



Paper **208**

Context and its complications

by

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be qualified: the assumption that communication is self-evidently a human-to-human activity has been challenged by human-machine interactions, and has thus become a variable rather than a stable feature. This, of course, has numerous knock-on effects on widely used criteria in theories of meaning: intentionality, agency, (human) rationality. Even more widespread is the kind of communication on which we base our fundamental theoretical imagination is unmediated, spoken dyadic face-to-face interaction in shared physical timespace and between persons sharing massive amounts of knowledge, experience and sociocultural norms within a sedentary community (an offline conversation between similar people, in short). The online world has critically destabilized that assumption by inserting scripted, multimodal, non-simultaneous, translocally

engagement in view of changes in the world of communication. In reviewing them, we will make proposals for reimagining aspects of them and for adopting another vocabulary in our descriptions of them.

Beyond the macro and micro: recognizability and formatting

A persistent feature of discussions of context and its uses in scholarship is the use of the *ö o ketq- o cetqö* fkej qvq o { "qecukqpcnn { "vwtpgf"kp vq" c"vkc f" d { "kpugtvp i "ö o guqö"kp" dgvy ggp+0" *ö Oketqö*-contexts would then be the factors affecting and informing local, situated events: the timespace frame, the participants, the immediately and *directly* relevant social roles, the topic, cpf"uq" hqt vj 0"ö O cetqö. "kp"vwtp. " y qwnf"uvcpf" hqt"vj g" pqp nqecn. "dtqc fgt" hcevqtu"kp" y jkej"vj g" event can be situated and by which it is *indirectly* affected: the wider historical, sociocultural and political parts of the picture making (at least part of) the event understandable (see the discussion in e.g. Goffman 1964; Silverstein 1992; Cicourel 1992; Duranti 1997; Blommaert 2015a).

While such distinctions might be discursively and heuristically helpful, they are methodologically unhelpful from the perspective we formulated above. They do point to a fundamental fact: the non-unified and complex nature of context *ó any context ó* but they do so in an inaccurate way. Certainly when we become aware of the ways in which they rest on a particular sociological imagination, and of the ways in which and structure an epistemological hkgnf 0"V j g"uqekq nq i kecn" k o c i kpcvkqp"qp" y jkej"vj g" fkej qvq o { "dgvy ggp"ö o ketqö"cpf"ö o cetqö" rests is the one sketched earlier: a world in which we can separate and isolate specific aspects of social life as being the *direct* conditions for conduct *ó* the local, sedentary, individual, variable and mundane aspects *ó* while other aspects appear to only *indirectly* inflect such conditions for conduct, due to their remoteness and their stable, collective character. The first ugv"qh" hcev u" y g"eqwnf"ecnn"ö r tqeguucnö" hcevqtu. "cpf"vj g { " y qwnf"cn y c { u"dg"wpkswg. " y jkng"vj g { " qv jgtu" y qwnf"dg"ö r tqegfwtcnö. "cpf"vj g { " y quld be general. The first set would index öeq o o wpkv { ö"ó a specific small-

exception, the empirical cpf"vjg"övmgpo." y jkng"ö o cetqö" y qwnf" rkp"vq"vjg systemic, the abstract, the generalizable, the norm, the theoretical cpf"vjg"ö { rgö"Vjwu."uq-ecmgf"ö o ketq-uqeknq i kuvuö"cpf"gvj pq i tcr jgtu" y qwnf"dg" fku o kuugf"cu"uejqntu" y jqug"cvvgpvkqp . it



It is this aspect of recognizability, generating congregational work and its social outcomes, the act meaningless. Since acts are *social*, they will draw on available and accessible social resources ó from the different social positions from which we enter the action, the kinds of language and discourse we use, over the topic, to the actual things we say, hear, write or read (cf. also Briggs 2005). And even if we see that such resources are unevenly distributed, a degree of order will emerge from the action itself. The latter was exemplified in a magnificent study by Charles Goodwin (2004), in which a man who, following a stroke, had lost almost all of his linguistic capabilities was shown to engage in lengthy and complex interactions with his friends and relatives. Evidently, the absence of shared linguistic resources imposes constraints on what can happen in such forms of interaction ó resources are crucial contexts for interaction (Blommaert 2005: 58-62); but when we intend to understand what *is* happening, recognizability is the key.

Recognizability, however, is not an empty and random container. We recognize particular social situations and their features *as* something specific ó a quarrel, a lecture or a Facebook update ó on the basis of perceived properties of the situation (what Garfinkel called *framing* it along what we could call a general *indexical vector*, i.e. entering that situation as one that imposes and enables specific forms of interaction, one or different orders of indexicality. When we recognize something as a Facebook update, we recognize that it enables (among other actions) different forms of *response*, and that it imposes keyboard writing and a specific set of symbols (e.g. emoticons) as techniques for responding to it. When we recognize the particular update as an instance of trolling, we recognize it as enabling an unfriendly response, and so forth. This we can call, following Garfinkel, *formatting*: shaping the particular situated interaction (i.e. generic, non-unique) action we are engaged in with others.

A lot of what we do in the work of contextualization is moving from recognition through framing to formatting. We do so dialogically in congregational work with others, and we do so by drawing upon socioculturally marked ó indexicalized ó resources that acquire a general direction in such activities. This, we propose, is the cornerstone of the argument here. We can now proceed to elaborate it further.

Chronotopes, scales and synchronization

as inappropriateness, rudeness, insolence, being off-topic, or trolling come to mind (cf. Blommaert & De Fina 2016; see Tagg, Seargeant & Brown 2017 for social media examples).

Chronotopes are, we believe, a useful gloss to address the specific nature of context and contextualization, one that forces us to examine with utmost precision what is elsewhere as *active*, something that structures action and makes it socially recognizable and, thence, socially valued. The demand for precision will almost inevitably lead to outcomes in which particular chronotopes are

(a)

This violates several older assumptions about communication. In speech act theory, J.L. Austin famously

o cmkpi "cm" rctvkekrcpvu "hc o knkct" ykvj "gcej" qvjgtøu "urggej" jcdkvu "cpf" kfkqu {petcukgu. "cpf" cnuq"
gpcdnkpi "cm" vq "mpqy" swkvg" y gnn" y jq" vjg" qvjgt "øtgcm {ø" y cu0 "Ncwtc" cpf" Pqwtc. "jqy gxgt."
responded to this question in radically different ways. Let us look at the sequences following
vjg" swguvkqp="kp" vjg" vtcpuetkrv "økø" uvcpfu "hqt" økpvgtxkg ygtö" cpf" øTø" hqt" øtgurqpf gpvö0

Ncwtcøu"cpu ygt

I: SO Laura*, who are you REALLY?

R: Who are I (am) really.. Eu::hm. What do you want to know of me. What isówhat is really?

I: TELL me something about yourself

R:

R: Can you ask.. can you ask the question more specific?//

I: Is this really who you really are?

R:

differences. What we can take from this is that uniformity in format does not guarantee uniformity in actions and that diverse lines of action can occur within the same format, even if some actions are not linear responses to what preceded. Formats are not one-

and bots, and of algorithms regulating the traffic and distribution of messages, such theoretical and analytic instruments obviously cease to be useful and have to be replaced by more flexible and precise ones.

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