
**The Constant Comparison Method of Classic Grounded Theory and
the *Explication de Texte*: Connections and Differences**

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Abstract

A historical connection between classic grounded theory and the French literary analysis called *explication de texte* has been well established in the literature. However, for non-French students and scholars residing outside of France, an *explication de texte* is not well-understood. Additionally, how the analytic method relates to the constant comparison method and, by extension, classic grounded theory is not well-understood and is not documented. The objective of this article, then, is multifold. First, the goal is to explain an *explication de texte*. The next step is to present a sample *explication de texte* based on a common American nursery rhyme to understand the nuances of such an analysis. Finally, several connections and differences between an *explication de texte* and the constant comparison method and classic grounded theory are presented.

Keywords: classic grounded theory, close reading, *explication de texte*, literary analysis, constant comparison

A basic dictum in classic grounded theory is that preconceptions (Glaser, 2001, 2002, 2010, 2013) and researcher biases are not allowed. The reason for this belief is that preconceptions, along with biases—along with any description—would result in data bastardization

(Chametzky, 2022). With such modification of the data, the researcher cannot uncover the true main concern of the participants and how that concern was addressed—the primary purpose of doing a classic grounded theory study.

In an *explication de texte*, a popular method of literary analysis started in the 19th century (Perret, 2020) and is used in present-day French high schools (*lycées*); however, the infusion of personal ideas, description, as well as external information are acceptable as long as they are supported and help further the understanding of the text to be analyzed.

Based solely on these few ideas, then, it would seem that the research design and analytic method are diametrically opposed one from the other. Though the ways that information is dissected are different, connections between the method of analysis and research design exist. Given that an analysis like an *explication de texte* is not common knowledge outside of France, two rather broad goals of this article exist; the first goal is to explain what an *explication de texte* is. Then, an equally important second goal is to elucidate any heretofore unknown connections with the constant comparison method (Glaser, 1965) used in classic grounded theory.

What is an *Explication de Texte*?

The term *explication de texte* often leads many young French high school students perhaps to feel a sense of panic as they are required to do such an analysis, among other tests, to pass the French high school exit examination, known as the bac (baccalaureate). It is not surprising, therefore, that students would dread the thought of doing such a detailed, nuanced textual analysis. But, as common as the *explication de texte* is in France, students and scholars elsewhere in the world may not be familiar with such an analysis. Certainly, such an analytic presentation is not required by American high school students to graduate. Therefore, a

discussion of when an *explication de texte* is done and what the analysis is would be highly valuable.

In the French educational system, the subject of an *explication de texte* is based on the type of diploma the student will earn: philosophy, literature, etc. Thus, one student might be given an extract of Sartre or Foucault to analyze, while another might be given a poem by Valéry or Verlaine to analyze. In either situation, the type of information presented will be the same.

A broad goal of an *explication de texte* is to understand the complete extract more closely and in a more nuanced manner. By “complete” I mean not only the ideas used, but also the language and imagery presented. According to Lyraud (2018), “le commentateur se distancie du texte pour en démonter les effets, pour en comprendre le fonctionnement interne, pour en déceler les principes d’organisation” (p. 9) (translation: The commentator distances him or herself from the text to disassemble the effects of the text, to understand its internal function, to detect the organizational principles). With this close reading, the objective of an *explication de texte* is to present a “slow and careful examination of the aesthetic properties of a text” (Jarvie, 2021, p. 2).

The analysis is detailed with an important goal of explaining “le sens que le vocabulaire a dans le text et non réciter le dictionnaire” (L’étudiant, 2022, Section 2) (translation: the sense that the vocabulary has in the text and not to recite the dictionary). Presenting what is hidden by the author and how the ideas are presented (L’étudiant, 2022) are what is needed in such an analysis. To accomplish such a goal—depending on the subject area—an understanding of cultural milieu may be needed.

Additionally, the student or scholar will need to explain how one idea in the text connects to the next, as well as how ideas build upon one another (L'étudiant, 2022). Why did the author write such-and-such here? What did the author mean? How does the text demonstrate the given idea? To address these questions and to understand the internal function (Lyraud, 2018) of the words and sounds, a metalinguistic discussion involving phonology, word choice, syntax, and sound is necessary. The information presented thus far may seem rather abstract and sterile. To present these points further, there is value in presenting a short sample *explication de texte* based on an extract from an American nursery rhyme.

