

Part I

(Con)Textualizing Discourses

Introduction

We open the handbook with a section devoted to contextualization in discourse. The choice of the term “contextualization” over “context” is not casual; indeed, the chapters focus on the processual nature of achieving understanding among participants in communicative events and on the multilayered interconnections that they create among different levels of meaning, rather than attempting to define context a priori. In that sense, the work presented in Part I does not aim to be representative of the many different ways of construing context that characterize various branches of discourse studies; rather, it aims to showcase views of context that, albeit stemming from within different traditions and representing applications to diversified domains of interest, also fundamentally converge on a practice-based, interactionally oriented focus on discourse and communication. Before we delve into the themes and issues raised in the chapters, we want to highlight some of the ways in which these contemporary orientations to context connect to, and at the same time diverge from, scholarly work that has developed nuanced and process-oriented understandings of context in the past within disciplines such as ethnography of speaking, interactional sociolinguistics and anthropological linguistics.

Let us start by noting that the definition of context is one of the most complex and controversial issues in discourse studies and that profound differences exist in the ways in which this construct is operationalized within the different orientations represented in the discipline. As rightly noted by De Saint Georges (2013: 920), different views of context are often

the hallmark of orientations to the analysis of discourse. Thus, for many critical discourse analysts context is a mental representation (Van Dijk 2009), while for conversation analysts it is restricted to the linguistic environment in its sequential development and to the elements of the social world to which participants explicitly orient (Schegloff 1987). This very difficulty of delimiting the borders of the contexts within which texts and communicative acts can be understood explains many attempts at producing taxonomies of elements that may be constitutive of them in order to guide the researcher in the interpretation of meaning-making. Perhaps the most famous of these taxonomies is the SPEAKING grid produced by Hymes (1974), which described the environments within which utterances could be placed in order to explain their interpretation. Such environments included both linguistic elements (such as *genre* and *sequence*) and “extralinguistic” elements (such as *participants* and *instrumentalities*). A similar attempt at capturing the various ingredients of context can be found in Ochs’ (1979) proposal to look at contexts as defined by settings (social and spatial frameworks), behavioral environments (including bodily behavior), language and background knowledge. These taxonomic efforts reflect, on the one hand, an attempt to make aspects of what we call the context of discourse tangible and, on the other, the need – at the time in which they were produced – to show the relevance of different social and cultural organization patterns to the analysis of language. Without denying the fundamental importance of those models, especially in view of their embedding into an environment of linguistic research that was still dominated by universalistic and essentializing views of language, it must be recognized, as noted by Duranti and Goodwin (1992) in their groundbreaking volume on rethinking context, that providing precise definitions may actually be not only extremely difficult but even, to a certain extent, unproductive. In their words:

However, it does not seem possible at the present time to give a single, precise, technical definition of context and eventually we might have to accept that such a definition may not be possible . . . From our perspective, lack of a single definition, or even general agreement about what is meant by context, is not a situation that necessarily requires agreement. (1992: 2)

Certainly, as they suggest, in very general terms, defining contexts implies distinguishing focal from non-focal phenomena. Thus, the analyst needs to establish levels of relevance of different aspects of the social that are either evoked or directly brought to bear in the discourse domain and determine how meanings get recognized, what is already shared and what becomes shared through the communication itself. Analysts need to ask: how do people come to understand each other’s linguistic and communicative acts while at the same time shaping the social world through them? The work of the contributors to Part I stems from a tradition that has shifted away from static views of context both as a kind of frame

