1 Rethinking context: an introduction

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Context has long been a key concept both in the field of pragmatics[1] and in ethnographically oriented studies of language use[2] as well as quantitative ones.[3] When we look at the work done within the last twenty years on the relation between language and context in these various fields, we can see a trend toward increasingly more interactive and dialogically conceived notions of contextually situated talk.

In the mid 1960s Gumperz and Hymes appealed for studies that would analyze in detail how language is deployed as a constitutive feature of the indigenous settings and events that constitute the social life of the societies of the world. Anthropological linguistics could no longer be content with analyzing language as an encapsulated formal system that could be isolated from the rest of a society's culture and social organization. Their call to arms was met by a host of detailed studies in societies all over the world. Initially it might appear that the appeal of such research would be primarily to linguists and other students of language, i.e. it would contribute to the empirical analysis of the social life of language (and it certainly has). However, this research has also had surprising and far-reaching consequences for the analysis of human social organization. Traditionally both social anthropologists and sociologists have focused their attention on the larger institutions that coordinate the behavior of members of a society, for example kinship and political organization. However, one of the most pervasive social activities that human beings engage in is talk. Indeed, Schegloff has identified it as "the primordial locus for sociality" (Schegloff 1987). Moreover, work by conversation analysts and other students of human interaction has richly demonstrated that the types of social organization required to accomplish mundane talk are both intricate and dynamic, and permit analysts to look in detail at how social organization is performed as an interactively sustained, time-bound process. Similarly Ochs and Schieffelin (Ochs 1983, 1986, 1988; Ochs and Schieffelin 1984; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986) have demonstrated that the process through which a child learns to speak cannot be analyzed simply as **language acquisition** (i.e. an encapsulated process of interest only to students of language), but instead constitutes a profound process of **language socialization** through which the child by learning how to speak in a community becomes a competent socialized member of his or her society. Such research has made it clear that it would be blatantly absurd to propose that one could provide a comprehensive analysis of human social

organization without paying close attention to the details of how human beings employ language to build the social and cultural worlds that they inhabit.

Since the mid 1970s, however, the research encompassed by the synthesizing collections of Gumperz and Hymes has become fragmented into quite separate fields. Thus, it is now not uncommon to find collections devoted exclusively to the ethnography of speaking (Bauman and Sherzer 1974), conversation analysis (for example Schenkein 1978 and Atkinson and Heritage 1984), or research inspired by Gumperz' study of contextualization cues and conversational inference (Gumperz 1982b). While the presence of such diverse collections demonstrates the independent achievements of each of these fields, it is our belief that each of them would be strengthened by direct communication with one another. Moreover, students being introduced to any particular perspective on language use could only benefit from being exposed to more than one perspective. Although by no means exhausting the great variety of studies employing (whether explicitly or implicitly) the concept of **context**, the present volume brings together research from different analytic traditions, all of which share a strong commitment to the study of situated discourse. By juxtaposing a variety of perspectives on context we hope to provide both researchers and students with an opportunity to compare and synthesize these traditions. In order to facilitate such comparison, and to place each chapter within the tradition from which it emerged, each one is preceded by an introductory commentary.

1 The notion of "context"

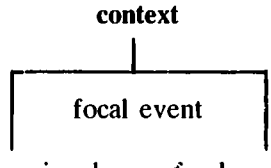
Providing a formal – or simply explicit – definition of a concept can lead to important analytic insights. Thus, as Gazdar (1979) notes, with such a definition we are often able to see inconsistencies or contradictions that were not visible before. However, it does not seem possible at the present time to give a single, precise, technical definition of **context**, and eventually we might have to accept that such a definition may not be possible. At the moment the term means quite different things within alternative research paradigms, and indeed even within particular traditions seems to be defined more by situated practice, by **use** of the concept to work with particular analytic problems, than by formal definition.[4] From our perspective, lack of a single formal definition, or even general agreement about what is meant by context, is not a situation that necessarily requires a remedy. Instead the fact that so many investigators recognize the importance of context and are actively involved in trying to unravel how it works is precisely why this concept provides such a productive focus for study at the present time. As Vološinov (1973: 45) notes:

> at the outset of an investigation, it is not so much the intellectual faculty for making formulas and definitions that leads the way, but rather it is the eyes and hands attempting to get the feel of the actual presence of the subject matter.

In order to explore differences in approach to context it is useful to begin with a tentative description of the phenomenon, even if this will ultimately

be found inadequate. Consider first the behavior that context is being invoked to interpret. Typically this will consist of talk of some type. However, simply referring to an event being examined as talk is inadequate. Thus, talk can be seen as hierarchically organized, and different notions of context may be appropriate to different levels of organization (see Kendon 1982; Gumperz, this volume). For example in the present volume Bauman analyzes both how prose-narration frames verse within a story, and how talk between teller and recipient frames the story as a whole as an event of a particular kind. Talk **within** the story (the prose frame) creates context for other talk (the verse), while yet other speech creates an appropriate context for the story itself. The **prose narration** in this story is thus at the same time, but from different analytical perspectives, **context** for something embedded within it, and talk that is itself **contextualized** by other talk. Use of the word "talk" to identify one element in this process can thus lead to confusion. From a slightly different perspective behavior that is interpreted by reference to a context is by no means restricted to talk. Indeed just as nonvocal behavior can create context for talk (Kendon and the Goodwins, this volume) so talk can create context for the appropriate interpretation of nonverbal behavior (C. Goodwin 1987, Goodwin and Goodwin 1989). We will therefore use the term **focal event**[5] to identify the phenomenon being contextualized. More generally an analyst can start with the observation, as Kendon does in this volume, that participants treat each other's stream of activity (talk, movement, etc.) in a selective way. The question then becomes **what** in each other's behavior do they treat as "focal" and what as "background". The job of the analyst is to delineate this.

When the issue of **context** is raised it is typically argued that the focal event cannot be properly understood, interpreted appropriately, or described in a relevant fashion, unless one looks beyond the event itself to other phenomena (for example cultural setting, speech situation, shared background assumptions) within which the event is embedded, or alternatively that features of the talk itself invoke particular background assumptions relevant to the organization of subsequent interaction (Gumperz, this volume). The context is thus a frame (Goffman 1974) that surrounds the event being examined and provides resources for its appropriate interpretation:



The notion of context thus involves a fundamental juxtaposition of two entities: (1) a focal event; and (2) a field of action within which that event is embedded.

2 Issues posed in the analysis of context

A relationship between two orders of phenomena that mutually inform each other to comprise a larger whole is absolutely central to the notion of context (indeed the term comes from the latin *contextus*, which means "a joining together"). From this perspective the relationship between focal event and context is much like that between "organism" and "environment" in cybernetic theory (Ashby 1956, 1960; Bateson 1972; Buckley 1968).

When context is viewed in this light a number of questions can be posed. For example what precisely is to be included within the system being examined (i.e. the conjunction of focal event and relevant context), and where is the boundary to be drawn between context and the behavior that it is context to. In attempting to formulate a cybernetic definition of "mind" and "self," Bateson (1972: 459) poses these issues with particular vividness:

> But what about "me"? Suppose I am a blind man, and I use a stick. I go tap, tap, tap. Where do *I* start? Is my mental system bounded at the handle of the stick? Is it bounded by my skin? Does it start halfway up the stick? Does it start at the tip of the stick? But these are nonsense questions. The stick is a pathway along which transforms of difference are being transmitted. The way to delineate the system is to draw the limiting line in such a way that you do not cut any of these pathways in ways which leave things inexplicable. If what you are trying to explain is a given piece of behavior, such as the locomotion of the blind man, then, for this purpose, you will need the street, the stick, the man; the street, the stick, and so on, round and round.
>
> But when the blind man sits down to eat his lunch, his stick and its messages will no longer be relevant – if it is his eating that you want to understand.

Bateson's metaphor poses with particular clarity a number of issues that are central to the analysis of context. First, it demonstrates the crucial importance of **taking as a point of departure for the analysis of context the perspective of the participant(s) whose behavior is being analyzed.** What analysts seek to describe is not what they consider context, for example their map of the city in which the blind man finds himself, but rather how the subject himself attends to and organizes his perception of the events and situations that he is navigating through.

Second, the metaphor vividly illustrates how what a participant treats as relevant context is shaped by the specific activities being performed at that moment. The task of walking, but not the activity of eating a sandwich, makes relevant and salient the physical environment provided by the city, with its corridors for movement, its constraints, and its obstacles becoming especially prominent. Moreover that city is not simply a physical environment, but also a social one, built by other human beings through an historical process, which requires knowledge about its social dimensions (for example division of space into areas for pedestrians and areas for vehicles, historical solutions to the problem of how one navigates when

these areas overlap [traffic lights and traffic regulations], a distinction between "public" and "private" space that constrains movement through the physical space, etc.) if one is to move through it successfully. One of the great difficulties posed in the analysis of context is describing the socio-historical knowledge that a participant employs to act within the environment of the moment.

Even if an analyst were able to provide a satisfactory description of how participants organize their experience of, and interaction with, such an environment, that would not provide anything like an adequate account of context. In so far as participants' articulation of their environment is shaped by the activities of the moment, the context that is relevant to what they are doing changes radically when they move from one activity to another, for example stop walking and begin to eat. The dynamic mutability of context is complicated further by the ability of participants to rapidly invoke within the talk of the moment alternative contextual frames. Indeed this is one of the key insights provided by Gumperz' notion of **contextualization cues** (1982a, this volume).

