

From Context to Contextualization

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Abstract

It seems to be a common-place enough statement to note that *language depends on context*. For example, under the notion of deixis, certain linguistic structures (i.e., deictics like *I, here, or now*) show a dependence on context that is thought to be essential. However, the relationship between language and context is far from clear and has been the centre of a debate which has gained momentum over the past ten years. The controversy begins with the question of how much in language and which parts of it are *context-dependent*, but it also, and perhaps more substantially, includes the question of how the relationship between language and context should be conceptualized in more theoretical terms. In this paper, I will follow some lines of argument of this debate. I will start with the traditional notion of context-in-language and show that it is too restrictive by listing linguistic structures beyond *deixis* which must be interpreted with reference to *context* in order to be understood properly. I will also give a typology of contextual elements (i.e., co-textual features, physical surroundings of the speech situation, social situation, participants common background knowledge and the channel or medium) which may play a role in understanding. In the second part of the paper, I will deal with the context-text link and I will try to show that the notion of *contextualization* is superior to that of *context-dependence* to account in an adequate theoretical and empirical way for this link.

Key words: Language and Context, Pragmatics, Contextualization, Deixis.

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1. Preliminaries

What is to be considered a context and what the text (more generally, the *focal event* or the object of participants' attention¹) which the context surrounds, is a question that cannot be decided on the basis of objective facts since observables do not neatly categorize themselves under these two labels. Instead, seeing something as a focal event and other things as its context is already an interpretation of the perceived stimuli in somebody's environment.

In order to underline the perceptual and interpretive character of *focal events* and *contexts*, it has been proposed to conceive of them in terms of a figure-ground relationship.² Focal events as figures are perceived according to Goodwin and Duranti (1992) as «well outlined, sharply defined, and well articulated», while contexts as grounds «appear far more amorphous, problematic, and less stable».

Another metaphor well suited to highlight the interpretive aspect of the notion of context is Husserl's *horizon* (Sinnhorizont)³ where the meaning of any event or thing cannot be understood by someone who does not properly take into account its horizon. The horizon itself dissolves as soon as we attempt to describe or analyze it; for anyone who tries to reach the horizon will only find himself in another situation which opens up yet another horizon as far out of reach as the original one.

Both the figure/ground and the horizon metaphor hold true for lay identification of *focal events* against their background or context, just as well as for linguistic theories, which usually work out the details of the linguistic datum (*the figure*), but gloss over the context (*the ground*) in which it is embedded and/or from which it receives its particular interpretation. Any attempt to move a part of the ground or horizon into the focus of attention will necessarily have to see this focus against another ground or horizon in which it is now embedded, and so on.

2. The traditional point of view: deixis in language

Linguistic theories of context may be categorized along three dimensions: (a) according to the aspects of context believed to be relevant for a pragmatic analysis of language (henceforth called the *indexed features*), (b) according to the aspects of language believed to be subject to a context-bound interpretation or meaning-assignment (henceforth called *indexicals*), and finally, (c) according to the type of relationship which is believed to hold between the first and the second. Although these three dimensions are theoretically independent from each other, certain triples of indexed features, indexicals and conceptualizations of the relationship between the two have established themselves in the

1. The term is borrowed from Goodwin and Duranti (1992).

2. Goodwin and Duranti (1992: 10) and following pages.

3. Compare with Gadamer (1960/1972: 286 and following pages).

history of the discipline. A particularly important triple consists in some feature of the physical surroundings here-and-now, such as speaker, hearer, time and place (*ego/tu, hic, nunc*) as the **indexed feature**; some deictic elements of a language (such as *here, I or now*) as the **indexicals** (*denotational indexical*), and a unidirectional relationship between the two (i.e., the context determines the meaning of the linguistic utterance). These three dimensions have come to be associated with what could have been called representational theories of language.

