We experience social life through the central medium of verbal messages. What coordination we achieve with others depends upon the fact that we talk to each other; we write and read in graphic forms; we manually sign (as well as gesture) in the visual channel. But what do we know about how verbal messages really work? No matter what your English composition teacher might have told you, I think linguistic anthropologists have developed new light to shed on the matter.

Paradoxically enough, to understand how verbal messages do their sociocultural work, we need to think about the nonverbal practice of pantomime. This silent performance art form—which, after all, is no language in it!—consists entirely of movements of the body and its various parts in an otherwise seemingly empty space. From the flow or sequence of such movements, the mime’s audience of spectators—the mime’s addressees—come to see that the sequence of body and facial movement is tracing some culturally coherent event or recognizable experience in a determinate (if only imagined) frame of objects, populated physical spaces, and social situations that are almost—“virtually”—present, too, because the addressees project them as they try to make organized sense of the form of the movements (Figure 0.1).

A successful mime immerses her- or himself in a thickening and dense context that the spectators need to project or supply as the counterpart, the complement (with an ‘e’) of the body movements to make a whole interpretation. The body movements gradually come to perceived coherence in recognizable ways in a gradually determinate framing envelope, the necessary counterpart effect. The “text” (as we might call it) of bodily movement thus projects the surround of “context.” Reciprocally, “context” comes to encompass or frame performer and addressees as in a compatibly same or similar social space of interpretation. As an event takes shape relative to the now no longer indeterminate context, the mime can even display affect or emotion (and even instill affect and emotion in the...
spectators). The mime and her or his addressees thus achieve a kind of social relationship: They both come to be intuitively understood kinds or types of personae or characters with human feelings and understandings through the magic of what we can term the *dynamic text–context structure* that comes into being in cognitive and affective space and is transformed over event-time.

The keywords here are **text** and **context**. Keep in mind that I’ve described a structure at the center of the mime’s magic, text-coming-to-linkage-with-context: The structure emerges over the interval of performed bodily narrative in a space gradually dimensionalized with volumes, planes, lines, and points within, as well as with projectively imagined people and things that, reciprocally, render the mime’s narrative coherent for the audience. The audience “gets” the complex message that the mime endeavors to “get across” by projecting a densely structured context that no one actually sees, but everyone comes to understand must be there. Participants fill in even unnamed and, indeed, unnamable aspects of self-
and other-definitions with an astonishing uniformity and alacrity by drawing on the culture in and of the message.

This set of lectures elaborates my account of the dynamic text–context structure in real time and space as we turn to discursive interaction, interaction that centers on the unfolding of discourse, of language-in-use. We will come to see that discourse, too, works in social life as a kind of multimodal pantomime, once we make the right analytic moves to study it, a central undertaking of linguistic anthropology over the last several decades. This analytic approach will ultimately take us to chains or networks of discursive activity that are immanent in — but far exceed — particular speech events.

So what happens when two or more people — or even persons and non-human beings of some sort — participate in a discursive interaction, that is, a social interaction centering on the deployment of language or its equivalent? In one of my disciplines, linguistics, the focus is on the fact of grammar underlying one kind of regularity in discourse. Grammar is the universal condition of representational form anchoring every human communicative regime. No language lacks a grammar. In discourse, the grammar of language allows us to refer to entities and conditions in any cognizable universe. We do so as we predicate modally true states of affairs about those entities and conditions.

Linguistics also centers on the forms called sentences and their parts which give regular shape to how we go about our referring and predicating. Such grammatical shapes lurk in our utterances as templates for arrangements implicit in the uttered signals; I like to think of a grammatical analysis as like an in-depth X-ray of the actual referring-and-predicating discourse in discursive interaction. But does this really determine the message one “gets” when someone tries to “get across” a message? (To jump ahead, the answer is: no.)

By contrast, consider the “interaction” aspect of what we mean by discursive interaction, the focus of fields such as sociology, anthropology, and social psychology. As social scientists, we are interested in the ways people are not mere psychobiological organisms; we are interested in persons with many identities defined by collective societal structures and their workings. As such, individuals are organized into crosscutting groups. They instantiate or inhabit, as well, distinguishable categories of social existence in terms that they use to understand how they affect one another, in effect reflexively interpreting themselves and others. “Interaction,” then, is the cover term for all events of co-participatory coordination of the people and other beings of an imaginable social universe. Much interaction
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depends essentially on discourse; this is discursive interaction, whether face-to-face or remote.