Such phenomena demonstrate 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; second, tying the analysis of context to study of the indigeneous activities that participants use to constitute the culturally and historically organized social worlds that they inhabit; and third, recognizing that participants are situated within multiple contexts which are capable of rapid and dynamic change as the events they are engaged in unfold.

While Bateson's metaphor of the blind man and his stick provides a useful point of departure for thinking about some of the issues involved in the study of context, the work in this volume goes beyond it in a number of significant ways. Most importantly, in Bateson's metaphor the blind man is navigating through a world that is solid, fixed and immutable, at least from the perspective of his walking. He does not rebuild the city as part of the activity of conducting his walk. However, within social situations a key constituent of the environment that participants attend to is other human beings, who are active agents in their own right, with their own plans and agendas. As Ray McDermott (1976) has remarked, "people become environments for each other." Such possibilities for dynamic interaction increase the complexity of the events being analyzed immeasurably. Of particular relevance to the themes being addressed in this volume is the capacity of human beings to dynamically reshape the context that provides organization for their actions within the interaction itself. Indeed, the dynamic, socially constitutive properties of context are inescapable since each additional move within the interaction modifies the existing context while creating a new arena for subsequent interaction (see Hanks' discussion in this volume of how the indexical ground changes over the course of

speech, and Heritage 1984: 106–10). Moreover, as strategic actors, individual participants can actively attempt to shape context in ways that further their own interests. This does not mean that context is created from scratch within the interaction so that larger cultural and social patterns in a society are ignored. Instead, as the chapters of Duranti and Lindstrom illustrate, even those participants who are strategically rearranging context to further their own goals invoke organizational patterns that have an existence that extends far beyond the local encounter. Moreover, in so far as the processes to which context is relevant are social and interactive, one party's proposals as to what should constitute operative context might fail to achieve ratification by others (see for example Kendon's chapter on how frame changes are accomplished through a collaborative process of interaction). Indeed, one of the key lessons of research on contextualization cues by Gumperz and those who follow him is that miscommunication and active challenges to a proposed redefinition of the situation are very real possibilities (see for example Gaik's chapter). In brief the chapters in this volume explore the ways in which context is a socially constituted, interactively sustained, time-bound phenomenon.

3 Dimensions of context

In an important attempt to specify some of the basic parameters of context, Ochs (1979: 1) notes that the analyst must use as a point of departure "the social and psychological world in which the language user operates at any given time." This is especially difficult since even an observer who has access to a setting and the talk that occurs within it may nonetheless not have access to all of the phenomena that participants are utilizing as context for their talk (Ochs 1979: 2). Briefly reviewing the contextual attributes noted by Ochs (1979: 2–6) provides an opportunity to both get a firmer empirical grasp on the range of phenomena that the notion of context must cover, and acquaint the reader with some of the themes explored by chapters in the present volume.

(1) **Setting**, i.e. the social and spatial framework within which encounters are situated. In Chapter 2, Hanks provides extensive analysis of how **deictic systems** provide participants with systematic, interactively based resources for organizing their mutual access to the environment they share and attend to in their talk. In his analysis he demonstrates how the figure/ground contrast provides powerful conceptual tools for the study of context, and uses it as a point of departure for investigation of the **indexical ground** of deixis. Duranti explores the reciprocal relationship between social attributes of participants (for example the status of someone as chief), the talk through which those attributes are invoked, and how constituting, i.e. establishing and renegotiating, the social personae of those present, is relevant to the larger activities they are

engaged in. As each of these chapters makes clear, neither the physical nor the social setting for talk is something that is fixed, immutable and simply "out there." Instead these phenomena, and the very real constraints they provide, are dynamically and socially constituted by activities (talk included) of the participants which stand in a reflexive relationship to the context thus constituted.

(2) **Behavioral environment**, i.e. the way that participants use their bodies and behavior as a resource for framing and organizing their talk. Kendon's chapter describes how participants socially organize the space in which they meet. Through spatial orientation and posture, participants both display their continuing access to the actions of others present and frame the talk they are producing. Of particular importance is the way in which postural framing establishes the preconditions for coordinated social action by enabling participants to both project and negotiate what is about to happen. Kendon also provides extensive discussion of how **attention** is organized as an interactive phenomenon. A class of events that are treated as officially irrelevant to the activity in progress can be used to interactively negotiate changes in the frame that provides context for the activity of the moment. Kendon's analysis of the "disattend track" complements Hanks' discussion of how the figure/ground contrast is relevant to the organization of context. The Goodwins provide detailed analysis of how participants use each other's nonvocal displays to both frame the talk of the moment and project future events within it. Consistent with Kendon's analysis, they demonstrate how by attending to such phenomena participants are able to synchronize their individual actions so as to achieve precise coordinated action. Rather than constituting a separate "nonverbal" level of organization, the context provided by the behavioral environment of talk is intricately and reflexively linked to it within larger patterns of social activity.

(3) **Language as context.** The way in which talk itself both invokes context and provides context for other talk is given extensive analysis by the chapters in this volume. The seminal notion of **contextualization cues** and the theoretical motivation for such a concept is described in some detail by Gumperz himself, who then applies the concept to the analysis of specific data. Contextualization cues figure prominently (sometimes implicitly) in other chapters as well. Basso investigates how contextualization is cued within narrative and in fact constitutes the culturally relevant meaning of the narrative text as a biographical and historical performance. Gaik examines how different forms of therapeutic interaction – different frames for the conduct and interpretation of what is happening between the participants at a particular moment – are cued by alternative speech styles.

Duranti demonstrates how choices between alternative lexical forms (namely common words vs. respectful words) in Samoan can be used by speakers to shape context or, more specifically, the mutual alignment of those present and the obligations they have toward each other. His work integrates recognition of the power that standing patterns of social organization have as context for the activities in a society with analysis of

how participants who accept the constraints of such structures are nonetheless able to deploy them strategically and thus reshape context in ways that further particular interests. While all of these chapters describe what can be glossed as contextualization cues, they also reveal how much of the structure of contextualization cues, and precisely how they work to frame interaction, remains to be discovered. In proposing the notion of contextualization cue Gumperz has given us not a static category but instead a point of departure for a rich field of further research.

The way in which **genres** contextualize talk is also given considerable attention in this volume, especially in the chapters by Bauman and Basso. Bauman, drawing on the work of Bakhtin, uses the notion of contextualization to rethink what is meant by both genres and traditionalization, analytical categories that are central to the field of folklore. One product of such questioning scrutiny is a greatly expanded view of the range of genres available for future folklore research; observing that one genre can be embedded within another, Bauman calls for further analysis of such "dialogic genres." Hanks explores how basic co-participation structures are coded in language forms, and describes how the production of new talk continuously changes the context of the moment. The Goodwins investigate how participants' close attention to structure in an emerging stream of speech provides them with resources for the organization of subsequent action. In addition they describe how larger social process can on the one hand be invoked within individual utterances, and on the other provide organization for the very talk that is invoking them (for example the organization of a story both invokes and is shaped by the larger social processes within which it is embedded). In sum, unlike some earlier views of context which conceptualized it as a frame that surrounds talk, all of the chapters in the volume emphasize the way in which talk itself constitutes a main resource for the organization of context.

(4) **Extrasituational context.** Cicourel provides an extended demonstration of how the appropriate understanding of a conversational exchange requires background knowledge that extends far beyond the local talk and its immediate setting. Indeed he argues strongly against work which proposes to analyze a sequence of talk without providing a rich ethnographic description of the background knowledge and frames of relevance within which that talk is embedded. Philips describes how phenomena that have typically been taken to be locally organized (slight hesitations and other forms of repair in talk) can in fact be seen as systematic features of much larger processes when the ethnographer collects repetitive examples of comparable events within a particular setting. Lindstrom, taking as a point of departure the work of Foucault, analyzes discursive rules and conditions that give different people unequal rights and opportunities to contribute to a debate, and to control the public meaning of what gets said there. He also identifies the "policing" effects of several domains of cultural knowledge on what counts locally as true talk, and what counts as false, i.e. culturally inappropriate, talk. At the same time, however, he demonstrates how individuals are able to "move around" within their culture's discursive order. Maneuvering to win the debate, disputants

> strive to control the public meaning of what is said, and to make their statements sound true while those of their opponents sound false, by shifting context and evoking particular local discourses that are more favorable to their positions.

The work in this volume differs in significant ways from other approaches to the study of context. For example there is a long linguistic and philosophic tradition in pragmatics[6] which invokes context to help account for aspects of meaning in language that go beyond the scope of semantics. Workers in this tradition typically use as data isolated sentences and descriptions of contextual features that have been constructed by the analysts themselves to illustrate the theoretical argument being developed. Within this tradition, processes of interaction between participants are rarely, if ever, examined. By way of contrast all of the chapters in the present volume are based on recordings of actual events, ethnographic fieldwork, or a combination of the two. Rather than restricting analysis to the resources used by an ideal, passive observer to make sense out of a sentence of a particular type, the research reported here focuses on how participants attend to, construct, and manipulate aspects of context as a constitutive feature of the activities they are engaged in. Context is thus analyzed as an interactively constituted mode of praxis.

