



# Discourse and Context

A Sociocognitive Approach

*Teun A. van Dijk*

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## Discourse and Context

How do social situations influence language use and discourse? This book is the first monograph to present a multidisciplinary theory of *context*. Traditionally, context was defined as “objective” social variables (such as gender or class of speakers). Teun A. van Dijk argues that it is not the social situation itself that influences the structures of text and talk, but rather the *definition* of the relevant properties of the communicative situation by the discourse participants. The new theoretical notion developed to account for these subjective mental constructs is that of *context models*, which play a crucial role in interaction and in the production and comprehension of discourse. They dynamically control how language use and discourse are adapted to their situational environment, and hence define under what conditions they are appropriate. Context models are the missing link between discourse, communicative situation and society, and hence are also part of the foundation of pragmatics. In this book, context models are studied especially from a (socio) linguistic and cognitive perspective. In another book published by Cambridge University Press, *Society and Discourse* Teun A. van Dijk develops the social psychological, sociological and anthropological dimensions of the theory of context.

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## Preface

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Thirty years ago I wrote a book called *Text and Context*. That book deals extensively, and quite formally, with text, but much less with context – a notion that is of crucial importance in understanding how discourse is embedded in society. In my later work in Critical Discourse Studies, for instance on racism, ideology and discourse, context is extensively dealt with as a social background for discourse, but analyzed theoretically hardly at all. Traditionally, in the study of language and discourse, context is conceived of in terms of independent social variables, such as gender, class, ethnicity, age or identity, or as social conditions of text and talk.

Both formal and ethnographic studies of *indexicality* define contexts rather in *semantic* terms, for instance as referents for deictic expressions, but most of such work is limited to spatial or temporal orientations of participants.

*Speech act theories* have formally accounted for some of the properties of Speakers and Hearers, such as their knowledge, wishes or status, so as to formulate appropriateness conditions, but have not further pursued a systematic analysis of such contextual conditions.

*Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA) is crucially interested in the social conditions of discourse, and specifically in questions of power and power abuse, but has also failed to develop more explicit theories of context as a foundation for its own critical enterprise. Obviously, power is not shown just in some of the aspects of “powerful speech,” and we need insight into the whole, complex context in order to know how power is related to text and talk, and more generally how discourse reproduces social structure.

Both the *cognitive psychology* of discourse and *artificial intelligence* have advanced much in the last decades in discovering the processes and representations involved in discourse production and comprehension. They have contributed insights into the fundamental role of mental models and knowledge regarding discourse processing and use. However, these models were also semantic rather than pragmatic. Apart from some experimental studies of individual differences or different goals, little systematic empirical work has been done on the influence of context on discourse processing.

*Social psychology* is among the few disciplines that have developed ideas about the structures of situations and episodes that might be used as proposals for the basis of a theory of context, but these were not intended as a theory of context for discourse. Indeed, except in *discursive psychology*, the study of discourse in mainstream social psychology is still quite marginal.

If any discipline should provide insight into the nature of contexts and their influence on discourse, it is *sociology*. But, rather ironically, the major influence of sociology in discourse analysis has been the *analysis of conversation*, which, at least initially, was even more context-free than much discourse analysis – while focusing more on the structures of interaction than on settings, actors and their properties. Note though that in earlier decades there were occasional attempts to define social situations in sociology, culminating especially in the work of Erving Goffman, who may be the sociologist who has contributed most to our understanding of how interaction and talk are situated.

*Anthropology* and, especially, the *ethnography of speaking* and *linguistic anthropology* are the only directions of research that have now for a period of decades been paying explicit attention to the study of context as an obvious component of “communicative events,” beginning with the well-known SPEAKING grid by Dell Hymes in the 1960s. Related are the ethnographic studies by John Gumperz and others in *interactional sociolinguistics* on what they called “contextualization.” Until today these are also the few approaches that have produced (edited) books on context and contextualization.

We may conclude from this very brief summary that in most of the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences there is growing but as yet unfocused interest in the study of context.

There are many thousands of books, in many disciplines, that feature the word “context” in their titles, but the vast majority of these studies use the word “context” informally, as social, political, geographical, or economic “environment,” “situation,” “conditions” or “background,” and hardly ever in the specific sense of “context of text or talk”.

There are a few books in linguistics, discourse studies, and the social sciences that use the notion of context in terms of constraints and consequences of discourse, but most of these studies focus on discourse itself, and not on the complex nature of its contexts. This is of course not surprising, because the very notion of “context” implies that it is defined relative to “text,” and that in that case the “text” (or talk) is the focal phenomenon. That is, contexts are generally only considered to better understand or analyze discourse. If not, a “context” study would be pure psychology, sociology or anthropology of settings, social actors and their properties, as well as their cognitions, activities, interactions, social practices or organizations.

The time has come to take contexts seriously, and to develop explicit theories of contexts and the ways they are assumed to be related to discourse and communication. This book, as well as *Society and Discourse* (van Dijk, 2008), in which I explore the study of context in the social sciences, is an attempt to develop just such a theory. It will do so by examining the (use of the) notion of context and its possible components in linguistics, sociolinguistics and cognitive psychology. *Society and Discourse* extends this theoretical exploration for social psychology, sociology and anthropology, studies that will often be referred to in the current volume. Although closely related as one comprehensive study of context, both books can be read as independent studies – this one largely directed at readers in (socio)linguistics and cognitive psychology, and the other monograph at readers in social psychology, sociology, anthropology and political science. Of course, I may hope that readers of this volume will also read the other study on context in the social sciences, given the obvious relationships between social contexts of discourse and the study of communicative situations and interactions in the social sciences.

This book is the first monograph dedicated entirely to the notion of context, and therefore should be seen as exploratory. It is a theoretical study, inspired by ideas, notions and developments in linguistics, sociolinguistics and cognitive psychology. Although I review a large number of empirical studies, I have no new ethnographic context studies or experiments to report. Instead, throughout the book I shall illustrate the theory with the example of one of the most influential discourses of recent years: the debate on Iraq in the British House of Commons. In his speech in this debate Tony Blair presented and defended a motion intended to legitimate war against Iraq – a war of which we all know the dire consequences.

This speech and subsequent ones by other Members of Parliament offer many examples that demonstrate that a context-free approach to the study of discourse and conversation is constrained and leads to superficial, formalistic, and sometimes trivial descriptions that seriously under-analyze discourse, as it is deeply embedded in social and political life.

Since intuitively nearly anything may become relevant for discourse – if only the topics we talk about, or the myriad of situations in which we may talk, write, listen or read – a theory of context risks becoming a Theory of Everything. It is therefore crucial to literally “define,” that is, delimit, what may otherwise extend to large part of society. Indeed, it is hardly an exaggeration to hold that Tony Blair’s speech needs to be understood not only as that of a Prime Minister addressing MPs (and the nation, and the world) in the context of a parliamentary debate in the British House of Commons on March 18, 2003, but also as part of UK foreign policy, the relationships with the USA and the EU, the Middle East question, and so on.

Unless we want to get lost in endless contexts, we must conclude that not everything that can somehow be understood as “background” to discourse is necessarily part of its “context” when that is defined in more restrictive, theoretical terms. Context draws on, but is not the same as, knowledge of the world. Developing a theory of context, thus, means first of all selecting those elements of a communicative situation that are systematically relevant for talk and text. This means that we need to examine how in linguistics, sociolinguistics, cognitive and social psychology, sociology and anthropology such situations are being defined in the first place – and then devise criteria of what to include and what not to in the theory of context.

This book is not only exploratory and a review of much earlier work. It also presents and defends a theoretical thesis that may be obvious (at least for psychologists and some old phenomenological sociologists) but is not apparent in much of the current social sciences and the various approaches to discourse and communication. This thesis is very simple, but it is crucial to an understanding of what context is and how it relates to discourse:

It is not the social situation that influences (or is influenced by) discourse, but the way the participants *define* such a situation.

Contexts are thus not some kind of objective condition or direct cause, but rather (inter)subjective constructs designed and ongoingly updated in interaction by participants as members of groups and communities. If contexts were objective social conditions or constraints, all people in the same social situation would speak in the same way. So the theory must avoid social positivism, realism and determinism at the same time: contexts are participant constructs. This is also the reason why the main hypothesis of the theory of context is a sociocognitive one, and this book may be defined as a sociocognitive perspective on the study of context within a broader multidisciplinary approach.

The thesis that contexts are subjective participant constructs also accounts for the uniqueness of each text or talk (or its fragments), as well as for the common ground and shared social representations of participants as they are being applied in their definition of the situation we call context.

We shall see that psychology has a very useful theoretical notion that places the theory on a solid cognitive foundation, namely that of *mental model*. That is, as subjective interpretations of communicative situations, contexts will be defined as *context models*. Here is what such context models (must) do:

- They control how participants produce and understand discourse.
- They enable participants to adapt discourse or its interpretations to the communicative situation as it is relevant to them at each moment of the interaction or communication.

- They provide the crucial missing link in the cognitive theory of text processing between mental models of events talked about (reference) and the way discourse is actually formulated.
- They define the conditions of appropriateness of discourse, and hence are the basis of a theory of pragmatics.
- They are the basis of a theory of style, genre, register and in general of all discourse variation.
- They are the missing link between discourse and society, between the personal and the social, and between agency and structure, and hence confirm that the well-known micro–macro problem can (also) be formulated in these terms, at least for the fundamental domain of language and communication.
- For linguistics and (formal) grammars, context models may be (and partially have been) formalized in ways that go beyond the referential semantics of deictics.
- Context models will allow sociolinguistic inquiry to continue more explicitly its development beyond the study of correlations with social variables, and at the same time focus more on the social influence on discourse structures.
- Context models make explicit old but still relevant notions of sociology, such as *definition of the situation*, also to be applied in interaction and conversation analyses.
- They show how context also may control aspects of text and talk that are relevant for the participants but are not observable.
- They reformulate earlier frameworks in anthropology for the study of communicative events.
- Finally, as also the contextual and critical analysis of Tony Blair’s speech as well as the other interventions in the Iraq debate will show, a more systematic account of context is part of the foundation of Critical Discourse Studies as much as it is for all more socio-political approaches to discourse.

Since the theory is only fragmentary, this book is also intended as a stimulus for further research. It deals with numerous issues that need further theoretical development, psychological experiments, ethnographic description and detailed discourse analysis. The influence of context is often subtle, indirect, complex, confused and contradictory, with results far from the main effects of independent social variables.

Contexts are like other human experiences – at each moment and in each situation such experiences define how we see the current situation and how we act in it. It is a fundamental task for the humanities and social sciences in general, and for discourse studies in particular, to show how exactly our text and talk depends on – and influences – such contexts.

More than any of my other books, the writing of my two books on context has been a tremendous effort of several years. Although developing theory (and analyzing interesting examples) can be fun, one may sometimes despair because of the complexity of the questions involved. When devising a general theory of context and its relation to discourse, we cannot limit ourselves to a more focused study of, say, pronouns, turn-taking or metaphor (each already an enormous area of study). On the one hand nearly all aspects of social situations need to be considered, and on the other all the variable structures of language use and discourse. No wonder it took years before I got a grip of the major problems involved! No wonder that this study, despite the severe limitations I imposed upon myself, steadily grew to its present size of two independent, but closely related, monographs! And I still have the nagging feeling that I have only scratched the surface – the same feeling I had about my understanding of discourse when I wrote *Text and Context* three decades ago.

I hope therefore that despite the obvious imperfections and incompleteness of my books, others will take up the challenge and further develop the field of *context studies* as one of the major areas of discourse studies in all disciplines of the humanities and social sciences.

Critical comments and suggestions are as always most welcome.

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# 1 Towards a theory of context

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On Tuesday, March 18, 2003, British Prime Minister Tony Blair made a speech in the House of Commons proposing a motion allowing British military action against Iraq “because of its continuing non-compliance with Security Council Resolutions.” After reading the motion, he began his speech as follows:

At the outset, I say that it is right that the House debate this issue and pass judgment. That is the democracy that is our right, but that others struggle for in vain. Again, I say that I do not disrespect the views in opposition to mine. This is a tough choice indeed, but it is also a stark one: to stand British troops down now and turn back, or to hold firm to the course that we have set. I believe passionately that we must hold firm to that course. The question most often posed is not “Why does it matter?” but “Why does it matter so much?” Here we are, the Government, with their most serious test, their majority at risk, the first Cabinet resignation over an issue of policy, the main parties internally divided, people who agree on everything else—

[Hon. Members: “The main parties?”]

Ah, yes, of course. The Liberal Democrats—unified, as ever, in opportunism and error.

*[Interruption.]*

For the Members of Parliament (MPs) present, and for us readers and analysts, to be able to understand this fragment – as transcribed in the official Hansard record – it is obviously crucial to know English grammar and the rules of discourse. At the same time, such understanding requires large amounts of “knowledge about the world,” e.g., about democracy or British troops, and, implicitly in this fragment, about Iraq. We thus understand, among many other things, that the speaker is defending sending troops to Iraq to bring democracy, and presupposing, again among many other things, that Iraq is not a democracy and that troops (war, etc.) can bring democracy.

This understanding, however, based as it is on grammar, discourse rules and world knowledge, is only part of our comprehension. What the Members of Parliament particularly also understand is that such an intervention is appropriate in this debate and in parliament, and why, what parliament’s

functions are, and what the speaker, Tony Blair, is now *doing* (as opposed to what he is speaking about, meaning and referring to, e.g., British troops). That is, they not only understand the text of Blair's discourse, but also its *context*. They know that the person speaking is Tony Blair; at the same time they know he is speaking *as* Prime Minister and *as* leader of the current British government; that he is now addressing them as MPs and party members; that he is intending to defend the current Iraq policy of his government; that when referring to "The House" he deictically refers to "this" House of Commons of which they are members and where he is now speaking; that he is mocking the Liberal Democrats for their alleged opportunism; and much more.

By understanding the combined text-in-context of this speech, the MPs – and we as readers of the Hansard report – understand what this speech really is about, namely a specific way of "doing politics" by means of participating in parliamentary debates. Through our knowledge of the political context of this speech, we know that this speech is not only grammatical English and meaningful, but also appropriate in the current situation of a parliamentary debate and understandable as part of the political process of parliamentary decision-making and legislation. In sum, *we understand the political "point" of this speech*.

As analysts we know that the MPs understand Blair's speech (more or less) in this way not only because *we* do so, given our knowledge of politics, parliamentary debates, the UK and current world history, but also because Blair and the MPs variously express, presuppose and signal such "contextual" understandings, both in this and in later parts of this debate (see the analysis in *Society and Discourse*). For instance, in this fragment Blair uses several deictic expressions that explicitly refer to how he understands the current context of his speech, by including the referents of "I," "the House," "this issue," "our right," "I say," "the course we have set," "here we are, the Government," "the main parties," that is, referring to the current situation and himself as speaker, his function as Prime Minister, parliament, British political parties, current policy and so on.

In their later interventions, the MPs also display such contextual understanding, in this fragment for instance by critically questioning Blair's reference to the main parties while "forgetting" the Liberal Democrats. That is, these MPs show that they have a different ongoing definition of the relevant communicative situation, and the ironical reaction of Tony Blair again shows that he understands this alternative construction of the context of the MPs by making it explicit as an afterthought: the presence of the Liberal Democrats as a party in the House – and the debate. In other words, their pragmatic understanding of Blair's speech involves contextualizing it, that is, making inferences about his definition of the communicative situation – a definition with which they may not agree.

We see that producing and understanding text and talk crucially involves what is traditionally and informally called the “context” of this speech, involving such categories as participant identities and roles, place, time, institution, political actions and political knowledge, among other components.

More detailed analysis will almost surely require a more refined analysis of this fragment and its context, such as the fact that Blair’s ironical remark about the Liberal Democrats presupposes that they are part of the opposition and not of the government party or parties. This is not a *semantic* presupposition or implication, however, as when supporting troops presupposes that the UK has troops and that the UK is engaging in military action, but rather some kind of pragmatic or contextual presupposition based on political knowledge about the current political interaction in the debate.

We also see that this fragment not only contains a question and a reply, but that the question may be heard as a challenge to Blair and that his response to this challenge may be understood as “doing irony.” Also, although such an interactional analysis of this fragment may and should be refined, it does not provide sufficient insight into what is going on without further analysis of relevant context properties, such as the relation between Tony Blair as Prime Minister and members of the Labour Party and his opinion on and opposition to the Liberal Democrats. Without such a *contextualized understanding* we do not know that the interruption of the MPs is not merely a question, or even a critique, but also a form of political opposition if the speakers are members of the opposition. It is only through such *political understanding* of the relevant context that Blair’s response can be heard as ironical, and hence as a relevant political attack on the Liberal Democrats. In other words, to understand this fragment as an interaction, i.e., to understand what Blair is actually doing, the participant MPs, as well as we as analysts, need to construct an appropriate (political) context for it.

