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# The Variant

Generally speaking, it is an elaboration on the same text, or a different solution to the same problem. At least, that is the definition of a variant in “Słownik Języka Polskiego PWN” [Polish Dictionary PWN – tr. JK]<sup>1</sup>. It might seem as if the explanation given above is clear enough, and would be easy to apply into an academic research method; yet, within some fields of philology, the concept appears to be quite problematic, as it presents a complex and nuanced background.

**Origin of the concept** | The concept of a variant started within the field of Classical Philology, to which we also owe the later interest in author’s manuscripts. Further research on this subject made the philologists realize that they lack certain definitions; a more precise philological take was necessary in order to enable possible relations between certain manuscripts, meaning the particular status of manuscripts popularization in ancient and medieval eras, as it was based on copying.

Let us take a closer look at the simple scheme of intertextual relations in *La Génétique des textes* by Pierre-Marc de Biasi<sup>2</sup>. Imagine we were to analyse a manuscript D, which is another copy of a text contained in manuscript A. It is not, however, a direct copy [of manuscript A]. The scribe used two other copies, which have existed besides manuscript A and D – the somewhat different manuscripts B and C. Thus, manuscripts B and C are the source text to manuscript D, and manuscript A is a source text to B and C. Within all of these copies, there are certain variances caused by problematic reading of an earlier copy, or caused by the damaged source of a manuscript paper, or a scribe’s decision to express themselves or just the simple, unintended mistakes which have happened to everyone who would transcribe any text. These various forms of message contained in the piece of writing, more or less different from the source text, were named “variants” by classical philologists.

**Modern manuscripts** | Manuscripts would gradually lose their meaning and usability after the revolution caused by Gutenberg; however, this process was a very slow one, and its development was non-aggressive. Printings were surely dominant in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Manuscripts lost the status of a primary knowledge medium, yet they still were meaningful to spreading content which was not welcomed in the primary circuit, i.e. the ones where an author would share political, social or religious opinions, especially vastly different ones from how reality was perceived by most. This way, manuscripts, in regard to the process of creating a piece of writing, became a mostly private thing. Writers’ private archives started to appear, and they became more popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

<sup>1</sup> „Variant”, Słownik Języka Polskiego [Polish Dictionary PWN – tr. JK], accessed on 30.09.2019, <https://sjp.pwn.pl/sjp/wariant;2579566.html>.

<sup>2</sup> See: Pierre-Marc de Biasi, *La Génétique des textes*, 2000 (Paris: CNRS Editions).

This research field, which has just been identified, needed a conceptual apparatus that would allow unrestricted movement in research on modern or contemporary manuscripts. The easiest solution seemed to be – even though it was not the best possible one – transferring certain definitions from the Classical Philology dictionary, which was already well established, as its research subject appeared to be exactly the same. Such simple and careless transfer of the term “variant” was discredited by French Genetic Criticism; still, the concept managed to spread amongst most European researchers early on.

**The classic understanding of “variant”** | Until now, Polish researchers understood the “variant” to be every single new edit of a piece of writing, both at the level of a rough copy, as well as later prints. Such a term could be used to describe every single change made in the analysed text: every crossed out and overwritten word, every note suggesting a different intention by the author, every single interference that overturned the meaning of a literary piece of writing. The primary claim is that a modification read by a researcher cannot bear the characteristics of a mistake, so it could be recognized as a conscious decision made by the author. Pinpointing this is not easy; the attempt to guess author’s initial “intention” turns out to be quite a problematic issue<sup>3</sup>.

In Polish textological research, the term “variant” was often interchanged with many other definitions of a similar phenomenon (i.e.: a variant, an alternation, a version, an edit) and could refer to units of various scope (from a single word up to whole chapters). Such a multitude could possibly lead to terminological chaos. Roman Loth, amongst many other researchers, tried to narrow down this diverse terminology while using previous editing practices. He claims that variants belong to the family of “side texts”, which would be every single piece of writing somehow different from the text recognized as the origin of the print<sup>4</sup>. This is how Loth describes the complexity of variants terminology:

The narrowed scope of applying [certain] names can be used with two completely synonymous phrases: “an alternation” and “a variant”. It seems to be, that editing practice is relating them solely on the level of alternations placed within a piece of writing – and a level lower than that. Hence we would not talk about two alternations (variants) of a novel or an epic poem (which we would name “two edits”), but we would talk about two (variants) of a stanza or an epilogue. And call two lower levels of a text accordingly to that: alternation of a verse, a sentence, a phrase or even a word (i.e. an epithet)<sup>5</sup>.

As we can see, this statement places the “variant” within the zone of changes made at the time of creating the text; not on a general level, but rather on the level of a [textual] detail. However, the key problem is that amongst editing practices, variants have always referred to the state of a rough copy. It is not far from the approach of academics related to one of the main fields in researching manuscript origins: specifically, the one started by Gianfranco Contini, a “variantistica”. The name itself already suggests an exquisite status of such a concept.

<sup>3</sup> For a broader take on this issue, see: Kamila Budrowska, „«Tekst kanoniczny», «intencja twórcza» i inne kłopoty. Z zagadnień terminologicznych tekstologii i edytorstwa naukowego”, *Pamiętnik Literacki* 97, nr 3 (2006): p. 109–121.