4 Figure and ground

Some of the analysis developed in the present volume offers insight into why many very successful approaches to the analysis of language and speech genres have been able to effectively ignore context. One key way in which context and focal event differ is in their perceptual salience. Generally the focal event is regarded as the official focus of the participants' attention, while features of the context are not highlighted in this way, but instead treated as background phenomena. The focal event is placed on center stage, while context constitutes the stage itself. In line with this, the boundaries, outlines, and structure of the focal event are characteristically delimited with far more explicitness and clarity than are contextual phenomena. Focal event and context thus seem to stand in a fundamental **figure–ground** relationship to each other, a point developed in considerable detail by Hanks in this volume. These themes constitute the main focus for Kendon's chapter as well, in which he provides quite detailed analysis of how the **main attentional track** in an encounter is sustained, and indeed shaped, by ongoing interactive work in a **disattend track**, "a stream of signs which is itself excluded from the content of the activity but which serves as a means of regulating it, bounding, articulating and qualifying its various components and phases." Viewing the relationship between focal event and context in this fashion demonstrates its central relevance to one of the key issues that has emerged in contempor-

ary studies of language and interaction: the use of **background information** to produce and understand action, and the question of how such background information is organized, recognized, invoked, and understood.[7] We want to use the perspective advocated by Hanks as a point of departure for discussing some of the reasons why the analysis of context has proved so difficult and intransigent.

4.1 Focusing on the figure and ignoring the ground

In our view the fundamental asymmetry of the **figure–ground** relationship of focal event and its context has had enormous consequences on how these phenomena have been studied. First, differences in salience are accompanied by corresponding differences in structural clarity. The effect of this is that the focal event, with its far more clearly articulated structure, receives the lion's share of analytic attention while methods for analyzing, or even describing, the more amorphous background of context are not given anywhere near the same amount of emphasis. Thus linguists have taken the segmental structure of language as the key focal phenomenon that is relevant to the production and organization of talk. One result of this is a vast disparity between the incredible amount of work that has been done within formal linguistics on language structure, and the very small amount of research that has focused explicitly on the organization of context. With the exception of artificial intelligence researchers interested in simulation of discourse-based inferential processes (Dyer 1983, Schank and Abelson 1977, Schank and Riesbeck 1981), formal linguists have been skeptical of psychologically oriented studies of mental units of behavior such as scripts, plans, and other such notions (cf. Mandler 1979; Nelson 1978, 1981; Parisi and Castelfranchi 1976). Indeed this disparity is found not only in formal analysis but also in the methodology available for simply describing the phenomena being examined. For thousands of years human beings have put great ingenuity and effort into the development of methods for accurately describing and writing down[8] relevant distinctions within the stream of speech. Comparable attention to precise description of the context of a speech situation has been almost nonexistent, and indeed a major task facing contemporary students of context is uncovering what are its constitutive features and how they are to be described. In our opinion this mixture of sharp, sustained focus on the details of language structure combined with a complementary neglect of its context is not accidental, but rather strong support for the arguments made by Hanks and Kendon about the intrinsic figure–ground relationship of focal event and context.[9]

4.2 Extracting the focal event from its context for analysis

The structural articulation of the focal event is matched by an apparent clarity in its shape, outline, and boundaries. The effect of this is that it becomes easy for analysts to view the focal event as a self-contained entity that can be cut out from its surrounding context and analyzed in isolation, a process that effectively treats the context as irrelevant to the organization of the focal event. Stories provide a classic example. In much research in anthropology, folklore, and sociolinguistics, stories have been analyzed as self-contained packages, entities that can be nicely "collected" in an exotic setting and then safely transported back to the laboratory of the researcher. It is tacitly assumed that the process of removing the story from the setting in which it actually emerged and placing it in a new and often radically different context, the analytic collection of the investigator, does little if any damage to its intrinsic structure. Indeed a number of features of narrative readily lead to such a view. Thus a story told in one setting can be performed in another (as speakers demonstrate when they retell stories). Moreover, participants themselves often delimit the boundaries of a story (Jefferson 1978) so that it stands out from other talk as a coherent entity. Many analysts have therefore found it both fruitful and unproblematic to devote their energies to description and analysis of the internal structure of stories while ignoring the interaction through which they were in fact told in the first place. The work of Levi-Strauss (1963) on myth provides a classic example, although the chapters by Bauman and Basso in this volume suggest that much of what is important in a story or myth is not the "content" but its inter-textuality (see also Halliday and Hasan 1976, Kristeva 1981, Silverstein 1985a). In brief it is very convenient to be able to extract speech forms from local contexts of production, a process that is facilitated by the clarity with which an event such as a story can be perceived as a discrete, self-contained unit.

There is however a range of work focusing on both the contributions made by the audience to a telling (see for example the special issue of *Text* on "The Audience as Co-Author" [Volume 6.3, 1986] edited by Duranti and Brenneis, C. Goodwin 1984, Sacks 1974, and Schieffelin 1986) and on how the internal structure of stories reflects their embeddedness within larger interactive processes (M. H. Goodwin 1982a, 1982b; Ochs, Smith, and Taylor 1988) that calls into question whether it is indeed appropriate to analyze stories in isolation from the local indigenous circumstances of their production. In the present volume Bauman demonstrates the major analytic gains that can be made by going beyond traditional assumptions about the ease with which stories can be extracted from their local context. By including within the scope of his analysis not only the story, but also the process of how it was told to the researcher, he is able to reexamine and reconceptualize a range of concepts that lie at the very heart of folklore,

including **contextualization** (here approached as an active process), **tradition**, and **genre**, placing them within a dialogic, interactive framework.

4.3 Restricting analysis to the sentence

The effort to limit the scope of analysis by finding easily extractable units is by no means restricted to elaborate speech genres such as narrative, but instead constitutes a core component of most contemporary approaches to the study of language. For example as both conversation analysts and the Bakhtin Circle (see especially Vološinov 1973) have amply demonstrated, a crucial context for talk is the surrounding speech within which the talk being treated as focal emerges. This is also one of the main points of Silverstein's (1985a, 1985b) recent work on metapragmatic verbs, namely verbs of saying, and their relation to the "culture" of a text. The author's and character's attitudes and stances toward a certain transaction or event are often revealed by the inter-textual play of the particular verbs which frame what is being said and thus reveal or suggest what to make of it (and of its author) – namely the difference between *said, objected, interjected, shouted, complained, remarked,* etc. However, Bloomfield's (1946: 170) definition of the sentence as "an independent linguistic form, not included by virtue of any grammatical construction in any larger linguistic form" and Chomsky's more recent methodological practices have provided a warrant for formal linguistics to restrict the scope of its inquiry to the individual sentence and its subcomponents. Not only is language analyzed in isolation from the interactive participation frameworks that align speakers to hearers and actualize a state of discourse (for analysis of how such participation frameworks are relevant to the organization of the talk that occurs within them see for example C. Goodwin 1981, Heath 1984, Kendon 1982, and the chapters by Kendon and the Goodwins in this volume), but in addition the individual sentence or utterance is treated as though it had no ties to the talk that surrounds it (with the exception of those indexical signs such as pronouns, demonstratives, spatial and temporal adverbs which evoke or require knowledge of the textual or spatio-temporal context for an interpretation of the referential–propositional meaning of the speech act within which they occur). The sentence is thus divorced from any relevant context and becomes a self-sufficient, self-contained world.

As the development of linguistics as a science in this century amply demonstrates, limiting the scope of analysis in this fashion has proven to be enormously successful. Note that what is accomplished by delimiting boundaries in this manner is not simply a quantitative restriction on the range of data that a theory has to deal with it, but more importantly a qualitative distinction in the types of phenomena to be examined. Structure within the sentence is well outlined, sharply defined, and well

articulated, while the phenomena to be included within its context, as ground rather than figure, can appear far more amorphous, problematic, and less stable. The frame of relevance established by the focal event, in combination with the analytic interests of the researcher, act as kind of a moving searchlight on the ground of context, now picking out from the surrounding darkness certain features of the terrain but a moment later shifting focus to something else. Not only the internal structure of context, but the prior question of what is to count as context at a particular moment, is capable of dynamic reformulation as local frames of relevance change. Simply getting one's hands on the shape of context is a major analytic problem. By way of contrast the individual sentence provides a clear, highly structured, well-ordered world, one that lends itself well to systematic description and analysis of the organization it displays so prominently. However, that analytic clarity may be purchased at the cost of ignoring fundamental aspects of the ways in which human beings construct, interpret, and use language as a constitutive feature of the activities they engage in.

5 Traditions in the social analysis of context

One of the strengths of the present volume is that it brings together research on the social and interactive organization of context from a variety of different perspectives. A reader well versed in one of these traditions might be unfamiliar with others. It is therefore useful to note briefly several of the research frameworks that the chapters in this collection use as their point of departure. Such an overview helps provide context for the chapters themselves by situating current interest in the social and interactive dimensions of context within broader theoretical trends. In addition we hope that awareness of alternative perspectives will help foster dialogue between different traditions. The following will be briefly examined: (1) ethnographic and (2) philosophical precursors to the notion of language as action; (3) Soviet dialogical approaches to language and cognition; (4) work in human interaction, with particular emphasis on the cybernetic and dramaturgic metaphors; (5) the ethnography of speaking tradition; (6) ethnomethodology, including Cicourel's cognitive sociology; (7) conversation analysis; and (8) Foucault.