From this example and my brief analytical comments we may also conclude that “contextual” analysis of discourse goes beyond grammatical, “textual” and interactional analysis or understanding. Similarly, this analysis goes beyond the usual “cognitive” analysis. Not only do we need to make explicit the knowledge of the world that sustains semantic understanding of this fragment. We also need the more specific political knowledge required to construct a relevant context for this fragment and hence to understand its *political* meaning as an appropriate contribution to a parliamentary debate and the political process in the UK.

In other words, understanding discourse means understanding text/talk-in-context. Hence, discourse analysis and conversation analysis need to make explicit what contexts are and how exactly the relations between contexts and text or talk are to be analyzed in ways that explain how language users do this.

### What is “context”?

Both in everyday conversation and in scholarly discourse, we frequently use general notions, such as “language,” “discourse,” “action,” “mind,” “knowledge,” “society” or “power,” but we have a hard time defining them more or less satisfactorily. This often means that we are dealing with fundamental notions that need complex theories, if not whole disciplines, to account for their properties. At the same time, we usually have specialized fields of philosophy dealing with such concepts.

The same is true for the notion of “context.” Perhaps seeing it as slightly more formal than related concepts, such as “situation,” “circumstances” or “environment,” we use the notion of “context” whenever we want to indicate that some phenomenon, event, action or discourse needs to be seen or studied in relationship to its environment, that is, its “surrounding” conditions and consequences. We thus not only *describe* but especially also *explain* the occurrence or properties of some focal phenomenon in terms of some aspects of its context.

When informally referring to the “context” of Tony Blair’s speech, we may roughly summarize such a context with the description “the parliamentary debate in the UK House of Commons on March 18, 2003.” Especially much later, however, we might also define the context of Blair’s speech in broader terms, such as the “debates about the war in Iraq” or even “the UK’s foreign policy.” That is, contexts come in different *sizes* or *scopes*, may be more or less *micro* or more or less *macro*, and metaphorically speaking seem to be *concentric circles of influence* or *effect* of some state of affairs, event or discourse.

Also, there seems to be a *mutual* relationship of conditional influence between events and their contexts. The broader context of Blair’s (or more generally British) foreign policy – such as relationships with the USA, or the situation in the Middle East – no doubt explains many aspects of the current parliamentary debate as well as Tony Blair’s speech. And conversely, the current debate and speech in turn contribute to this very foreign policy of the UK. Text and talk not only are *constituents* of (or even produced by) their contexts, but also appear to be *constitutive* of their contexts: by addressing parliament about military action in Iraq, Tony Blair is also setting or defining UK foreign policy.

We see that the notion of “context” is frequently used in order to place or explain things. One puts or sees things in their “proper context,” and we are often urged not to take or describe things “out of context.” This is also why news report schemata in the press typically have a special Context category that places current events in their political, social or historical context (Van Dijk, 1988b).

We may conclude from this informal characterization of the notion of “context” that we do not properly understand complex phenomena without understanding their context. This is also true for parliamentary speeches. We would hardly understand large parts and especially the political “point” of Blair’s speech if we did not know that he was defending his Iraq policy in the British House of Commons. Much of the “content” of this speech on Iraq could be (and has been) debated by other speakers on other occasions, also outside of parliament, but obviously with very different functions while uttered in different situations. In this situation of the parliamentary debate, only Blair as Prime Minister – as well as some others allowed by the rules and the Speaker of the House – may open the debate, present motions, and do other political things. And conversely: *what* Blair says, and *how* he says it, may not always be appropriate in other situations. Indeed, it is not likely that during a family dispute at home Tony Blair will say something like “I do not disrespect the views in opposition to mine.” Apparently, contexts also control discourse *style*, such as this formal use of the rhetorical negated antonym (litotes) and his choice of lexical items (e.g., “in opposition to mine” instead of “opposed” or “dissident”). In other words, since Blair knows the specific contextual constraints of the parliamentary debates in the UK, he is able to formulate the content and style of his speech in accordance with such constraints.

### “Context” in the humanities and social sciences

#### *Literature, semiotics and the arts*

In the study of literature and the arts, at various moments of history, scholars were urged to study works of art and their structures “in their own right,” and to ignore the social context or psychological conditions of the author. Eventually, such “isolationist” or “autonomous” positions (*l’art pour l’art*, formalism, New Criticism, close reading, etc., Bell-Villada, 1996; Gibbons, 1979; Erlich, 1965) were rejected in favor of a more “contextual” approach that accounts for many properties of works of art in terms of psychological, social, cultural or historical “circumstances.” This does not mean that we should be less precise and systematic in describing the structures of a poem or a novel, but our understanding is surely more complete when we are able to describe and also explain many more properties of such literary texts in terms of their various contexts. Contextualization is a fundamental part of our understanding of human conduct, in general, and of literature and other texts and talk, in particular. Indeed, *con-texts* are called that way, because etymologically they come *with* “texts.”

Similar observations may be made for the emergence of the new cross-discipline of semiotics in the 1960s, one of the paradigms of the structuralist

movement in the humanities (see, among a vast number of other introductions, Eco, 1978). Largely based on abstract concepts of “signs” as applied to other forms of discourse and communication, e.g., in literature, narrative, film, dance, the arts or design, and inspired by the structuralist linguistic ideas of Saussure, Jakobson, Hjelmslev, Martinet, Barthes, Greimas, and others, few semiotic studies paid attention to social or cultural contexts. However, towards the 1990s, with the emergence of more explicit social semiotics and the critical analysis of multimodal messages semiotics took a more social direction of research (see, for instance, Hodge and Kress, 1988; Van Leeuwen, 2005).

### *Linguistics*

The same is true, as we shall see in more detail later (see Chapters 2 and 4), for the study of language. One does not need much historical knowledge of linguistics to know that the discipline for decades was limited to a “formalist,” “structuralist” or “transformational” study of signs, sounds, words, sentences, meanings or speech acts (see, e.g., the chapters in Aronoff, 2003). In such studies lip service tends to be paid, if at all, and typically in introductory chapters only, to the fact that language and language use are of course social phenomena, and need to be studied in their social and cultural contexts. Few linguistic schools, originally interested only in grammar, have explored the role of context, except systemic and other functional approaches, to which we shall turn in Chapter 2 – see, for instance, the work of Givón (see, e.g., Givón, 2005).

We have to wait until the late 1960s to witness the emergence of new interdisciplines, such as pragmatics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and the ethnography of speaking, that began to provide some insight into the cognitive, and especially the social and cultural “contexts” of language and language use (see references in later chapters and especially also in *Society and Discourse*).

Thus, at the boundary of linguistics and philosophy, the study of speech acts, implicatures and conversational postulates (Austin, 1962; Grice, 1975; Searle, 1969) for the first time not only emphasized the role of social action in language use, but also accounted for the (formal) contextual conditions of the *appropriateness* of utterances, as one of the characteristics of the new cross-discipline of *pragmatics*. It is also in this framework that the notion of “context” received analysis in its own right (see, e.g., Stalnaker, 1999; Horn and Ward, 2004).

Susan Ervin-Tripp, one of the pioneers of *sociolinguistics*, has been among those linguists who most emphatically advocated the explicit study of context, while criticizing the lack of context analysis in earlier studies:

The omission of context from linguistic accounts has occurred because some linguists have considered contextual structure to be too chaotic, too idiosyncratic, to be characterized systematically. When linguists began to identify variable rules (Labov, 1969, 1–44), the separation of the variable from the obligatory or categorial was obvious and unavoidable. Variationists have gradually introduced context into their analyses. What we are now beginning to do is use contrasts in linguistic features, including those that are variable, as our guideposts for identifying both the structure of conversation and the structure of context, indeed the immediate social structure for speakers. Linguistic features can tell us what are natural human categories for context. Such an approach can at last systematize the domain of context (Ervin-Tripp, 1996: 35).

### *Discourse studies*

The emerging discourse studies of the 1960s brought important new ideas to the study of language and communication (Van Dijk, 1985, 1997). However, many of its first contributions were rather structuralist and formal. Early *text grammars* often emulated generative sentence grammars (Van Dijk, 1972), although with attempts to incorporate a formal account of context as part of a pragmatic component (Van Dijk, 1977). Early *genre studies* (e.g. of narrative and argumentation) generally followed a formal paradigm, and seldom used more contextual approaches. The *cognitive psychology* of text processing later offered insight into what could be called the “cognitive context” of discourse, but – with some exceptions – would do so itself in terms of a socially isolated mind (Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983).

These first discourse analyses made one step forward in the direction of an account of context, but mostly limited such a context to the *verbal context* or *co-text* (Petöfi, 1971) for units of language or language use. Many studies of “context,” both in linguistics as well as in other more formal approaches, still limit this notion to the “verbal context” of previous (and sometimes following) words, sentences, propositions, utterances or turns of conversation.

We had to wait until the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s before discourse structures were more systematically studied in their social, historical and cultural contexts – something already done in part in sociolinguistics (Labov, 1972a, 1972b) and in the ethnography of speaking (Bauman and Sherzer, 1974; see below, and for greater detail *Society and Discourse*).

### *Critical Discourse Analysis*

A more critical and sociopolitical approach to language use, discourse and power was initiated at the end of the 1970s by a team of researchers, led by Roger Fowler, advocating the study of “critical linguistics” (Fowler, Hodge, Kress and Trew, 1979). During the 1980s and 1990s this “critical” approach

soon grew out to an international movement of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), under the initial influence of European scholars (Fairclough, 1995; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Jäger, 1993b; Van Dijk, 1993b, 2001; Wodak and Meyer, 2001).

More than sociolinguistics, the ethnography of communication or other approaches to the social and cultural aspects of language use, this movement was specifically interested in the discursive reproduction of social power (Fairclough, 1989; Wodak, 1989), the critical study of political discourse (Chilton, 1985), ideology (Van Dijk, 1998) and the study of fundamental social problems, such as racism (Jäger, 1993a, 1998; Reisigl and Wodak, 2000; Van Dijk, 1984, 1987, 1993a; Wodak and Van Dijk, 2000). This critical movement developed in parallel with, and inspired by, the feminist movement and the critical study of gender, language and discourse (of a vast number of studies, see Eckert and McDonnell-Ginet, 2003; Holmes and Meyerhoff, 2003; Lazar, 2005b; Wodak, 1997; see many further references in Chapter 4).

Despite this extensive study of the social and political dimensions of discourse, however, CDA did not develop its own theory of context and of context–discourse relations (see also the critique by Blommaert, 2001, on the limited contextualism of CDA). Indeed, many of its studies presupposed various forms of social determinism, according to which discourse is directly (or “in last instance”) controlled by social forces.

### *Sociology*

In sociology too the end of the 1960s brought renewal by adding an important qualitative and microsociological dimension to the study of society by focusing on the details of situated interaction in general, and of conversation in particular (see, e.g., Button, 1991; Ten Have, 1999). However, these early “ethnomethodological” studies in many ways followed the same pattern as linguistics, by initially focusing more on the formal structures of interaction and conversation, such as the rules of turn-taking, than on their social “situatedness” (Sacks, et al., 1974). Later, the methodological strictures of conversation analysis were somewhat loosened (or simply ignored) in order to place the structures and strategies of conversation and interaction more explicitly in their societal, institutional or cultural “context” (for an early collection in this new direction of conversation analysis, see, e.g., Boden and Zimmerman, 1991; and many other references in *Society and Discourse*). From the late 1990s we thus find increasing attention to context in conversation analysis as well and related approaches to the study of language use and interaction (see also the special issue edited by Karen Tracy, 1998).



### *Ethnography and anthropology*

If there is one discipline that by definition should be an exception to this general trend of the humanities and the social sciences to focus on formal properties first and deal with situations, context or environmental factors later, it is anthropology. In a way this was true as long as it dealt with the general, broader study of culture, and it is obviously also true for most ethnographic studies of discourse, which by definition are not limited to an account of discourse alone.

However, remarkably paralleling the other disciplines mentioned above, and in fact often preceding and influencing them, modern anthropology has also been going through important structuralist and formalist phases. In the 1960s, thus, the systematic study of folktales and myths in anthropology (e.g., by Lévi-Strauss; see Lévi-Strauss, 1963) in many ways became the paradigm for the structuralism in the new discipline of semiotics and related studies, first in Europe and later in the USA and elsewhere.

At the same time, ethnography in the USA made an original contribution in the 1960s by focusing on the detailed study of “communicative events” and the “communicative competence” of the members of a community (Bauman and Sherzer, 1974; Saville-Troike, 2002). In this paradigm Dell Hymes, its founder, formulated his well-known SPEAKING grid as a summary of the contextual factors of communicative events (Hymes, 1972), one of the earliest more explicit accounts of the structures of context. Although this formulation was quite programmatic for the ethnography of speaking, it hardly led to a systematic exploration of the contextual factors of language use and discourse.

These developments in anthropology were initially closely related to those in linguistics and other social sciences. As is also the case in the disciplines mentioned above, we had to wait a decade for these ethnographic studies to take a more “contextual” turn, introducing notions such as “recontextualization” (Bernstein, 1971), on the one hand, for instance in the work of Gumperz and others (Gumperz, 1982a, 1982b), and dimensions such as identity, power, social structure or ethnic relationships, on the other hand (see, e.g., the contributions in Duranti, 2001). As we see in more detail in *Society and Discourse*, linguistic anthropology thus became (again) one of the leading disciplines, this time because of several scholars – such as Hymes, Gumperz, Duranti and Hanks among others – and studies explicitly dealing with context.

### *Psychology*

Psychology traditionally focused on people’s individual “behavior” and later on their “minds,” and much less on “context” beyond the experimental conditions

of the laboratory – in which “context” factors appear mostly as independent variables, such as the gender, age or knowledge of the experimental subjects. Again, this was true for much of behaviorist and then cognitive psychology until the 1980s, and remains true for much mainstream psychology today, even in “social” psychology. As always, there are notable exceptions, such as the work of F. C. Bartlett and Herbert Clark, to which we shall turn in Chapter 3.

In the last decades interest in the role of context in discourse processing has been growing rapidly in cognitive psychology, but just as the social approaches to discourse have largely ignored the cognitive nature of context understanding, most cognitive psychologists have paid little attention to the sociolinguistic approaches to contextualization. Even those interested in discourse generally focused on discourse structures, meaning and the nature of their interpretation in “situation models” in memory, rather than on the role of context (and its memory representation) in production and understanding.

The study of “social cognition” in modern social psychology seemed to provide the necessary social context to the study of cognition, but was generally limited to the study of formalist mental schemata and laboratory experiments that were hardly different from those in individual psychology (Augoustinos and Walker, 1995). Indeed, until recently it was hard to find a reference to a book on society or culture in mainstream social psychology. Only since the 1980s do we witness the development towards a broader, “societal” and “critical” orientation to the study of minds, knowledge, persons, groups or attitudes on the one hand, and a more discursive, interactionist approach to social psychology on the other (of many studies, see, e.g., Resnick, Levine and Teasley, 1991; and further references in *Society and Discourse*).

### *Computer science and Artificial Intelligence*

Interestingly, there is more work on context in formal approaches in computer science, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the area of Natural Language Processing than in psychology (see, e.g., Hovy 1988; 1990). These approaches aim to account in formal terms for discourse interpretation, e.g., of pronouns, deictic expressions, verb tenses, presuppositions, knowledge accumulation, and many other properties of discourse that need context modeling (see, e.g., Akman, Bouquet, Thomason and Young, 2001; Iwańska and Zadrozny, 1997). This work is related to work in formal grammar, logic and philosophy, originally inspired by Montague (1974), and Hans Kamp (see Kamp and Partee, 2004; Kamp and Reyle, 1993). Although often called formal pragmatics, most of this work focuses on semantics, that is, on how to *interpret* discourse expressions in terms of (formally represented) contexts, rather than on their appropriateness. This formal approach to context is also the only direction of research that represents context as models, as I shall also do, but then not as

formal models, but as mental models. Also, these scholars are the only ones who organize a bi-annual conference on context.

In these formal paradigms contexts are often reduced to sets of propositions (see also Sperber and Wilson, 1995) and hardly analyzed in their own right beyond obvious parameters such as time, place and shared knowledge (Common Ground) of the participants, as we also know from psychology (see also Clark, 1996).

### *“Context” in other disciplines*

The analysis of context is not limited to the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. Of the thousands of books that have the word “context” in their title or bibliographical descriptors, many deal with other phenomena and disciplines.

Indeed, one might say that context is not just a concept or category studied in many disciplines, in each of which it has a slightly different meaning and different implications. Rather, we may speak of *contextualism*, that is, of a movement, perspective or kind of theory that for each discipline is contrasted with context-free, abstract, structuralist, formalist, autonomous, isolated, or other “introvert” ways of studying phenomena. Thus, contextualism in many disciplines implies that phenomena must always be studied in relation to a situation or environment, as is the case for language and discourse studies.