So using language allows us to represent and communicate about the world of our experience and imagination. Language is also our social instrumentality for bringing groupness and social identities into being in the here-and-now, allowing us as persons to coordinate in such terms. We can’t pretend that language lacks its representational function. However, we can forge further to productively think about how the very same signals we use to represent also may play a critical role as the medium of social coordination – on the face of it, a very different function. In the course of communication, discourse – the processual aspect of language – unfolds, as one says, in the “social context” that it effectively brings into being. The “context” of discourse, as we can perhaps now see, is the always transformable structure of salient social identities and relationships that comes, over interactional time, to frame the ever-moving interactional here-and-now; though projected, in fact, from the “text” of discourse, “context” at every moment is that framework in which individuals socially coordinate in one or more ways.

We may start out not knowing much about an individual with whom we are interacting, and vice versa, so we make a stab at uttering something, as the top left of Figure 0.2 suggests. Our interactional partner contributes something back (a second utterance), sharpening the parameters of identity on which interaction proceeds (top-right). We make a further conversational move, perhaps even more revealing of who is involved in what, and what, therefore, must be going on socially (bottom-left). And, in kind, our counterpart’s next co-contribution about a represented world makes clear the dimensions of identity and the social consequences now possible if interaction is to proceed (bottom-right), and so on and so forth.

Such alternating turn-contributions constitute one of the elementary forms of measure or unitization of dyadic – two-co-contributor – interaction. Such alternating contributions are termed “adjacency pairs,” where what one says in, say, even-numbered positions links up with what someone else has said in odd-numbered positions, and where one says something in an odd-numbered position expecting the interlocutor to contribute an even-numbered utterance to the event. It is like a dance or, better, a practical “poetry” of turn-taking, a clear example of a principle of metricalization, of measure which, when violated, constitutes trouble the participants have to address, as we’ll see in a moment.

Just think of all the different ways we greet each other in social encounters: “Hi, how’re ya doin’?” uttered to our interlocutor contrasts markedly with “Hello; how do you do?” Note that the difference between
these otherwise equivalently uttered greetings actually plays upon the grammatical forms out of which the interrogative phrases are composed, not upon any real difference of content words (how, you, do-), but instead upon grammatical and phonetic style. Except for the grammatical variance — in grammarians’ terms, progressive aspect versus punctual, and stative versus active control — an otherwise identical question is being
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asked here. Each form of question is, moreover, compatible with the special initial greeting word, Hi or Hello as the case may be. Seeking a compatible response from the individual greeted, each variant will have set up – will have made salient and contextually real – the social reality of possibly in-play identities of self-and-other that can thus be presumed upon – that will have been “gotten across” – in whatever interaction may follow. The interlocutory partner “gets” the interactional import of the variant message by producing a compatible or non-controverting response, indicating that understanding of the social-relationship-come-into-being is mutual. “Hi, how’re ya doin’!” offers friendly “in-groupness.” “Hello; how do you do?” offers the distance of status-dependent positionality as salient in the situation, to which one had better pay attention. For students of culture, the crucial question is: which is accepted, in each instance, or contravened in the pas de deux of alternating co-participation?

As you can see, it’s not so much what one says in the way of contributing to a representation of something; it’s how one says what one says by way of such a contribution that does the work of social coordination. We can never successfully “get across” such a message until someone else “gets” it, as revealed in a confirmatory or at least non-contravening return, one that is compatibly (as we say) in the same interactionally relevant denotational register. (Imagine the uneasy, if always productive situation if someone answers the proffered first register variant, the “Hi!” form, with the second, the “Hello” form: Oops! It’s like saying, “Keep your social distance, bub, and pay attention to who I am – and who you are not!”) Only we don’t have to say this explicitly; just using the understood context-shaping variant as opposed to a register alternative does the trick.