This overview is designed to highlight those approaches to the study of context that are most relevant to the perspectives treated in the present volume, in essence those that focus on language as a socially constituted, interactive phenomenon. As such it provides a very selective history rather than a comprehensive review of all of the ways in which context has been argued to be relevant to the analysis of human language and cognition (such a review would require a volume of its own). Thus no attempt is made to cover work in **pragmatics** by formal linguists and philosophers in

which context is invoked to account for aspects of meaning that fall outside the scope of semantics (cf. Levinson 1983). Relevant to such research is a logical semantic tradition which includes work by Stalnaker (1979) and others on presuppositions and possible worlds (Lewis 1973, 1986) and continues with more recent proposals such as Heim's (1981) notion of "file change semantics" (see also Kamp 1981), which try to reconcile traditional formal accounts of natural language expressions with discourse phenomena (e.g. definiteness) not easily accountable for in terms of truth-functional semantics (e.g. via quantification). The basic intuition in these works, which lean toward possible artificial intelligence applications, is the idea of a continuously evolving set of presuppositions which draws from and at the same time affects the "actual" world as well as other "possible" worlds. There is also an important ordinary language tradition, possibly deriving from the later Wittgenstein but with a strong life of its own, that encompasses not only speech act theorists but also work from Ryle and Strawson through to Baker and Hacker (1984). Within sociolinguistics, social attributes of participants (class, ethnicity, gender, etc.) have been used to account for language variation (see for example Labov 1970, 1972a). Such work provides new insights into such central topics of linguistic theory as language change, and demonstrates how linguistic phenomena are relevant to the organization of social inequality in a society. It must also be argued that Geertzian and Beckerian ideas about rich interpretation, or work in hermeneutics or the new literary criticism, including work on reader-response theory (Tompkins 1980), provide yet other perspectives on context. Despite their intrinsic value, we have made the decision not to discuss these traditions since we believe that such a discussion would take us far afield. Instead, we will focus on how the relationship between language and context has been analyzed from ethnographic and interactive perspectives.

5.1 An ethnographic precursor

In a seminal essay on "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages" Bronislaw Malinowski (1923) elaborated two important themes that were to figure prominently in subsequent work on context:

(1) Language is embedded within a **context of situation**. After noting how words only become comprehensible when one takes into account the larger sociocultural frameworks within which they are embedded. Malinowski argues that the utterance itself

> becomes only intelligible when it is placed within its context of situation, if I may be allowed to coin an expression which indicates on the one hand that the conception of *context* has to be broadened and on the other that the situation in which words are uttered can never be passed over as irrelevant to the linguistic expression. We see how the

conception of context must be substantially widened, if it is to furnish us with its full utility. In fact it must burst the bonds of mere linguistics and be carried over into the analysis of the general conditions under which a language is spoken.

(Malinowski 1923: 306)

Malinowski thus proposes that linguistic analysis must be supplemented by ethnographic analysis of situations within which speech occurs. Indeed he argues that "linguistic analysis inevitably leads us into the study of all the subjects covered by Ethnographic field-work" (Malinowski 1923: 302). The sentiments expressed here have motivated generations of anthropologists in their attempts to tie language to the ethnographic context within which it emerges.

(2) Language must be conceptualized as a mode of **practical action**, rather than a mere reflection of internal, abstract thought. Malinowski was led to this pragmatic view of language by observing how it functioned within the task activities, such as fishing, of the people he studied:

The study of any form of speech used in connection with vital work would reveal . . . the dependence of the meaning of each word upon practical experience, and of the structure of each utterance upon the momentary situation in which it is spoken. Thus the consideration of linguistic uses associated with any practical pursuit, leads us to the conclusion that language . . . ought to be regarded and studied against the background of human activities and as a mode of human behavior in practical matters . . . In its primitive uses, language functions as a link in concerted human activity, as a piece of human behavior. It is a mode of action and not an instrument of reflection.

(Malinowski 1923: 312)

While Malinowski initially phrased such ideas with reference to "primitive" uses of language, this notion was later dropped (Malinowski 1935), and issues such as these were framed as general properties of language.

Such a perspective on language as "an indispensable element of concerted human action" (Malinowski 1923: 316) led him at a very early date to articulate a view of meaning as something embedded within trajectories of action:

A word is used when it can produce an action and not to describe one, still less to translate thoughts. The word therefore has a power of its own, it is a means of bringing things about, it is a handle to acts and objects and not a definition of them.

(Malinowski 1923: 321)

Meaning . . . does not come . . . from contemplation of things, or analysis of occurrences, but in practical and active acquaintance with relevant situations. The real knowledge of a word comes through the practice of appropriately using it within a certain situation.

(Malinowski 1923: 325)

In brief, Malinowski not only introduced the notion of a "context of situation," but also anticipated much later work in pragmatics by drawing attention to the importance of studying language, and the process through

which it is interpreted and becomes meaningful, within indigenous systems of action (see also Malinowski 1935). In addition to his influence on ethnographic approaches to the study of context, Malinowski's work constituted the point of departure for an approach to the analysis of language that extends from Firth (1957) to Halliday (1973), one of the grammarians most committed to the instrumental view of language.

5.2 Philosophic approaches to context, intentionality and action

Philosophers who have turned their attention to natural language have typically adopted one of two basic stances. Most frequently language is viewed as a flawed and defective mechanism for logical thinking. Effort is therefore invested in programs for developing a formal calculus that will overcome its limitations and provide a framework for rigorous analytical work. Research that originated within or was inspired by the Vienna Circle in the 1920s belongs to this tradition. However, other philosophers have rejected the assumptions that underlie such an approach. They argue that analysis must begin by treating language as something embedded within contexts of human action. By attending to its intrinsically context-bound nature, human beings are able to make definite sense out of talk despite the indefinite resources provided by language as a formal system. Instead of seeking to specify the properties of a single, ideal, formal system, analysis must focus on the variety of ways in which language is deployed to accomplish understanding and action in a multiplicity of situations of use. Within such a perspective context is viewed as a core component of the organization of language. A very striking, and profound, example of these two positions toward language, and the dynamic tensions that exist between them, can be found in the work of a single person: Ludwig Wittgenstein. In the early part of his career (in work that culminated in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [1922]) Wittgenstein proposed a theory of language based on the assumption of a one-to-one correspondence between parts of speech and aspects of the context or activity that was being described. This approach still paid homage to the predominantly "referential" or –reflectionist view" (cf. Silverstein 1979) of language and thus continued the earlier philosophical tradition of favoring declarative sentences (e.g. *The boy hit the ball*) over other kinds of linguistic expressions (e.g. imperatives, questions). However, in the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein (1958) countered his own earlier work by arguing that emphasis on the development of a logically coherent, self-contained formal system had to be replaced by an approach focused on language as a form of action (or "form of life," as he wrote) and thus used context as a point of departure for uncovering the multifaceted variety of thought and action made available by the different **language games** that human beings engage in. Thus, just as a coin can mean one thing when

offered to a storekeeper after taking a candy bar, and quite another when used to replace a missing piece in a game of checkers, so the same utterance can mean quite different things when it is embedded within different natural activities. Study of decontextualized sentences must therefore be replaced by investigation that goes beyond the talk itself to analyze the larger activities within which the talk is embedded, and through which it becomes meaningful (for discussion of how activities are relevant to the analysis of talk see Duranti 1981, 1984, this volume; Goodwin and Goodwin 1989; and Levinson 1979).

A second philosopher who has had major influence on the analysis of language as a mode of action is J. L. Austin. In order to describe how people use words to accomplish action, Austin (1962) turned to the cultural and social conventions that provide for the interpretability and efficacy of performative utterances. Thus a statement such as "I now pronounce you man and wife" (when spoken in an appropriate civil or religious ceremony) is able to change the marital status of its addressees because of a surrounding framework of social conventions about what constitutes marriage and how it is validly entered into. The context, in the sense of a set of recognizable conventions, provides the infrastructure through which the utterance gains its force as a particular type of action. Rather than speaking of grammaticality conditions (or their logical equivalent, "well-formedness conditions"), Austin introduced the concept of "felicity conditions." Thus a speech act is not "grammatical" or "ungrammatical," rather it works or misfires (if the conditions are not appropriate or if they change). The felicity conditions he proposed for the speech acts he discussed were in fact categorizations of contexts (e.g. the range of participants necessary for a marriage ceremony, the manifest or implicit knowledge and attitude of speaker and hearer(s), etc.). Moreover, with his notion of "uptake" Austin emphasized interactive aspects of both speech acts and the context that encompasses them.

One of the main differences between Austin's theory and generative grammar lies in his emphasis on conventions as opposed to innate structures or internalized knowledge (Griffin and Mehan 1981, Strawson 1964), a point echoed by Wittgenstein's (1958) concern with community norms as opposed to the speaker's state of mind in the definition of meaning. Later work on speech acts (for example Searle 1969) was, in our view, influenced by the "cognitive turn" of linguistic studies characteristic of Chomskyan and post-Chomskyan linguistics. Such a turn was originally a reaction to crude behavioristic models of verbal behavior, but had the effect of facilitating the reintroduction of psychologism in the philosophical literature on linguistic competence. Interest shifted from conventions and context to focus on intentionality and speakers' inner psychological states. This turned into a methodology that avoids discussing those aspects of meaning that could not be immediately traced back to the speaker's state

of mind (cf. Bach and Harnish 1979, Searle 1983). Whatever needs reference to societal norms or conventions that may exist outside of the speaker's conscious intentions to communicate is seen as problematic for a theory that explicitly takes the speaker as the sole originator of the meaning making process. This is demonstrated quite vividly by the way in which the hearer is treated in some versions of speech act theory. Although both speaker and hearer often enter in the representation of speech acts and speech act types, they have unequal status. The hearer is often but a projection of the speaker's wants or attitudes, and rarely an active (co-)participant in the utterance event (cf. the exchange between Clark 1982 and Sperber and Wilson 1982a, 1982b; and the exchange between Clark and Carlson 1982 and Allan 1986, with Clark's 1986 reply). That is, the hearer exists as an Internalized Other, but not as an actual additional participant who could guide the interaction (and the interpretation of talk) toward directions unforeseen by the speaker. More recent work in speech act theory has moved beyond some of these limitations by paying attention to effects as well as intentions, and by devoting attention to speech act sequences and the behavior of speech acts in conversational sequences (see Streeck 1980, 1984; Verschueren 1983).