Thus, in *philosophy*, and especially in *epistemology*, contextualism breaks with a theory of knowledge in terms of context-free, absolute truth in which knowledge is traditionally defined as *justified true beliefs*. Contextualist epistemology conceptualizes a more realistic and commonsense notion of knowledge (Blaauw, 2005; Brendel and Jäger, 2005; Preyer and Peter, 2005). It emphasizes that truth of beliefs may vary with social situations: what is true in one context, for some people, may not be true in another, so that also knowledge may contextually differ (see Chapter 3 for the philosophical concepts of context and knowledge).

By definition the study of *history* focuses on the historical context of discourse. As is the case for several other disciplines in the social sciences, such as political science and education, most data of historical research are various forms of text and talk (Struever, 1985; Blommaert, 2005, and Chapter 6). Indeed, history has also been described in terms of “communities” of discourse (Wuthnow, 1989). The study of “oral history” has become a major method and approach in the fields of history, narratology and discourse studies, and is also specifically relevant in accounting for the relations between social events and their personal interpretation from the perspective of social members (see, e.g., Charlton, Myers and Sharpless, 2006; Douglas, Roberts and Thompson, 1988; Tonkin, 1992). Within the broader field of

Critical Discourse Analysis, Wodak specifically advocates a more systematic historical approach (Martin and Wodak, 2003), for instance in her seminal studies of anti-Semitism (see Wodak et al., 1990, among many other studies). See also the historical studies of the discourse of the Nazi period (Maas, 1984). Unfortunately, I shall not be able to give an account of the whole vast field of historical discourse analysis.

Closely related to the other studies in the social sciences dealing with discourse is the interest in context in the field of *communication studies*. Largely profiled on the pattern of traditional social psychological research, such interest in context generally focuses either, on the one hand, on context dimensions as independent variables influencing communication messages, or, on the other, on the “effects” of (mass media or persuasive) messages on people. There are, however, some publications that show a more explicit interest in the study of context in communication, such as the book edited by Owen (1997), published by a publisher apparently focusing on context, the Context Press in Reno, Nevada.

In his introduction James Owen especially highlights Stephen Pepper’s 1942 study on World Hypotheses: one of these world views (besides “mechanism,” “formism” and “organism”) is “contextualism.” The root metaphor of this contextualism is the “historic event” or the “act” that is alive in the current setting; these events in the real world are being experienced in a novel way by each individual; the goal of the contextualist is understanding, a process that is personal and situational. As is the case for other edited studies on context, in this book several of the articles have only tangential relations to a theory of context but rather pursue the respective research directions of the authors. One of these studies, by Gary Cronkhite (on the cognitive representation of rhetorical situations), relevant to my own approach, will be further referred to in Chapter 3. Several authors in the book, such as Shailor (1997: 97–98), highlight the relation of this kind of contextualism to pragmatism in philosophy, and with the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) approach in communication studies advocated by Pearce, Cronen and associates, for whom contexts are “not found things, but . . . interpretive achievements.”

In the field of *organization studies* there is a debate about whether to study discourses autonomously or within their (organization, social, political) contexts (Grant, Hardy, Oswick and Putnam, 2004; Barry, Carroll and Hansen, 2006).

In *biology* (Smocovitis, 1996), *physics* (Kitchener, 1988), and the other sciences, there are developments that emphasize that forms of life or physical events need to be studied in their respective contexts. A more detailed study of these approaches is beyond the scope of this book, but they should be seen as an intellectual manifestation of the same kind of meta-theoretical concern,

namely that we better understand phenomena when we explicitly link them to their environments.

### *Similar developments in many disciplines*

We see that most of the humanities and the social sciences have shown a very similar development between the 1960s and 1980s, namely an expansion from a formal study of sentences, discourses, speech acts, interaction, communicative events or mental processing, to more socially or contextually sensitive approaches. During the 1990s, in most contemporary discourse studies, sociolinguistics, social psychology, ethnography, formal linguistics and AI, “context” and “contextualization” have become key concepts, and some other disciplines, such as philosophy, history and the natural sciences have been influenced by various forms of “contextualism.”

Given these developments, one would expect not only that the notion of context would by now have been widely used in many disciplines, but also that many articles and monographs would have been specifically dedicated to this notion. Nothing is further from the truth. There are many articles and books that feature the notion of context in their titles or descriptors, but usually these publications do not study context per se, but simply take it for granted.

There are articles, edited books and special journal issues that study the notion of context more explicitly (see, e.g., Auer and Luzio, 1992; Duranti and Goodwin, 1992; Fetzer, 2004; Leckie-Tarry, 1995; Owen, 1997; Tracy, 1998, and other references in the next chapters), *but so far there is not a single monograph that offers an integrated theory of the notion of context in the humanities and the social sciences*. It is the aim of this book – jointly with *Society and Discourse* (Van Dijk, 2008) – to offer just such an integrated, multidisciplinary theory.

### **The everyday uses of “context”**

Before I deal with the notion of “context” systematically and explicitly in the chapters that follow, I should describe and delimit it in a more informal way. In order to do this, let us begin with a brief look at some everyday uses of the word “context,” followed by a more systematic study of the uses of “context” in various corpora.

1. A Google search on the internet on July 30, 2007 produced about 243,000,000 hits.
2. In the corpus of 56 million English words that constitutes the “Wordbank” on the English language reference CD-ROM *Collins/COBUILD* (2002), the word “context” appears 1,642 times, that is, once every 34,104 words. Just for

comparison, the apparently more common word “situation” appears 7,655 times, and “environment” 4,369 times. Significant collocates (words that occur close to it) for “context” are: “social,” “historical,” “wider,” “cultural,” “broader,” “European,” “family,” “modern,” “contemporary,” “international” and “global” (as well as the obvious words, such as definite and indefinite articles, demonstratives and prepositions, such as “in” or “within,” and verbs such as “put,” “taken” or “seen”).

3. Dictionaries list two basic meanings of the word “context,” namely verbal context, and conditions and circumstances, as in the following, from *Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* (1996 edition):
  - a. the parts of a written or spoken statement that precede or follow a specific word or passage, usually influencing its meaning or effect: *You have misinterpreted my sentence because you took it out of context.*
  - b. the set of circumstances or facts that surround a particular event, situation, etc.
4. *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* uses the term “interrelated conditions” for the second meaning, and mentions “environment” or “setting” as synonyms. The Spanish dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy (DRAE) also lists these two basic meanings.
5. Informal inspection of the use of the notion of “context” in the mass media, based on the Nexis-Lexis database, shows uses of context only in terms of social, political or historical circumstances or backgrounds of events.

These first observations of the everyday uses of the term “context” show several things. First of all, although “context” is used in millions of web pages, it is used less than words with related meanings, such as “situation” or “environment.” This also suggests that “context” tends to be used in more formal, written, communicative events.

Second, the dictionaries basically list two meanings, namely that of verbal context, and that of social, political, economic or historical situation or circumstances, or in relation to geographical extension, as in “international context.” In both cases, the idea is that the context somehow *influences* a word, passage, meaning or event or *enables* its (better) interpretation. Hence the widespread principle that people should not be quoted “out of context” (McGlone, 2005).

Third, the actual uses in the press, both in the USA and Spain, favor the second dictionary meaning of “situation” or “occasion” and closely related meanings, such as “perspective,” and so on. Because of the opinions and news in the press, the meaning of “context” is especially related to social, political, financial and cultural backgrounds. In general, then, the everyday uses of “context” imply that something (an event or action) is related to a given

situation, conditions, circumstances or background. In terms of the well-known metaphors used in traditional Gestalt psychology, we would say that context is the “ground” for the “figure” focused upon (Köhler, 1929).

### **A corpus study of “context” in academic titles**

In order to further explore the use of the scientific notion of context, a preliminary corpus study was made of all the 3,428 English book titles (in 2002) in the Library of Congress and all the 5,104 article titles in the Social Science Citation Index (between 1993 and 2001) that had the word “context” in them.

Just as it is the case for the term *context* in the titles of articles, a corpus analysis (not reported here) of the term *context* in book titles shows that the term usually refers to temporal, geographical and sociocultural situations, factors or variables that impinge on the focal phenomena studied in such books. The notion of “verbal context” (co-text) hardly occurs outside of linguistics. Often the notion of context barely has meaning and only vaguely indicates some relationship between a phenomenon under study or focus and something else, as in “context of change” or “context of crisis,” or the influence of context is mentioned without mentioning *what* kind of context is meant.

This brief summary of a preliminary corpus study of the “scientific” uses of context, as summarized in the titles of articles and books in English (and hence, in principle, a prominent concept in their semantic macrostructure) suggests that many social phenomena are not studied in isolation, but in relationship to some kind of influencing geographical, historical, sociocultural or organizational setting or environment, which also limits the scope of the study. Studying poverty, AIDS or management, for example, along with a large number of other phenomena in society, is generally impossible to do in general terms, and books and especially articles can only study such subjects by limiting the scope of the study to a specific period, country, culture, neighborhood or organization.

### **Towards a new, multidisciplinary theory of context**

In this book, I shall not explore these uses of the everyday word “context,” but design elements of a framework for a theoretical *concept* of “context” that can be used in theories of language, discourse, cognition, interaction, society, politics and culture. Before I deal with the details of such a theory in the next chapters and before I define context in language, cognition, society and culture, respectively, let me briefly summarize some of its main tenets. I’ll do so first without providing relevant references to other work; these will be given in the next chapters.

**Contexts are subjective participant constructs.** Contrary to most approaches that conceptualize contexts as objective properties of social, political or cultural situations, I consider contexts to be *participant constructs* or *subjective definitions* of interactional or communicative situations. This does not mean that social and political situations and structures may not have objective dimensions (e.g., of time and space), or that they are not experienced as “real” by social members. My fundamental point is to emphasize that such social situations are able to influence discourse only through their (inter) subjective *interpretations* by participants. Such a perspective is a special case of the view that social situations in general are social constructs, and only as such are able to influence all human conduct.

**Contexts are unique experiences.** As subjective definitions of communicative situations, contexts are unique constructs, featuring the ad hoc, embodied experiences of ongoing perceptions, knowledge, perspective, opinions and emotions about the ongoing communicative situation. As such, unique contexts also condition unique ways of using language, that is, unique discourses. One of the reasons why subjective definitions of the same communicative situation are unique and different for each participant is that by definition their knowledge (opinions, emotions) at each moment must be minimally different for the very interaction to make sense in the first place.

**Contexts are mental models.** Theoretically, subjective participant constructs will be accounted for in terms of a special type of *mental model*, namely *context models*. These models represent the relevant properties of the communicative environment in episodic (autobiographical) memory, and ongoingly control the processes of discourse production and comprehension (for my earlier approaches to context in terms of models, see Van Dijk, 1977, 1981, 1987; Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983; for the first detailed statements of the current theory, see Van Dijk, 1998).

**Contexts are a specific type of experience model.** If contexts are mental models representing communicative situations, they are also a special type of the mental models people ongoingly construe of the situations and environments of their everyday lives, models we may call “experience models.” The solution to the complex problem of human consciousness may require a theory of just such experience models. These dynamic models control all ongoing perception and interaction and consist of such basic categories as spatiotemporal Setting, Participants and their various identities, ongoing Events or Actions, as well as current Goal(s).

It is this experience model that not only subjectively represents the self and environment of conscious human beings, but also controls their current actions so that these are relevant in the current situation.

**Context models are schematic.** Contexts as mental models consist of schemas of shared, culturally based, conventional categories, which allow fast



interpretations of unique, ongoing communicative events (Van Dijk, 1981; Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983). Without such cultural schemas and categories, participants would not be able to understand, represent and update sometimes vastly complex social situation in real time, that is, in (fractions of) seconds. Such categories are, for instance, Time, Place, Participants (and their various Identities or Roles), Action, Goals and Knowledge. Empirical theories will need to develop and refine these schematic context theories, however. Each (fragment of a) communicative situation may give rise to a different combination, configuration and hierarchy of these categories. For instance, Gender or Occupation as Participant (Identity) categories may be (construed as) more or less relevant or prominent in different situations or at different moments of the “same” situation.

**Contexts control discourse production and comprehension.** Most crucial of all is the assumption that contexts, defined as mental models, control the processes of discourse production and comprehension, and hence their resulting discourse structures and discourse interpretations. This is the cognitive basis, as well as the explanation, of what is traditionally called the influence of society on text or talk, and the process that guarantees that language users are able to shape their discourse *appropriately* to the (for them) relevant properties of the communicative situation. Of course, we need a detailed cognitive theory of the processes and representations involved. Despite such crucial cognitive processing of context and discourse, however, these processes of language users are embedded in broader social and cultural conditions shared by language users as members of groups and communities.

**Contexts are socially based.** Although contexts are unique, subjective definitions of communicative situations, their structures and construction obviously have a social basis, for instance in terms of the shared *social cognitions* (knowledge, attitudes, ideologies, grammar, rules, norms and values) of a discourse community, as is also the case for the schematic categories that define the possible structures of contexts. This means that contexts also have an important *intersubjective* dimension that allows social interaction and communication in the first place. For instance, although the context models of the MPs during Blair’s speech may be subjective and unique, they undoubtedly share the intersubjective “facts” that they are MPs and are listening to the Prime Minister, in parliament and on March 18, 2003, among other properties of the communicative situation of the parliamentary debate. Yet, each MP may represent such shared “facts” in her or his own subjective way with regard to the current relevance, perspective, opinions, emotions, etc. associated with this shared “common ground.” In other words, contexts are both *personal* and *social* – as is also the case for the discourses they control. We shall see that social cognitions (knowledge, etc.) in general, and specifically linguistic and communicative *resources*, may also be defined

as part of basis of the context of participants: if such resources are fragmentary, also the contexts may be deficient (see, e.g., Blommaert, 2001).

**Contexts are dynamic.** Contexts as mental models are not static, but *dynamic* (for an early statement of this principle, see van Dijk, 1977). They are constructed for each new communicative situation and then ongoingly *updated* and *adapted* to (the subjective interpretation of) the current constraints of the situation, including the immediately preceding discourse and interaction. In other words, contexts develop “ongoingly” and “on line,” that is, in parallel with interaction and (other) thoughts.

**Contexts are often, and largely, planned.** For many social and cognitive reasons, even unique contexts are of course not built from scratch at the moment of interaction. As is the case for all interaction and experiences, participants already know and plan ahead many of the probable properties of the communicative situation. Thus, besides their own identities, they will often know or plan with whom they will speak or communicate, when, where and with what goals. This is especially the case in written and formal modes of communication, but also in much spontaneous interaction. Moreover, communicative events are often embedded in broader social events already ongoingly represented (experienced) by participants (as is the case for a conversation during a party or professional meeting). Planning and anticipated knowledge of contexts are possible because specific contexts are built from (culturally shared) general context schemas and categories, and because people have accumulated memories of similar communicative events in the past. Thus, as is the case for discourse genres, context types too may be “learned.” Indeed, many aspects of the communicative event of Tony Blair’s speech will already have been planned or known in advance by his recipients as well as by him – because they all know the genre and context type of a parliamentary debate. Ongoing interpretations of actual events and interaction will finally fill in the unique details of such a context model.

**The pragmatic functions of context models.** The fundamental *function* of context models is to make sure that participants are able to produce text or talk *appropriate* to the current communicative situation and understand the appropriateness of the text or talk of others (Fetzer, 2004; Van Dijk, 1977, 1981). In this sense, a *theory of context* would be one of the aims of a *pragmatic* account of discourse. It explains how language users *adapt* their discursive interaction to the current cognitive and sociocultural “environments.” Such a theory also makes explicit the usual felicity conditions of illocutionary acts and the appropriateness conditions of politeness and other dimensions of interaction (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Hence, an explicit theory of context at the same time provides a solid basis for various approaches in pragmatics.

**Contexts versus texts.** Contexts as mental models cannot be reduced to text or talk (as would be implied by some constructivist and discursive

psychological approaches; see, e.g., Edwards and Potter, 1992). Contexts are called “contexts” precisely because they are *not* “texts” – although properties of previous “texts,” for instance, implied knowledge, may be or become parts of contexts. Context models and their properties remain largely implicit and presupposed. They influence talk and text in indirect ways that only under specific circumstances (problems, errors, misunderstandings) are made explicit in talk and text itself. Indeed, Tony Blair need *not say* who he is, that he is PM, and so on, because he knows that the MPs already know this – as part of their context models as they overlap with that of Tony Blair.

Where necessary, contexts are *signaled* or *indexed*, rather than fully expressed. Their properties often need to be *inferred* from structures and variations of discourse as used in different social situations, and this is what both recipients and analysts do. One example is indexing one’s sexual orientation when referring to one’s wife or husband (Rendle-Short, 2005).