The triple represents the most narrow theory/theories of context in linguistics, but also the one/s that has received most attention. One reason is that the relevance of context is confined to restricted areas of grammar from which it can be expelled by proper paraphrase. Schneider (1993) speaks of the *semantization* of pragmatics in this case, consisting in a translation of relevant aspects of context into expressions of the object language, which is then subject to non-pragmatic, or truth value semantics. A second reason has to do with the fact that only those linguistic utterances which cannot be assigned referential meaning unless their context-of-occurrence is taken into account are seen to be in need of a pragmatic analysis. Non-referential aspects of meaning are excluded; linguistic indexicals for these aspects of meaning are neglected. A third consideration is that the relevant indexed elements are looked upon as real world objects *out there*, to which deictic structures refer. As a consequence, context features are regarded as existent prior to and independent of speakers' linguistic activities in or relative to them. The incompatibility of such a notion of context with the above-mentioned Gestalt approach is obvious.⁴

3. Context-bound linguistic elements beyond deixis: some examples

One way to show that the previous approach to context is restrictive is by enumerating linguistic structures other than deictic expressions in their denotational function, which nevertheless index entities outside the *focal event*. What immediately comes to mind here are systems of **honorifics** which, in many languages, relate to participants' social roles; here, we may include structurally simple systems such as forms of address or the TU/VOS pronominal distinction, but also elaborate systems such as those of Japanese or Javanese, which affect major parts of the grammar and lexicon. In this case of what is sometimes misleadingly⁵ called *social deixis*, it is not a denotatum in the *real world out there* which is indexed, but rather a perceived social relationship between

4. For a thorough critique of the narrow approach to context, the reader is referred to Schneider (1993), and Silverstein (1976, 1992). According to Silverstein, the privileged position of the narrow construal of context in linguistics is related to (and even a consequence of) the semiotically based *limits of [speakers'] awareness* which biases their metalinguistic abilities towards *referential, segmental, and maximally creative* features of language.
5. The term is misleading if the notion of deixis is restricted to a denotational or referential indexical.

the speaker and the addressee, or the referent, or of all three. But, of course, not only honorifics are chosen relative to social role relationships. Variationists and interactional sociolinguists as well as linguistic anthropologists have accumulated evidence for the claim that variation permeates grammar, from phonetics up to turn-taking; this variation (including its *ideological* underpinning as part of a *habitus* in the sense of Bourdieu 1977) is partly an index of speakers' and recipients' social categories, and of the social relationship that holds between them. The selection of a variety from a repertoire - be it a style, register, dialect, vernacular, or language (code-switching) is subject to the same complex of context variables.

Another large area of linguistic structure which eschews the narrow reading of context-dependence may be subsumed under the heading of *subjectivity*.⁶ Contrary to the narrow reading of context in which speakers enter only to the degree that they fix the *here-now-and-there* for denotational action, the impact of the speaking subject under this view extends to how his or her life-world, likes and dislikes, identification with persons or events referred to, is reflected in and indexed by syntax and morphology, lexicon and prosody. This is particularly clear in the case of what Jakobson (1971) has called *evidentials*, which are the grammatical or morphological means by which a speaker signals his or her commitment to the truth of a statement (e.g., the Turkish *dubitative* verbal affixes). In addition, work by Kuno (1987:203ff) and others has demonstrated how the selection of certain syntactic constructions (such as passives, subordination, sentence mood) and lexical items (certain reciprocal verbs, certain verbs of motion, and so on) can be explained by reference to the speaker's empathy. The function of prosody, particularly intonation, to display the speaker's point of view has been acknowledged since the beginnings of modern linguistics (among many others, Voloshinov 1926/ 1976). Only recently has it been shown that this expression of subjectivity in language is not individualistic and unstructured, but follows recurrent, conventionalized patterns.⁷

In addition to the speaker's *point of view*, grammatical structure also depends on and indicates the *recipient's point of view*, pragmatic distinctions such as the one between *given* and *new* information or that between *theme* and *rheme*, which have been shown to be central for word order and other syntactic phenomena such as left- and right-dislocations, capitalize on precisely this aspect of context.

Finally, syntax is an index to co-participants' *shared background knowledge*. Fillmore, Kay, and O'Connor (1988) have demonstrated this link in their analysis of the conjunction *let alone* (e.g., *I wouldn't hire Smith, let alone Jones*), which construes a scalar model of interpretation in which the second proposition expresses the answer to a factual or hypothetical question, but the

6. The term alludes to Benveniste's (1958) *subjectivité dans le langage*. Present-day terms would be *empathy*, *perspective* or *point of view*.
7. Compare with recent work by Günthner (1996), Selting (1994) on the prosody of *indignation*, *ridiculing*, *expressive assessments* and similar *emotional* aspects of language.

first proposition establishes some point of comparison, which by presupposed common knowledge is superior to the second. Without the knowledge that Smith is quite an alcoholic, and Jones even more so, the conjunction could not be understood correctly. The same argument can be made for other parts of syntax.