within which discourses takes place and as an environment fundamentally determined by well-defined social and cultural organizing structures. The orientation embraced by the contributors to this section reflects approaches to context as highly dynamic, shaped by different structures of knowledge and organization in the social world but also shaping them. Among the most important theoretical methodological points of reference for the reflections presented by the contributors are work of scholars in anthropology and conversation analysis such as Duranti and Goodwin, theorizations on contextualization by Gumperz in interactional sociolinguistics, and ideas proposed by Goffman on interaction and participation. Duranti and Goodwin stress the orientation to emic understandings as a central focus, that is “the importance of, first, approaching context from the perspective of an actor actively operating on the world within which he or she finds him- or herself embedded; and second, tying the analysis of context to study of the indigenous activities that participants use to constitute the culturally and historically organized worlds they inhabit” (1992: 4). As a consequence of this focus on participants, for all contributors, the study of discourse in context can happen only through ethnographic enquiry. From Gumperz (1992), they derive an emphasis on contextualization as a dynamic process in which social actors create connections between discursive elements, social categories, ideologies and common-sense understandings about identities, relations and actions. Finally, following Goffman (1974), they all take as central to the analysis of communicative practices the domain of interaction as the site where structures of action, rules of behavior, social values and identity categories get defined and negotiated. As we will see, authors bring to bear many other influences in their chapters, but the work mentioned above defines their approaches to context as nuanced, participant- and process-centered, and interactionally and ethnographically oriented.

Let us now highlight some of the major themes discussed by the contributors. The chapters present and reflect on some of the fundamental constructs that allow for an analysis of contextualization processes (with the notion of chronotope being particularly salient given its presence in different contributions), ways in which different levels or elements of context are interrelated in communication, and the role of language in relation to other repertoires of semiotic resources. Central to their reflections is also a discussion of how the relationships between simultaneity and historical embedding within contexts have been theorized.

In the Chapter 1, **Moore** focuses on three fundamental constructs that have allowed scholars in sociolinguistics and discourse studies to shift from contexts as rather static sets of spatiotemporal categories surrounding and determining the shape and interpretation of utterances to contextualization as a live, ongoing process. Through the latter, linguistic elements at different levels are related to social meanings which then become recognizable to participants in interaction but also get recycled,

recontextualized and transformed. Moore centers his discussion on indexicality and the two interrelated concepts of style and register.

He reconstructs the history of this concept through Peirce's ideas about the sign, Jakobson's work on shifters as linguistic signs with indexical properties and Silverstein's proposals about indexicality as a context-presupposing and context-creating process in which users relate utterances to social categories and, building recursively on these relations, create "orders" that reflect higher levels of ideological saturation. Such orders are revealing of widely shared social norms and expectations. Moore underscores how the shift from the focus on dialects to a focus on registers implies a turn to interaction as a central domain. In his words, "this has immediate 'methodological' implications, because it means that unlike 'dialectal' variants, 'superposed' ones must be observed *in use* in actual contexts of interaction, since they are constituted as reflexive models, as what a (culturally recognizable) type of person would say (i.e., choose from a set of 'permissible alternates') in a recognizable type of situation – or might not – and to what effect" (p. 16). The study of enregisterment has expanded the range of investigation to the ways in which linguistic resources become indexically linked with social meanings but can also be continuously reconfigured. A similar attention to process is shown, in Moore's view, by the growing interest in stylization, rather than style, as a site of linguistic mutability that allows speakers to reconfigure and recombine semiotic and linguistic resources from a variety of repertoires creating ever changing meanings. Moore points to indexicality and the interrelated concepts of style and register as central to current developments in discourse analysis that look at "how participants in discursive interaction orient to the contextualization (and recontextualization) of their own and each other's contributions to semiotically mediated communicative activities, whether these activities unfold online, offline or across these and other modalities of contact" (p. 25).