Despite the usually implicit nature of contexts, contexts may also be discursive. In everyday conversations as well as in many types of institutional talk, implicit or explicit reference may be made to other, previous, text and talk. Bureaucratic discourse may consist of large “text trajectories” (Blommaert, 2001). Media discourse multiply relates to various “source discourses” (Meinhof and Smith, 2000; Van Dijk, 1988b). In other words, *intertextuality* (see, e.g., Plett, 1991) may be an important condition of both the meaningfulness and the appropriateness of discourse.

One of the specific theoretical problems we have to deal with (see Chapter 4) is whether in the same communicative situation previous parts of the ongoing discourse should also be considered to be part of the context. For instance, does what has just been asserted generally become part of the Common Ground of shared knowledge of participants?

**Contexts and relevance.** Contexts do not represent complete social or communicative situations, but only – schematically – those properties that are ongoingly *relevant*. In other words, a context model theory is at the same time a theory of the personal and of the interactional relevance of the situation interpretations of participants (in Chapter 3, we shall see how such a theory is related to, but different from, the theory of relevance of Sperber and Wilson, 1995).

**Macro and micro contexts.** Context models may represent social or communicative situations at various *levels* of generality or granularity (Van Dijk, 1980). That is, on the one hand models may represent situated, momentary, ongoing, face-to-face interactions at the micro level (for instance of Blair’s current speech or speech fragment), and on the other, overall social or historical situations, that is, social structure, at the macro level (parliamentary decision making about the Iraq war, British foreign policy, etc.). Such levels may vary within the same communicative event, and be indexed

as such during text or talk. For instance, in his ironic criticism of the Liberal Democrats, Blair momentarily activates as currently relevant his party membership, as well as that of his recipients – a typical property of a more permanent, global situation. Similarly, Blair's local level action is a parliamentary speech and its component acts, but at a more global level he is implementing British foreign policy. In *Society and Discourse* (Van Dijk, 2008) we show that a model-theoretical approach to situation definitions also resolves the old problems of the macro–micro link in sociology.

**Contexts as the “center of my/our world”.** Contexts are crucially *ego-centric*. They are defined by a set of parameters that include a Setting that is the spatiotemporal *hic et nunc* of the ongoing act of speaking or writing, of *Ego* as speaker or listener, of *other* participants whom I now address, or listen to, as well as of the ongoing social actions I am now engaging in with specific aims and purposes, and on the basis of what I now know and believe. The properties of this “egocentric” nature of contexts define the conditions of the many different *deictic expressions* of many languages, such as personal pronouns, demonstratives, verb tenses, motion verbs, prepositions, expressions of politeness and deference, and so on. Some languages and cultures, however, define spatial coordinates in absolute terms, saying, for instance, not “behind that tree” (relative to position of Ego/Speaker), but “north of the tree” (Levinson, 2003). Note that such contextual orientation parameters also have metaphoric extensions: one may be spatially or ideologically “to the left” of someone, and deem others to be temporally or ideologically modern or *passé* (Fabian, 1983) – depending on one's own *stand* or *position*. The same is true for contextual group membership of participants, and the distinction between in-groups and out-groups, typically expressed by the ideological pronouns *Us* versus *Them*.

**Semantics versus pragmatics of context.** Discourse and its properties may signal, index or express properties of contexts in different ways, for instance, by *indexical* or *deictic* expressions. However, we should carefully distinguish between the semantics and pragmatics of such expressions. That is, a description of the *reference* to elements of the ongoing communicative situation, such as present time, speaker or recipient, for instance by the expressions *now*, *I* and *you*, respectively, is part of a *semantic* account of discourse. Such a description may be part of a situation semantics (Barwise and Perry, 1983). On the other hand, a *pragmatic* account is not about reference (extension, truth, etc.) but about the *appropriateness* of the use of such and other expressions in the current communicative situation. For instance, *tu* and *vous* in French are semantically equivalent (both refer to the recipient being addressed) but pragmatically different on the basis of attributed social differences between speaker and recipient, as represented in the context model of the speaker. Context analysis is often associated with

a pragmatic approach, but we see that some aspects of a theory of text–context relations are semantic. This book focuses on the pragmatic rather than the semantic approach to context partly because the semantic approach has been extensively explored in other studies on deixis and relative or situation semantics in various disciplines (Akman, et al, 2001; Barwise and Perry, 1983; Hanks, 1992; Jarvella and Klein, 1982; Levinson, 1993, 2003).

**Appropriateness.** I have stressed that a pragmatic approach to context should account for the relative *appropriateness* of discourse (see Fetzer, 2004; see also Van Dijk, 1981). Such a criterion is on a par with well-formedness for syntax, meaningfulness for intensional semantics, and truth (satisfaction, etc.) for extensional, referential semantics. Yet, the notion of appropriateness is not very precisely defined, and merely conceptualizes that discourse as social action is normatively more or less acceptable, correct, felicitous, etc. Thus, Blair can appropriately give a political speech in parliament, but not have an informal conversation with MPs about the color of their neckties in the same situation. He should use specific, formal, forms of address instead of informal, colloquial ones and so on. That is, his discourse and its variable properties should conventionally match the current, normative definition of the situation, for instance, as a parliamentary debate. Such appropriateness may be defined for all levels and dimensions of text or talk, such as intonation, lexical selection, syntax, indexical expressions, topics, speech acts, turn distribution and so on. These discourse levels will be examined in Chapter 4. Similarly, one may distinguish between different *types of appropriateness* in terms of the type of contextual parameters involved. Thus, using an informal pronoun to address someone of higher status involves a different kind of breach of appropriateness than asserting propositions already known to the recipients.

Note also that pragmatic appropriateness should not be confused with following/violating various kinds of discursive or interactional *rules*, say of argumentation, storytelling or conversation. For instance, interruptions may sometimes be “inappropriate,” but not because of pragmatic, contextual reasons, but because of the rules of conversation or debates (as in parliament), as would telling a story without a complication, or reasoning without arguments. It is true that as soon as we analyze discourse as action and not merely as verbal structure, it is hard to distinguish between formal rules and norms of appropriateness. Thus, being impolite may involve both violating rules of address – being socially inappropriate – and threatening the face of Recipients. Obviously, an explicit theory of context should make various notions of appropriateness more explicit.

**Types of contexts and genres.** As we do with discourse, so we can classify contexts as different types, and these types are often related to different

discourse *genres*. Thus, genres, contexts, communicative events or social practices can be classified in many ways, e.g., by spheres (public, private), mode (spoken, written, multimedia, etc.), main social domain (politics, media, education, etc.), institution or organization (parliament, university, shop), participant roles and relations (doctor–patient, Prime Minister–Members of Parliament), goals (impart or require knowledge, advice, service, etc.), or (inter)actions (decision making, governing, etc.), among other dimensions that may be taken as so many proposals for categories of a formal context schema. At higher or lower levels further theoretical notions may be developed to make the typology, and hence the theory of context and its social embedding, more explicit. Thus, domains may be further grouped into realms that organize collective decision making, action and control (politics, law, administration, etc.), a symbolic realm for the exchange of knowledge and beliefs (media, education, science, religion, etc.), a production realm (fabrication of commodities), and a service realm (health institutions, etc.). At a lower level, genres, communicative events or social situations may be further classified in terms of subtypes of actions such as getting knowledge about persons (interviews, interrogations), exchanging scientific knowledge (congresses, papers, etc.), controlling people's actions (commands, arrests, instructions, manuals, etc.), and so on.

**Contexts are culturally variable.** Context schemas and their categories may be culturally variable, thus defining different appropriateness conditions for discourse in different societies. Although some context categories may (or must) be universal, as is the case for Speakers and various kinds of Recipients, as well as Knowledge, others may be more culturally variable, for instance specific social properties of participants. Status, power and kinship are relevant Participant properties in the context schemas of many cultures – controlling for instance various expressions of politeness and deference – whereas others (say, talking to one's mother-in-law) may be more specific, and others again probably irrelevant anywhere (such as the length of one's hair). A general theory of context should account for such cultural universals and differences of context.

**Cognitive and social approaches to context.** I have defined context as a specific kind of mental model, that is, as subjective participant representations of communicative situations, and not as the communicative situations themselves, as is the usual approach. We shall later show in detail that, and why, social situations do not directly influence language use and discourse, and that such influence is possible only through mental models. Such a mental interface subjectively represents relevant aspects of the communicative situation, and at the same time is the kind of cognitive structure that is able to monitor the production and comprehension of discourse. According to broadly accepted insights of cognitive science, this is the way social

situations and social structure influence text and talk. Therefore, traditional approaches accounting for the social influence of language use and discourse, for instance, in sociolinguistics or Critical Discourse Studies, are incomplete without such a crucial cognitive interface. This is also one of the reasons why the study of sociolinguistic variables tends to be superficially correlational, because without such an interface it is impossible to explain the detailed production and interpretation links between society and discourse.

A definition of contexts in terms of mental models does not imply that we *reduce* social influences to mental ones. On the contrary, we thus *describe* and *explain* how local and global social structures are able to influence text and talk in the first place. That is, even a cognitively based theory of context is part of a broader *social* theory of the relations between society and discourse. So far, we have sociological theories of situations and social structure, and linguistic and discourse-analytical ones of the structures of text and talk, but the *relations* between these different types of structures have never been made explicit, even if we define discourse as social practice, because even then we need to show exactly how social structures influence the properties of that social practice. That is, so far we have only philosophical speculation, superficial statistical correlations or various forms of determinism – none of which really *explain* the nature of the relations between society and discourse, for instance, why different people in the same social situation may still talk differently. My claim is that a social theory of discourse relating discourse structures to social situations and social structure should also feature various cognitive components, namely in terms of shared social cognitions (knowledge, ideologies, norms, values) in general, and the unique mental models of social members in particular. Only then do we have an integrated theory of discourse and language use in general, and of context in particular. This is also the reason why my general approach to discourse is called socio-cognitive: My aim is to integrate social and cognitive approaches to text and talk in one coherent theoretical framework, without reductions, without missing links. Indeed, talk is not only social practice, but also mental practice – talk is at the same time thought and action.

**Towards a theory of social situations.** If context models subjectively represent communicative situations, such an account presupposes a more general theory of situations and situation interpretation. And if such models make participant experiences during interaction and communication explicit, context models are also a special case of more general everyday experiences. In the following chapters, as well as in *Society and Discourse*, we shall see that such is indeed the case, and that a theory of context should be embedded in more general theories of the representation and understanding of – and interaction within – social situations. That is, many of the conventional categories of communicative situations will be similar to the ones people use to



understand any kind of social situation or episode and to act appropriately in such a situation. It is in this sense that a theory of context is systematically related to other cognitive, social and cultural theories of everyday human experiences and interaction.

### Terminological issues

#### *“Context” and “situation”*

To avoid terminological confusion, I use the *theoretical* terms “context” and “context model” as defined, that is, as a specific mental model, or subjective interpretation, of participants of the relevant properties of the (social, interactional or communicative) *situation* in which they participate. In other words, where earlier studies often use “context” I use (communicative) “situation.”

One of the terminological problems is then how to define the notion of “situation” in my own framework – if not again as another participant construct, and hence as a mental model (a “communicative situation model”). Communicative situation models are of course different from context models because they may have many properties that are usually irrelevant in context models, such as the color of people’s clothes, their height, and a vast number of other socially, but not communicatively relevant, properties of social situations. In that sense a context model is a specific selection or reconstruction of a situation model (see *Society and Discourse* for detailed analyses of the notion of “situation”).

Apart from such a constructionist or cognitive definition of situation, it should be borne in mind that participants themselves *experience* communicative or social situations as real episodes in their everyday lives and not as mere beliefs, except in the case of problems or conflict, in which they may be aware that they and their Recipients may “see” the “same” situation differently.

In a more formal account, we may define situations as spatiotemporally demarcated fragments of possible (social) worlds.

#### *“Text” versus “context”*

Another theoretical and terminological problem is the distinction between “context” and “text” (talk, discourse, verbal interaction, etc.), which is to be discussed in detail in Chapter 4. The point is that such a terminological pair presupposes that discourse is itself a focal object, action or event, and context some kind of “environment,” as appeared to be the case for the informal uses of the notion of context.



If that were the case we should still need a term to describe the combination of discourse and its relevant social environment, and I shall occasionally use the term *communicative or interactional episode* for such situated communicative events (see *Society and Discourse*; see also Forgas, 1979). Episodes, thus, are complex fragments of the everyday lives of social members, consisting of talk, text or other social interaction, and the relevant properties of the social situation, such as time, place, social roles and relations, goals and knowledge. Note that the notion of “situation” is often used more or less in the same sense as “episode.”

Another way to theorize and define the relation between “text” and “context” is to take discourse (talk, etc.) *as part of the context*. In that case, contexts as defined (that is, as mental models) are models of communicative episodes, and not just of the situational environment of discourse. We shall see later that there are good reasons to assume that discourse, as action, is part of contexts, in that participants indexically and reflexively also represent their own ongoing action. However, in *that* case we again need a special term to denote the situational “environment” of discourse, without the discourse itself, and we may then use the term “situation” to denote such an environment, as we also do in the broadly used expression “situated interaction.” In other words, in this “inclusive” perspective on contexts, discourse and interaction take place “in” a communicative situation, where discourse and situation are distinct.

Our predicament is that a theoretically sound terminology does not square well with broadly used informal terminology and intuitions. I therefore decided to use theoretical terms that remain close to their informal uses. Hence, I can summarize my terminology provisionally as follows (most of these terms need to be examined later in much more theoretical detail in the relevant chapters of this book as well as in *Society and Discourse*). We can distinguish between an *inclusive* notion of context (context-I), that is, one including the mental representation of ongoing verbal interaction, and an *exclusive* one (context-E), that is, a mental model of the situational environment of such interaction. We then provisionally have the following abbreviated working definitions to be made explicit in the theory:

social episode = social interaction + social situation  
 social situation = relevant social environment of social interaction  
 communicative episode = discourse + communicative situation  
 communicative situation = relevant environment of discourse  
 context-I = subjective mental model of communicative episode  
 context-E = subjective mental model of the communicative situation.

I shall primarily discuss context-E, that is, the model of situational environments of discourse, without discourse itself, so as to be able to show

how such situational environments may influence discourse through mental models. However, we shall see that for several theoretical and empirical reasons such context models should be extended to include discourse, making them reflexive models of complex communicative episodes: in communicative episodes language users are not only aware of their social environment, that is, of the communicative situation “in which” they are interacting, but also of their own discourse. One of the remaining problems is then how to delimit discourse as verbal social interaction from its communicative situation, for instance, when describing non-verbal communicative conduct: gestures, facework, keeping distance, etc. I shall come back to that issue in Chapter 4.

### **“Iraq” or the discourses of war and peace**

The main objective of this book is theoretical, namely to provide a multi-disciplinary account of the notion of context within a broader theory of discourse. However, as has become obvious at the start of this chapter, it is quite useful to argue on the basis of examples. We cannot “cite” contexts as mental models, and, since contexts by definition come with “texts,” analyzing them makes sense only when we provide examples of text and talk, both as an illustration of the theory and as an empirical warrant, and (re) construct them in relation to such discourse. We shall see that in several directions of discourse and conversation analysis contexts are only accounted for when they somehow “show” in text or talk – if only to make sure that “contexts” do not grow out of proportion, making us need a Theory of Everything to describe them.

Throughout this study I shall therefore make use of the example given at the beginning of this chapter, and later (in *Society and Discourse*) analyze other fragments of the same debate about Iraq.

In line with the broader framework of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), this analysis obviously also features a more critical approach to the kind of power abuse and manipulation which according to many analysts were engaged in by such leaders as Bush, Blair and Aznar.

“Iraq” here stands for a complex of themes organizing discourses about the war in Iraq following the invasion of Iraq by the US army and its allies in March 2003 so as to oust the regime of Saddam Hussein and gain control over this crucial oil-producing country in the Middle East, among other more or less covert aims. These discourses followed the devastating attack against the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, by members of al-Qaeda, generally described as a “terrorist” organization, although there have been more or less public discourses about invading Iraq since the Gulf War of 1991 (see *Society and Discourse* for references to these discourses about “Iraq” and the “War on Terror”).

Apart from the discourses about “Iraq” by Bush, Blair and Aznar, a vast number of other discourses became part of the public domain, including some expressing alternative and dissenting views, largely through the mass media and the internet, as well as through meetings and demonstrations worldwide. These discourses have been analyzed in much other work and need more analysis in the future. In this study I can offer only a few examples of a “contextual” analysis of one genre and one example of this vast corpus, namely a parliamentary debate. The theoretical, political and critical point of my “contextual” analysis is to show exactly how such discourses become *political* discourses, that is, how linguistic properties of text and talk are embedded in political situations. In that sense, this book is also intended as a contribution to the foundation of Critical Discourse Studies.