Dependence on shared knowledge is also found in the structure of the lexicon, where single lexical items point to others to which they are bound by cultural convention and with which they form a semantic field (Trier 1934). In the famous mini-story *The baby cried, the mommy picked it up* discussed by Sacks (1972), a correct understanding is only possible when *mommy/baby*, but also *mommy/pick up* and *baby/cried* are seen as parts of a frame-like whole, such that mentioning one of them activates the other, or the first (*category-member*) activates the second (*category-bound activity*), respectively. The effectiveness and elegance of the working of such a *membership categorization device* depends on knowledge about the set-up of a *family*; in a culture in which only grandparents take care of the children, its interpretation would be quite different from what it is in a Western cultural context.⁸

The few examples given here may be sufficient to show that the relevance of contextual factors for the understanding of linguistic structures is not restricted to the case of deixis. When we move from grammar and lexicon to a broader (and indeed, *pragmatic*) conception of language as social action, this relevance becomes even less disputable.⁹ It is here that the *semantization* of pragmatics has failed in particularly obvious ways. Early attempts to describe the meaning of *speech acts* by relating them to underlying *performative verbs* are generally dismissed as misleading and inadequate today. The meaning of an utterance qua social activity (*Handlung*) cannot be reduced to a speaker's mental state (*intention*) to perform such an activity; nor can it be dealt with by the semantic description of a *performative verb* which seems to correspond to this mental state. Instead, it is the joint achievement of both the speaker and his or her recipient/s, to make an utterance meaningful in its context-of-occurrence. In Voloshinov's words, such an activity is not simply fit into, the result of, or caused by its context: it *resolves* it (1926/1976: 100; also compare with his materialistic notion of dialogue, Voloshinov 1927/1971).

The most radical alternative to the *semantizing* approach to context has been formulated by ethnomethodologists (Garfinkel 1967) who assume the indexicality of any linguistic (or other) activity to be *obstinately unavoidable and irremediable*, whatever *remedial actions* investigators may engage in (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970: 349). Although lay members—or professionals—may, for some reason and for some purpose, *formulate* parts of an interaction, (i.e., they may *say-in-so-many-words-what-we-are-doing*), these *accounts* them-

8. Compare with Bilmes (1993) for lexical and grammatical implicature from an ethnomethodological point of view.

9. As an early transition from the semantizing to the pragmatic point of view, note Benveniste's (1970) notion of *énonciation*.

selves display indexical features; in this way, context becomes relevant at different hierarchical levels of (meta-)linguistic action, but it can never be expelled from it. Accounts are always informed by their occasions of use.

4. Which contexts? A preliminary typology

If we are willing to accept a wide notion of context, it is useful to distinguish types of indexed entities in order to come to grips with the complexity of the sign/context interface.¹⁰ In a pre-theoretical, but intuitively plausible way, five dimensions of context suggest themselves: (a) linguistic contexts (sometimes called co-texts), (b) non-linguistic sense-data in the surroundings of the linguistic activity (the situation in a physical sense), (c) features of the social situation, (d) features of participants' common background knowledge other than (a)-(c), and (e) the channel of communication (the medium).

Links between a linguistic sign and its co-textual features have been thoroughly studied as means for establishing textual cohesion (Halliday and Hasan 1976); here, anaphoric and cataphoric pro-forms play a decisive role.¹¹ The long-standing linguistic interest in these textual functions may be a consequence of the fact that the linguistic means employed for them overlap considerably with those used for deixis.¹² Another fundamental co-textual feature is the sequencing of conversational act(ivities). Research in conversation analysis has shown that conversational activities (*moves*) prestructure (to different degrees) the following conversational slot with respect to speaker as well as activity selection. While *adjacency pairs* represent a particularly strong kind of sequential link, other activities (e.g., first parts in *action chains*) leave more alternatives for the sequentially next activity open.¹³

In the case of cohesion, as well as in that of conversational sequencing, *focal events* are related to their co-texts by a relationship of (immediate or mediate) adjacency on the same hierarchical level of text structure. What represents a co-text for a given linguistic sign may also be located on a superordinate level of linguistic structure. This is the case when utterances are parts of larger speech activities, speech events, or genres. These *larger events* will then provide the context for the *focal event*, which is embedded in them. For instance,