Central to **Roth-Gordon's** Chapter 2 is the discussion on how discourse analysts can articulate links between texts and different levels of context with a particular focus on the micro–macro dilemma, that is, on the ways in which local interactions can be connected to wide constructs such as ideologies, mainstream discourses and interactional practices. As thoroughly discussed in Chapter 3, this is a notoriously thorny issue within discourse studies since the way analysts approach these levels is revealing of tensions between seeing texts and discourse practices as more or less directly determined and influenced by social structures and by power relations. Roth-Gordon distinguishes among four levels of analysis – linguistic features, interactional context, ethnographic context and sociopolitical context – and argues that showing how all these levels are interconnected is a particular concern for discourse analysts working within an ethnographic tradition. Indeed, such linkages, especially the connections between the first three levels and the sociopolitical context,

are revealing of how discourses reflect and at the same time participate in the construction of the social order. In Roth-Gordon's view, it is precisely through ethnographic approaches that such interrelations can be studied and uncovered. Chapter 2 is devoted to the discussion of methodological strategies that facilitate such an approach to discourse in context and the tools that have been developed within different traditions of linguistics. Roth-Gordon focuses on Goffman's notion of participant roles, the concepts of stance and register, and the Bakhtinian notions of genre, intertextuality, voicing and chronotopes as ways of linking "local contexts" to the realms of societal norms, processes and ideologies, but she stresses that it is only through ethnography that these particular concepts can be put to use to articulate how the social informs and is informed by discourse practices.

The issues of levels of context and particularly the micro–macro dilemma are at the center of **Blommaert, Smits and Yacoubi's** Chapter 3 as well, but, as we will see, these authors take a radically different approach from that of Roth-Gordon by effectively denying the relevance of the micro–macro opposition. Like Moore, they explicitly link their approach to a view of contextualization and indexicality as key notions to connect discursive features to "relevant chunks of sociocultural knowledge" (p. 53). In their view, the micro–macro distinction reveals an orientation to discourse in which certain aspects of social life are seen as direct and others as indirect causes of linguistic conduct and in which the micro is related to the anecdotal and the unique, while the macro is taken to represent the generalizable and the stable. The authors argue that such binary opposition is unhelpful since, in fact, the macro can be found only in the observation of the small details of interaction. At the same time, the small details of interaction reveal a high degree of organization and recognizability even when communication processes seem chaotic and complex. Indeed, participants in interaction draw upon available resources that are layered and multiple but also socioculturally marked and therefore recognizable. Recognizability is based on framing, and framing happens in social environments. Blommaert, Smits and Yacoubi propose the notions of chronotopes and scales as capable of capturing some of these regularities. Chronotopes capture the particular spatiotemporal frames that make relevant specific discursive and behavioral scripts, while scales represent "reflections and expressions of how social beings experience dimensions of sociocultural reality as indexical vectors, as informing the general normative patterns that shape formats of action" (p. 59). The authors emphasize how the presence of these different processes and levels of meanings points to the need to recognize simultaneity as central to the construction and interpretation of contexts and argue that it is through recognition of the simultaneous working of different processes of contextualization that discourse analysts can tackle communication in digital environments.

Fabricio and Moita-Lopes offer in Chapter 4 yet another perspective on the micro–macro duality, but they do so from a critical discourse studies standpoint and through the analysis of how different philosophers, social scientists and linguists have reintroduced history as a central concern for language studies. Their focus is on how discourses can be understood as entrenched with different spatiotemporal parameters and the ways in which they show links to both punctual and disperse temporalities. They argue that a great deal of the theorizing around the relationships between discourse and history happened in the past in disciplines other than linguistics, for example through the work of philosophers such as Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari and through that of social theorists such as Foucault who fundamentally contributed to the analysis of how discourses are embedded in power struggles.

The authors focus the second part of the chapter on the constructs of interdiscursivity and intertextuality as key notions to demonstrate the sociohistorical embedding of discourses since they capture both the regularities of discourse meanings and structures (for example types and genres) and change. Indeed, as they argue, “because discourse practices involve the constant repetition-reactualization of prior texts, utterances, and voices, they are inherently destabilizing intertextual phenomena. Therefore, discourses and genres have the potential to materialize in new micro-recontextualizations, which may structure a social field outright” (p. 81).

Fabricio and Moita-Lopes discuss how these understandings of discourse as shaped by and shaping sociohistorical contexts have been enriched by the recent focus on mobility in discourse studies. Such focus has opened the way to the development of the constructs discussed by other authors in Part I – entextualization, scales and chronotopes – which dynamically capture both the processes of circulation and change in discourses and their articulations with diverse spaces and temporalities.

