

## Reading as a Sociocultural Phenomenon: its Nature and Functions

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### ABSTRACT

The article analyzes reading as a sociocultural phenomenon in terms of the philosophy of culture. The purpose of the study is the identification of reading functions in contemporary culture. Research concept is defined by reading comprehension as a multifunctional phenomenon. In the course of reading genesis research it is revealed that reading performs informational and communicative, socializing, worldview, culturesaving, ideological, axiological, aesthetic, expressive, ritually applying, semiotic, educational, suggestive functions. It is proved that among the functions carried out by reading in the life of an individual (company) informational-communicative function is a leading one. The role of reading in today's culture is not only in the storage and transmission of specific information with the help of specific symbolic means, but also in the creation of etiquette regulations, moral guidelines of culture and shaping real, practically useful strategies for successful behavior. In the course of studying the nature of reading, the view on reading as a kind of topical unfolding dialogue of semantic structures of the author with the reader's semantic structures representing a certain experience of understanding the author's thoughts, and leading to the generation of reader's senses is formed. It has been shown that reading serves as a basic skill which is necessary for human life in the sociocultural environment.

### KEYWORDS

Reading, text, language, meaning, writing

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## Introduction

Addressing the identification of the nature of reading and its functions is a topical matter, as it allows to understand the issue of the genesis of culture, contributing to the understanding of the deep meaning of life. Understanding the peculiarities of reading genesis is of particular interest for modern researches of culture (Kagan, 1997 & Zapesotskiy, 1996). In the history of mankind the emergence of reading is connected with the advent of writing - a specific sign system that represents a kind of human communication, the essential feature of which is a departure from the situation "here and now" interaction, which is a form of fixation expressed in the language content

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aimed at the preservation and transfer of intellectual experience of generations. Initially, reading is determined, on the one hand, as the strategy of transmission of writing into oral speech and on the other hand, as the interpretation and application of enshrined semantic content in the specific social conditions.

Securing reading comprehension as a universal cultural mechanism in European culture turned out to be associated with a re-interpretation of reflection on language and writing undertaken in structurally-oriented linguistics (Saussure, 2011), semiotics (Peirce, 1958), philosophy of language (Wittgenstein, 1989) in the tradition of analytical philosophy. The focus of the discussion was the opposition of language and reality, speech and writing, reading and writing, as well as finding ways to overcome it. In the post-structuralist, post-modern concept reading is universalized up to culture-constituting phenomena, thus, becoming a means of cultural organization of the society (Eco, 1979; Foucault, 2002).

In spite of the existing studies of reading as a cultural attribute in contemporary philosophy, psychology and pedagogy the issue of the analysis of this phenomenon in the semiotic aspect is important. It is topical to treat reading as a specific sign system, storing and transmitting aesthetic information from generation to generation of people living in different historical epochs. Analysis of informational and communicative function of reading as a sociocultural phenomenon is especially relevant.

### Research Methods

The study of reading, understood as an attribute of culture is the main issue of the present paper. Reading phenomenon is complex, and therefore, the essence of the concept of reading may be disclosed in the context of the philosophical, cultural, psychological and sociological understanding. The research methodology is a systematic approach that allows you to consider reading as a specific hierarchical system, which is in development, that allows to form an idea of the current concept of reading a philosophical picture of the world that underlies the artistic thinking of different historical times (from the ancient world up to the present). This problem is revealed through the use of the dialectical method of investigation, having the unity and diversity of properties of the reading phenomenon, system approach and semiotic analysis, allowing to explore the use of symbolic means of education as a sociocultural system.

### Results

No doubt, reading is an important part of modern culture. In the world of technical innovations the range of reading problems is large enough and it is a complex structure. Reading and its organization was interesting for philosophers for a long time. Reading in the Socratic - Platonic interpretation is presented as an indicator of "cultivated" mind. The question of the ordering of reading as a basis for creative thinking is raised by many philosophers and writers.

Antique covenants of reasonable and proper bibliophile have found its reflection in the medieval culture where reading, writing and eloquence were inseparable. English humanist, philosopher John of Salisbury (Solsberiyskiy, 1985), noting the special civilizational mission of writing and reading, wrote that with the highest diligence it is necessary to dwell on the things that either facilitate dispensation of public life, both civil law or precepts of morality, or contribute to the body's health and soul. After all, reading always requires a person to become constantly better than himself.

In modern philosophy there is a kind of a split between "heart" and "mind" caused by the advent of printing. The majority of the philosophers of this period were dominated by the rationalist interpretation of the interaction between the mind and feelings, expressed in underlining the benefits of the mind over the emotional-volitional sphere of human life and activity.