10. Various proposals have been made to list the different components of those aspects of *context* that may be relevant for language. Dell Hymes' SPEAKING acronym has been one of the most influential ones (Hymes 1972); other influential ones are given by Halliday (e.g., Halliday and Hasan 1985, Blom and Gumperz 1972, more recently also by Goodwin and Duranti 1992 and Auer 1992). The selection and discussion of context types is necessarily restricted here to the most fundamental ones.
11. Of course, it is well known that anaphoric and cataphoric links between full forms and pro-forms are not always based on referential *continuity*.
12. For a discussion of the difference between deixis and anaphora, see Ehlich (1982). It should be noted that the parallel treatment of anaphora and cataphora is indicative of a planar, non-linear (and basically literate) visualization of language as a non-temporal, textual form.
13. See Schegloff and Sacks (1973), or Pomerantz (1975).

an utterance may be co-textually embedded as an *orientation* to a *story*. In this case, the superordinate co-text informs the organization and interpretation of the subordinate one, just as the latter contributes and, in a way, helps to *achieve* the first.

A final component of co-text which brings us to the fringes of the linguistic dimension of context is given by the intertextual relationship between texts produced on different occasions. Following Bakhtin (1986), it is well known that texts often (or, in some theories, always) respond to prior texts, and, at the same time, anticipate subsequent ones. Indeed, some linguists have proposed seeing context as yet another collection of texts indexed by the focal text. While Bakhtin's notion of intertextuality includes sequentiality in the sense of conversation analysis, the more interesting aspect of intertextuality refers to distant text relationships across situations. Here, texts may relate to actual other texts by referring or quoting them; or they may index prior traditions of formal structures in text production, as in the case of re-uses or adaptations, changes or amalgamations of one or various genres (Briggs and Baumann 1992).¹⁴

The second dimension of context is given by the **physical surroundings of the speech situation**, (i.e., the things and events in the co-participants' sensual, particularly visual, reach). Everything that can be pointed to,¹⁵ including time, may become an indexed feature of a deictic expression. The second dimension of context therefore seems to be directly linked to the *narrow* construal of context. There is, however, an alternative tradition to this rather static approach to the situational environment of speech: Malinowski (1926) first drew linguist-ethnographers' attention to a language that does not have the dignity of many written texts (i.e., being detached from the social activities of everyday life) but which is part of a stream of verbal and non-verbal activities, both of which are intertwined and depend on each other for their interpretation. His famous description of the Trobriand islanders coming back into the lagoon after a fishing expedition gives an example of such *language in action* (where the *in* refers both literally and idiomatically to *action*). Here, the verbal components of the situation as it develops in time are certainly not autonomous; and their relationship to the *context-of-situation* is far more intricate than could be analyzed on the basis of deixis alone. In fact, the verbal components are often only secondary —less essential to, less constitutive of the action than the non-verbal ones. Nevertheless, they may take on decisive importance at some points. Bühler (1934:154ff), who elaborated on this *empractic* use of language from a more linguistic perspective in his analysis of *situatio-*

14. For further reading on the link between intertextuality and the construction of discourses, see Fairclough (1992).

15. To speak of *pointing* in this case obviously requires a rather loose usage of the term, including metaphorical extensions not present in everyday language. Since Bühler (1934), *pointing* gestures such as the voice of the speaker, eye-movements or body orientation are accepted parts of deixis.

nal ellipsis (presumably without knowing Malinowski's work), aptly calls them *diacritics* on non-verbal activities.

As a third dimension of context, the **social situation** was mentioned. It includes the constellation of participants, their social roles and the social activity they are engaged in. The analysis of the different *alignments* a co-participant may establish with a particular linguistic utterance (i.e., his or her *participant role*) is one of the main topics in Goffman's work. For Goffman, a *social situation* is an *environment of mutual monitoring possibilities* within a *gathering* (1964: 135). Within such a social situation, it is not enough to distinguish *speaker* and *hearer*, as used to be done in the traditional, cybernetically based models of communication. Instead, Goffman distinguishes, on the production side, between an *animator* who is the *sound box* for the message, an *author* who is responsible for its wording, and a *principal*, a *party to whose position the words attest* (Goffman 1979). On the reception side, the *addressed recipient* and *unaddressed recipients* are ratified participants to an encounter, while *over-hearers* (*bystanders*) and *eavesdroppers* are non-ratified listeners of other people's encounters.¹⁶ Which participant role a person is in provides a context for how this person is permitted to act.