So we can think now of discourse – using language and similar cultural signs, hand or face gestures, body stance, and the like – as the very medium of how people engage each other in social interaction. People try to compose and convey messages that they presume are, to varying degrees, “appropriate” to or allowable in the social context. People attempt to speak to the who – what – where – and – why of the social situation as defined for them up to some point in an interaction. Thus, given the purposiveness of communication, such messages are, to varying degrees, “effective” in clarifying, in maintaining, in contesting, or in transforming not only the participants, but also the social context in determinate ways – that is, if social life mediated by discourse has any regularity or normativity to it (as, empirically, it seems to).

Discourse is cumulative in time and space, to be evaluated not only in terms of semantic and logical coherence – the focus of the tradition of the Enlightenment in the West – but as well in terms of its degrees and kinds of coherence of social effect, both within and across interactional encounters.
Logical coherence of what one says is measured as an aspect of what I like to call denotational textuality, representations of an experienced or imagined world that one co-constructs in the course of communication. By contrast, when we are interested in the coherence of discourse as action in the realm of social coordination, we can study interactional textuality, how discursive forms bring about the understanding of what is happening in the cause-and-effect world of social coordination.

An account of denotation tries to answer the question “What did they say?” An account of interaction answers the question “In-and-by (denotationally) saying such-and-such using thus-and-such signs, what did they bring about in social life?” The next question becomes: How is denotational textuality, properly viewed, projected into interactional textuality? As in our example of greeting, how does how one says what one denotes come to count as what one contributes to the envelope of social life (and lives) in which communication is experienced?

Even the most carefully intended or strategized purposive acts of an individual can go astray in all kinds of ways because interacting individuals may not already be mutually coordinated as social types. The transcript in Figure 0.3 reveals that as interaction proceeds between a certain A and B, even if it seems to cause a coordination problem it can be, as it were, re-calibrated through alternate, remediating coordination of power-laden
identities. All through the magic of messages that are themselves about “getting” and “getting across” messages!

Here’s the scene of interaction. It is after-hours in some organizational headquarters, for example a suite of departmental offices in a college or university. Through a door left ajar, B walks into A’s office in the evening at the time when office-cleaning regularly happens; A is staring at a computer screen in a corner of the office. A verbalizes without looking away from the computer screen: “There’s some more trash to take out under that table over there.” B: [surprised, incredulous facial expression, frozen body stance]. A [turning to take in B]: “Oh, sorry! I thought you were the janitor!” Individual A reveals that the first turn-at-talk mistakenly ascribed an identity to B that lay behind the particular formulation – the how – of the message used. In explanation, A describes that identity to which A’s turn was directed: “I thought you were the . . .” with a status term, part of our metalevel vocabulary of social differentiation, in particular, a so-called noun of agency, a noun that denotes a status derived from someone’s habitual or institutional role to perform. In this sector of the American English cultural community, A’s meta-comment counts as an “apology plus excuse” for A’s prior turn-at-talk that reflexively recognizes it as a social faux pas on A’s part and thus invites closure and discounting of the interactional segment of which it was intended as a turn. The unit-segment of which it was a first contribution is termed an adjacency pair, you will recall, the reaction to which, contributed by B, was not talk, but was B’s stopped-in-one’s-tracks bodily reaction. An apology plus excuse for A’s prior misconstrual counts as an attempt to defuse the situation of surprise or affront on B’s part and to allow a reset, partial or complete, of the relationship between A and B for any further interaction.

What message is A apologizing for? A was simply trying to “get across” a message appropriate for an interactional context presumed to exist at that moment of utterance. A’s original turn-at-talk was offered as a “hint” that counts as a request or order for B to do something. Why did A presume, in issuing the hint-as-order, that B would know – in that projectively communicated identity – what to do? Denotationally, A’s first utterance appears to be just a statement of contextual fact, but of course a statement of contextual fact that informed B of the existence of “some more trash” – that is to say, in addition to the usual or nearby available-to-sight trash – in a perhaps unexpected or non-visible location at some remove from where the speaker then was, “under that table over there.” But note not merely some more trash; some more trash to “take out,” that is, out of A’s office, by someone: to be sure, by the addressee, B. So A is specifying a focus of
Attention for B, the extra trash A’s utterance is locating under a landmark, a certain table, in relation to which speaker and addressee then were, and formulating a purposive action to be accomplished by someone in respect of it – guess who?