<sup>4</sup> Roman Loth, *Podstawowe pojęcia i problemy tekstologii i edytorstwa naukowego* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL, 2006), p. 122.

<sup>5</sup> Loth, op. cit., p. 123.

Alfredo Stussi, when explaining the “Italian School of Genetic Reading”, describes variants as modifications of segments in different stages of a writer’s work. These modifications can get overbuilt by any further change made within the phrase, while at the same time, they could be creating a layered variant<sup>6</sup>. Stussi understands variant as a change made in the manuscript on its lower level (that is, a paragraph, a sentence, a word).

**“Variant” in French Genetic Criticism** | French Genetic Criticism remains in opposition to the term “variant” as we have understood it until now. In the 70s, Jean Bellemin- Noël defined this concept differently. He classified it as a modification, which transforms a piece of writing into “another” piece of writing. What we can see here is a wider understanding than just a change made by the author, which would also modify the intention of a text; instead, it would be about constituting a new textual quality. However, one should not equate these modifications with revision of a text, as it does not constitute a “new” piece of writing - it is only another stage of a writer’s work<sup>7</sup>.

Pierre-Marc de Biasi, one of the main representatives of Genetic Criticism and an heir to Noël’s way of thinking, claimed that the concept taken from classical philologists does not have a rational purpose in describing a matter so fluid as an author’s rough copy. He suggests that textologists should stop naming changes within the manuscript “variants”, because the word is inadequate and loses its usefulness when compared with the distinctive research material. This is how Biasi supports his claims in *Génétiq ue des textes*:

[In] the field of research on rough drafts, schemes, sketches and so on, the genetic criticism would talk about “another repeated writing”, “stages of writing” or “the history of writing process”, but never of variants. Why? Because its main focus is modification, within which everything is still possible, and yet nothing can be predicted: what have been modified is still not a text, but it is what precludes the text itself. For a long period of time, at the stage of making [a piece of writing] nothing is certain or stable, nor is it definitive – every single created element could disappear at any time, or transform into its opposite form, or evolve at the expense of another element, or destroy the whole writing process. If so, how could we possibly talk about “variants”. Variants of what? For the lack of any constant element (*an invariant*) – and it is a rule in the world of rough drafts – the idea of variants itself loses any kind of coherency<sup>8</sup>.

Thus, the specific character of Genetic Criticism’s approach means they would focus on the evolution of a piece of writing, transferring the researcher’s attention from the end product of the work onto the “path”, which has led to said end product. This approach excludes the concept of “variants”, because during the research on the stages of the “paths”, they do not end up constituted within the final piece of writing. Too much unpredictability and the lack of stability characterises phases of the hand-writing process to allow us to think about variantivity. Zofia Mitosek, in one of the first Polish research papers on French Genetic Criticism, has already noticed that “variant” is not very popular amongst genetic critics, because it is inherently tied to the theology of a final text<sup>9</sup>. Biasi claimed

<sup>6</sup> See: Alfredo Stussi, *Edycja genetyczna „włoska”*, w *Wprowadzenie do edytorstwa i tekstologii*, tr. Mateusz Salwa, Piotr Salwa (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2011), p. 139–165, translated from Polish by Jolanta Kikiewicz.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Bellemin-Noël, *Le texte et l’avant-texte* (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1972), p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Biasi, loc. cit., p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> Zofia Mitosek, „Od dzieła do rękopisu. O francuskiej krytyce genetycznej”, *Pamiętnik Literacki* 81, no. 4 (1990): p. 397.

that we could allow the use of such problematic name only in the case of relating modifications to the final form of a piece of writing; however, it would be fake and a too far reach within the field of chronology, because it suggests "(...) establishing the existence of something not recognised by manuscripts, something they are still trying to invent"<sup>10</sup>. Such an approach is opposite to Biasi's method.

The French critic does not completely negate the concept of a "variant" and does not exclude it from the field of genetic criticism research. However, he suggests that the use of it should be more like how it was first used<sup>11</sup>. Thus, we could talk about variantivity in the case of different versions of a text, appearing in-between another editions of a piece of writing. After we cross the border of the first edition, the piece would gain the status of "point of reference", but it would not become permanently stable. It still could be modified by the author, or modified under different circumstances, but other than the rough drafts, such pieces of writing can be compared in a similar way; it is also how classical philologists would elaborate on said matter. The author of *Génétiq̄ue des textes* calls that kind of research "printing genetics". He claims that this approach would allow for the maintaining of a certain meaning the concept has, and clear up some of its terminological inaccuracies.

translated by Jolanta Kikiewicz

<sup>10</sup>Biasi, loc. cit., p. 35.

<sup>11</sup>Biasi, loc. cit., p. 36.

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# KEYWORDS

PIERRE-MARC DE BIASI

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**ABSTRACT:**

The paper focuses on the concept of a “variant”, which is deeply rooted in the fields of editing practices and literary criticism. The main goal is to show the concept the way it is understood by the classical textology and French Genetic Criticism, as well as to confront different ways of using it.

## variations

### GENETIC CRITICISM

*text genetics*

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