"Enlightenment" program continued its development in the hermeneutical studies of XVIII - XIX centuries. In contrast to the idea of "pure reason" hermeneutics highlighted the need for artistic comprehension of reality. Scientific bases of hermeneutics were laid by the German philosopher W. Schleiermacher (Schleiermacher, 1998), according to which it is necessary to understand not only the literal meaning of words spoken or written, but also the personality of the author of the statement or text; the text and the context, and the creator-artist must be understood. In the works of W. Dilthey (2010) it is said about the need of introspection in the process of learning and understanding of individual texts and phenomena of life in general. W. Dilthey (2010) introduces the term "empathy" in the scientific diction. Both W. Schleiermacher and W. Dilthey (2010) taught to consider texts as written fixed expression of life; according to the scientist, its interpretation is making its way opposite to objectification in mental vitality, and then in the historical ties.

In terms of defining the essence of reading conclusions of researcher Roman Ingarden (Ingarden, 1985) are of great interest, considering reading as a two-step process in which a simple reading of the information is the first step perception of the text. It is followed, though not always, by the second stage - the stage of true understanding. It is during the second stage, there is a comprehension of the subject, about which the story narrates. The condition for such comprehension is an active readers' participation in the "filling-in" the text. He is a co-creator of the text, understanding the essence of the text, showing a high level of activity and attention.

In philosophical and hermeneutic studies an idea on the equivalence of the reader and the text, the relationship between them is understood not so much as the relationship between subject and object, but as a relationship between two entities. The reader and the text are equivalent: they are the essence of individualization of something unified. Russian philosophers wrote on such "unity". Recognition of the potential unity of the primary items and objects (specifically, the reader and the text), according to L.P. Karsavin (1991), is a condition of all cognition - in the course of reading the content of the text is converted into thoughts and feelings of the individual reader, in other words, the object properties are becoming "qualitating" ones of perceiving knowing subject.

Defining the reading as a kind of interaction between a reader and a text, you must identify the psychological nature of this interaction. The heart of the modern understanding of the essence of reading is the doctrine of the higher mental functions (conceptual thinking, conscious speech, verbal memory), represented in the works of L.S. Vygotskiy (2012) and A.N. Leontyev (2007). L.S. Vygotskiy (2012) determined that these functions originally exist as a form of external activity, derived from the forms of verbal communication between humans and are mediated by signs of language. According to L.S. Vygotskiy (2012), a word is a unit of communication and synthesis", a unit of the two basic functions of speech: communication and thinking, he determined that "the idea is not expressed in words, but completed in the word. A.N. Leontyev (2005) studied in detail the role of words in the mental development of a person: due to words people can handle things mentally, when they are absent, to perform mental activities, mental experiments; thanks to the word the human world "doubles", the word gives an opportunity to transfer experience from individual to individual and



ensures the assimilation of experience of generations. Reading is a kind of human speech activity, the formation of which is based on the other ones. Firstly, there is an establishing of audible (acoustic) and understandable speech, and then uttered (motor) one under the control of audible speech. A complex system of conditioned reflex connections between the audible uttered and understood speech is formed. Later it is becoming increasingly complicated when mastered "visible" - printed text, based on the perceived audible, spoken and understood. This mechanism is preserved in the later stages of the reader's development. The interaction of visual and articulation mechanisms in the process of perception, understanding, presenting and storing the text defines the psychological nature of the various texts that are unequal in terms of values, meaning, imagery, emotionality, artistry.

Many psycholinguistic and hermeneutical studies are devoted to the problem of text understanding. A.A. Brudnyy (1998) indicates that understanding is manifested as following a certain direction, as the ability to predict, reading a text as is mounted in the minds by successive segments, relatively completed semantically. The question of search (definition) mechanisms, reflection and understanding of the text is comprehensive. Different levels and forms, characterized by various elements and parameters are highlighted in the understanding of researches. A.F. Zakirova (2006) notes that different levels of understanding differently show the relationship of subjective and objective, psychological and logical, intuitive and rational. Primary understanding (most common) only shows the understanding of the basic statements of the topic. Located on this level, the subject is able only to determine the subject of oral or written statements, but cannot reproduce its content. The next level of understanding is characterized by understanding of the progress, consistency of thought and the main argument. The highest level of understanding is defined by sense of purpose, reasons, methods and internal logic statements.

It is important that the process of learning as a constructive activity of the person is possible only through the relationship I and another. "Dialogism" opened by M.M. Bakhtin (1988), is the only means of knowing the truth, the recognition of being the contact with them, dialogue is understood as a universal communication, the basic principle is not only culture, but also human existence and only dialogic, the participatory installation takes another's word seriously and is able to come to it as a semantic position, as a different point of view. Mechanisms of understanding of the text in the reading process described by Bakhtin as a dialogical movement stages of understanding: the starting point is the text, movement back is previous contexts, a movement forward is the anticipation (and the beginning) of a further context. The texts are not only set for reading as a material for interpretation and understanding: understanding itself is associated with the construction of texts. The same idea is expressed by Y.M. Lotman (2010) when he writes that the text itself, taken in isolation, does not produce any new messages, in order to do it any other text should be passed through it, that is almost made when the text is "connected" to the reader who stores in memory some previous messages; when texts are mixed, "stereoscopic", "avalanche self-expansion of meaning" "creative consciousness" is formed.

