

Recommended citation

Giovanni Ciotti, Michael Kohs, Eva Wilden, Hanna Wimmer and the TNT Working Group:

‘Definition of *Paracontent*’

Link to this document: http://www.manuscript-cultures.uni-hamburg.de/papers_e.html

Published: 15.11.2018

CSMC – Occasional Paper No. 6

Definition of *Paracontent*

1. *Paracontent* is a set of visual signs (writing, images, marks) that is present in a manuscript in addition to the core-content(s).
2. It provides data either on the manuscript and/or its core-content(s). This distinguishes it from guest content(s).
3. Its three main functions are structuring, commenting, and documenting.
4. It can sometimes be assigned a predetermined place within a manuscript as well as specific properties according to the patterns of the relevant manuscript culture. These properties may range from null-highlighting over segmentation marks to elaborate visual organization.
5. It can be part of the original production plan of the manuscript in which it is found or be a later addition.
6. It can be optional or mandatory according to the patterns of a particular manuscript culture.

Commentary

1. *Paracontent* is a set of visual signs (writing, images, marks) that is present in a manuscript in addition to the core-content(s).

Core- and paracontent

Expressions such as “this manuscript contains ...” or “the content of this manuscript is ...” are ubiquitous and reveal much of how is perceived what is to be found in a specific manuscript. Usually, this would be a text, a group of texts (e.g. the Bible), a text with its commentary, but also pictures such as in sketch-books, or musical notation. This is called *core-content*.

However, a manuscript may contain further sets of visual signs related to the core-content, such as a preface, maybe written by someone else than the author of the core-text found in the manuscript, the notes of a reader or a cataloguer of the manuscript, a table of contents added maybe centuries after the production of the manuscript, a diagram, etc. This is called *paracontent*. This term is used in order to avoid ambiguities of the more familiar term *paratext* often used to refer to textual elements only.

The perception of what is the core-content in a specific manuscript is culturally determined and depends on the point of view from which a manuscript is observed, may it be the one of the producers of the manuscript or its various users across time and space. This perception may change in time. While a commentary that is always transmitted together with a text (or a specific version of that text) is usually considered as paracontent to that text, both can over time come to be regarded as a unity.

In such cases, when studying the transmission of these two texts, it may make sense to treat both texts as one core-content.

Example 1 The rules of Sanskrit grammar laid down by Kātyāyana are, from the point of view of the manuscripts in which they are found, inseparable from its commentary by Patañjali. Although these are two different texts (they are written in different styles by two clearly identified different authors) there are no manuscripts that contain only one of the two texts, thus we have to conclude that from a material point of view, i.e. from the point of view of the transmission in manuscripts of these two texts, they constitute one core-content, as witnessed by the titles found in the manuscripts which always mention Patañjali's text only.

Example 2 When Herbert of Bosham, private secretary to Thomas Becket, commissioned a lavish two-volume manuscript of Peter Lombard's Gloss on the Psalms which, essentially, is a collection of excerpts from earlier commentaries, he had several incorrect attributions corrected, not by just replacing the wrong authors' names with the correct ones, but by adding pictures of the authors in the margins and having them voice their protest on speech scrolls. One thus encounters, for instance, St Augustine pointing to a passage and saying "non ego", 'this is not me!'. The addition of pictorial paracontents here both preserves the revered author's original version and highlights Herbert's own editorial work.

Example 3 Tafsīr is a commentary on the Qur'ān. There are more than a hundred of known Tafsīr works spanning a period of 1200 years (ninth/twenty-first century). In Tafsīr manuscripts (and also in printed editions), the Qur'ān text is inseparable from its commentary (i.e. a short Qur'ānic phrase or a verse is followed by explanations). Such Tafsīr manuscripts have always include embedded text of the Qur'ān. While the relationship of both could be identified as that of core-content and paracontent, it may make sense to consider both together as one core-content.

Whether something is paracontent or core-content may in many cases only be determined based on contrastive and comparative analysis, synchronically as well as diachronically.