To end this section, Chapter 5 by **De Fina and Georgakopoulou** centers on how orientations to discourse that recognize the multiplicity, fragmentation, context-specificity and performativity of communication practices have revolutionized narrative analysis, particularly in relation to the study of identities. It discusses how the field has shifted from a view of stories as containers of experience to a stress on narratives as practices that are both context-shaped and context-shaping.

The chapter reviews recent work in the area, paying particular attention to ways in which identities are configured within different narrative practices with their own associated resources. Thus, De Fina and Georgakopoulou discuss a variety of constructs and areas of engagement that reflect this shift: First, they turn to small stories as encapsulating an orientation to narrative identities not only as co-constructed, fluid and profoundly contextualized but also as pointing to digital contexts as privileged points of observation of the dynamics between participants’ choices and the constraints

imposed by technological frames and surveillance mechanisms. Within such research, narrators are seen not as sole producers of identities but as engaged in constant dialogue and negotiation with audiences and affordances provided to them. Second, they note how the centrality of mobility for the study of narratives and narrators has opened the way to investigations of the narrative construction of mobile identities within different media and environments and of ways in which mobile identities are regimented and dealt with in institutional practices. They also discuss how this renewed interest in mobility has brought to light the many imbrications of narratives with space and time (for example through chronotopic constructions) and their embedding within nexi of historical and sociocultural spaces.

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1

Registers, Styles, Indexicality

Robert Moore

1.1 Introduction/Definitions

Researchers in linguistic anthropology and post-variationist sociolinguistics have over recent decades increasingly converged on a shared focus of attention: the unfolding real-time process of communicative activities that involve language – spoken/heard, written, digitally mediated – in concert with the other semiotic affordances that provide participants with the means to presume upon, and to (re-)create, the very contexts in which these forms of talk take place, with various effects in the here-and-now and beyond (see Silverstein 2017a).

Sociolinguists emerging from the confines of variationism have increasingly abandoned the operationalism and quasi-experimentalism of earlier work in favor of more ethnographically rich accounts that take note of the way that historically situated facts about sociolinguistic variation (e.g. Inoue 2004; Zhang 2017) do not just reflect but also help to constitute identities made manifest in other ways: through modes of dress, bodily practices, consumption patterns, etc.; these patterns – both linguistic and nonlinguistic (e.g. Mendoza-Denton 2008) – are often grouped by sociolinguists under the heading of *style* (see, e.g., Eckert 2003, 2012, 2018).

Linguistic anthropologists, meanwhile, have been increasingly oriented to the way that observed variation in language usage resolves itself into verbal (phonological, lexical, etc.) repertoires keyed to the interactional contours of recurring types of situation with recurring types of participant role – termed *registers*. Linguistic anthropologists have also been alert to the ways in which linguistic and semiotic resources that are by-degrees regularized and presumed upon as “normal” in some contexts are, by that very fact, ripe for creative “recycling” and reuse in other contexts, with different and sometimes surprising effects (see, e.g., Agha 2004, 2005, 2007).

All of these disciplinary and transdisciplinary realignments, I argue, result from the introduction of a single, centrally important analytic concept: *indexicality*. Developed by the American mathematician and logician Charles S. Peirce (1839–1914) and introduced into modern linguistics by Roman Jakobson ([1957]1990) – its implications developed further by Jakobson’s student Michael Silverstein (e.g. 1976, 2003) and others – the concept of *indexicality* has drawn scholarly attention to the central importance of sign forms (including expressions of ordinary language such as *I/you, here/there, this/that*, etc.) that function *not* by representing, describing or naming things in the world (including participants in discourse) but by *pointing to* them, which is to say, *indexing* them. The increasing importance of indexicality in studies of language, discourse and interaction has enabled the recent alignment of erstwhile disciplinary forms of inquiry in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology (Silverstein 2017a) and seems to be the fulcrum for much of the work now emerging at the intersection of these and other fields, including discourse studies, linguistic ethnography and applied linguistics.