While Goffman's approach is restricted to the realm of what he calls the *interaction order*, other ethnographers and linguists (e.g., in the tradition of the *ethnography of communication*) would include participants' interactional and social roles and the type of *speech event* (e.g., medical consultation, birthday party, telephone enquiry) into a definition of the social situation as well. Interactional roles may be a function of the *speech event*; for instance, a *medical consultation* requires participants to take over, at least temporarily, the roles of *doctor* and *patient*. Other (aspects of one's) social roles, which tend to be trans-situationally more stable and which are not *eo ipso* bound to the type of speech event co-participants are engaged in, are social class, caste, ethnic affiliation, gender or age.

The fourth dimension of context —that of **participants' common background knowledge**— is of particular complexity. Research on this dimension may be located in the tradition of phenomenological approaches to the structure of the lifeworld, the essential structural principles of which have been outlined in Alfred Schütz' work;¹⁷ it has also been elaborated on in the tradition of formal pragmatics and presupposition theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986), and more recently, there have been attempts to formalize this knowledge in artificial intelligence.¹⁸

There is an obvious overlap with the previous dimensions. What has been mentioned before in a text may become an indexed feature of the co-text of a later utterance; at the same time, it is part of the situation-specific common

16. Follow-up work on these distinctions can be found in Goodwin, Ch. (1984), Goodwin, M.H. (1990) and Levinson (1988).

17. See for example Schütz & Luckmann (1976).

18. Reichman (1984), or Putnam (1988).

background knowledge participants may rely on in the production and interpretation of future activities. Similarly, social roles can only become visibly relevant for an interaction because their attributes, including rules of linguistic conduct, are part of participants' shared knowledge. Thus, underlining the knowledge aspect is sometimes just another perspective on context which focuses, not so much on objective facts as indexed objects, but rather on (inter) subjective interpretations and typifications. From this perspective, a useful distinction is one that relies on the reach or domain (*Gültigkeitsbereich*) of a particular piece of knowledge.¹⁹ Knowledge is accumulated between participants during a particular interactive episode; this very specific knowledge may be partly forgotten after the episode, or it may be partly transferred to a stock of knowledge which accumulates between these same participants in the course of their *history of interaction*. A larger *Gültigkeitsbereich* is involved when knowledge which is characteristic to a certain profession (reflected, for instance, in a professional code or *register*), a neighbourhood, a *sub-culture*, becomes a relevant context of interaction. Finally, knowledge on how to behave properly within a given (ideal) community which is shared by all its members may be invoked for the understanding of a *focal event*. Here, we reach the maximal domain within which knowledge is shared among participants, (i.e., that of common *culture*).

In the latter domain, looking at participants' background knowledge is not simply a different way of looking at the same indexed elements, but it covers an additional range of phenomena. The *culture* perspective is a central component of the Firth/Halliday tradition of linguistic research, but also of the *ethnography of communication* and other branches of anthropological linguistics.²⁰ Attempts have been made to formalize restricted components of this knowledge, using notions of *schema*, *script*, or *frame*.

The final dimension of context is that of the *channel* or *medium* in which the interaction takes place. For many, including the *Western* cultures, the technology that has had the most impact on language is writing (see Ong 1982). The influence of modern or recent technologies —such as telephone, telegamme, e-mail, automatic answering machines— is only beginning to be investigated.

19. See Kjolseth's distinction between *background*, *foreground*, *emergent grounds* and *transcendent grounds* (1972).
20. Apart from earlier treatments in the Humboldtian tradition, it is once more Malinowski whose *ethnographic view of language* was a breakthrough towards the view on language that takes culture seriously. (He claimed that language is essentially rooted in the reality of the culture, the tribal life and customs of a people, and that it cannot be explained without constant reference to these broader contexts of verbal utterance (Malinowski 1926:305).) See for example Halliday and Hasan (1985) for an overview of this tradition; for anthropological approaches to cultural contexts see Geertz (1973). Important contributions in modern linguistic anthropology towards a better understanding of cultural contexts and their relation to linguistic structure have derived from the interest in cross-cultural communication, particularly in the work of J. Gumperz (Gumperz 1982, and Gumperz (ed.) 1982).