2. It provides data either on the manuscript and/or its core-content(s). This distinguishes it from guest content(s).

2.1 Types of Paracontent

Paracontent can provide explicit and/or implicit information about the manuscript's setting and the people who produced and used it. To modern scholars, paracontent may yield more information than that which its producers originally intended to convey. For instance, a scribal colophon intended to preserve the scribe's name and to have it included in the users' prayers may give us information about the manuscript's setting, scribal practices, the scribe's status as a cleric or layperson, the status of scribes, and so on.

Prefaces, notes, tables of contents, commentaries, titles, sub-titles, interlinear and marginal glosses, colophons, subscriptions, epigraphs, *ex-libris*, and seals, some illuminations, pictures, diagrams, and tables, and in some manuscript cultures even punctuation, diacritics, reading-aids, accentuation and marks (if not an essential part of the writing system) are paracontent (e.g. the addition of hand-written punctuation marks in Chinese block-prints by a reader). According to our definition of paracontent, page/folio numbers, quire numbers, catchwords should also be included in the list, since they provide data about manuscripts as physical objects. Manuscript cultures have their own categories to name different kinds of paracontent.

Paracontent can have a bearing on both the core-content and/or the manuscript. If a manuscript containing a poem in addition features glosses to the words perceived as difficult, these will tell us something about the core-content. The same manuscript may also contain a colophon, where one can read the name of the scribe, the date and place of production of the manuscript, etc. At the same time, paracontent can also tell us something about the manuscript, if for instance the hand that wrote those glosses can be matched with the writing of another manuscript, thus helping us to reconstruct the activity of a specific scholar.

2.2 Guest content

The term paracontent is not applicable to elements which are not linked at all to the manuscript's core-content nor provide any substantial data on the manuscript. Elements such as additional documentary notes, diary remarks, or images that do not relate to the core-content should be termed guest content.

Example 1 On Folio 10r of the Eadwine Psalter (Trinity College, Cambridge MS R.17.1) below the text we find a note about a comet that presumably could be observed in the sky at a certain time. The note declares this being an omen and features a schematic drawing of the comet and its tail. Often, this note was regarded to relate to the appearance of Halley's Comet in 1145.¹

Example 2 In the Ethiopian manuscript culture documentary texts of various kinds usually do not constitute a volume of their own, but are either inserted in the blanks and guard leaves of existing manuscripts in the course of time or are added as separate leaves or fascicules then rebound within one volume. In both cases the hosting codex, if it is a Gospel, typically takes the name of "Golden Gospel". The presence of these additional documentary texts in such Gospel codices can be considered a specific cultural pattern. The documentary texts can consist in acts granting donations, rights of inheritance and exploitation, land prerogatives and benefits, foundation charters, inventories of goods and books, any other such document concerning the institution (chiefly a monastery or a church), the place or the region where the codex is preserved, or its owner dwells, like historical records, genealogies, monastic rules, prayers, correspondence, etc.²

Example 3 Islamic manuscripts (e.g. in the Middle East, West Africa and the Northern Caucasus) were used to record external events and historical notes unrelated to any text of the manuscript. A common practice was to use flyleaves or margins of Qur'āns for writing personal notes, birth and death of family members, official deeds or recording extraordinary event.³

¹ See S. Keynes, 'The comet in the Eadwine psalter', in M.G. Gibson, T.A. Heslop, and R.W. Pfaff, eds, *The Eadwine Psalter: Text, Image, and Monastic Culture in Twelfth-Century Canterbury* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1992), 157–164.

² See A. Bausi, 'Documentary Manuscripts and Archives: The Ethiopian Evidence', in A. Straface, C. De Angelo, and A. Manzo, eds, *Labor limae. Atti in onore di Carmela Baffioni* (Napoli: Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale", Dipartimento Asia Africa e Mediterraneo, 2017), 63–80 (64).

³ See S. Molins Lliteras, 'A preliminary appraisal of Marginalia in West African Manuscripts from the Mamma Haïdara Library Collection (Timbuktu)', in A. Brigaglia and M. Nobili, eds, *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy: Islamic Manuscript Cultures in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Studies in Manuscript Cultures, 12 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 143–177 (150f.)