Doing an *Explication de Texte*

On perhaps a more myopic level, an *explication de texte* "is studying a work line by line to see exactly what is being said" (Glaser, 2008, p. 3). Though a linear textual analysis is fundamentally accurate, I view an *explication de texte* more as a type of auto-stereograph, a 2-dimensional image into which a viewer could see a heretofore hidden 3-dimensional picture (Koning & Steffen, 2022). Through analysis, a deeper "hidden 3-dimensional picture" of the text becomes evident. The goal of the *explication de texte*, then, is to create such a 3-dimensional picture of a 2-dimensional text. And to develop a 3-dimensionality of an *explication de texte* requires analysis on more than just a linear level.

To demonstrate the (almost) autostereographic perspective of what an *explication de texte* is, I will briefly look at one strophe of an American nursery rhyme, Hickory dickory dock:

Hickory, dickory, dock,

The mouse ran up the clock.

The clock struck one,

The mouse ran down,
Hickory, dickory, dock

From a broad perspective, this text is about a mouse running up and down a clock. One might wonder why a mouse would be running up and down a clock. To address this concern, there is value in examining the historical perspective of the nursery rhyme.

There is a belief, though not fully substantiated, that this nursery rhyme is based on the clock in Exeter Cathedral (Surman, 2004). Further, the hole that existed in the clock was for the mouse to use while the cat, who was employed by the cathedral, chased the rodent (Surman, 2004). This information would explain how a mouse might run up and down a clock as well as where the creature might hide from a territorial predator (Abbate, 2020). Given that cats are accustomed to routine (King, 2022), a reasonable explanation for why the mouse runs up and down the clock would be that the cat shows up regularly at one o'clock when the clock strikes one.

From a textual perspective, the five lines in this strophe can be viewed as complete since lines 1 and 5 (“Hickory, dickory, dock”) surround the complete idea that the mouse ran up and then down the clock. The first and fifth lines use high and low vowels (/i/ and /ä/ respectively) to create a balanced “tick” tock” sound. Lines two, three, and four use more open and central sounds like /o/ and the schwa. Based on these sounds, too, one might view the strophe as complete.

From an onomatopoeic perspective, the clock ticking can be present with “hickory, dickory dock” since these words rhyme with tick and tock. Similarly, the rhythm of tick-tock can also be thought of as a yin-yang where one element is balanced and completed with the

other one. The plosives (/d/ and /k/) make the onomatopoeic nature ticking of the clock more intense.

The rhyme scheme can be described as A A B C, where dock and clock rhyme. But “one” and “down” do not rhyme with each other. Thus, there is an open-endedness to this text, which causes a bit of tension that could parallel the fighting between the cat and mouse. From this simple yet detailed example, the reader should gain a clear understanding of an *explication de texte* and see how the fuller understanding of the text is presented. Likewise, in looking back at an initial reading of the five lines of the nursery rhyme compared to the more refined, “autostereographic” perspective one has now, one can hopefully easily see how the analysis is more than “studying a work line by line to see exactly what is being said” (Glaser, 2008, p. 3). From a simple five-line strophe, I have written more than a page of analysis, and more would be possible. There is value, now, to examine what the constant comparison method (Glaser, 1965) is and what connections exist between it and the *explication de texte*.

Constant Comparison Method: What is it?

On its most basic and broadest level, the constant comparison method (CCM) is an inductive way—no more and no less—to codify the qualitative analysis process (Glaser, 1965) and develop a theory. However, as a scholar studies the 1965 seminal article on the CCM by Glaser, especially in light of extensive later classic grounded theory research, a greater and deeper realization is made: CCM is a direct precursor to the classic grounded theory research design. The term “constant comparison method” serves two roles. First, the term shows what a researcher would need to do in his or her analysis; second, the term presents classic grounded theory in a bare-bones, skeletal manner. In the ensuing paragraphs, a brief overview

of the CCM will be presented before a discussion of connections and differences with the *explication de texte* can take place.