5. The nature of the contextual link: the notion of *contextualization*

Enumerating types of contexts is more of an illustrative or heuristic endeavour than a theoretically rewarding or satisfying one. This is so because there is some justification in the claim that basically everything can become a *context* for a linguistic *focal event*. The more interesting question surely is **how** this *becoming-a-context-for-something* is accomplished. It is precisely this question which has recently moved into the forefront of pragmatic thinking.

Contrary to the narrow approach to context, recent theories see the relationship between *focal event* and *context* as a reflexive, dialectic one. This means that it is not only the *focal event* that receives its adequate interpretation from a given context; it is also the indexicals which make relevant, invoke, actualize, and maintain contextual frames. The latter point is underlined in Gumperz' work on *contextualization* (Gumperz 1982, 1992a; 1992 b; Auer and Di Luzio, eds., 1992). Coparticipants, so Gumperz argues, not only engage in fitting their utterances into contexts existing prior to and independent from their verbal and non-verbal activities; a major task in making interaction work consists in additionally making these contexts jointly available through what he calls *contextualization cues*. Contrary to the unidirectional conceptualization of the text/context-link usually adopted in the *narrow* approach to context, this context is continually reshaped in time, in other words, language is not determined by context, but contributes itself in essential ways to the construction of context.

This implies that context is not given as such, but is regarded as the outcome of participants' joint efforts. It is not a collection of material or social facts (such as the interaction taking place in such-and-such locale, with such-and-such social roles), but a cognitive scheme (or model) about what is relevant for the interaction at any given point in time. This scheme may exclude or include certain facts of the material and social surroundings of the interaction as they might be stated by an *objective* on-looker who tries to describe context without looking at what takes place in it, but it may also include information not storable before the interaction begins, or independently of it (*brought along* vs. *brought about* context features in Hinnenkamp's terminology; see Hinnenkamp 1989). These emergent context parameters refer to types of linguistic activities not predictable from the material or social environment of the interaction at all, but also to facets of knowledge which may in fact be shared by co-participants from the very beginning, but have to be turned from invisible (and interactionally irrelevant) dispositions (potentialities) into commonly available grounds on which to conduct the interaction.

It is useful to distinguish between more and less contextualizing cue indexicals, or between *relatively presupposing* and *relatively creative* ones (Silverstein 1976, 1979). A typical instance of the first kind would be local deictics (presupposing an object *out there* to which they refer), a typical instance of the second kind inclusive vs. exclusive first person plural pronouns

(creating a grouping of participants which has no necessary counterpart in the *world out there*). It is a matter of debate if an indexical can be exclusively presupposing and completely uncreative; local deictics, for instance, surely also create (in addition to presupposing) an indexed object in drawing participants' attention to something, the presence of which they may not have been aware of before.

Generally, this means that all contexts are **grounded in interactional work**. Methodologically, this groundedness of context in interactional work requires analysts to validate their claims to the relevance of contexts by showing that such interactional work has in fact been done. Contexts, then, are no *free goods* available to analysts in all sizes for the interpretation of a given text.²¹

Gumperz' perspective on context draws on prior work in *context analysis* by Bateson (1956)²² and on *frames* by Goffman (1974), but substantially takes into account the fine-grained phenomena (prosody, gesture, choice of register, variety or style), which are the material basis of all processes of contextualization; in doing so, he goes beyond the more general description of (hierarchies of) frames, towards an empirical analysis of how these frames are made to work as contexts for actual linguistic utterances. Linguistic understanding then consists of the semantic interpretation of lexico-grammatical structure together with the culture-bound interpretation of these contextualization cues, which are usually non-representational signs (see section 6 below). Nonetheless, his reflexive and interactionally grounded theory of context does not stand alone in linguistic and sociological theory.

For instance, a constructive/constructivist view of context is also advocated in ethnomethodology, which may be seen to be, among other things, a re-assessment of sociological role theory. It aims at showing that social roles have to be made relevant in interaction in order to provide the context for interpretation. (A *doctor* is not a doctor because he or she holds a diploma and a *patient* isn't a patient because s/he has entered a *doctor's office*, but both become incumbents of the complementary roles of *doctor* and *patient* because of the way in which they interact, taking on the rights and obligations of the partners in this unequal relationship). Thus, although there may be a pre-existent repertoire of possible roles people can take over in a society, one (or more) of these roles must be actualized as soon as the interaction begins, and throughout it. What has been *brought along* in terms of social background now needs to be *brought about* as the now-relevant-context, and is therefore also subvertible: *patient* and *doctor* may become *old friends* or *neighbours*, and vice versa.

