Worksheet 1.2: Chapter 1 – ‘texts’ in English

On page 1 of the coursebook, we have a definition of what ‘texts’ are and what they do:

‘Texts are little mirrors that reflect cultural values.’

This idea gives a good starting point for the whole course. You will be introduced to other ways of defining ‘texts’, but you may find it helpful to keep this one in your mind as you progress.

**Texts as mirrors**

Let’s first consider further the idea of texts as ‘little mirrors’. We might think of mirrors as items that allow us to check our appearance, how we look or dress. But dentists use mirrors to look at our teeth; submarine engineers use the mirrors in periscopes to see above the surface of the ocean – to see while remaining unseen! Just like mirrors, texts can have many different functions.

With this analogy (that texts are like little mirrors) we must assume that the one looking into the mirror is a reader. While every reader will have a particular way of processing and interpreting a text, the text itself may represent:

- an **objective** reality (about which all readers could reasonably agree)
- a **subjective** reality (that may be open to interpretation by each individual reader)

**Activity: Objective/subjective reality**

Read each of the following texts. Do you feel these texts mirror an **objective** reality or a **subjective** reality? Give a brief explanation of your rationale below each text.

1. ‘Some writers have so confounded society with government, as to leave little or no distinction between them; whereas they are not only different, but have different origins. Society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness; the former promotes our happiness **positively** by uniting our affections, the latter **negatively** by restraining our vices.’
   
   (from *Common Sense* by Thomas Paine, 1776)

2. ‘E=mc²’,
   
   (‘energy is equal to mass times the speed of light squared’, as argued by Albert Einstein, 1905)
3. ‘The Brain – is wider than the sky –
   For – put them side by side –
   The one the other will contain
   With ease – and You – beside – ‘
   (from Poem 608 by Emily Dickinson, 1896)

4. ‘Love is a Losing Game’
   (from Back to Black by Amy Winehouse, 2006)

5. ‘Oh! it is absurd to have a hard-and-fast rule about what one should read and what one
   shouldn’t. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn’t read’
   (from The Importance of Being Earnest by Oscar Wilde, 1895)

Texts as reflections of cultural values

Now let’s consider what we mean by ‘cultural values’. It can be agreed that cultures have values: for
example, all cultures practice a form of education that passes knowledge and skills from one
generation to another. The different ways that cultures conduct funerals is another reflection of
cultural values, whether or not all people would agree with or practice a certain ceremony.

We learn best about ‘cultural values’ by being within a given culture and talking to locals. In our
increasingly globalised world, the Internet has facilitated this exchange of knowledge—with the caveat
that Internet ‘texts’ often blur the objective and subjective realities discussed above.

Look at Text 1.7 on pages 15–18 of the coursebook. Fela Kuti is being critical of the Nigerian
government in the context of this text, and his voice is a reflection of one of several points of view. In
reading this text, we therefore gain a greater understanding of cultural values in Nigeria—including
that which allows people to criticise aspects of society!


**Activity: using the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis**

Read about the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in the side margin on pages 11–12 of the coursebook. Explore some of the concepts and practices found in your own culture. Then use this hypothesis to help you to think about how certain words or concepts are used in your culture to represent reality. Write down two or three associated values for each of the concepts listed below, and then think of some concepts of your own.

- **marriage:** fidelity, companionship, home-making

- **entertainment:**

- **facing a dilemma:**

- **citizenship:**

- **owning a pet:**

- **building monuments:**

- **________________:**

- **________________:**

- **________________:**

**Watch your language!**

The concepts in the exercise above all have colloquial equivalents: some cultures refer to ‘marriage’ as ‘getting hitched’ or ‘tying the knot’; the idea of ‘facing a dilemma’ might be described as ‘being between a rock and a hard place.’

Read the definitions of *jargon* and *idiolect* on page 8 of the coursebook, and *register* and *colloquialisms* on page 11. Then look back at the responses you’ve made on this worksheet and decide how you have expressed yourself with idioms, jargon, and formal or informal language. Feel free to add to or change what you have written in light of your raised awareness. By this process you are making a new, reflective text!