Creative reading incorporates all the basic characteristics and parameters of critical thinking: 1) pronounced unique personal and spiritual activity; 2) freedom of conscious, reasonable choice of action when reading; 3) aesthetic perception as a core and an indispensable prerequisite for interest in reading, semantic orientation reading activity; 4) evidence, self-assessment of reading, based on the ability of critical judgment about the text as a phenomenon of a certain type and genre; 5) correlation of reflection on one's own experiences about the reading with judgments, experiences of other readers, critical studies, that is, other points of view. Scientists are unanimous in

the opinion that reading is a kind of actual unfolding dialogue of semantic structures of the author with the reader's semantic structures representing a certain experience of understanding the author's thoughts, and leading to the generation of reader's senses. In particular, D.A. Leontyev (2007), exploring the specificity of communication, notes that the meaning acts in psychology in three aspects, where the first of them is the aspect of the objective relationship between the subject and the world, characterized by the fact that the objects, phenomena and events are actually included in the standard world of the subject are beginning to acquire a special meaning of life for him due to the fact that they objectively are not indifferent to his life. The second aspect is this image of the world in the consciousness of the subject, one component of which is the personal sense. Finally, the third aspect is the substrate of psychological sense - unconscious mechanisms of internal regulation of life. In this aspect sensible vital relationship takes the form of semantic structures of personality, forming an integral system of life and ensure the regulation of the subject in accordance with a particular semantic logic. Therefore, the meaning is presented as a ratio that connects the vital objective attitude of the subject, the substantive content of consciousness and the structure of its operations. A "meaningful contact" is necessary to have for the complete understanding of the text, a condition which coincides with "semantic tricks" of the author and the reader.

In the understanding of the text cognitive psychology highlighted the issue of relations between the continuously updated and brought existing readers' knowledge into the text, and it is presented, in particular, by the theory of Piaget (1953), who studied the psychological mechanism of logical operations and described the origins and development of stable integral intelligence agencies (which he called a schema), consisting of parts (schemata) and that are in stable equilibrium, provided the relation between the functions of adaptation, assimilation and accommodation. Piaget (1953) pointed out that the acquisition of new knowledge, skills and experience is not a linear process, where new information summative joins are available. In his opinion, as new information or knowledge come up, a person must adapt, transform, modify it (information and knowledge), in order to adapt to holistic mental structure, system, reflecting the concept or idea. Interpretation of the new is happening in the context of the already known, the reader creates a sense of the text, using, lapping, trying on it his thoughts and values, all his experience.

Postmodern culture distinguishes a particular vision of understanding and interpretation of written texts. Coined by Jacques Derrida (1967) a concept of "deconstruction" involves restructuring the meaning of the text: the meaning is given and constituted by the fact that a new sense assesses the previously defined meaning, which is rebuilt on new foundations.

Today there is understanding of the text of culture, culture of language as symbol creating due to cultural and historical context. Researchers T.V. Lazutin & N.K. Lazutin (2015) outline the specificity of the artistic image, considering the result of individual action as a kind of way of the accumulation of spiritual experience of humanity, and the language of art conceived as an effective communication system with specific content and the ability to pass a map of the world in the minds through images (Lazutina & Lazutin, 2016).

Thus, the culture, with its sign and symbolic images, is a specific socio-cultural phenomenon in the dynamics. The text, as an important part of modern culture, requires further study.

## Discussion



The role of reading as a socially significant phenomenon is currently locked in "literacy" concept included in the World Health Organization having 12 indicators that characterize a healthy nation. According to the definition given by UNESCO in the 1950s, literacy is understood as a set of skills, including reading and writing used in a social context. UNESCO has also been proposed to use the concept of a minimum (academic) and functional literacy, where the first refers to the ability to read and write simple messages, and under the second means the literacy rate, making it possible to complete the activity with a person of the written word in a social environment. Anyway, reading is seen as fundamental, basic skills necessary for a person living in a socio-cultural environment.