21. This point has been made most rigorously by Schegloff (1987); see also Sacks (1976) and with reference to *ethnicity* as a context Moerman (1968). Divergent points of view have been stated in Labov and Fanshel (1977: 73, 30, 352) and Oevermann et al. (1979).
22. For a summary of this tradition of research and its importance for the analysis of *non-verbal* communication, see chapter two in Kendon (1990).

A similar swing-over from a unidirectional, non-reflexive notion of context towards a dynamic, flexible one has taken place in certain parts of linguistic pragmatics. For instance, Chafe's dichotomy *given/new* has replaced the older distinction between *old* and *new* information. Whereas the old/new distinction is an external one, in which the status of information is seen quasi-objectively from the point of view of the observer/linguist, the given/new distinction takes the participants' point of view: it recognizes that even old (i.e., aforementioned, or general background) information has to be made available in order to be treated as given. Many so-called topicalizing structures in syntax do precisely that: they upgrade old information to given information; thereby they construe context (instead of being determined by it). Note that the given/new distinction, although primarily used in connection with co-textual or background information, applies to deixis as well. Even the spatio-temporal surroundings cannot be taken for granted. Many (or possibly all, depending on definition) uses of deictics are in fact topicalizing, (i.e., they refer to objects in the surroundings of the speaker and hearer which have always been there in a material sense, but are only turned into given objects of context by this particular type of reference).

As a second example from pragmatic theory, Sperber and Wilson's (1986) *theory of relevance* sees context as a set of assumptions which have to be selected by the individual from a larger set of assumptions (on the perceived situation, short-term memory and long-term memory, including the whole of encyclopaedic memory). As soon as such a set has been chosen, the processing of a new utterance (comprehension) can take place; but at the same time, context formation can be revised, (i.e., assumptions can be removed or added to it). Sperber and Wilson make a point similar to Gumperz', namely, that activating a context involves an effort, just like the processing of information in this context.

Since the mid-eighties, reflexive notions of context have also become integrated into artificial intelligence. For instance, Reichman (1984) sees discourse as a hierarchical organisation of so-called context-spaces which provide the necessary information for the processing of subsequent utterances. Participants, so she argues, generate and interpret utterances in the context of these context-spaces; but at the same time, they must be able to identify the relevant (focused) context at any given moment. It is not always the immediately preceding context space which is relevant for a given utterance. Therefore, participants **attribute** focus to context spaces, omitting passages of discourse, or pointing back to distant ones, mainly by the choice of referential means. Thus, the selection of a relevant context space is as important as the processing of new information given in the light of it.

6. The semiotic nature of *contextualization cues*

As outlined in the last section, the notion of contextualization includes those verbal and nonverbal cues which contextualize language without being part

of *grammar* or *lexicon*, (e.g., prosodic, stylistic or non-verbal cues). What are the properties that make these cues useful for steering the interpretation of *what is going on*? And how are they used in the process of inferencing which leads towards such an interpretation?

First, it should be noted that cues may bundle together in time to varying degrees. There may be points in interaction where there is a dense synchronization of contextualization cues on all levels, (i.e., there is *redundancy*); at other points, it may be a singular cue which re-contextualizes the situation at hand.

In either case, contextualization cues in Gumperz' sense do not have referential (decontextualized) meaning of the kind we find in lexical entries. Thus, it is impossible to say what a *high onset (in intonation)*, *clapping hands*, *gaze aversion*, *code-switching into Italian* mean as such. On the other hand, it is often possible to come to a plausible interpretation of what is going on in a given piece of interaction, only if exactly these contextualization cues are taken into account; there can be no doubt, therefore, that these cues are meaningful in some way or other, although no referential/decontextualized meaning can be attributed to them.

