interpretation of the available evidence, then they have

fulfilled the parameters for "winning" the "game" of historical interpretation as laid out by

Collingwood ("The Limits of Historical Knowledge," 97-98). From this perspective, linguistic

context is not absolutely necessary, and its use depends on the judgement of the historian on

its place in the argument at hand.

This being said, the reality of historical interpretation often shows linguistic context to be less superfluous than might be supposed from this claim. Whereas there may be circumstances where linguistic context is not *needed*, historians often find it to be a very useful and insightful piece of evidence, particularly in the field of intellectual history. It is well worth noting that every historical text or article referenced in this essay uses at least one subset of linguistic context, and most use either some mixture or all three somewhere in its explicit analysis, despite the fact that it is not the primary purpose of any of these works to inspect the language of the source used. Calvert, Remini, Meyers, Howe, Holt, Freehling, Bartlett, and Peterson—all these historians fulfill the role of what Collingwood called "the historian proper," namely, "the person who thinks historically … [by] interpreting all the available evidence with the maximum degree of critical skill" (Collingwood, "The Limits of Historical Knowledge," 99). As premier historians, they understand that the most persuasive historical accounts ignore as little evidence as possible but instead try to offer the largest practicable base of evidence for their argument. If an argument would be strengthened by the inclusion of a piece of historical evidence, it would be foolishness not to include it in the explicit historical analysis. Linguistic context as a piece of historical evidence may not be "necessary" in the strictest sense of the word, but it frequently is quite useful to the intellectual historian, making it a recurrent form of evidence in that field. Since intellectual history, in the broad sense of the field, studies the ideas of thinkers in relation to their time period and vice versa, and ideas must be communicated through some medium like language, it is only natural that the historian would pay heed to the vessel that carries the idea as an additional source of evidential support.

VII.   Linguistic Context in Implicit Historical Analysis

As alluded to earlier though, this argument applies only to the *explicit* historical analysis, or the publicly stated judgements of historical evidence and the accompanying argument presented by the historian. The case must be reexamined when considering the implicit historical analysis, or *the series of judgements which are used in evaluating historical evidence but which are excluded from a historian's present argument*. Implicit analysis precedes the explicit analysis, as the historian must first make judgements for themselves about the character of the evidence and then afterwards decide what argument to make and which pieces of evidence to use in supporting this argument. When analyzing a linguistic act specifically, the viewer must make several key judgements that cannot be avoided. They must decide if the language of an author or speaker is sincere or insincere, direct or indirect, serious or flippant; they must likewise decide the meaning of the words used in addition to any consideration of the form of the argument. These two items—the character of the language used and the meaning of the words—are most accurately determined with the help of linguistic context.

It is, of course, *possible* to pass judgement on the character of the language used in a linguistic act and the meanings of words in that same linguistic act without the use of linguistic context, but such a judgement would be void of any sort of concrete grounding. A person could walk into a library, pick a book off the shelf with no knowledge of the author or the time period in which the book was written, read it, and then proceed to offer an interpretation of that text. Even if judgements of the character of the linguistic act were not discussed in their explicit analysis, that individual would still have had to make an implicit analysis of the text, judging if the author was serious or not, determining the meanings of words, so on. With no prior

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context, these judgements would have to be made based on the individual's arbitrary impression of the text. Regardless of if these judgements end up being correct, this is no sort of basis for a professional interpretation of a linguistic act; readers studying history would surely hope and expect a greater implicit justification than an impressionistic image alone.