The issue of where actions are situated, and what actions these are, becomes much more complex when the power of recipients, as well as speakers, to constitute what actions are occurring is given serious attention. Despite the importance accorded intentionality in speech act analysis, not all societies grant such primacy to the intentions of the speaker, but instead allow recipients considerable power to determine what act an utterance will be officially heard to constitute (Duranti 1988a, Rosaldo 1982). Even in our own society there is now clear evidence that the action that a strip of speech embodies is mutable and capable of change and negotiation within multi-turn sequences.[10] Both the constitution of acts by different individuals across different turns (Ochs, Schieffelin, and Platt 1979; Duranti 1981, in press), and recipient negotiation of what an act will eventually be seen to be (C. Goodwin 1979, 1981) demonstrate that situations exist in which actions emerge not from the speaker alone in a single turn, but rather are collaboratively defined through a process of interaction in which recipients play a very active role. In the present volume, Kendon ties the question of intentionality to the problem of achieving coordinated social action, and his analysis reveals how the structure of intentionality, rather than being situated within the mind of a single individual, might be distributed within the interactive context. Lindstrom's chapter, on the other hand, taking inspiration from Foucault's work on technologies of power, suggests that the very act of interpretation, the evoking of some specific frame or context, is an act of power whereby participants try to establish what is acceptable evidence or truth, and what could be meant at any given time. Intentionality in this perspective is

deeply embedded within local practices for political action. The idea that one could build a theory of human action with the speaker's intentions at its center becomes highly problematic when we look at actual interactions, and when we try to place acts of interpretation within the context of political struggle.

5.3 The Bakhtin Circle and Vygotsky

The intellectual ferment following the Russian revolution of 1917 produced two quite separate, though complementary, research programs built on the idea that language and context were interdependent phenomena that must be analyzed in concert with each other.

First, the Bakhtin Circle, in a critique that was most clearly articulated in Vološinov (1973),[11] argued that Saussure's view of language as an abstract system internalized in the minds of individual speakers was inadequate:

> Verbal communication can never be understood and explained outside of . . . connection with a concrete situation . . . Language acquires life and historically evolves . . . in concrete verbal communication, and not in the abstract linguistic system of language forms, nor in the individual psyche of speakers.
>
> (Vološinov 1973: 95)

This perspective is quite consistent with the "early" Marx and with the dialectical materialist program for the construction of a philosophy of human praxis (cf. also Gramsci's work), where there is an interplay between subjective (namely psychological) and objective (namely historical) processes and where language as a relatively autonomous manifestation of superstructure can play an important role in the constitution of both the individual and society.

Rather than constituting a formal system that can be safely extracted for independent analysis, for Vološinov (1973: 98) "Language is a continuous generative process implemented in the social-verbal interaction of speakers." Vološinov opposed what he called the "isolated monologic utterance" (Vološinov 1973: 94), emphasized the ways in which language must be conceptualized as embedded within a matrix of human interaction, and produced ground breaking work on the contextualizing power of reported speech (cf. Bakhtin 1981, 1984).

Central to the work of Bakhtin is the notion of the **dialogic** organization of language. That term can be somewhat misleading since it immediately conjures up visions of multi-party talk, i.e. a dialogue between different speakers. This is not what Bakhtin meant by **dialogic**. Rather he wanted to call attention to how a single strip of talk (utterance, text, story, etc.) can juxtapose language drawn from, and invoking, alternative cultural, social, and linguistic home environments, the interpenetration of multiple voices and forms of utterance. An example of such dialogic use of language is provided in Dostoyevsky's novels:

> Dostoyevsky's novel is dialogic. It is constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other; this interaction provides no support for the viewer who would objectify an entire event according to some ordinary monologic category [. . .] and this consequently makes the viewer also a participant. [. . .] everything in the novel is structured to make dialogic opposition inescapable.
>
> (Bakhtin 1984: 18)

A prototypical example of the way in which dialogical oppositions are created is found in **reported speech** in which the quoted talk of one party is embedded within the speech of another. Vološinov discussed several ways in which the author's or a character's voice can infiltrate the speech of another. As developed in Silverstein's notion of metapragmatics (Silverstein 1985a, 1985b), verbs of saying are ideal framing devices for expressing local linguistic ideologies and can thus be equally exploited by authors/speakers and analysts for getting at the interplay of alternative interpretations of text or talk. Speech genres vary in the extent to which they permit dialogic organization (narrative vs. scientific writing). In this volume, Bauman uses Bakhtin as point of departure to rethink how folklorists have traditionally analyzed both genres and the concept of tradition itself.

Bakhtin's perspective on the relationship between language and context insightfully anticipates many of the contemporary theoretical concerns that animate current attempts to rethink context in fields as varied as conversation analysis, Goffman's (1974) frame analysis, Habermas' (1970) critique of the monologic competence embedded within Chomskyan linguistics, and the current interest in developing a Bakhtinian, dialogic perspective within linguistics and anthropology (cf. Brenneis 1986, Duranti 1988a, Duranti and Brenneis 1986, Hanks 1987, Hill 1985, Macaulay 1987, Tedlock 1983).

A second attempt to place the genesis of thought and language within a context constituted through dynamic processes of social interaction can be found in the work of Vygotsky (1962, 1978)[12] and his two closest associates, Luria (1979) and Leont'ev (1981a, 1981b).

Focusing on the development of language and cognition, Vygosky took strong issue with Piaget's (1959) claim that before using speech **socially** children first passed through a stage characterized by **egocentric** speech. Vygotsky opposed Piaget through an ingenious series of experiments in which he demonstrated that "egocentric" speech was strongly influenced by the social context in which it occurred. As Emerson (1983: 10–11) observes:

> Vygotsky concluded that egocentric speech was not, as Piaget had suggested, a compromise between primary autism and reluctant socialization, but rather the direct outgrowth (or better, ingrowth) of speech which had been from the start

socially and environmentally oriented. Piaget was correct when he observed that private and socialized speech did indeed intersect at this stage, but development was proceeding not along the lines of Piaget's scenario, but in the opposite direction. The child was not externalizing his internal thoughts, but internalizing his external verbal interactions.

For Vygotsky, replacing autistic egocentric speech with a focus on the social context of language acquisition was but part of a much larger endeavor: demonstrating that language and consciousness were both lodged within a matrix of **social activity**, and that this **activity system**, rather than the isolated individual, should be the primary focus of study. Thus, when he turned to study intelligence he did not focus on measurements of the individual child, as most Western psychologists do, but rather on the process of interaction between the child and its teacher. For Vygotsky, what should be measured is not what the child knows before the test, but rather the ability of the child to interact with its caretakers so as to extend its present knowledge toward new frontiers. The difference between what the child can do on his or her own, and what he or she can do under adult collaboration is what constitutes the "zone of proximal development." Vygotsky argued that "what is the zone of proximal development today will be the actual developmental level tomorrow" (Vygotsky 1978: 87). In this framework, intrapsychological (i.e. internal) processes typically arise, first, at the interpsychological (i.e. social) level. It is in the coordination with the environment and other, more competent members of their community that children come to take advantage of tools, a most important class of tools being symbols. Words are thus seen as but one example of tools that function as mediating devices. In this scheme, language is, from the beginning, part of an interaction, an activity system, whereby development can take place.

If indeed language development starts as part of a social matrix and the child's egocentric speech is in fact internalized social speech, we should be questioning the adequacy of child language acquisition models based on a notion of linguistic structure as an independent level, not affected, in its most basic nature, by the conditions of linguistic performance. Indeed, it would seem that any kind of language acquisition device would have to be able to both read, i.e. interpret, and reformulate (or filter) some aspects of the context that give meaning and form to speech signals. A device only aimed at decoding context-free forms may not be able to decode the relevant input.

The ideas and theoretical perspective of Vygotsky remain very much alive today and are currently having new influence, not only in the Soviet Union, but also in the United States where the approach to issues of language, intelligence, learning, and technology he originated is being pursued by scholars interested in investigating cognition, language, and education as phenomena embedded within social contexts. The influence

of context on cognitive operations is well illustrated by Scribner's (1984) study of how the spatial organization of material in a warehouse is utilized in the mathematical operations that workers perform in taking inventory, by Scribner and Cole's (1981) work on the acquisition of literacy (cf. also Cole 1985, Cole and Griffin 1987, Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition 1983, Newman, Griffin, and Cole 1984), and by Suchman's (1987) research into the organization of situated activity. Lave (1988) contrasts a contextually embedded, practice-based approach to mathematical operations with traditional accounts of cognition in both psychology and anthropology. The role of context is also central to the approach to the analysis of educational processes developed by McDermott (McDermott 1976, McDermott and Gospodinoff 1979, McDermott, Gospodinoff, and Aron 1978), Erickson (Erickson 1979, 1982; Erickson and Shultz 1981), Cook-Gumperz (1986, Cook-Gumperz, Corsaro, and Streeck 1986) and John Gumperz and his students (Gumperz 1982b).