Because they are so fundamental to the CCM and to classic grounded theory, codes, and memos must be briefly defined. Codes are the one-or-two-word terms used to explain what is happening in the data. Memos are text about the codes and show any connections that may exist between codes (Chametzky, 2023; Glaser, 1998, 2011). According to Glaser (1965), four stages of the CCM exist: (a) comparing incidents, (b) integrating categories and their properties, (c) delimiting the theory, and (d) writing the theory. Each of the four stages will be discussed briefly in turn.

In the first stage, similar incidents are compared with each other. Once codes are created, memos are written on those codes and then compared one with another to help find potential connections. Such comparisons will yield more memos requiring additional comparisons (Glaser, 1965) to be made. The goal of writing these memos and comparing one with another is to enrich the various incidents (Glaser, 1965).

In the second stage, categories and their properties continue to be integrated and enriched. As memos are written and compared one with another, the codes will become increasingly descriptive and increasingly conceptual as the categories and properties become theoretically saturated (Glaser, 2001). Indeed, as memos are compared and saturated, an interchangeability of indicators (Glaser, 1998) starts to occur—a requirement to develop a rich, multivariate theory. Additionally, during this stage, the analyst will discover that some memos will collapse (Glaser, 1978) and become integrated into other memos.

In the third stage, the developing and resulting theory is taking shape and its categories are becoming theoretically saturated. Memo comparison is still taking place, and the re-

searcher is still delimiting the theory so there is a “parsimony of variables” (Glaser, 1965, p. 441) used.

In the fourth and final stage, all the written memos and all the comparisons done up to this point have helped the researcher discover the theory. Now, the memos are properly arranged and put together to “provide the content behind the categories, which are the major themes of the theory” (Glaser, 1965, p. 443).

With brief explanations of the *explication de texte* and the CCM (Glaser, 1965) accomplished, there is value now in comparing the CCM with the *explication de texte*. In the following section, four more subtle connections and differences will be presented in an attempt to shed light on previously undiscussed ideas.

CCM and the *Explication de Texte*: Connections and Differences

The way something new is created is with an idea. A person thinks, “What would the result be if things were done this new way instead of that old way?” Such a question is applicable whether one is talking about trying something new in a recipe, a new way to exercise, or a new type of analysis. The question shows a willingness to explore a new way of thinking as well as a new aspect to explore. And the beginning of classic grounded theory is no exception.

From a historical perspective, the connection between an *explication de texte* and the CCM (and, by extension, classic grounded theory) is easy. Glaser studied at Columbia for his PhD in Sociology. While there, one of his professors was Paul Lazarsfeld, who suggested the *explication de texte* as a way to see, in a linear manner, what is going on in the text (Glaser, 2008). Fortuitously, Glaser later studied literature at the Sorbonne, where he learned about and used the *explication de texte* (Simmons, 2022). According to Simmons (2022), the “ex-

explication de texte . . . led to the unique systematic analytical method of grounded theory, constant comparative analysis” (p. 32). While a linear analysis in an *explication de texte* is not directly related to the CCM (Glaser, 1965), if one applies the “what-would-the-result-be-if . . .” question, then one could understand and see how the CCM might have developed in both instances, the goal is to uncover heretofore unknown connections in the text or data and considering the idea of linearity was something that was novel at that time.

But other more subtle connections and differences exist between the *explication de texte* and the CCM (Glaser, 1965) used in classic grounded theory. In this section, I hope to discuss four specific elements: (a) opinions, description, and analogies; (b) linearity; (c) “3-dimensional/autostereographic” analysis; and (d) emic and etic perspectives.

Opinions, Descriptions, and Analogies

In an *explication de texte*, as in classic grounded theory, the goal is to understand what is happening in the specific literary “environment,” whether it is a poem, prose, or data from an interview. Thus, solely from this perspective, there is a similarity between the textual analysis and research design. However, there are important differences, too.

In an *explication de texte*, to make supported and supportable statements such as the repeated sounds in “hickory dickory dock” remind the reader of a clock ticking is acceptable. On the other hand, unsupported opinions, along with analogies and descriptions, are not valuable as such conjecture may not help explain what is going on in a suitable manner. For example, in the *explication de texte* presented earlier in this article, to describe those sounds as a heartbeat would not be acceptable as there is no connection between the sounds in the nursery rhyme and the “lub-dub” sounds of a beating heart.