### **The organization of this book**

This theoretical study of context was originally planned as one monograph. However, the review of a vast amount of relevant literature in several disciplines of the humanities and social sciences finally led to major work that for practical reasons had to be split up into two independent books. The present book deals mostly with linguistic, sociolinguistic and cognitive dimensions of context, whereas *Society and Discourse* presents a detailed account of contexts, situations and their properties in the social sciences.

The next chapter will critically examine one of the most prominent approaches to context in linguistics, namely that of Systemic Functional Linguistics. Chapter 4 then provides a detailed account of earlier, mostly sociolinguistic, approaches to language, discourse and context, in which I shall also deal with related notions, such as register, style and genre.

Chapter 3 on context and cognition is the theoretical core chapter of this study. It defines the very notion of context as context models against the background of contemporary cognitive science. It is this chapter that explains the subtitle of this monograph, namely that my perspective on context is cognitive (or rather sociocognitive).

However, in order to stress that I do not reduce the theory of context to a mere cognitive account, my other book on context, *Society and Discourse* (Van Dijk, 2008), deals in great detail with the notion of “context” and related notions (social “situation,” etc.) in social psychology, sociology and anthropology. In the chapters of that book I shall analyze context in relation to social cognition, social interaction, social structure and culture, respectively.

The last chapter of *Society and Discourse* applies the theory in a detailed analysis of the context characteristics of fragments of the Iraq debate in the British House of Commons – which at the same time adds an important political and critical dimension to this study.

### **A critique of the systemic-functional approach to context**

#### *Introduction*

In this chapter I begin with a first assessment of the use of the notion of “context” in linguistics. I shall do so by focusing primarily on the linguistic theory that has most consistently prided itself on its theory of context: *Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)*, founded by M. A. K. Halliday. I shall show that the SF approach to context is misguided, and needs to be abandoned; but, although I also make some more general critical remarks on SFL explaining some of the shortcomings of its account of context, the critique in this chapter does not imply at all that SFL has no merit as a linguistic theory. On the contrary, much work on discourse in linguistics has been carried out in that paradigm, including many very original studies that go beyond the core theory, such as more recent work in semiotics, appraisal, and so on.

The reason I limit myself in this chapter to a critique of the analysis of context in SF linguistics is first of all that this analysis has had broad influence worldwide, for several decades, in many branches of linguistic discourse analysis, and in Critical Discourse Studies. Hence, a detailed critique is in order to show that SFL approaches to context need to be revised, and such a critique does not leave space, within one chapter, for a detailed examination of the analysis of context by linguists of other approaches. Most of the linguistic studies of context, in fact, took place in sociolinguistics, and I shall review them extensively in Chapter 4, by focusing especially on the relations between context and discourse structures. There I shall also deal with the discussion about language and context in the study of style, register and genre.

My focus on SF linguistics in this chapter is not only on account of its extensive discussion of the notion of “context,” but also because it constitutes a detailed case study of a linguistic approach to context (see also Chapter 4 for many further references to studies on the social conditions of language use).

In the previous chapter, I argued that most work in the structuralist and generativist paradigms has an “autonomous” orientation, that is, it tends to

disdain the systematic study of the relations between grammar and (social) context. As is the case for SF linguistics, most context-sensitive studies in linguistics have been carried out within functional paradigms, such as those propagated by Dik (1981), and especially by Givón, who most explicitly deals with context, also within a discourse-analytical and cognitive perspective (Givón, 1989, 1995, 2005; see also Chapter 3). For a systematic review of the studies of the relations between grammar and context, and a detailed discussion of the notion of appropriateness, see Fetzer (2004).

Other aspects of language-context relations have been studied in *pragmatics*, a field that has been extensively dealt with in many other studies, and hence does not need to be reviewed here (Levinson, 1983; Mey, 1993; Verschueren, Östman and Blommaert, 1995). In various chapters of this book, as well as in *Society and Discourse*, I only briefly re-examine the contextual appropriateness conditions of speech acts (Searle, 1969).

Given these earlier linguistic studies of context, this chapter will not review the same literature, also because most of these studies are focused on the analysis of linguistic structures, and hardly systematically study the properties of contexts themselves. As to the context dependence of pragmatic and discourse structures, see also Chapter 4.

### Systemic Functional Linguistics

A complete critical account of the SF notion of “context” would need a thorough general evaluation of SFL as a body of linguistic theory, if not as a movement. Such a huge enterprise is however clearly outside the scope of this chapter and of this book, and I shall therefore just focus on the various uses of “context” by different SFL theorists. However, since the notion of “context” in SFL is linked to many of its other theoretical constructs, I cannot avoid developing a somewhat broader perspective for my critical remarks. Furthermore, SFL is not only a linguistic theory: many SF linguists have also contributed to the study of discourse. This means that my evaluation of the analysis of “context” in SFL is also related to my critical perspective on SFL as a framework for the study of discourse. Indeed, many of the limitations in SF theories of “context” are in my view a function of the defects of its more general approach to language and discourse and as a paradigm of research.

These defects (which I shall further examine below) may be summarized as follows:

- too much linguistic (“lexico-syntactic”) sentence grammar;
- too few autonomous discourse-theoretical notions;
- anti-mentalism; a lack of interest in cognition;
- limited social theory of language;

- too much esoteric vocabulary;
- too little theoretical dynamism, development and self-criticism;

and may generally be explained in terms of the origins of SFL in the linguistic theory of clause structure, that is, as a sentence grammar. The more serious consequence of these defects is the problem that despite its general claim to provide a *functional* theory of language, SFL's limited social theory and non-existent cognitive theory hardly provide an *explanatory* functional theory of language use and discourse.

It should be emphasized from the start, however, that the shortcomings of the SF paradigm mentioned above are general tendencies. They do not characterize all workers in SF, but only many mainstream studies in SF. Also in the larger SFL community, despite the shared admiration for the work of its founder and leader, there are dissidents. It should also be repeated that my critique does *not* mean that SFL has not made significant contributions to the study of language and discourse. It has. But no theory and no approach in linguistics is perfect.

#### *The history of the SFL approach to "context"*

The history of the SFL approach to "context" has been told and retold, and hence will be dealt with here only briefly. SFL and many of its notions are rooted in the tradition of Firth in linguistics and Malinowski in anthropology, both in London. If one examines more closely what these forebears of SFL said about context, one is soon disappointed by the limited nature of their contributions. That they nevertheless have been heralded, especially but not only in SF linguistics, as prominent scholarly pioneers can perhaps be explained by the fact that other linguists at the time were not interested in context at all.

Compared to more formal approaches in linguistics, Firthian linguistics and SFL explicitly emphasize the social nature of language and language use. Language is seen as an inherent part of the lived experience of the members of a society and culture; linguistic structures should therefore also be accounted for, and possibly explained, in terms of their "natural" environment and of the social activities constituted by them. It is within this very general aim that the notion of context was introduced in Firthian linguistics, namely as the "context of situation". For those who may find this notion somewhat strange, seemingly saying the same thing twice, it should be explained that it should be understood as "situational" context, as opposed to the "textual" or "linguistic" context, for instance, of words and sentences. In this respect, then, it is close to the notion of "social context," as being used in related approaches to language, for instance in Bernstein's sociolinguistics (also in London), with

which it has family resemblances. To avoid misunderstanding, I'll simply use the general notion of "context" here, also when describing the Firthian notion of "context of situation," as used in SFL, and not my own terms of mental context models.

*Malinowski* The history of the Firthian/SF approach to context is usually associated with the work on "primitive" languages by Malinowski. His pervasive racist terminology (he also routinely speaks about "savages") is usually conveniently forgotten in many of the references to his work, at least in linguistics – until recently hardly a discipline particularly concerned about social inequality and racism. The reason for Malinowski's insistence that "primitive" languages be studied in their context of use was that they were only spoken, and that in order to understand and study them, unlike the "dead" languages usually studied by linguists, we also need to study the situations in which they are used (Malinowski, 1956 (1923)).

Although such an argument may be found trivial today because the importance of the study of languages in their social situations is generally recognized, even for "civilized" languages, it should be recalled that at the beginning of the twentieth century such an aim was rather new in linguistics.

Unfortunately, Malinowski's claim that languages or language use should be studied in context is programmatic rather than a concrete contribution to the theory of context. Apart from mentioning speakers and hearers, hardly any explanation is given of the nature of such contexts, and its description is limited to only a few examples.

Interestingly, as we shall also see later, context is here largely reduced to what may be called the "referential (or semantic) context" consisting of *things or persons present* in the current situation. That is, the perception or awareness of present objects allows utterances to be incomplete and meanings of deictic expressions to be derived from the knowledge of this "context." How exactly the presence of things or persons explains (leads to? causes?) incomplete sentences, for instance, in terms of shared knowledge and inferences, is not explained in this simple idea of a "semantic" context. Indeed, the more behaviorist leanings of Malinowski's paradigm do not allow for much cognitive activity in the first place. The "pragmatic" nature of the social context, and the other properties of communicative events (such as roles of participants, among many others) are not dealt with in these first ideas about context. That is, despite Malinowski's insistence that language is a "mode of action" (p. 312), and that the "primitive functions" of language are essentially "pragmatic" (p. 316), his idea of context is as yet hardly a contribution to the study of the *functional* nature of language: his examples seem to be limited to a contextual semantics, and do not suggest a pragmatically oriented concept of context. Important though is his view that language use is not merely

thought or “contemplation” but also action and experience (p. 327), and that the uses of language “have left their trace in linguistic structure” (p. 327).

*Firth* Although theoretically Malinowski has little to say about the structures and functions of contexts, the overall cultural approach to language, which emphasizes the study of language use as action and social experience, provides the background to Firth’s contribution to the study of context. As will be the case in ethnography later, Firth sees the study of “speech events” as the main object of study for linguistics, and he stresses, like Malinowski, that language use must be studied in everyday life and as social intercourse (Firth, 1968: 13). Linguistics, just like the other social sciences, must start, he says, “with man’s active participation in the world” (p. 169). For Firth, the participants of the speech event, described as members of a speech community, as well as in terms of their “personality” (p. 13) are part of this “context of situation.” He insists on the fact that a “science” of language necessarily deals with abstractions, and hence not with the unique characteristics of specific situations but rather with general, abstract properties. As is the case for the structuralist paradigm in general, “occasional, individual and idiosyncratic features” are declared outside the boundaries of linguistic interest (p. 176).

Although for Firth too the “context of situation” is a crucial element of his approach to language study, his definition of this context is fairly succinct, and he cites an earlier book (Firth, 1930):

1. The relevant features of participants: persons, personalities
  - (a) the verbal action of the participants
  - (b) the non-verbal action of the participants
2. The relevant objects.
3. The effect of the verbal action (p. 155).

Note that apart from obvious characteristics of a speech event, such as participants and actions, he also includes relevant objects, thus combining pragmatic with referential-semantic aspects of language, as was also the case for Malinowski. In line with his emphasis on the abstract nature of contexts, he also defines a speech event as a “schematic construct,” applicable especially to typical, repetitive events (p. 176). It is this “schematic” nature of contexts that I shall later consider in more detail when I examine the notion of context in other disciplines. This is an element of the classical account of context that I wish to maintain in my own theory of context.

The reference to the “effect” of verbal action as a component of contexts is not further detailed by Firth, but within his framework such effects are



probably social, rather than mental. In fact, as is typical for British empiricism and the behaviorist tendencies of the time, he explicitly rejects mentalism, in a passage that deserves to be quoted in full because even today its anti-mentalist ideology continues to have a fundamental and long-lasting influence on SF linguistics – and other contemporary approaches to language and discourse:

If we regard language as “expressive” or “communicative” we imply that it is an instrument of inner mental states. And as we know so little of inner mental states, even by the most careful introspection, the language problem becomes more mysterious the more we try to explain it by referring it to the inner mental happenings that are not observable. By regarding words, acts, events, habits, we limit our inquiry to what is objective and observable in the group life of our fellows.

As we know so little about mind and as our study is essentially social, I shall cease to respect the duality of mind and body, thought and word, and be satisfied with the whole man, thinking and acting as a whole, in association with his fellows. I do not therefore follow Ogden and Richards in regarding meaning as relations in a hidden mental process, but chiefly as situational relations in a context of situation and in that kind of language which disturbs the air and other people’s ears, as modes of behavior in relation to the other elements in the context of situation. A thoroughgoing contextual technique does not emphasize the relation between the terms of a historical process or of a mental process, but the interrelations of the terms – set up as constituents of the situation itself. (p. 170)

Thus, although accepting the unity of thinking and acting in principle, in practice he reduces meaning to “objective” and “observable” properties of situations, so relating functional linguistics with the positivist aims of the contemporary scientific enterprise.

Interestingly, his focus on “observable” acts and events does not consider the fact that these acts and events are also abstractions, interpretations or constructions of reality, and not immediately observable, or instances in terms of the physical waves “that disturb the air.” Whereas earlier he speaks of abstractions, and here of interrelations between the constituents of a situation, one may wonder how language users and analysts alike are able to handle such abstractions otherwise than through mental processes.

This reduction of the study of language use to “observable” acts and events within a realist ontology eliminates one of the main properties of the everyday lives of participants functional linguistics claims to study, namely their thoughts. Firth says so in so many words: “A man [*sic*] is not here primarily to think about it [the world] but to act suitably” (p. 171). In this respect, Firth is a precursor not only of SFL, but of virtually all interactional and ethnographic approaches to language and discourse of the last decades. As suggested, his anticognitivism is of course consistent with the dominant behaviorist paradigm of those times.

Firth concedes that as yet no exhaustive system of contexts of situation has been set up. But although, for instance, in the description of deictic expressions we may need to involve the presence or absence of persons mentioned, this

does not involve the description of mental processes or meaning in the thoughts of participants, and certainly need not imply any consideration of intention, purport or purpose. (p. 178)

He thereby excludes from (the study of) context many relevant features apart from the crucial contextual criterion of purpose, such as the beliefs or knowledge of the participants. Throughout this study, I shall repeatedly come back to such notions as intention, purpose, aims and goals as “cognitive” elements of context explicitly rejected by Firth, and giving rise to much debate later, in linguistic anthropology (see, e.g., Duranti, 2006) as well as in linguistics.

Apart from their abstract nature, contexts for Firth are defined in terms of the *relevance* of the relations between text and the other constituents of the situation, but it is the linguist (and not the language user) who defines such relevance “in the light of his theory and practice” (p. 173). We shall see below that “relevance” is indeed a decisive characteristic that turns situational properties into context. Also clear from Firth’s description of contexts is that texts are an inherent part of them. This is important for the account of the functions that relate text and (the rest of the) context.

In addition to the schematic definition of contexts given above, later passages of Firth are much more liberal in the inclusion of contextual features, such as:

- economic, religious or social structures of the societies of which the participants are members;
- types (genres) of discourse;
- number, age and sex of participants;
- types of speech functions (such as speech acts and other social acts accomplished).

Although these features include many, if not most, of the characteristics of social and communicative situations, there are no further arguments or examples showing why these aspects are part of the contexts, and not others. These and many other reasons suggest that Firth’s remarks on context hardly constitute a theory, even by the standards of the time of his writing – for instance in terms of the sophistication of linguistic theory and description (for critique, see also Hasan, 1995).

Summarizing Firth’s contribution to the theory of context, we may conclude the following about the properties of what he calls the “context of situation”:

- (a) Contexts are embedded in the *experiences* of the everyday lives of people.
- (b) Contexts must be described in *abstract*, general terms.

- (c) Contexts consist only of the *relevant* aspects of a social situation.
- (d) Contexts consist mainly of participants, actions and their consequences.
- (e) In a broader sense, contexts feature other social aspects of participants and of the societies these are members of, as well as of genres and speech “functions.”
- (f) The description of contexts is to be given only in the social terms of “observable” and “objective” acts or events, and not in terms of “hidden” mental processes.

We may conclude that Firth does have interesting theoretical ideas about context, and about the need for linguistic theories to be contextual, but that his remarks have barely been worked out or related to systematic empirical research on the contextual nature of language use.

*Context of culture* The notion “context of situation” is often related, by Malinowski, Firth and later SF linguists, with that of “context of culture,” of which it is a specific instantiation, and which is usually described as the general context for language as system (Halliday, 1999). Although the notion “context of culture” may be integrated into a more general theory of “context,” I shall not discuss it here, also because it is not extensively used and elaborated in SFL. Rather, as also Halliday points out, cultural contexts are more typical in the work of US anthropologists of the time, e.g., in the work of Sapir and Whorf (Halliday, 1999). That is, we may assume that unlike “contexts of situations” their influence on language use is more diffuse and indirect, and takes place at a more abstract level.

Thus, one may in principle agree with Halliday’s view that context of culture is instantiated in or “through” more specific contexts of situation. After all, social situations may be described as an inherent part of a broader culture. However, he does not explain how *for language users* such instantiation is possible, how in actual language use the macro or global relates to the micro or local level. If, for him and Firth, language use is embedded in our daily experiences, and if these experiences are typically situational, how does the broader culture impinge on these local experiences, other than through the interpretations or constructions, and hence the cognitive representations, of the language users about their culture?