5.4 Human interaction

The organization of human interaction is central to the analysis of context in a number of different ways. First, face-to-face interaction provides the primordial locus for the production of talk. The features of face-to-face interaction thus constitute a primary examplar of context. Second, in so far as face-to-face interaction is accomplished through the collaborative work of separate individuals it provides an elementary example of human social organization. Talk spoken there is thus inescapably a form of social action. Moreover, the way in which talk-in-interaction is designed for, and shaped by, the social properties of its interactive environment sheds light on the basic organization of language itself (Schegloff, this volume). Treating human interaction as a central context for speech provides an expanded view of language, one that ties the production of talk to systematic social organization. Third, within interaction participants are faced with the task of accomplishing understanding and, as part of this process, displaying to each other their understanding of the events in progress at a particular moment (see for example the chapters by the Goodwins and by Cicourel in this volume). Accomplishing such shared agreement about the events that members of a society encounter in their phenomenal world is central both to what anthropologists have traditionally analyzed as culture and to the social organization of cognition and intersubjectivity that has been a main topic of ethnomethodology (Cicourel 1973, this volume; Garfinkel 1967; Heritage 1984). Finally, face-to-face interaction is inherently dynamic. Each subsequent utterance, and indeed events within a single utterance, change in subtle but profound ways the operative context of the moment (see Heritage 1984, and the chapters by Duranti, the Goodwins, Gumperz, Hanks, Kendon, Lindstrom, and Schegloff in this volume). Face-to-face

interaction thus provides an opportunity to analyze language, culture, and social organization as integrated components of a single system of action, and moreover deal with such processes as dynamic, intrinsically time-bound phenomena. No comprehensive view of context can ignore analysis of this topic.

Important early research into the properties of face-to-face interaction can be found in the work of the anthropologist Gregory Bateson (an important collection of his essays can be found in Bateson 1972). Bateson helped formulate some of the most basic theory and methodology for the study of human communication. For example he was one of the founders of the field of cybernetics. While doing fieldwork in Bali with Margaret Mead he pioneered the use of film as a research tool for the analysis of human interaction. Later he organized the Bateson Project on Human Communication, a research group which produced work that had far-reaching consequences for subsequent studies of face-to-face interaction. One process that they analyzed was therapy. Their work led them to reconceptualize "mental illness," which had previously been treated as something located inside the individual (e.g. by Freud, etc.), as an interactive phenomenon. Early work on the theory that they called the "double bind" led them to shift both analysis and therapy from the psychiatrist–patient dyad to encompass the relevant social units that the "patient" was embedded within, and in particular the family. This work helped found the field of Family Therapy and had great influence on other social approaches to psychiatric phenomena. As part of this research Bateson organized an interdisciplinary team, including linguists, anthropologists, and psychiatrists, to intensively analyze films of interaction. Though publication of the final report of this team was delayed for many years, work on the project produced a range of seminal insights about the organization of face-to-face interaction, including recognition of the importance of meta-communication, the development of kinesics as a discipline, intensive study of how talk, paralanguage, and body movement were related to each other, etc. A similar close analysis of films of therapy sessions was undertaken by Albert Scheflen at Bronx State Hospital and led to important insights about how participants used the spatial alignment of their bodies to communicate about their interaction (Scheflen 1963, 1964, 1966, 1971, 1973). One of Scheflen's collaborators was Adam Kendon, whose chapter in this volume provides a good example of how spatial orientation, and a range of other phenomena in a "disattend track", provide organization for the events that are the official focus of their attention. In subsequent work Scheflen investigated how features of settings (for example the type of event in progress, the arrangement of furniture in a room, etc.) shape interaction, and performed an extensive cross-cultural study of how members of different ethnic groups use the space in their homes. The work on visual materials of both Bateson and

Scheflen had considerable influence on the research of subsequent scholars.

Bateson's interests were by no means restricted to therapeutic discourse. Looking at otters playing in a zoo he made the crucial observation that they were capable of **framing** their behavior, so that actions that in other circumstances would be treated as quite hostile and aggressive – nips and bites for example – were here recognized as not serious but playful. Building from such observations, Bateson called attention to the crucial role that **framing** plays in the organization of interaction in general. Indeed, framing provides a prototypical example of context (consider for example how the narrator frames his story in Bauman's chapter, the way in which postural configurations frame spates of talk in Kendon's analysis, the framing provided by discourse genres in Lindstrom's chapter, etc.). Bateson laid the groundwork for an ecological, contextual view of phenomena as diverse as play, family structure, art, and the mind itself. His work had a strong influence on the approach to context, keying, and frame analysis developed by Erving Goffman (1974).

A number of different, major analytical perspectives for the analysis of face-to-face interaction can be found in the work of Erving Goffman. With respect to the chapters in this volume it is useful to distinguish two distinct strands in Goffman's work. The first, most prominent in his early work (especially Goffman 1961, 1963, 1967, but also 1974), provides a variety of analytical frameworks for the description and analysis of all types of multi-party interaction. Goffman starts by differentiating **unfocused interaction** (which occurs whenever two or more individuals are mutually accessible to each other, for example when strangers pass each other on the street) from **focused interaction**, "the kind of interaction that occurs when persons gather close together and openly cooperate to sustain a single focus of attention" (Goffman 1963: 24), for example conversations, card games, surgical operations, etc. He then offers a range of analytical categories to describe the structural features of each of these types of situations, for example primary and subordinate involvements, involvement shields, rules governing accessibility and leave taking, different types of spatial regions, information structures, communication boundaries, situational properties, etc. Goffman is careful to take into account both the physical and the social setting of interaction (for example in Goffman 1971 he devotes considerable attention to the distinction between public and private space in our society), and indeed on one level his work provides a powerful ethnography of middle-class society. Of particular relevance to the work in the present volume is the analysis of participant structures he provides, differentiating for example those within an encounter from those outside it (ratified participants vs. overhearers), and a range of different types of participants within an encounter (speaker, addressee, hearer, etc.). The themes found in this strand of Goffman's work are most

explicitly addressed in Kendon's chapter in this volume, which investigates how the defining characteristic of a focused encounter, the collaborative organization of a moving focus of attention, is accomplished within face-to-face interaction (other analysis of the collaborative organization of mutual involvement can be found in the Goodwins' chapter).

A second theoretical strand in Goffman's work investigates frames that can be invoked by a single speaker within talk itself. A good example is provided by Goffman's analysis, in both "The Frame Analysis of Talk" (one of the concluding chapters of *Frame Analysis*, Goffman 1974) and "Footing" (Goffman 1981), of the different entities that can be invoked by a speaker within a strip of talk: (a) the **author** of the words being spoken; (b) a **principal** or party officially responsible for what is being said (who might, as in the case of a President and press spokesman, be quite different from the person who is actually speaking); (c) the **animator** or entity who is actually speaking; (d) a **figure** or protagonist animated by the speaker, for example a character in a story, though the speaker can of course animate him- or herself as a figure and does so when using the pronoun "I". Note that such framing can be performed by a single speaker within a single strip of talk. It is "dialogic" in the Bakhtinian sense (and indeed Goffman's formulation of these distinctions was influenced by the work of Vološinov [1973] on reported speech) rather than dialogue in the conversational sense of a state of talk sustained through the collaborative action of multiple participants. Though Goffman included various types of recipients in his analysis of **participation status** (1981: 131–7), the way in which his conceptual apparatus provides resources for describing how speakers build participant frameworks has had the most influence on subsequent research (Hanks 1990, Levinson 1987), with only a few scholars focusing empirical investigation on what recipients as well as speakers actually do to constitute a state of talk (see the Goodwins' chapter in this volume for an example of such an approach).

5.5 The ethnography of speaking

Following up on Malinowski's notion of "context of situation" and Jakobson's (1960) speech event scheme, Hymes' SPEAKING model (1972) represents a major shift in the choice of units of analysis: for the first time (see also Hymes 1965) a non-linguistic unit, the event, becomes the frame of reference for interpreting speech. This has several consequences for the scope of context, the most important one being that context is not defined on the basis of what is needed to interpret a particular set of linguistic phenomena. Rather, the ethnographer attempts a description of what seem the most important dimensions of the event, on the basis of culturally defined categories, before or while engaging in linguistic interpretation. The native taxonomies for the communicative event inform the analysis of

talk and vice versa (Bauman 1977, 1986; Bauman and Sherzer 1974; Duranti 1981; Sherzer 1983).

The grid proposed by Hymes defines a wide range of phenomena under the rubric of "context." With respect to the grammatical studies and philosophical approaches mentioned earlier, the most striking difference is the introduction of the category "participant" in the analysis. This means going beyond the dyad speaker–hearer and taking more subtle distinctions into consideration. The study of oratorical discourse has taught us, for instance, that at times the speaker may need to be differentiated from the addressor and that the hearer may need to be differentiated from the addressee (cf. the articles in Bloch 1975 and Brenneis and Myers 1984) – or that different kinds of addressees may need to be taken into consideration (see for example the extensive deconstruction of the terms "speaker" and "hearer" in Goffman's analysis of "Footing" [1981: 124–69]; and Levinson 1987). In the last few years, research within anthropological linguistics and conversational analysis has developed these concepts in an attempt to define the collaborative albeit differentiated work done by participants in a public verbal performance (cf. Brenneis 1978, 1986, 1987; Du Bois 1987; Duranti 1986, 1988b; C. Goodwin 1986; Haviland 1986).

