

The Conceptual Origins of Hypertext

Many people consider these forms of writing to be new, drastic and threatening. However, I would like to take the position that hypertext is fundamentally traditional and in the mainstream of literature.

Theodor H. Nelson (1980:1/14)

Abstract

With the advent of new media, hypertext has clearly shaped the way how linguists consider and analyze contemporary texts (cf. Hayles 1999, Jucker 2005). Understanding the phenomenon of hypertext in its synchronic and historic dimension is indeed necessary to grasp the full potential of the common worldviews which lie concealed in the writing spaces of today's global networks. With the emergence of digital communication, new media have triggered innovative ways of creating, reading and evaluating electronic and non-electronic texts (Manovich 1999, Hoffmann/Eisenlauer: unpublished). Consequently, linguists also need to account for these electronic texts by reconsidering some of their traditional approaches and concepts on classic textuality (e.g. text, texture, cohesion, coherence, intertextuality, etc.). If the hypertext metaphor could be usefully applied in future linguistic theories, it plainly deserves a profound insight look which encompasses its conceptual origins and terminological diffusion. In this respect, multi-linear writings can be said to pre-date the computer age. In fact, we can already detect the first predecessors of modern day hypertexts in the original writings of Plato, and structural evidence of hypertexts can be traced back to a multiplicity of sources, some of them as old as the Jewish Talmud. So, if we want to acknowledge the socio-historical impact and give consideration to the historicity of hypertext theory, we need to distinguish between the various notions of hypertext which fluctuate between the scientific disciplines. Also, the similarities and differences which hold between traditional and present concepts of hypertextuality need further comment. This paper aims to deliver an organic overview of the general hypertext definitions common to hypertext linguistics and their interrelations by evaluating current conceptions of the term against the backdrop of their historic counterparts.