Similarly, with the CCM and, by extension, classic grounded theory, when an analyst talks about an aspect of a given theory or a code in a memo, analogies, opinions, and descriptions are not permitted (Glaser, 1998, 2011, 2012) as they are not generalizable, regardless of their appeal. In classic grounded theory, the objective is not to be descriptive; the goal is to present an idea that is conceptual and not tied to a person, place, or time (Glaser, 2012).

In these two situations, the analogy, opinion, or description serves two different purposes. One may be forgiven for providing an analogy or description in an *explication de texte* as “description runs the world” (jillrhine [sic], 2010, 0:00-0:05); it is a “natural way of seeing life” (Glaser, 2011, p. 91) and is used to help explain a given element in the analysis. But such explanations are not permitted in classic grounded theory beyond perhaps an initial memo.

Linearity

In classic grounded theory, as in an *explication de texte*, a line of data can vary in size depending on many different factors (i.e., poem or prose, typed notes versus handwritten, etc.). In the research design as well as in the analysis, the idea, not the length, is what matters. Thus, a similarity exists between the research design (and the CCM) with the analysis.

Here are two examples. If I were conducting an interview using classic grounded theory and were simultaneously typing notes on a computer in Microsoft Word, a line might be approximately 6 inches long. If I were hand-writing notes during an interview, then the line lengths would be considerably shorter. There would be little value if an idea spanned two or more lines to each line with the same code. Though Glaser (2002, 2008) wrote that line-by-line analyses are done in classic grounded theory, what he meant was that an idea-by-idea analysis is done.

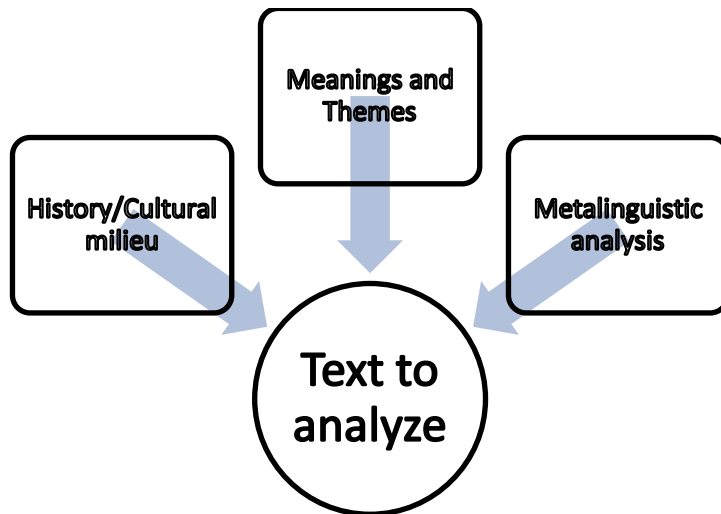
Similarly, in an *explication de texte*, a line from a poem could be approximately 3-5 words, whereas a line from an extract of prose would most probably be longer. In a poem, as in prose, an idea might last several lines, not just one. Unless there were a clear reason and objective, there would be little value in analyzing each line individually. Thus, a connection exists between the *explication de texte* and the CCM (Glaser, 1965).

“3-Dimensional/Auto-stereographic” Analysis

In an *explication de texte* as with the CCM and classic grounded theory, the objective is to offer a detailed analysis to uncover hidden elements of the text. To accomplish such an endeavor, in an *explication de texte*, the analyst would generally discuss the historical or cultural elements, present themes, explain unclear meanings, and provide various metalinguistic elements pertinent to the textual extract. Then, the analyst would relate the ideas back to the text. Inter-elemental connections, for example a relationship between the rhyme scheme and historical or cultural content and context, would generally not be made. A visual representation of an *explication de texte* is presented in the following figure (see Figure 1) showing how the various elements are unidirectional relating back to the text not to each other.