Whereas in speech act theory context usually does not go beyond speaker and hearer, in the ethnographic approach, several other aspects of the speech event are taken into consideration, for example the spatial and the temporal dimensions of the event (cf. also Duranti 1981, 1985). This is particularly the case for the study of ritual and institutional activities (e.g. classroom interactions, political meetings), which tend to use linguistic markers to define the spatio-temporal scope of phenomena that are locally relevant to the ongoing talk.

Other elements of the SPEAKING model also offered an alternative to the more limited notion of context proposed within speech act theory. For instance, the study of genres implied an attention to units of discourse larger than the sentence (cf. Bauman 1977, 1986; Sherzer 1983). The very notion of genre assumes a complexity of linguistic and extralinguistic factors that can be exploited for an integrated analysis of speech performance as inherently dialogical and constitutive of social reality. This is indeed the direction of the study of genres recently inspired by the work of Bakhtin and his Circle (see for example Bauman's chapter in this volume and Hanks 1987). The attention to larger units of analysis and the contexts of their production also questions the cross-contextual and cross-cultural validity of taken-for-granted speech acts such as **promising** and **praising**. The more we pay attention to actual acts of speaking and their embedded practices, the more we realize that any act of interpretation is indeed a social act and participants must continuously negotiate what is being said and what the appropriate, namely acceptable, interpretation is (see Lindstrom, this volume; Duranti 1988a; Rosaldo 1982). A given speech

act, e.g. **praising** or **promising**, is seen within the wider context of a speech performed on a given occasion, within particular sociocultural expectations. The focus on **keys** – an aspect of communicative behavior analyzed as well by Bateson (1972) and Goffman (1974) – also stressed the need to consider multifunctional aspects of linguistic expressions, whereby the same utterance may carry several messages at once, namely a given proposition and the locally appropriate interpretation, e.g. serious, ironic, etc.

The attention to all of these factors has been very important in expanding current notions of context and making them more receptive to culture-specific norms and expectations.

The approach to the ethnography of communication established by Gumperz and Hymes now includes several flourishing lines of research. For example Gumperz and his collaborators (Gumperz 1982a, 1982b) have devoted considerable attention to analysis of **context as a process of inference**, the study of the **contextualization cues** through which context is invoked (see also Basso, this volume), and how the cultural loading of such cues can lead to **miscommunication in cross-cultural settings**, issues discussed in some detail by Gumperz in his chapter in this volume. For a more detailed view of research produced by Hymes and his students see Duranti (1988b).

5.6 Ethnomethodology

An important perspective on context emerges not from the study of language itself but rather from sociologists interested in systematic analysis of how members of a society build the events they participate in. **Ethnomethodologists** including Aaron Cicourel (Cicourel 1964, 1968, 1973, 1974; Cicourel and Kitsuse 1963; Cicourel *et al.* 1974) and Harold Garfinkel (Garfinkel 1967, Garfinkel and Sacks 1970, Garfinkel, Lynch, and Livingston 1981) are interested in the most basic of all social phenomena: the way in which social order and social organization are constituted. In order for separate individuals to engage in coordinated social action they must recognize in common what activities are in progress and what those present must do to perform the activity. The central question of intersubjectivity (how separate individuals are able to know or act within a common world) is thus raised as a constitutive feature of social action. What ethnomethodology (from Husserl and via Schutz) defined as the problem of intersubjectivity can be seen as an attempt at answering the question about how members negotiate or achieve a common context. Many traditional social theorists essentially bypass this problem by assuming that through psychological processes such as internalization members of a society will automatically recognize the scenes they confront and be motivated to play their parts within them. Analysis can then focus on larger

aspects of the social system while the cognitive activity of actual actors is treated as either epiphenomenal or defective (Heritage 1984). Mundane social actors are conceptualized as "judgmental dopes" (Garfinkel 1967) embedded within a matrix of action that exceeds their comprehension. The context of their understanding exists prior to their acting in the world. By way of contrast, ethnomethodologists argue that both intersubjectivity and the social order visible in coordinated action are accomplished through ongoing, moment-by-moment social and cognitive work; participants display to each other their understanding of the events they are engaged in as part of the process through which these very same events are performed and constituted as social activities. Instead of judgmental dopes the ethnomethodologist finds actors who are reflexively aware of the social events they are producing and who are possessed of a rich and immensely varied, socially organized cognitive life. Part of this richness arises from the way in which social action is embedded within the settings and institutions of a society from mundane talk to abstract science (Knorr-Cetina, Mulkay, and Mulkay 1983; Lynch 1982, 1988; Lynch, Livingston, and Garfinkel 1983). Analysis of how participants accomplish social order requires detailed investigation, from the inside out, of the indigenous settings and activities of a society. Within ethnomethodology strong disputes exist about a variety of issues, including the relevance of ethnographic fieldwork. In his chapter in this volume, Aaron Cicourel, one of the founders of ethnomethodology, addresses some of these questions and demonstrates how vast an array of members' knowledge, situated within specific settings and activities, must be deployed to understand even a very short stretch of talk.

5.7 Conversation analysis

Conversation analysis is a field of study that emerged within sociology through the work of Harvey Sacks, Gail Jefferson, Emanuel Schegloff, and their colleagues. It accords primary importance to the analysis of talk as a body of situated social practices.[13] This work emerged from a larger ethnomethodological tradition. The central place that language occupies in the organization of human social phenomena is recognized by Garfinkel and Sacks (1970: 342) when they equate the basic social actor with **mastery of natural language**. Such mastery includes the ability to understand more than is explicitly said within a strip of talk by situating it both within indigenous frameworks of commonsense knowledge, and within the practical circumstances and particular activities that parties to the talk are engaged in. Analysis thus shifts from the isolated sentence that is the focus of study within linguistics to the utterance embedded within a **context**:

> A speaker's action is context-shaped in that its contribution to an on-going sequence of actions cannot adequately be understood except by reference to the

> context – including, especially, the immediately preceding configuration of actions – in which it participates. This contextualization of utterances is a major, and unavoidable, procedure which hearers use and rely on to interpret conversational contributions and it is also something which speakers pervasively attend to in the design of what they say.
>
> (Heritage 1984: 242)

Indeed the production of talk is **doubly contextual** (Heritage 1984: 242) in that a subsequent utterance not only relies upon existing context for its production and interpretation, but that utterance is in its own right an event that shapes a new context for the action that will follow it. Consider for example the way in which a **question** makes producing an answer to that question the appropriate thing to do next. As a mode of action an utterance invokes for its interpretation the social field from which it emerges while simultaneously creating a new arena for subsequent action.[14]

When viewed from this perspective, talk is analyzed, not as a syntactic code, or a medium that reports events in some external world, but rather as a mode of action embedded within human interaction. Conversation analysts seek to describe the procedures used by participants in conversation to produce and understand that behavior. A key focus of research by conversation analysts has been the **sequential organization**, the larger sequences of talk, within which utterances and speech acts emerge and are interpreted (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974). As Heritage and Atkinson (1984: 6) note:

> no empirically occurring utterance ever occurs outside, or external to, some specific sequence. Whatever is said will be said in some sequential context, and its illocutionary force will be determined by reference to what it accomplishes in relation to some sequentially prior utterance or set of utterances. As long as a state of talk prevails, there will be no escape or timeout from these considerations. And, insofar as unfolding sequences and their constituent turns are unavoidable analytic concerns for interactants, they provide a powerful and readily accessible point of entry in the unavoidable contextedness of actual talk.

Such an approach to the study of face-to-face behavior has much to contribute to a range of theoretical and methodological issues of interest to cultural anthropologists (cf. M. H. Goodwin 1990, Moerman 1988). For example, participants in conversation have the job of providing next moves to ongoing talk which demonstrate what sense they make of that talk. It is therefore possible to see how group members themselves **interpret** the interaction they are engaged in without having to rely on accounts they pass on to anthropologists through interviews or an analyst's rendition of speakers' intentions. Moreover this indigenous process of interpretation links cultural and social phenomena; the analysis participants are engaged in is itself a constitutive element of the social organization achieved and manifested through interactive talk. Conversational structure thus provides a powerful proof procedure that is quite relevant to

some of the major theoretical issues that have long been the focus of ethnographic theory.

Conversation analysis is represented most clearly in the present volume in the chapters by Schegloff and the Goodwins. In these chapters the analysis of context, and of sequential organization, is explored on a variety of different levels. Thus the first part of the Goodwins' chapter focuses on the interactive organization of activities occurring within a single utterance. By way of contrast, Schegloff investigates how events which seem to disattend their local context when examined on a micro level, can in fact be found to be organized by their placement in much larger sequences. Finally, the Goodwins' analysis of **instigating** describes how the internal structure of stories is shaped by the larger social projects within which the production of narrative is embedded (for example, by telling a story in which recipient is a principal character, speaker can incite recipient to a future confrontation with someone who is portrayed as having committed offenses against him or her). In brief, conversation analysis provides a thoroughgoing analysis of language as a mode of interaction which relies upon context for the interpretation of action that at the very same time shapes, expands and changes that context.