2.3 Borderline Cases

Depending on the research focus some sets of visual signs might be considered as being either guest content, paracontent, or neither of them. Such borderline cases are for instance:

- corrections
- doodles
- *probationes calami*.

3. Its three main functions are structuring, commenting, and documenting.

Functions of paracontent

The paracontent of a manuscript can provide data on the activities of everyone involved in the production, transmission, and use of the manuscript and its content: authors, editors, scribes, artisans, commentators, readers, sellers, owners and so on.

The three functions are:

- (a) structuring, e.g. offering navigation aids that guide the reader, such as titles and tables of contents;
- (b) commenting, e.g. glosses and annotations that offer interpretations and explanations of a text;
- (c) documenting, e.g. colophons, ownership marks, seals etc.

That means that paracontent can be useful to trace the transmission and circulation of the core-content of the manuscript and the manuscript itself, informing us on where, when, and how the manuscript was used, and possibly by whom.

4. It can sometimes be assigned a predetermined place within a manuscript as well as specific properties according to the patterns of the relevant manuscript culture, with a range from null-highlighting over segmentation marks to elaborate visual organization.

In some manuscript cultures, specific places in certain manuscript types are reserved for certain kinds of paracontent. These specific places can be left blank during a first phase of the production of the manuscript and filled up with paracontent at a later stage.

Properties that can be assigned to paracontent include type, size, style of script, and palaeographic features in general; the orientation of writing (e.g. glosses in Arabic manuscripts); frames and cartouches.

Example 1 Colophons in Arabic manuscripts may vary in their content and in form. Even if present in a manuscript, they were not always visually distinguished from the core-content. However, from the sixteenth century on, the dominant and characteristic layout for Arabic colophons was the shape of a triangle standing on its tip. Likewise, also paracontent that is not *sensu stricto* a colophon, e.g. closing formulas and blessings, can be arranged this way. The triangular form may be an imitation of the handles of a *tabula ansata*, which have the shape of key-stones.

6. It can be optional or mandatory according to the patterns of a particular manuscript culture.

Despite the possibility to label certain content as paracontent, we should be careful in assuming they may thus be optional. This may be the case where not all the copies of the same treatise may necessarily contain the same commentary. However, it is also possible that, despite being perceived as accessory, they may nevertheless be deemed mandatory. In other words, a manuscript – ontologically speaking – might not be perceived as complete by its producers and users unless it bears a particular paracontent. (Cf. the concept of *patterns* in Hanna Wimmer et al., ‘A heuristic tool for the comparative study of manuscripts from different manuscript cultures’, http://www.manuscript-cultures.uni-hamburg.de/papers_e.html , Published: March 2015.)

Example 1 Early medieval Latin Gospel Books, which played a central role in the liturgy, contain not only the four Gospels but, in addition, a set of paracontents consisting of letters written by the translator-editor of the Gospels, St Jerome, and the commissioner of the translation, Pope Damasus, introductory texts by St Jerome, canon tables preceded by an introduction by St Eusebius and supplemented by references in the margins of the Gospel pages, as well as a capitulary. While the order of the texts may occasionally vary, and they may not always be complete, they were apparently thought of as essential to a book of the four Gospels.

Core-content, paracontent and guest content can also be subject of a relational analysis in cases such as multi-layered and multiple-text manuscripts.

For further readings see P. Andrist, ‘Toward a definition of paratexts and paratextuality: The case of ancient Greek manuscripts’, in Liv Ingeborg and M. Maniaci, eds, *Bible as Notepad: Tracing Annotations and Annotation Practices in Late Antique and Medieval Biblical Manuscripts*, *Manuscripta Biblica*, 3 (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 130–149.

Recommended citation

Giovanni Ciotti, Michael Kohs, Eva Wilden, Hanna Wimmer and the TNT Working Group:

‘Definition of *Paracontent*’

Link to this document: http://www.manuscript-cultures.uni-hamburg.de/papers_e.html

Published: 15.11.2018