1.2 Overview

As can be seen, the three concepts of *register*, *style* and *indexicality* are now rather densely interrelated in the work of scholars from several fields. In some work, the (*indexical*) phenomena discussed under the headings of *style* and *register* overlap so much in their conceptualization that the terms become near-synonyms; in other work, processes of *enregisterment* have become central to a more comprehensive theory of the nature of social relations viewed through the lens of communicative practices (e.g. Agha 2007, 2011b).

Clearly, *indexicality* is a term/concept of a more encompassing order than *register* or *style*, since it identifies the semiotic process that makes it possible for participants (and researchers) to link particular forms of speech or conduct to types of social situation and participant in these: all such linkages are by definition *indexical*, hence discussions of *register* and/or *style* are attempts to model the way that participants in interaction engage with linguistic and other semiotic and communicative resources available to them to construe the situations they find themselves in as situations of this or that *type* or category and to project themselves (and their interlocutors) as participants of this or that type or category.

These ideas, and the many projects of empirical and field-based research into communication conduct carried out under their auspices since the 1970s, did not develop in an intellectual vacuum, of course: linguistic anthropology’s turn away from a focus on cognition and classification (e.g. Conklin 1962) and toward discourse practices as central to the agentive self-positioning of actors (speakers) negotiating unstable and unequal

regimes of power and political economy (e.g. Hill 1985) responded to wider shifts in anthropology (e.g. Ortner 1984), just as sociolinguists answered Goffman's (1964) call for attention to "the neglected situation" of face-to-face interaction with ever more detailed analyses (and transcripts – see Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974).

Accordingly, then, I will first provide an overview of *indexicality*, the governing concept of this field of study, before passing on to *register(s)* and *style(s)*.

1.2.1 Indexicality

Peirce propounded his semiotic theory as a unified account of logic and cognition, "an attempt to explain the cognitive process of acquiring scientific knowledge as a pattern of communicative activity" (Parmentier 1994: 3). Three elements are crucial: (1) an object, constituted as such not because of its inherent properties but because it enters into a relationship with (2) a sign, which "stands for" it, and finally (3) an interpretant, some form of (human) consciousness that takes account of the standing-for relationship between the sign and its object. Signs are "forms of representation (verbal, graphic, gestural, etc.) which stand for, substitute for, or exhibit the object" to an observing consciousness, this last conceived by Peirce "indifferently, [as] members of a community or [as] sequential states of a single person's mind" (Parmentier 1994: 3).

With respect to the "ground" – the sign-object relationship – Peirce identified three classes of signs, which he called icons, indexes (or indices) and symbols (see Peirce 1955 for details).

Icons are signs that stand for their objects by virtue of resembling them; that is, the sign of itself possesses qualities that are similar to ("iconic" representations of) qualities possessed by the thing it stands for. Icons are "signs whose grounds involve formal resemblance" (Parmentier 1994: 17): think of a Russian *ikon*, a painted image of an Eastern Orthodox saint, with all of his or her ritual paraphernalia; or a painting of cows in the grass (sign) and actual cows in the grass (object); or the highly schematized images of male and female persons that identify gender-specific restrooms.

Indexes are signs that stand for their objects not by virtue of shared qualities (resemblance) but by virtue of the existential fact of a direct physical connection between sign and object: contiguity in space or time. Indexes are signs that in a sense emanate from their objects, are caused to exist by their objects: think of smoke (sign) and fire (object). For Peirce, indexical signs and their objects are in a relationship of "dynamical coexistence" (quoted in Hanks 1999: 124) with each other, which is how they are construed by an interpretant (or observing consciousness). An index, says Peirce, "directs attention to its object by blind compulsion" (Peirce 1931–58, Vol. 2: 306).