The same is true for the relations between the *system* of language (in Halliday’s terms a system of “potentialities”), on the one hand, and actual language *use* (texts), on the other hand. This relationship also presupposes that language users *know* and can apply these potentialities, that is, that their grammar and rules of discourse and interaction also have a cognitive dimension. These problems probably also explain why for Halliday “context of culture” should be related with the language *system*, at a global level, and only in a linguistic theory.

In other words, as we also saw with Malinowski and Firth, the notions of “context of situation” and “context of culture” are linguistic, analytical notions, not members’ categories. In that respect, SF linguists seem to diverge from later ethnomethodological approaches to the study of conversation and interaction. These and other cultural aspects of contexts are discussed in *Society and Discourse*.

### *Halliday*

Michael Halliday was a student of Firth and his work shows a clear continuity of the Firthian paradigm (for a discussion of the history of the SF theory of context, see also Hasan, 1985, pp. 16–49). The overall framework is also social, and often defined as a “social semiotic,” but most of Halliday’s contributions are limited to, or directly related to the development of functional grammar. Whereas Malinowski and ethnography in general had a marked influence on Firth, Halliday’s writings are only marginally informed by the social sciences. The references in his well-known collection of articles *Language as a social semiotic* (Halliday, 1978) include hardly any studies in sociology or anthropology. This is astounding in the light of his own recognition, in an interview with Herman Parret, that linguistics, if anything, is a branch of sociology. In other words, as I suggested in my initial list of the defects of SFL, especially in its early stages and as practiced by its leadership, Systemic Linguistics was essentially a monodisciplinary enterprise, without much input from the other social sciences.

This is a fortiori the case for psychology. Just like Firth, Halliday is a staunch anti-mentalistic:

Language is a part of the social system, and there is no need to interpose a psychological level of interpretation. (Halliday, 1978, 39)

Thus, he rejects Dell Hymes’s notion of “communicative competence,” as follows:

There is really no need to introduce here the artificial concept of “competence,” or “what the speaker knows,” which merely adds an extra level of psychological interpretation to what can be explained more simply in direct sociolinguistic or functional terms. (p. 32)

His argument seems to have two dimensions, namely simplicity (Ockham’s razor), and naturalness. Both dimensions, however, seem inconsistent with the proliferation of idiosyncratic theoretical terms used in SFL. Most of these are more jargon than everyday and experiential notions such as thought, belief, knowledge or purpose as descriptions of what social participants (know they) do when using language.

Also, it is surprising that Halliday's theoretical sophistication in grammar accepts a social empiricism and reductionism that prevents a serious explanation of how elements of social situations can possibly affect the production or comprehension of discourse. In other words, Halliday's functionalism totally disregards the problem of the mediation between society and language use, and even disregards the fundamental role of knowledge in text and talk. Here is one of the passages in which he does so:

there is no place for the dichotomy of competence and performance, opposing what the speaker knows to what he does. There is no need to bring in the question of what the speaker knows; the background to what he does is what he could do – a potential, which is objective, not a competence, which is subjective. (p. 38)

One hardly needs much epistemological sophistication to wonder why potentials and competences are objective and subjective respectively, and why competence, as socially shared by the members of a language community, should be less objective than the (individual?, abstract?) *potential* of a specific language user – if we are able to describe such “potentials” in other than cognitive terms in the first place.

Indeed, the notion of “potential” seems much vaguer than that of “knowledge.” If “potential,” as in everyday language use, means something like “the things people are able to do,” then this is begging the question, because we then need to explain that ability, or we are speaking about the “ability” itself, and then there is no fundamental difference with the notion of “competence” in the first place.

However if one formulates these fundamental notions, one always comes back, whether through the front door or the back, to what language users are able to do, and what they share with other language users, namely some form of knowledge, both in the sense of “knowing that” as well as in the “performative” sense of “knowing how.” And no serious study of such knowledge is complete without a socio-cognitive account of some kind. This obviously does *not* mean either that such abilities or knowledge should *only* be studied in a cognitive or social psychological framework: “competence” as *shared* knowledge obviously has social and cultural dimensions as well.

By excluding mental concepts, the systemic enterprise is incomplete from its conception. And even this social functionalism is limited to a linguistic perspective, ignoring much of the contributions of the social sciences. It is only later that other scholars associated with the SF paradigm have added some of these missing links, thus defying the orthodoxy.

#### *Context of situation in SFL*

In his account of the “context of situation,” Halliday explicitly takes the same line as Malinowski and Firth (Halliday, 1978). In this account, Halliday lists

the following properties of context, acknowledging them to have been identified by his masters:

- Language is used, and must be studied, in relation to its social environment.
- Contexts only feature *relevant* aspects of situations.
- Contexts are learned as general and abstract *types of situation*.

Note that despite the prevalent anti-mentalism of the theory, many mental or cognitive notions are implied by these and other definitions in the work of Halliday and other SF linguists. Thus, one may well agree with a definition of contexts as abstractions of situations, and hence as *types*. We see too that for Halliday language users need to *learn* these types, which of course implies that they *know* them when using language. In other words, even this first definition already has cognitive implications.

Although context theory is often attributed to SF linguistics, Halliday did not in fact develop his own theory of context, but borrows its main defining characteristics from other linguists, such as Spencer, Gregory, Ellis and Pearce. The well-known SF triad broadly used to define context, namely *field*, *tenor* and *mode*, should thus be attributed to others.

Unfortunately, from the start these three idiosyncratic terms were hardly well-defined. Instead, just a few illustrations were given, as, for example in what follows (in a definition attributed to John Pearce), in Halliday (1977; 1978).

Field: institutional setting, activities, subject matter.

Tenor: relations between participants.

Mode: medium (e.g. written/spoken), and the (symbolic) role of language in the situation.

Now, this is a rather strange list, with both obviously overlapping categories and large numbers of social situation features missing. No distinction is made between institutional and spatiotemporal “settings,” or between (semantic?) subject matter on the one hand, and activities and settings on the other; participant relations are mentioned, but not participants, nor other properties of participants; and the concept of the written or oral medium is combined with the totally disparate and very vague notion of “the role of language in the situation” – which is quite strange when one considers that the point of the *whole* context is to define the functions of language. Given these examples, the three categories appear rather arbitrary.

Although it had been devised by experts on style (see, e.g. Gregory, 1985; Gregory and Carroll, 1978; Spencer and Gregory, 1964), it is strange that Halliday, and then after him countless of his followers, would accept such a simple, heterogeneous and hardly theoretically consistent definition of “situational contexts.” It is even stranger that for many years this definition

and its rather idiosyncratic terminology has not substantially changed, and that many analyses of language use have apparently been based on it (see also the comments, and comparisons with other proposals, in Leckie-Tarry (1995). Indeed, until Halliday's article (Halliday, 1999; but written in 1991) contributed to the book *Text and Context in Functional Linguistics* (Ghadessy, 1999), we find the same triadic analysis, more or less the same divisions and the same overall view on what context is. That is, if judged by the conceptions of its paradigmatic leader, and despite its vague and heterogeneous definition, SF's very simple and heterogeneous notion of context does not seem to have changed very much in more than thirty years. This is why I concluded that, at least on this point and within the mainstream, SF as a direction of research is not very self-critical and dynamic in the development of its theoretical notions.

Halliday himself does not add much to, let alone correct, these earlier definitions borrowed from the stylisticians. Thus "field" for him is the "whole setting of relevant actions and events." "Subject matter" for him belongs to that, because, as he argues, before we begin to speak we already know what we want to speak about: "The content is part of the planning that takes place."

Note first the surprisingly mental terminology ("planning") used in his argument, rather inconsistent with his earlier rejection of such "arbitrary" notions – unless planning is defined as an observable act. It is arguable that plans or intentions should be included in a theory of context, but obviously at a different level of analysis from activities of participants or institutional settings, and of course (also) in an appropriate cognitive framework; Halliday, however, rejects this. Note that for Halliday the vague term "subject matter" is obviously something language users think about in their planning of discourse, and not, for instance, the abstract semantic object of a topic or theme of discourse. In other words, if events and actions are part of "field," and if "subject matter" is what people plan or think about before speaking, then field also gets a cognitive dimension.

The lack of precise definitions of the three contextual categories adopted by SF linguists of course hardly allows us to formulate further criticism or proposals about what is lacking in the examples given. One may wonder, for instance, not only why participants are not mentioned as such, but that their plans ("subject matter") and activities are mentioned in one category ("field") and their relationships in another ("tenor"). And what about their linguistically relevant functions, roles and group memberships? Are these "field" or "tenor"? Since the categories are not defined but only intuitive examples are given, there is no way of knowing this.

So far, the initial context notions of SFL barely add up to an explicit and systematic theory. We shall see that the framework built on such a shaky

foundation, namely the very theory of language functions, will hardly be more satisfactory.

### *Register*

In order to relate context, thus defined, with language, SFL uses the notion of “register,” predictably with the same vague criteria: “the fact that the language we speak or write varies according to the type of situation” (for more recent accounts of register, see Leckie-Tarry, 1995; see below; for detail, see Chapter 4). Obviously, we need to know exactly what aspects of “language” vary as a function of situation types.

Using Ockham’s razor, one might wonder why the notion of “register” is necessary at all, unless one defines it in a much more specific way, for instance in terms of the set of grammatical or discourse properties controlled by one or more contextual features. In terms of our example of parliamentary debates, this would mean that a “parliamentary debate register” would be the set of all grammatical (or more generally discursive) features of the debate that are controlled by such context properties as the parliamentary Setting, MPs, political goals and so on. However, this means that the number of registers is (theoretically) infinite, and it may be asked in which way such a theory is different from a theory of discourse types or genres (see also Leckie-Tarry, 1995). I shall return to a more detailed discussion of register in Chapter 4.

Another concept of register may thus be the set of *grammatical* properties that typically vary in a specific situation, for instance, the use of specific lexical items and syntactic constructions in “formal” situations such as parliamentary debates or newspaper articles. Whatever the usefulness of the notion of register, there is no doubt that we need more explicit theoretical language that defines the relations between discourse structures and context structures (see Chapter 4 for discussion).

Comparing registers with dialects, Halliday speaks of a “diatypic variety” of language, and lists some of the following characteristics:

- determined by current social activity and diversity of social process;
- ways of saying different things, especially as to content;
- typically used in occupational varieties;
- controlled by context (field, mode, tenor);
- major distinctions of spoken/written (language in action).

We see that this list says more about social situations or contexts than about the “language variety” itself, although it is assumed that this variety especially manifests itself on the level of meaning or content (and hence also the lexicon).



Again, this kind of list lacks a theory to specify in detail the nature of such registers (a property of contexts, or of texts, or of relations between them, etc.), and especially how registers differ from discourse types, genres or classes of genres (such as medical discourse or legal discourse).

A further complicating factor is that, at least initially, SF was generally formulated as a linguistic theory and not as a theory of discourse, so that the vague use of “varieties of language” did not help to solve the theoretical problem of definition. That is, many of the manifest properties of register were traditionally described in terms of grammar (e.g., as lexicalization and lexical variation) and not in terms of (other) discourse structures, such as global topics, schematic organization (such as the conventional structure of a scholarly article) or rhetorical moves and strategies. Another surprising feature of Halliday’s list of properties of register is that social activity, social process and occupation are mentioned as being distinct from context. And finally, does “saying different things” mean using, for instance, different words to say more or less the same thing, or that different registers are associated with different topics as well? Again, we find that as far as crucial theoretical notions are concerned, definitions are limited to rather vague and unsystematic lists of examples. Thus, we still do not know exactly what “register” is, or how it relates to language or language use. But let us continue with the core of the SF doctrine: the functions of language.

### *Functions of language*

If registers link contexts with language, we may also expect the triple of “field,” “tenor” and “mode” to be related to a triple of language structure. This is indeed the case, and Halliday does this by distinguishing *ideational*, *interpersonal* and *textual* (meta) functions (and systems) of language. It is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into a general discussion of these fundamental notions of SFL (or again of the terminology used), but it need not surprise us that the arbitrariness of the contextual categories carries over to their “linguistic” correlates. Indeed, there seems to be little theoretical reason why, for instance, the account of themes, reference or coherence should be “textual” rather than “ideational” if both are defined in terms of concepts or meaning, or why “textual” functions of language should be limited to semantics and lexico-syntax (for instance, as cohesion), thus excluding many other levels of discourse structures and their functions.

What does “ideational” mean exactly as a function of language, especially in a non-mentalist paradigm? Obviously not knowledge structures or mental representations. Examples suggest some kind of conceptualization, typically expressed in the lexicon, but one wonders whether such is not also the case for the semantics.

And finally, and more crucially, why only three (meta) functions of language? This seems to make more sense when defined in terms of such well-known distinctions as those between syntax, semantics and pragmatics, which show more than a family resemblance to textual, ideational and interpersonal functions, respectively, when we understand “syntax” also to include overall formal-schematic organization of discourse. What, indeed, does the SF functional typology have to offer for a theory of discourse that goes beyond the traditional distinction between syntax, semantics and pragmatics with which it partially overlaps? And when they are defined in a more independent functional system, one may wonder whether the major (meta) functions of language can be captured by these three notions alone, and whether one should not also introduce the following fundamental functions, from more general to more specific ones:

- cultural functions (definition of cultural identity and reproduction);
- social/societal functions (e.g., for group identity, institutional activity, dominance);
- evaluative or normative functions (e.g., for the reproduction of norms and values);
- ideological functions (e.g., for the enactment of group interests, etc.);
- emotional functions (for the enactment or expressions of emotions);
- intrapersonal functions (establishment and maintenance of self-identity, etc.).

It is strange that a socially defined theory would ignore these (and probably other, such as poetic, artistic, etc.) fundamental functions of language, each of which can also be systematically associated with various levels or dimensions of language use or discourse structure.

Suffice it to say that the original theory of context, as limited to a heterogeneous collection of three vague categories, is indeed rather arbitrarily related to a functional typology that is equally misguided, or at least quite limited. That is, a bad theory of context also generates a bad theory of the very functions of language, language use or discourse. Or rather, SFL does not really offer a theory of context, but rather a theory of language focusing on grammar – and later also on text or discourse. The notions used elsewhere in that grammar will not be further discussed here.

We see that the *theory* of context and its associated theory of register and functions of language in SFL is not very sophisticated. But what about its *applications*? Let us briefly examine an example. On the basis of a dialogue between mother and child (his own son Nigel), Halliday (1978) attributes such totally heterogeneous contextual properties to “field” as: manipulation of objects, assistance of adults, movable objects and fixtures, recall of similar

events and evaluation. Note that the original definition of “field” was “institutional setting” and “activities.” “Tenor,” originally defined in terms of relations between participants, in this example features such categories as interaction with parent, but also: determination of course of action, enunciation of intention, control of action, sharing of experience, seeking corroboration of experience. That is, “activities” belong to “field” but various kinds of interaction to “tenor” – a rather arbitrary division of realms of context it seems. Again, we also see several cognitive notions enter by the backdoor when actual contexts are being described. We earlier saw that “planning of what to say” (“subject matter”) was categorized as “field,” and now see that similar cognitive notions, such as “determination of course of action,” are categorized as “tenor.” And “mode” – originally defined as the role language plays in the situation – here includes a totally heterogeneous list of notions such as spoken mode, dialogue, reference to situation, textual cohesion (objects, processes), furthering child’s actions, as well as orientation to task.

It needs no further argument that this example sheds little light on what exactly we should understand by “field,” “tenor” and “mode”, which are thus among the theoretically most confused notions of SFL, and hence barely serious candidates for a theory of context. Unfortunately, the later texts of Halliday do not contribute many more details on the structure of context – his treatment of context has not evolved over the years (as is also recognized by Hasan, 1995, 217).

In one of the most comprehensive recent discussions of the SF notion of context and its relation to text, Hasan (1995) provides further background for these distinctions, but again, she does not offer any correction, extension or further definition to the usual categories, but uses a large part of the article to polemicize with SF theorist Jim Martin, for instance, about the dynamic (process) or static (text-structural) account of context and genres in SF.

### *Other SF approaches*

Of course, there are SF linguists who are aware of the rather sorry state of the SF theory of context, and who stress that a lot still needs to be done (Ventola, 1995; Butler, 1985; Martin, 1985, 1992, 1999). However, even contemporary monographs and collections of SF studies maintain the original distinctions between “field,” “tenor” and “mode,” and its register applications, and not only in studies dedicated to the work of Michael Halliday (such as Fries and Gregory, 1995). Since the contextual categories are so vague and general, many other categories fit, and thus there is always a contextual “base” to account for linguistic functions and structures, so that the (much more sophisticated) linguistic analyses in SF can develop rather freely, thus

contributing to its significant work on the study of language and discourse. This may also include combinations with cognitive theorizing, especially, and predictably, about knowledge (see, e.g., Asp, 1995).