5.8 Foucault

Finally, we want to turn to another major trend of analytical thought in the Western tradition that has had an impact on our current notions of context, namely the work of the French historian and polymath Michel Foucault. Through a number of extremely original and thought-provoking series of lectures and publications, Foucault reexamined the history of human sciences, prisons, madness, and public health, and how such varied institutions affect individuals and their perception of themselves, their sexuality, and the meaning of their existence. Foucault's contribution was to highlight vast domains of power that are mostly sub-institutional and therefore hidden. These are often unconscious cultural conditions, rules, and practices that govern what people do with their bodies, how they communicate and otherwise relate among themselves, how they desire and fear, and so on. All "knowledge" – or what we might call cultural "domains" – carries within it sub-institutional power networks in which we become enmeshed as soon as we begin to learn and to use that knowledge socially. Following post-structuralist practice, Foucault calls a cultural domain of knowledge a "discourse." Discourse, here, should not be confused with its usage in other analytical traditions in which it means simply the flow of conversation, or a text longer than a sentence. Rather, for Foucault, a discourse is a cultural complex of signs and practices that regulates how we live socially. As such, Foucault's "discourse" has many similarities with Bourdieu's "habitus" – mostly unthought but still learned ways of thinking, feeling, and acting.

As in Bourdieu's case, Foucault was interested in providing a solution to the dichotomy between the predetermined socio-historical and economic conditions of existence and its emergent, and socially negotiated properties. The realm of discourse practices discovered by Foucault provides the analytical link between more subjective, emotional experience and the objective constraints of the institutions. As pointed out in Lindstrom's chapter, what is relevant from the point of view of our rethinking the notion of context is the stress that Foucault places on the intricate and subtle relationship between the interpretive frames we use in everyday life (within and across various activities and institutional roles) and the implicit power relations that each frame implies, exploits, and, at the same time, helps reproduce (in a different vein, similar themes are discussed by Cicourel in this volume). Thus, for instance, Foucault discusses how domains of scientific knowledge are protected by the operation of "disciplinal" policing – by the operation of rules that limit who can "talk" science, who can use it publicly, and that make some talk seem scientifically true, some seem false, and some just "silent," not even audible. We realize then that the discourse of science is not necessarily different from the discourse of politics. They are both concerned with the definition of "truth." But truth, Foucault reminds us, is a socio-historical construction, mediated by particular discourse practices. The role of the historian, or of any other social or human scientist interested in such practices, is to systematically unveil the hidden processes whereby a potentially undifferentiated stream of sounds or sets of continuous behaviors are channeled into systematic oppositions of figures and grounds, visible and less visible elements, focused and unfocused interaction, talk and its surrounding context.

6 Conclusion

Recent work in a number of different fields has called into question the adequacy of earlier definitions of context in favor of a more dynamic view of the relationship between linguistic and non-linguistic dimensions of communicative events. Instead of viewing context as a set of variables that statically surround strips of talk, context and talk are now argued to stand in a mutually reflexive relationship to each other, with talk, and the interpretive work it generates, shaping context as much as context shapes talk. On the one hand the traditional variables of ethnographic and sociological analysis have to be supplemented by study of participant attributes and patterns of social organization that are intrinsic to the activity of talk itself. On the other, the characteristics of language as an interactive phenomenon have challenged traditional notions of linguistic structure and linguistic rules, suggesting a view of the relationship between language and context as a process that emerges and changes through time and space. To rethink something means to recontextualize it, to take it out

of earlier frames and place it in a new set of relationships and expectations. The notion of context stands at the cutting edge of much contemporary research into the relationship between language, culture, and social organization, as well as into the study of how language is structured in the way that is is. The essays in this volume represent a variety of viewpoints on this new concept of context. They draw upon a wide range of methodological and theoretical expertise. Each one describes some complex phenomenon involving the role of context in linguistic interpretation and offers suggestions for the relevance of such phenomena to the understanding of other aspects of speech as social action. We offer these chapters as a bridge between the past and the future in an area of study that is relevant to much of contemporary cognitive and social sciences.

Notes

1 See for example Morris (1938), Carnap (1942), Bar-Hillel (1954), Gazdar (1979), Ochs (1979), Levinson (1983), Leech (1983).

2 See for example Malinowski (1923, 1935), Jakobson (1960), Gumperz and Hymes (1972), Hymes (1972, 1974), Bauman and Sherzer 1974.

3 See for example Labov (1966, 1972a, 1972b), Romaine (1982), Sankoff (1980).

4 However, there have been attempts at clarifying the terms and notions necessary for handling the different kinds of relations that linguistic signs entertain or establish with their context of use. The semiotically informed work by Silverstein (1985a, 1985b) on metapragmatics is one such example.

5 Describing what is being contextualized as the **focal event** implies that it is in some sense more salient and noticeable than its **context**, and indeed, as analyzed in some detail by Hanks and Kendon in this volume, there does seem to be a fundamental **figure–ground** relationship implicated in the organization of context, with the **figure**, what we are calling the focal event, standing out from a more amorphous ground as the official focus of attention. This will be discussed in more detail below.

6 For a review of the scope of pragmatics that encompasses interactive as well as linguistic and philosophic approaches, see Levinson (1983).

7 The importance of the dichotomy foreground vs. background information has long been accepted within discourse-based grammatical studies, as shown by such contributions as Cooreman (1987), Givón (1983), Hopper and Thompson (1980), among others.

8 Indeed literacy, and writing in particular, is one of the main procedures through which the **ground** within which language emerges is systematically erased, made invisible, and excluded from analysis. This has enormous consequences for how the linguistic phenomena that become objects of study within particular paradigms are in fact constituted. Though work in the linguistic traditions flowing from generative grammar is based on spoken examples, the utterances studied are not spontaneous but rather built by the analyst in terms of specific theoretical problems. The utterances are in fact dealt with as **printed samples of**

language possibilities whose natural home is other printed language (either in an article by the researcher or on a handout for a talk). The linguistic context for these very specialized samples of language thus consists of either talk by the linguistic **about** the written sentences (rather than responses to them as embodied social action) or juxtaposition with other written samples in an organized "data set." The effect of all this is to focus grammatical analysis on language samples that exist only within a very unusual, highly specialized context. Moreover, this context is not usually attended to explicitly by the analyst, but instead sentences are studied as though context were irrelevant (a problem that becomes especially serious in speech act analysis).

9 The asymmetry between figure and ground has dramatic consequences for special populations such as deaf people when they try to fully participate in interactions where the simultaneous use of both verbal and nonverbal information is necessary (e.g. a teacher talking while writing on the blackboard). Both channels cannot be accessed via an interpreter who typically chooses to translate verbal over nonverbal information. However, the verbal information requires almost exclusive visual access in order for it to be understood (Johnson 1989).

10 For example Jefferson (1979) has demonstrated that outbreaths and other paralinguistic cues are redefined as "laughter" or "invitations to laughter" only after the recipient has given hints that that interpretation is acceptable.

11 We will not here enter into the dispute about whether, and to what extent, Bakhtin was in fact the author of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (cf. Clark and Holquist 1984). Many groundbreaking attempts to explore new phenomena emerge from the intense collaboration of a small group of individuals, and efforts to unequivocally assign ideas to unique individuals seem rather to reflect a Western prejudice about the importance of the individual (carried to an extreme in America) than to provide a relevant guide to the body of ideas being examined, especially for a group so committed to the social nature of language and thought as the Bakhtin Circle. Both Vološinov and Medvedev suffered the consequences of publishing the work of the Bakhtin Circle under their names (Medvedev to the death) and we agree with Todorov (1984: 10) that "in such a context I would be most loath to deny him even partial authorship of works for which he died." Furthermore, Bakhtin's theory recognizes any meaning-making process as always cooperative and, therefore, his co-authors and friends deserve from us the credit that his recognizes.

12 For more detailed commentary on Vygotsky, and his relevance to contemporary social theory, see Cole (1985), Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition (1983), Wertsch (1979a, 1979b, 1981a, 1981b, 1985a, 1985b). For explicit comparison of the perspectives of Vygotsky and Bakhtin see Emerson (1983), Wertsch (1985b), and the special issue of the *Quarterly Newsletter of the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition* 5(1) (1983).

13 Important collections of research in conversation analysis can be found in Atkinson and Heritage (1984), Button and Lee (1987), Schenkein (1978), the special double issue of *Sociological Inquiry* edited by Zimmerman and West (1980), and a special issue of *Human Studies* (1986) edited by Button, Drew, and Heritage. Turn-taking is most extensively analyzed in Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974). The investigation of phenomena within the turn, including the interdigitation of verbal and nonverbal behavior in that process, is dealt with at

length in C. Goodwin (1981) and Heath (1986). For an analysis both of basic ideas in ethnomethodology and of work in conversation analysis that grows from it see Heritage (1984). Levinson (1983) provides a review of conversation analysis that focuses on its contributions to pragmatics. For examples of how conversation analysis can be applied to the analysis of larger institutions see Atkinson (1984), Atkinson and Drew (1979) and Maynard (1984).

14 For more detailed exposition of how an action in conversation creates a framework of expectations that constrains and provides for the interpretation of subsequent action see Schegloff's (1968) discussion of **conditional relevance** and the reviews of work in conversation analysis provided in Heritage (1984, 1985) and Levinson (1983).

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