Of course, historians in actuality are not individuals approaching a linguistic act with no prior context whatsoever; most times, they have some predetermined expectations of the text or knowledge of the linguistic context that then is used in the implicit analysis of the text, whether that historian is cognizant of this or not. As Skinner notes, these preconceived models or "mental sets" alter how a text is received, even when the observer is completely unaware of the existence of that mental set ("Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," 6). This only serves to emphasize the point though, for often times, linguistic context becomes folded into one's mental set. Steinberger himself, opponent of linguistic context, unwittingly demonstrates how prior linguistic context can be unknowingly used in the implicit analysis of a text. In trying to refute the necessity of linguistic context, Steinberger makes the claim that a written theoretical treatise is most likely to "maximize clarity and minimize the possibility of miscommunication," and that "… in writing *Leviathan*, [Thomas] Hobbes was engaged in the activity of presenting, and defending at length a series of assertions … and that, in doing so, he sought largely to employ a language that did not require, indeed would not allow, the discovery of an illocutionary force different from the literal meaning" (141). Setting aside the assumptions this claim makes, in contending that Hobbes used language that "did not require, [and] indeed would not allow" ambiguity, Steinberger engages in precisely the type of activity that Skinner suggests is necessary: he asserts "the intention to be understood, and the intention that this

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intention be understood" in Hobbes, thus staking a claim on what Hobbes "could in practice

have been intending to communicate by the utterance of this given utterance" (Steinberger,

141; Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas, 48, 49). This is none other

than the illocutionary force Skinner advocates for. This judgement of Hobbes' intended

illocutionary force may not need to be discussed in an explicit analysis of *Leviathan*, but it is a

judgement nevertheless made in the implicit analysis and understanding of the text.

Presumably, Steinberger did not base this judgement upon random first impressions of Hobbes

but on Hobbes' profession as a philosopher and on the style he typified when writing—all

information derived from the personal context of the linguistic act.

At the root of it, when interpreting any linguistic act, a judgement must be made on

whether the text can be understood at face value or if it contains ambiguity and subtext, and if

this judgement is not to be baseless, it will likely use linguistic context in some form. Once

again, this is not to say that linguistic context is *necessary* (in the strictest sense of the word) to

the judgements inherent in the implicit analysis of a text; this is only to say that it is extremely

useful in making these judgements, and that in practical application is used more often than

not.

In applying linguistic context to historical interpretation of linguistic acts, it should be

noted that, like all types of historical evidence, it is prone to error or misapplication. As

Collingwood points out, even "the most learned and most careful historians are able to blunder

amazingly in their treatment of evidence," making the possibility of error ever present in any

historical interpretation (Collingwood, "The Limits of Historical Knowledge," 91). This is true

regardless of what source is used or what historical method is applied. Even if historians were

capable of perfectly analyzing historical evidence, it still would be insufficient, as the answers to many historical questions are gone, lost from time, unpreserved in any kind of evidence (99). Historical interpretation is, once again, a judgement made by a historian, a hypothesis to be tried in front of the historical community. Thus, when a historian applies linguistic context to their historical interpretation, it is always a tentative claim, subject to change based upon further evidence or a more penetrating analysis of the available sources.

VIII.   Conclusion

In this light, linguistic context, defined as the collection of settings or circumstances shaping a linguistic act, including the particular historical, schematic, and personal contexts which shape a speaker or writer's linguistic act, may be technically "unnecessary" to textual interpretation, but it can be and is a valuable aid to the historian and particularly to the intellectual historian, depending on the purpose of the study at hand. Linguistic context is most helpful in clarifying meanings, recreating thought, tracing its lineage, and providing insight into a statement's subtext. If these are the tasks undertaken in a historian's project, then the historian is almost certain to use one or more aspects of linguistic context; if, on the other hand, the historian undertakes a different task, the use of linguistic context in an explicit historical analysis will depend on the project itself and the judgements the historian makes upon the usefulness of that type of evidence in crafting their argument. Like other types of historical evidence, linguistic context is but one piece of evidence which may augment or be augmented by other types of evidence. Likewise, in an implicit historical analysis, it is possible for a historian to make a judgement on the character of a linguistic act without utilizing linguistic context, but it is likely to lack a strong, evidence-based foundation without

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considering this type of historical evidence. Thus, in both the explicit and implicit historical

analysis within a historical interpretation, linguistic context is not absolutely necessary in every

case, but nevertheless very valuable and often very illuminating, particularly for the intellectual

historian.

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