In the last collective study of context in SFL (Ghadessy, 1999) we find several approaches to context that (at least for outsiders) do not fundamentally alter the SF approach to context, although details are given about at least some aspects of context (such as “institutionalization” by Bowcher, 1999, 141–176, and “material situations” or “settings” by Cloran, 1999).

Although most work in SFL is anti-mentalist, suggestions are sometimes formulated that question this axiomatic principle. Thus, in the same volume O'Donnell (1999) suggests that contexts need elements beyond the “here and now” and especially some *memory* of what was mentioned before or what has happened before.

Note that an approach that includes cognitive aspects of context (whether or not defined as mental models) also avoids the *determinism* of an exclusively social concept of context: Without individual beliefs, mental representations and processes, and hence without individual variations and decisions, all generalized, abstract or social theories of context are by definition deterministic in the sense that social condition  $x$  causes or necessarily leads to textual structure  $y$ . No “probabilistic” account (the SF approach to individual variation) can save such determinism, apart from being a reductionist approach to actual language use and individual variations. Only when language users are able to represent social conditions of the situation in a personal way (for instance, in their mental models of the communicative situation), are they able to adapt to the social situation as they wish, following the norms or not, and in their own way – and it is for this reason that not all language users in the same situation speak exactly in the same way even when they have the same social characteristics.

However, true to the anti-mentalist and positivist doctrine, Hasan (1999) in her contribution to the same volume, also rejects any account of the role of knowledge: “the impetus for speaking does not originate in the knowledge of language.” Psycholinguists would probably ask her to explain how people can possibly speak without knowledge of the language, without knowledge of how to use the language in social situations, without general knowledge of the world and indeed without knowledge of the social situation or context, among many other types of knowledge. That is, in an anti-mentalist SF account of language use, language use seems to emerge spontaneously (magically, mysteriously) in speakers and social situations.

In the same collection Martin (1999) gives his view of (the history of the notion of) context, also in his own work. This view was criticized by Hasan in an earlier paper (Hasan, 1995), a criticism that is elaborated in the present volume (Hasan, 1999). Martin begins by claiming that there are some

alternative SF models of context, but these seem to be minor variations on the same “field”–“tenor”–“mode” theme (for all relevant references to other work, see Martin, 1999). He rejects the idea of a cognitive dimension to language: “we were as far as possible trying to model context as a semiotic system rather than something material or mental” (Martin, 1999). This semiotic system is borrowed from Hjelmslev’s notion of “connotative semiotic,” which is also familiar in studies of literature, e.g., in the Tartu School tradition. Thus, Language (Content Form + Expression Form) becomes the Expression Form for a higher level (connotative) Content Form, for instance, Register (or Literature). Martin’s concept of “genre” is again another, higher level of “connotation” based on Register, thus producing a “stratified” concept of the relation between language, register and genre, and hence also of context, a conception criticized by other SF linguists (see, e.g., Hasan, 1995). The basic idea, as far as I understand the complex meta-theoretical notions of SFL, is that genre is realized by register, which in turn is realized by “language” (in turn including, e.g., discourse semantics, lexico-grammar and phonology/graphology). Genre is part of the “context plane” (as usual organized by “tenor,” “field” and “mode”).

Whereas these theoretical analyses of the relations between genre, register and language/discourse may be useful for internal SF thinking, they do not contribute a fundamentally different view on the notion of context – apart from relating it with genre. At the end of his article, Martin does, however, offer several ideas about the way SFL can be linked up with work in critical linguistics and discourse analysis, and thus provides some opening to neighboring approaches to language.

Despite Martin’s endeavors, we remain with the important question of *how* genre (however defined) is exactly related to other properties of context – especially since the “field”–“tenor”–“mode” triple is apparently so confused and vague. Recall that context, thus defined, features not only social properties (participants and their properties), but also linguistic–cognitive properties (subject matter), and linguistic–communicative properties (channel, written/spoken modalities, overall “rhetorical” functions of language), and even textual–semantic properties (themes, coherence, etc.).

Although the theoretical argument about the connotative semiotics of language and context seems sophisticated, we cannot escape the conclusion that the whole framework is built on a fundamentally flawed notion of context – which in no way reflects a systematic analysis of the (linguistically) relevant structures of the social context, as was (and is) the overall aim of context theory, as it was in SFL.

Unlike much earlier work in SFL, Martin (1985) emphasizes the *dynamic* nature of contexts, namely a situation that is constantly changing, especially in oral communication (see also the critical commentary by Hasan, 1999).

This emphasis on the dynamic nature of context is important, but for Martin and other SF linguists contexts are abstractions and one may thus wonder how such dynamics can be theoretically accounted for: what abstract things have a dynamic character?

This is one of the many reasons why we should assume that contexts are dynamic participant constructs (e.g., mental models), which are ongoingly formed, activated, updated and de-activated by language users, something I have assumed in the previous chapter and shall further develop in the next chapter. In other words, if contexts are dynamic they must be so because language users *do* something, strategically, either by their actions or by their “thoughts.” A theory of context as an abstraction cannot account for such dynamics – unless it is done in some kind of formal pragmatics, but that is not what SF offers.

In his monumental book on English text, Martin (1992) emphasizes that SFL needs a proper theory of context, defined as a connotative semiotic. After several historical remarks about where the notions of “field,” “tenor” and “mode” come from, he finally summarizes his own definitions in accordance with Halliday’s:

- *Field*: social action – what is taking place, what is going on (also language).
- *Tenor*: role structure – who is taking part (nature of participants, status and roles)
- *Mode*: symbolic organization, what role language is playing, what does language here, status of language and text, channel and rhetorical mode.

Apart from the strange vocabulary for the contextual categories, this list is somewhat clearer than most other characterizations, and we may conclude (and accept) that somehow contexts feature categories for ongoing activities and participants (and their status and roles) in a social situation. “Mode,” however, remains a mysterious collection – we do not know what “symbolic organization” is, and the “role” of language in the context would hardly be different from its “functions,” but that would be inconsistent because *all* of context provides functional relationships for language or language use. Note also that Martin disposes of the notion of “purpose,” which he finds hard to associate with one of the metafunctions of language – not surprisingly when the SF approach does not recognize cognitive notions, and a further indication that the notion of “metafunctions” seems as flawed as the context categories on which it is based. To further complicate matters, note also that where Halliday uses “context,” Martin prefers “register” (Martin, 1992), thus blurring the difference between social context and the ways such context influences language use. It is not surprising that after a detailed examination of the SF literature on context, an outsider feels rather confused and lost.

*Helen Leckie-Tarry*

Perhaps the most articulated SF study of register and context has been provided by Helen Leckie-Tarry in her PhD thesis, completed just before her untimely death (Leckie-Tarry, 1995). This study is interesting because on the one hand it is firmly rooted in the SF tradition, but on the other the author takes a much more independent position, integrating ideas from many authors and directions of research, even from psychology (for instance she refers to the strategic theory of text processing proposed in Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983). After a historical and systematic overview of the notions of context, register and genre by various SF linguists and others, she proposes her own theory of context, followed by a systematic study of several structures of text.

Following several other authors, she first of all distinguishes between three different “levels” of context: Context of Culture, Context of Situation and Co-Text, which together define the complete “meaning potential” of a culture.

Context is then modeled at three levels of “delicacy,” following the usual SF distinction between the three meta-functions, Ideational, Interpersonal and Textual, in order to link context to text. She then uses the usual three SF notions of “field,” “tenor” and “mode,” but with the following specifications (p. 32):

- Field: Arena/Activities, Participants, Semantic Domain;
- Tenor: Formality, Role, Focus;
- Mode: Planning, Feedback, Contextualization.

Via the Medium these context variables influence the register, which may vary between more oral and more literate formats. She also discusses other authors’ proposals for contextual categories, such as Hymes (1974) and Rubin (1984), including, for instance, topic domain, setting, content, etc., but she subsumes them under one of the three context dimensions mentioned above. She argues that the set of context categories of the other authors is not structured, as those in her SF triad are. However, the fundamental problem is that she offers no criteria to decide whether certain kinds of context category should be “field,” “tenor” or “mode,” since these categories remain undefined or untheorized as such: only examples are given. Thus, Hymes’s notions of “setting,” “content” and “participants” are all subsumed under the category of “field,” and Hymes’s notion of “key” is subsumed under “tenor,” etc., but the author does not explain why. And norms and purpose are not subsumed under any category, but taken as properties of the interaction of various other categories.

Leckie-Tarry further emphasizes that context and its categories are not static but dynamic, with different forces that produce “an ongoing environment of which the text is part,” with the strongest forces running from “field” to “tenor” to “mode.” She does not further explain what exactly these “forces” are, but

examples suggest that field variables, such as “setting,” “participants” and “topic,” have a strong influence on “tenor” variables, such as “formality,” “role” and “focus,” which again may influence “mode” variables, such as written or spoken language, etc. Different contextual configurations of values for these variables thus favor specific types of discourse with specific meanings and forms.

Again, the informal examples are persuasive and there is a strong suggestion that an explicit theory of context thus can be related to discourse structures, but we remain confused about the theoretical nature of the categories, and hence about the criteria for categorizing contextual variables. Why, for instance, are participants categorized as “field,” but their roles and relationships as “tenor?” And why do such different things as setting, topic and subject matter, and even participants’ knowledge, also belong to “field?”

Thus, “field” is categorized as the “fixed” properties of the social situation, and “tenor” as the non-inherent features of social situations, but no other criteria are given – again she cites Halliday who characterizes “field” as “the total event in which the text is functioning.” But Halliday categorizes participants and their permanent and temporal properties as part of “tenor.” These differences of “interpretation” suggest that the main contextual categories are hardly well defined. Relationships between participants, such as power, are categorized as “tenor,” and the distance of the participants as “mode,” although one fails to see why these cannot be part of the fixed characteristics of “field.”

The category of “mode” features a similarly heterogeneous collection of variables, such as degree of planning or feedback (or distance) between participants, medium (spoken or written) and “contextualization,” i.e., the degree to which the text is embedded in the surrounding activities. Thus, “mode” is seen as closest to the text itself, and somehow as an intermediate between “field” and “tenor” variables and text structures.

We have already seen that it is strange that there should be one specific *context* category, namely “mode,” that is said to define the *functions* of the text, when precisely the whole point of contextual analysis is that such a function is defined in terms of *all* the relations between text and context. Indeed, one can only understand this when language use or discourse in SF is not defined in broad interactional terms, but only as linguistic (grammatical) realization, because obviously matters of planning, feedback, functions (like persuasive or didactic functions) or medium are themselves properties of various dimensions of the discourse itself. This is also why (also according to Leckie-Tarry) “mode” features depend on “field” and “tenor” features, as all properties of discourse do; no wonder, then, that the “mode” category is related to the “textual” meta-functions of language. Indeed, “mode” categories *are* properties of discursive interaction or text. We now understand why in SF theory rhetorical features are placed in “mode.” In other words, everything that does not fit the traditional



domains or levels of (sentence) grammar is thus placed in the *contextual* category of “mode,” thereby collapsing text theory into part of a context theory.

In sum, there is virtually no contextual variable that could not be fitted anywhere else in these vague categories. Unfortunately, despite her broader and less orthodox perspective, the author remains close to the conventional SF literature and does not clear up the nature of the mysterious triad. However, although most of the basic categories used by the author so far are close to those of SFL and share much of their vague nature with the traditional context categories of SFL, she seems much more “liberal” in her interpretations of the categories. Thus she emphasizes that it is not the context categories themselves that influence the meaning and form of the text, but rather the *knowledge* the participants have of the variables of these categories. *She thus explicitly introduces a cognitive interface between context and text, an interface that is missing in orthodox anti-mentalist SFL.* I have argued, and will later show, that this is theoretically the only way we can get from the social to the textual. Language users are able to represent social structure and social situations as well as discourse structures, so that it must be at the level of these (mental) representations that we need to search for the missing link between discourse and society, and hence between discourse and “context of situation.”

#### “Context” in an introduction to SFL

Whereas most of the studies mentioned might be considered the core texts of the founders and leading scholars of SFL, it is also important to briefly examine an introduction to SFL, that is, what is now considered the “standard theory” on notions such as “context,” for instance, Eggins (1994).

Here we find the definitions encountered above, but with the following further explanations. First of all, there is a very close relationship between context and register. Indeed, the “field,” “tenor” and “mode” notions are defined by Eggins in terms of *register* variables (and not as context variables or categories). This is strange because register is vaguely defined, as usual in SF, as the *impact* (of the context) on the way language is used (p. 9). That is, if these are register variables, they should say something on this linguistic “impact.” The definitions of the three notions themselves are close to the classical definitions in SFL: “field” as the “topic or focus of the activity,” “tenor” as the “role relations of power and solidarity” and “mode” as the “feedback and amount of language,” definitions that barely provide any further insight into the detailed structure of social contexts of communicative events.

After a historical review of the use of the notion of context, mentioning Malinowski, Firth and Halliday, and Eggins adds a more detailed explanation of

the three “register variables”. Especially her account of “mode” is interesting, because instead of the usual vague description of “mode” as “the way language is being used”, she here introduces the criterion of the “distance between participants,” spatially, interpersonally or experientially, which would be related to more or less interactive, face to face, spontaneous or casual language use.

Although it may be clear what the author is after, the problem remains why “distance between participants” is a property of something like “mode,” which more intuitively is associated with, e.g., whether language is spoken or written. The point is that in this way the characterization of participants, their roles and relationships appear in three different, unrelated categories.

Another recurrent problem of SF is also unresolved here, namely that properties of language use (such as spoken/written, spontaneous/casual, etc.) appear as properties of precisely the context that is being postulated to describe or explain such properties of language, thus arriving at a vicious circle. That is, register theory – at least in SF terms – should relate properties of context with properties of language structure or language use or “texts,” and not confound these different levels or dimensions of description. That is, to avoid circularity, contexts in SF theory should be defined only in sociological terms and feature no “linguistic” terms that characterize text or talk.

### *Gregory*

In order to “contextualize” the SF approach to context, let us also briefly consider what one of those who inspired some of its initial concepts has to say: Michael Gregory, whose early work was on socially based linguistic variation, for instance, as a basis for a theory of style (Gregory, 1967; see also Spencer and Gregory, 1964). Note by the way that in Spencer and Gregory (1964) the authors define “field,” “tenor” and “mode” not as properties of the context or situation, but as properties of discourse; they speak of the “field of discourse,” etc. That is, they would rather be part of what SF defines as “register,” a notion that the authors reject as not very helpful (Spencer and Gregory, 1964). Instead of “style,” as used by Halliday, McIntosh and Stevens (1964), they introduce the term “tenor,” defined as reflecting the degree of formality of the relations between the speaker/writer and hearer/reader.

Gregory’s later approach is called “communication linguistics” (Gregory, 1985), in which he not only refers to the work reviewed above by Malinowski, Firth and Halliday, but also to that of tagmemic linguists such as Pike, Longacre, Gleason and Lamb in the USA. Gregory uses the notion of “planes” of experience, and relates these to “strata” of grammar. Citing the work of Fleming (1978), he thus defines the communicative situation as the “extra-textual features of experiences that are relevant for the discourse”

(p. 123). We shall later see that the notion of “experience” may well be used as a foundation for a (psychological) theory of context, but it should be emphasized here that it would be inconsistent with an SF approach, which only accepts social variables of context, and not how language users *experience* these relevant features of social situations. Gregory then proceeds to a further account of these features of communicative situations, such as

- the speech community context: language users’ individual, temporal, geographical and social “provenances”;
- the generic situation: language users’ experience medium, personal and functional relationships;
- the referential realm: real or imaginary persons, things, incidents, interactional intent and attitudes from which message/referential plot selects.

These situational aspects are connected to the “semology” stratum of grammar (virtually all of semantics and pragmatics). As a second plane of experience, Gregory then lists “other forms of intentionality,” but also various aspects of discourse, such as plot, structure, typology, register variables (“field,” “tenor,” “mode”), dialects, and chains, cohesion, etc. All these situation characteristics are said to relate to morphosyntax. The third plane is that of manifestation (body behavior, writing, etc) and is related to the phonology stratum of the grammar.

Although perhaps some more features of context become clear in this case, as well as the links with the SF approach, I am again puzzled by the heterogeneous nature of these situational categories. One could imagine that the set of things that can be referred to in some context is declared to be part of the context, e.g., to explain deictic expressions, and that set might include persons, things and events, say, but why in the same category do we find interactional intent and attitudes? Why is the individual “provenance” of a speaker part of the “speech community context,” and why are personal and functional relationships between language users called part of a “generic” situation? Even more puzzling is that properties of discourse (which as such is a very strange list to begin with) are also part of the situation.