Did A utter something like, “Might you please take out the trash under that table in the corner of the office?” or even, with pointing gesture, “Take out the trash under that table over there!” No. As linguistic anthropologists, we are interested in the specific form A’s message took in practice, as opposed to several possible forms, so as to discern the participants’ presumed-upon and ever thickening social context, including B’s second-turn reaction.

In American English, to any competent user of the language, what A uttered did count interactationally as a command (a directive in the interactional text) that put B in the position of having either to comply with its terms or not. A’s misguided usage has, in fact, precisely conformed to the late Susan Ervin-Tripp’s (1976) classic empirical finding that such hints-as-directives occur in the register of talk either among intimate familiares or to someone expected to conform to routine role expectations of a job or similar circumstance where identities and the presumption of associated role fulfillment are clear. How so?

In our office-cleaning example, it is important for us to recognize that A is not simply reporting a state of affairs under an office table as an interactionally irrelevant denotational text – as B certainly recognized, taken aback in the framework of this particular interactional situation by what B took, with justification, to be a directive issued by A under a presumption of mistaken identity. A had apparently been presuming upon the temporality of what goes on in the organizational site of an office building, including the habitual organizational functions like office-cleaning. Knowing only that someone has entered A’s office, A’s first utterance appears to rest on presumption of B’s stipulated role within the organization’s structure of statuses, thinking it must be the janitor. A’s presumptuous utterance points to (or, indexes) this understanding of the pre-discursive social context as the operative framework. Since A and B apparently share discursive-interactional norms (or, register norms) of the kind Ervin-Tripp identified, B has interpreted what interactional text is building in-and-by A’s utterance, and accordingly B performs “surprise” or even “shock” at A’s misidentifying presumption in uttering the directive.

Notably, B has not really responded to A’s directive in kind, either silently doing the stipulated task, doing it with a verbal signal (“no problem”; “sure thing, boss”), or offering an excuse for non-compliance.
B’s bodily communication is in effect a commentary on A’s ascriptive boo-boo, a meta-discursive or metapragmatic move, we will term it, cutting the misguided would-be effect of the prior turn off at the pass, as it were. B has thus declined to participate in the interaction under the identity A had apparently ascribed to B. (“Don’t you speak to me like that, young man/lady!” – you may have heard from an elder, at one or another time during your teen years, issuing to you a verbal metapragmatic response.) Similarly, A’s following “apology plus excuse” is, in effect, a responsive commentary on that bodily commentary by B in rejecting the presumption of A’s directive, A, as we can now see, justifies the use of the hint-as-directive utterance by revealing A’s incorrect presumption of the role-relational facts of the pre-discursive context that both A and B implicitly know as members of the culture. Both participants know the norms and how these norms are usually invoked in-and-by actual utterance in social context. And perhaps both A and B share the assumption that were B a slightly junior co-worker, A might well have said, “Might I possibly impose on you to help me by taking out that trash under the table over there?” All in conformity with the way the how of utterance, the specific syntactic formula, points to or indexes the dimensions of social context (i.e., institutional role, rank, status) relative to which one from among a whole pragmatic paradigm of variant forms is appropriate and effective.

At least A apologizes to B, with an excuse as well, a precursor to any repair or reset of the social relationship, indeed the social ranking. A’s apology is perhaps to be followed by an appropriately calibrated greeting ritual based on actual identities and mutually acceptable role relationality. This puts everyone on the proper footing in a post-workday collegial encounter framed as “dropping in to a colleague’s office after-hours” (A might, then, continue: “Good to see you, B! I was meaning to ask you about your new journal article but didn’t get a chance earlier.”)

First, it is very important to see that even in this brief exchange there is a social context that is not only presumed upon (pointed to, indexed) by the particular forms of the utterances, but is also transformed over the time of interaction as a function of each of the co-contributions to an emerging doubly organized text – both the “what-has-been-said” denotational text and the “what-has-been-done” interactional text. Second, it is clear that discourse in this turn-bound manifestation is not structured merely like a run of beads serially strung along on a chain, whether sentences or turn-utterances or whatever. Rather, there is a complex chunking of layered segments organizing text, some more closely internally structured according to what the participants contribute to unfolding metrical forms like...