Figure 1

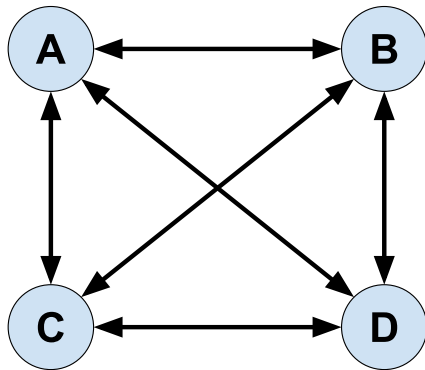
Explication de Texte Connections



Like an *explication de texte*, the goal of the CCM (Glaser, 1865) is to uncover hidden connections. However, the heretofore undiscovered connections are made between memos (and their associated codes) (Chametzky, 2013; Glaser, 1998). Additionally, in uncovering any connections between and among memos, the analyst will compare each memo with another to create a more “3-dimensional” depth to the analysis. Such depth is understandable as the broader goal is to produce categories that are rich and saturated. Thus, because of the repeated comparison of ideas found in the method by Glaser (1965), the researcher is able to get a more “3-dimensional almost auto-stereographic” perspective of the data than with an *explication de texte*. To demonstrate this point, for the sake of simplicity, I will present four codes—A, B, C, and D. In the following figure (See Figure 2), the reader can see how the four codes would be compared with each other in the CCM by Glaser (1965) to create a richer analysis than in an *explication de texte*.

Figure 2

CCM and “Auto-stereographic” Analysis



Thus, in so far as a “3-dimensional, auto-stereographic” perspective of the text is concerned, there is a connection between the CCM (and classic grounded theory) and an *explication de texte*. Yet, the extent of that 3-dimensionality is more evident in the CCM than in an *explication de texte*.

Emic and Etic Perspectives

The terms emic and etic, originally linguistic terms, are borrowed from the field of ethnography to refer to two perspectives (Mostowlansky, 2020). Emic refers to the perspective of an insider (Fetterman, 2010), while etic refers to that of an outsider; in this discussion, the outsider is the analyst or researcher. While both perspectives are valuable and important in qualitative research, each perspective requires a different perspective.

For the *explication de texte*, the analyst needs to distance him- or herself from the text (Lyraud, 2018). To take the perspective of an outsider, a researcher needs an etic perspective. Even if hypotheses are offered in the *explication de texte*, the analysis is not from the perspective of an insider.

To explain this idea further, in Hickory, Dickory, Dock, the aforementioned nursery rhyme, the reader follows the nursery rhyme unfolding from the perspective of an observer, and the analysis is presented in this same etic manner. However, if the analysis were presented from the perspective of the mouse (i.e., what the mouse heard and how and why the mouse ran up and down the clock), then an emic perspective and analysis would exist.

On the other hand, in the CCM (Glaser, 1965) and, by extension, classic grounded theory, an emic perspective (Glaser, 1998) is required and, indeed, mandatory. During a classic grounded theory study, a researcher will need to ask, “What is actually happening in the data” (Glaser, 1978, p. 57). Such a question requires an emic perspective where no opinions or external information from the researcher are offered. To incorporate any external thoughts, preconceptions, opinions, or preconceptions into the data analysis would corrupt the data (Chametzky, 2022) and result in a study that was not a classic grounded theory research design. When a researcher has external thoughts, because a tabula rasa is not possible (Glaser, 1967), they must be set aside.

Conclusion

The idea of connecting an *explication de texte* with classic grounded theory is not new; a historical connection between the two analyses is well documented (Glaser, 2008; Simmons, 2022). Yet, a deeper understanding of what an *explication de texte* is, as well as their commonalities and differences, has not been made apparent until now. Aside from the various theoretical and perhaps somewhat abstract connections presented in this article, the two analyses are clearly different one from another. Yet, the analyses are perhaps not as vastly different as one might have previously imagined. The goal of this research—to help the reader develop a more nuanced understanding of the connections and differences between the *explica-*

tion de texte and the CCM—has been attained. Such an achievement should not be minimized because new ideas can and should be created from this study. New perspectives may be considered and hypothesized. Perhaps because of these new perspectives which were stimulated by this research, the reader might ask the “what-would-the-result-be-if . . .” question and discover something else new.

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