The way in which this can be done is twofold. In the most simple case, contextualization cues establish **contrasts** and influence interpretation by punctuating the interaction by these contrasts. For instance, cues may oppose stretches of talk in a loud and in a low voice, in a high and in a low rate of articulation, with a wide and with a narrow pitch range, in language A and language B; they may oppose stretches of interaction during which two interactants have eye contact and those in which they haven't, or those during which an interactant leans back and those in which he or she sits upright. The mere fact of (usually abruptly) changing one (or more than one) aspect of the interaction may be enough to prompt an inference about why such a thing happens. In this process of inferencing, it is necessary to rely on information contained in the local context of the cue's occurrence. The only meaning the cue has is to *indicate otherness* (to paraphrase Jakobson's famous definition of the phoneme). The direction of the change (from one prosodic packaging, or gesture, or body position, or language, to another) is irrelevant, and dictated by the specific state the signalling resource involved is in. (For example, when loudness is *low*, a process of inferencing can only be triggered by switching to *loud*.) This first semiotic functioning of contextualization cues has been compared to a knot-in-the-handkerchief.

But many contextualizations do more than that. They establish a contrast and thereby indicate that something new is going to come, but at the same time, they restrict the number of possible plausible inferences of what this might be. They may do so on the basis of an **inherent meaning potential** which gives the direction of an inferential process. Such a direction-giving is a good deal more than what a merely contrastively used cue can achieve in the interpretation process, (i.e., more than the knot-in-the-handkerchief use of contextualization cues).

Inherent *meaning potential* may be conventionalized (arbitrary) or natural (non-arbitrary), or a mixture of both. An example for a purely conventionalized meaning potential of contextualization cues is code-switching between languages. In a given speech community, switching from language A into B may be meaningful not only because of the contrast established, but also because of the attitudes and values associated with these languages. These may differ from one community to the next, even when the same pair of languages is involved, (e.g., switching from Italian into German evokes different associations in South Tyrol than it does in a West German migrant community). What is associated with a particular language in a repertoire is a matter of conventions only and therefore arbitrary.

Many cues have a natural inherent meaning base, however. *Natural* here must be understood as having its basis in some universal requirement of human interaction, of the working of the human mind, or of the articulatory and/or auditory mechanisms involved in speech production and perception. Such natural cues do not have to be acquired by the child in and as part of a given culture; they are at the disposition of every human interactant. But although natural cues do not have to be acquired, they can be suppressed or given a counter-reading by convention. This convention, of course, has to be learned. An example is turn-final (and, by extension, sentence-final) intonation contour. There is a natural expectancy that the end of a speaker's contribution or of a syntactic unit should be marked by diminishing fundamental frequency.²³ This expectancy is based on an iconic-metaphorical relationship between *bottom / rest / termination*. In fact, unit-final intonation contours are falling in many speech communities. However, it is well known that some varieties (such as Australian English, Tyneside English, Alemannic) have rising final contours, which are to be regarded as conventionalized suspensions of the natural correlation between termination and falling contour.

Another case of a natural contextualization cue which is frequently suppressed by convention is gaze. Given the fact that human interaction is multi-channelled, a natural expectation is that more intense (or focused), or even competitive / aggressive interaction should be accompanied by eye contact, and not by gaze aversion, for eye contact both enables a full monitoring of the other's non-verbal activities, and displays this monitoring (attention). This natural correlation is used for contextualization in Western communicative cultures; in many other cultures (e.g., American Indian), however, verbal interaction must not be accompanied by frequent or permanent eye contact, even if it is an intense and highly focused one.

Thus, by their very nature as indexicals, contextualization cues *point* to the contexts they invoke or identify; in Peirce's terms, they do so 'by virtue of a relationship of contiguity. However, few indexicals are pure *indices* in Peirce's sense; usually, there is an admixture of symbolic elements (qua convention) or iconic elements (qua similarity).

23. See Bolinger (1983).

7. Conclusion

Contextualization refers to a conceptualization of the text / context-link which is capable of overcoming the limitations inherent in traditional linguistic thinking about this topic; the new notion of context—as an emerging, interactionally grounded achievement—may even shed new light on deixis, the *prototype* of the old notion. Equally important, research on *contextualization* has made it possible to link the more technical analysis of micro-phenomena of behavioural form in areas such as phonetics (intonation, rhythm, loudness, and so on) and *non-verbal communication* (gesture, gaze, proxemics) to the hermeneutically inclined analysis of conversation and similar approaches to interaction. There is a substantive body of research on this link now (among others, the collection in Auer and Di Luzio 1992) which is growing steadily. Eventually, it may be able to advance our understanding of human communication.

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