Internal necessity experienced by everyone, feeling within a particular culture is cultural identity. The mechanism of cultural identity creates a "role model", i.e. develop a strategy of behavior in society, on the one hand, and on the other, it makes it possible to penetrate the core of one's own subjectivity. Considering the reading from the position of determining its value, it is necessary to identify the unity and interpenetration of its two sides - the reproductive and productive (creative) ones. This feature is determined in the light of the concept of "possession and being" of Erich Fromm (2005). Reproductive nature of reading provides a person the opportunity to purchase a certain minimum "cultural property", especially if it becomes a possession, not understanding, not being. Students are taught to read the book so that they can repeat the basic ideas of the author. It is in this sense that the students "know", for example, the ancient philosophers. People who read on the principle of being, as if talking to the author, learn to notice the contradictions in his views, to empathize with the heroes, that is, critically and creatively apply to it. A person seeking to understand the meaning of reading, acquires an internal scheme of self-cognition, and this process is unique in terms of its inability to substitute any other form of activity. In reading the text a human has thoughts, sometimes quite far from the event-factual or canvas, they are diverse, sometimes conflicting emotions. Taking into account reproductive and creative component ratios helps to reveal the peculiarities of the spiritual and practical demands in reading. Socializing role of reading is shown in the mediation between the individual and the system of values of a given society or social group. Axiological approach to reading problems focuses on value attitude to reading, its inclusion in the system of values of the individual, group, society as a whole. Despite the individual nature of the reading process, its significance is determined not only by personal attitudes, but also closely correlated with the value system of the society and the proclaimed ideal of personality.

In the context of the information society reading is a process of perception semantic information recorded on any physical medium. As a complex mental activity in conjunction with the other components of a modern information and cultural space, reading is at the intersection of cultures and computer culture with expansion of screen culture. In connection with the development of telecommunication systems, new ways of presenting information and, consequently, new ways of reading, such as reading an electronic text, which has a number of features appeared. Firstly, electronic text, not only "leads" reading, but it can also stop the further advance of the text in accordance with the educational and other criteria laid down in the program. For example, when reading with stops after the passage of the text there are questions, checking its understanding. In the case of a negative result, the reader reads the text and repeat the task, as the following excerpt of the text is closed for him. Secondly, electronic texts often have new symbols. They may be not only illustrations typical of a printed text, but videos, computer graphics. Thirdly, the electronic structure of the text can be presented in the form of hypertext. The classification of literary hypertext is very diverse and has



not been acknowledged yet. They can be divided into three groups. The first category may include conventional linear, one-dimensional texts, having a comparatively small number of connections and links similar to a book. The second one includes products with varying degrees of hyper-depth and highly branched connections, which, nevertheless, have one important feature: the presence of the main text body. The plot may have branches, links can take away from the main unit far away sometimes, but the author makes some unobtrusive main line. Degrees of freedom of the author and the reader are very high, but, in principle, the reader may limit himself to the basic version, and not interfere with the course of action. Such construction of the literary text in paper form is already very difficult for publication. Third one, the most complex and interesting category requires the reader to participate in the construction of a literary work, making the process necessarily interactive. Deep communication is so complex that two people, reading the same piece would read something completely differently. Plots, ideology and philosophy of the same product may vary to the extreme. Each reader becomes a co-author, but if wanted - a researcher of the text, a traveler along it.

Exploring reading problems in the information society, experts determine what an e-book is, what opportunities it offers; for whom and for what it is intended; where and how to read it; what advantages and disadvantages it has; what it is thought by its readers. There are fears of widespread use of information and telecommunication technologies. In particular, G.M. McLuhan (1962) notes that the space of modern information culture exists not only on the basis of the production and distribution of images - this is only one part of the relationship - but also due to the special form of information exchange - "posts - communion", the production of information products is focused, on the one hand, to satisfy the interests of the audience, but on the other, on the formation of these interests; Imposing a certain logic for a person is carried out, regardless of his desires, resulting in a kind of "amputation" of consciousness. As a consequence, it is difficult to have mature conscious attitude to reading and the formation of self-assessment of reading.

## Conclusion

By identifying the ontological foundation of modern communication, it was found that reading is a multifunctional phenomenon which requires an interdisciplinary study for its research. So in the philosophical comprehension reading is regarded as the cultural basis of human existence. Reading from a psychological point of view, is a specific type of speech activity, a kind of mental operation, comprising two interconnected processes: reading technique (visual-auditory-motor decoding the information contained in the text) and the understanding of readable text (semantic perception of the text, and sensecollection and sensecreation). In the social context reading appears as a communicative mediator between members of a social group, as an indicator of the intellectual reproduction of society.

Thus, the study highlights reading comprehension issues as a particular socio-cultural reality, which is an important part of the modern science of language and culture. Reading is a multifunctional phenomenon, we can distinguish primary and secondary reading functions. The main function of reading is informational communicative, through which the transmission of meanings of culture and connection of generations in the history of civilization is exercised. The research results are interesting for specialists in the field of philosophy, cultural studies, sociology, and psycholinguistics.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.



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