One can only explain this in a theory of language where grammar is the core and everything else is “context.” It hardly needs further argument that discourse structures just like sentence structures need to be related to contextual structures in their own right, and that the way they are “context” for other parts of the discourse (like following sentences) implies a different concept of context (verbal context or “co-text”) than that of the social context. Scholarly terminology may sometimes be somewhat idiosyncratic, but this very heterogeneous characterization of the communicative situation does not offer a systematic theory of the structures of contexts or communicative situations either.

*Wegener*

Malinowski, Firth and SF linguists repeatedly refer to the situation theory of Philipp Wegener (1848–1916), the nineteenth century German linguist, as formulated in his book *Untersuchungen über die Grundfragen des Sprachlebens (Investigations into the Fundamental Questions of the Life of Language)* (Wegener, 1885/1991). Let us briefly examine what Wegener has to say, and how his remarks fit (or do not fit) the SF approach to context.

Wegener's book has a surprisingly modern style of thought and exposition. Many passages, for instance, on the relations between language and action, and on the development and the use of language, are still relevant in contemporary psycholinguistics and pragmatics.

The same is true of his (brief) study of the role of the situation in the understanding of language use. His general assessment of the role of situation factors is that language users need to say less when they are more familiar with the situation, a general strategy that would also figure today in any theory about the role of knowledge (and context) in the understanding of discourse. He also relates this general role of knowledge with the Subject–Predicate articulation, which today would be associated with Topic–Comment articulation: Subject is what is already known (in some situation), and hence less interesting in an utterance, and the predicate is what is new and interesting, and forms the actual “Aussage” (proposition, statement). But because the grammatical subject need not be the same as the “logical” subject (for instance in passive sentences), he proposes the use of “Exposition” to refer to what is already known when an utterance is made. The notion of *situation* is then related to this concept of Exposition (which we would probably call “Topic”), as follows:

The exposition serves to clarify the situation, so that the logical predicate becomes understandable. The situation is the ground, the environment, in which a fact, a thing, etc. appears, but also the temporal antecedent from which an action emerges, namely the action that we state as predicate; similarly belong to the situation the particulars of the person to which the communication is directed. Within the communication, the situation is not only determined by words, but more commonly and more extensively by the conditions of the environment, by the immediately preceding facts and the presence of the person with whom we are speaking. We become conscious of the situation that is given by the environmental conditions and the presence of the person being addressed because of our perception, and hence we shall call it *perceptual situation*. (Wegener, 1885/1991, 21)

Note, incidentally, that the original text probably has an error when it uses the word *Gegenwort* instead of *Gegenwart* (presence), since the latter is the word used earlier in the passage. However the uncommon word *Gegenwort*, which might loosely be translated as “talking back,” would of course perfectly fit

Wegener's definition of the situation. We have translated *Anschauung* as *perception* in order to maintain the visual aspect of the German original, but it might more generally also be rendered with "view" or "experience." After this passage he gives examples that show that the presence of objects in a situation make explicitly naming such objects superfluous.

In other words, the immediate, experiential situation for Wegener is characterized as follows:

- it serves as basis, environment or background of talk;
- it features preceding events, actions or other conditions (e.g. presence of objects);
- it features properties of recipients.

However, a situation is not defined just by what is present, but also by previous events or actions that are still in the "foreground of our consciousness," and that may be inferred from what we know already. This situation is called *situation of remembering* (*Situation der Erinnerung*).

The third kind of situation distinguished by Wegener is called *Situation des Bewusstseins* (*situation of consciousness*) (p. 25). These are the "elements of consciousness" or "groups of representations" that are currently under focus, as is the case for the situation of remembering, but in this case the interest is fixed, a more general, human tendency, such as the knowledge group members share. These general tendencies may be so strong that they override the consciousness of locally preceding events as it is defined by the situation of remembering – for instance, when an ideology determines a biased interpretation of an event. It is also for this reason that Wegener speaks here of the "prejudices of a period," or of a "world vision." This distinction between two kinds of consciousness or representation might today be formulated in terms of episodic memory (and its mental representations) of ongoing events, on the one hand, and semantic (or social) memory or shared social beliefs, on the other.

This brief summary of the three kinds of situation distinguished by Wegener shows an interesting discrepancy with the reception of his ideas in British empirical ethnography and linguistics. Wegener unabashedly talks about perception, experience, consciousness, memory, remembering and representations. Indeed, a large part of what he calls situation is in fact a mental situation, and not merely a social environment. He shows that because of our world views or prejudices the actual perceptions or memories of the current situation may become biased. That is, he builds in a cognitive interface between social situations and actual language use.

We have seen that the empiricist leanings of Malinowski, Firth and Halliday did not allow them to take a more cognitive stand on situations, and thus reduced them to their allegedly more "observable" characteristics, such

as participants, etc. We shall see later that my own approach to context is closer to that of Wegener than that of the British empiricists as well as their SF followers.

### Summary of critique of SF approach to “context”

We may summarize my critique of the dominant SF approach to context as follows:

- a. Its conceptualization is theoretically closed, without much theoretical development, systematic research, or influence from other approaches and disciplines.
- b. Halliday, and then later other SF linguists, borrow a notion of context from Gregory and other UK linguists that is vague, heterogeneous, terminologically idiosyncratic and theoretically confused, namely the triple of “field,” “tenor” and “mode.” With small changes, this conception has barely changed in nearly forty years, although it produces numerous problems for the theory of the relations between text and context.
- c. Much of the approach to “language” advocated in SFL would be better called an approach to “grammar”; this would also avoid many inconsistencies and contradictions in its terminology (such as the “textual functions of language”).
- d. Because of the rather arbitrary nature of these three “variables” defining contexts, the mapping of such contexts on (three) functions of language (ideational, interpersonal and textual), and on the language structures controlled by them, also remains arbitrary, incomplete and confused. This not only shows in the theory but also in the analyses of language use in SFL.
- e. Despite the social (or social semiotic) approach to language, there is no social research into the nature of contexts, and the ways properties of context systematically influence language or discourse. References to the social sciences are scarce.
- f. The fundamentally construed or interpreted nature of context, for instance, in terms of mental representations, as well as the important role of knowledge and other beliefs as relevant cognitive and social properties of language users, is not recognized. This also means that there is no explanation of exactly how such contexts are able to influence discourse production and comprehension by real language users – and indeed, conversely, how context can be affected by discourse. Especially, the dynamic nature of context cannot be explained in an approach that ignores a mental component in which actual language users (and not abstractions) ongoingly (re)construct a context through a dynamic interpretation and representation of the communicative event and situation.

It should be emphasized again that this summary of critical problems of the SF approach to context is necessarily a generalization. I have examined a number of core texts in SFL, especially those dealing explicitly with context, but not the vast number of other publications inspired by SF. This means that various authors may have proposed alternatives for the definition of the “field”–“tenor”–“mode” triple and its relations to register and functions of language. However, my general conclusion of SF-inspired studies is that the basic notions, especially the “field”–“tenor”–“mode” triple, have been generally and passively repeated without much critical investigation.

This critique does not mean either that all work on context in SFL is useless. True, the foundations of the concept, namely what constitutes the relevant structure of social situations of communicative events, should be revised, and the hopelessly confused terminological triple of “field,” “tenor” and “mode” abandoned. But, the main point of the account of context, namely how properties of a social situation of interaction or communication are systematically related to grammar or other discourse properties, is a fertile and productive area of SFL.

Thus, more than most other approaches to language, SFL has thought about genre, register and other ways contexts leave their traces in (or are expressed in) the structures of language use. Although cognitively agnostic, if not anti-mentalist, SFL’s systemic approach has provided valuable analyses of some of the relevant systematics that may be integrated in a theory of context, for instance, of the social actions, activities and actors of social situations – schemas that can easily be integrated in a mental model theory of context, as presented in this book. Even without a theoretically more up-to-date concept of context, much of this systematic work on language and discourse structure, and on the relations between text and context, remains relevant today.

### Introduction

One of the main theses of this study is that contexts are not some kind of objective social situation, but rather a socially based but subjective construct of participants about the for-them-relevant properties of such a situation, that is, a mental model. This chapter provides further details about this claim by developing a theory of *context models* as a special kind of everyday experience model, represented in the episodic memory of discourse participants. Such context models are assumed to control many aspects of the production and understanding of text and talk. This means that language users are not just involved in processing discourse; at the same time they are also engaged in dynamically constructing their subjective analysis and interpretation of the communicative situation on line.

There is ample psychological work on context properties, and in the study of discourse processing (Graesser, Gernsbacher and Goldman, 2003). However, we as yet do not have an overall cognitive *theory* of context as a type of mental model. Indeed, most psychological work that uses the term “context” in *fact* deals with what is called verbal context or “co-text,” that is, the part of a discourse that is the environment of other parts (see, e.g., Cook and Myers, 2004, 268–288). And where *social* or *communicative* context is being studied, this usually happens in terms of one or more independent variables, sometimes also summarized under the label “individual differences,” such as specific tasks, goals or relevance (e.g., Perfetti, 1983; Lehman and Schraw, 2002), age (e.g., Miller, 2003), gender (e.g., Rice, 2000; Slotte, Lonka and Lindblom-Ylänne, 2001), or personal circumstances, for instance, in the interpretation of survey questions (Schober and Conrad, 1997). One of the context features most widely studied in the psychology of language is (shared) knowledge or “common ground” (Clark, 1996; see below).

If we take the Graesser, Gernsbacher and Goldman (2003) handbook as the state of the art on text processing, we must conclude that context is not a central notion in the study of discourse, namely as the kind of mental model that controls production and comprehension. Indeed, apart from the long chapter by



Grimshaw (2003) on context, genres and register (which has little to do with discourse processing and deals with context only marginally), the other chapters do not refer to context. In other words, although there may be widespread interest in aspects of context among psychologists, and experimental design sometimes features some independent context variables (such as gender or age), the psychology of discourse processing still needs to develop a systematic cognitive theory of the role of context in such processing.

That is, psychological discourse research does not study the role of context as a unified construct or in terms of participant representations of the social context, but rather as inherent (non-controlled) individual characteristics. Nor is it theoretically explained why and how such context features are able to influence discourse processing or other cognitive tasks, perhaps with the exception of the role of gender on discourse processing (see, e.g., Ferrell, 1999).

Thus, the paradoxical situation presents itself that whereas there are many studies of “context-effects” in cognitive psychology, there is no overall theory of context as a specific mental construct influencing discourse production and comprehension. As we shall see in more detail below, current theories relate discourse structures directly to underlying text representations or mental models (“situation models,” etc.) of events or situations referred to or spoken *about*, and not the situation *in which* participants are speaking. *That is, psychological model theory is semantic, not pragmatic. It does not postulate an intermediary representation of the communicative situation in terms of mental models.*

Note also that many psychological studies that do take isolated context features into account, such as age, gender, knowledge or goals, examine more general aspects of *language use* (e.g., sentence comprehension) rather than the specific structures of *discourse*, which is the special focus of this chapter and this book. Unfortunately there is no space in this chapter to review the psychological literature on individual differences of sentence production and comprehension.

Although my proposals do not pretend to present a complete psychological theory of context models and of their role in discourse processing, and although they especially need detailed empirical testing, they do claim to represent a plausible mental interface between discourse and social situations. Also, I contend that the theory is a necessary and consistent extension of the current state of the theory of text processing: it explains and unifies many earlier findings and assumptions on text processing.

### **Mental models**

If contexts are some kind of mental model, we first need to summarize some of the general properties of mental models. After earlier proposals by Kenneth Craik (1943) on people’s “small-scale models” of the world, the theory of

mental models for discourse and language use was independently proposed in the early 1980s in books by Johnson-Laird (1983) and by Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983), although in quite different frameworks (see also, Gentner and Stevens, 1983; for contemporary approaches to mental models, see Oakhill and Garnham, 1996; Van Oostendorp and Goldman, 1999; for a detailed review of research on “situation” models, see Zwaan and Radvansky, 1998).

Johnson-Laird (1983) postulated mental models in order to be able to resolve some problems of inference. That is, language users do not merely operate logically on linear sequences of propositions, but also need to have some “analogical” representation of reality in order to derive acceptable inferences from a text. Johnson-Laird’s notion of mental model, thus, is closely related to logical model theory, that is, to formal semantics. However, his approach is an important psychological correction to formal approaches when applied to discourse understanding.

Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) also postulated a theory of mental models, called “situation models,” in order to explain how people understand discourse within a broader theory of strategic discourse processing. Earlier proposals of discourse understanding were limited to some kind of mental representation of the local and global (thematic, topical) meanings of texts.

#### *Mental models and discourse coherence*

The theory of “situation models” provided an explanation of a large number of problems that could not be accounted for by traditional approaches to cognitive semantics, such as the conditions of local and global coherence and coreference, false recall, cross-media recall, the relations between meaning and knowledge, and so on (for a summary of the various functions of mental models, see Zwaan and Radvansky, 1998). The crucial thesis of mental model theory is that besides a representation of the meaning of a text, language users *also* construct mental models of the events texts are *about*, that is, the situation they denote or refer to – hence the name “situation models” chosen by Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983).

In this way, psychology was able for the first time to deal with the fundamental notion of reference and coreference, and explain why it is not only meaning but also reference to related “facts” that forms the basis of the crucial notion of coherence (Van Dijk, 1977). Thus a sequence of sentences of a text is coherent if the language users are able to construct mental models of the events or facts they are talking/writing or hearing/reading about, and if they are able to relate the events or facts in such models, for instance, by relations of temporality or causality.

More generally and abstractly, this definition of mental models is consistent with formal theories of meaning and interpretation. For both perspectives on

language we may simply say that a discourse is meaningful (true, false, etc.) if it has a model (for details, see, e.g., Portner, 2005; Portner and Partee, 2002).

In psychological accounts, such models are mental models of language users, and meaningfulness is defined relative to the models of speakers or recipients. What may be meaningful to the speaker obviously need not be (completely) meaningful to the recipient: they may have overlapping but different models, that is, interpret the “same” discourse in different ways.

Instead of complex and incomplete accounts of discourse coherence in terms of meaning relations, such as have been proposed in structural, functional and generative semantic approaches to discourse, mental models provide a simple, elegant and powerful account of local and global coherence as well of many other aspects of discourse understanding and production.

Incidentally, it is important to distinguish such forms of semantic coherence, based on mental models, from the ways such coherence may (or may not) be expressed or signaled in text or talk, for instance, by definite articles, pronouns and other pro-forms, demonstratives, adverbs, topic-comment structure of sentences and so on. These surface-structure manifestations of underlying semantic coherence are usually called “cohesion” (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). It should be emphasized that cohesive devices are neither necessary nor sufficient manifestations of semantic coherence, and hence grammatical cohesion should not be confounded with semantic coherence – as happens quite frequently.

Unlike the usual “interpretative” approaches to discourse comprehension, mental models also provide a “starting point” for the *production* of discourse: if people represent everyday experiences as well as events or situations in subjective mental models, these mental models at the same time form the basis of the construction of the semantic representation of the discourses about such events, as is typically the case for everyday stories or news reports.

However, one crucial missing link in this mental model theory of discourse processing is the account of the role of context, since we obviously tell or write about the same events (that is, the same mental model of these events) in a different way in different communicative situations or genres. *In other words, as well as talking about events, language users also need to model themselves and other aspects of the communicative situation in which they are currently engaged.* In this way, context models become the crucial interface between mental models of events and the discourses about such events.

*Mental models are unique, personal and subjective. . .*

One of the many fundamental properties of mental models is that they are *personally unique and subjective*. They do not objectively represent the events a discourse is about, but rather the way language users variably

interpret or construct such events, for instance, as a function of different personal aims, knowledge or previous experiences – or other aspects of the “context” as we shall later define them.

Although in most forms of discourse between members of the same community mental models will be sufficiently similar to guarantee successful communication, it should be stressed that mental models necessarily embody personal elements that make all discourse productions and interpretations unique – and hence misunderstanding possible – even when they have many, socially shared, elements. Thus, we see that discourse comprehension involves the context-controlled construction of mental models based on knowledge-based inferences (for instance, for goal-dependent narrative comprehension, see, e.g., Graesser, Singer and Trabasso, 1994).

*... but with objective constraints*

Besides important intersubjective and social constraints, subjective mental models may also be influenced by “objective” constraints, such as the perception of physical properties of things or people, or of situations, such as spatial organization. In sum, the subjectivity of mental models does *not* imply that they are totally subjective, in the same way as the uniqueness of each individual discourse does not imply that such a discourse is totally original. Indeed, whereas earlier work on discourse comprehension and the formation of (subjective) mental models tends to presuppose the largely subjective, mental nature of understanding and representation, there are new developments that emphasize the role of “objective” constraints on the structure of objects, people, events and situations. In the development of a theory of contexts as mental models, we therefore need to explore also how the perception or experience of “objective” dimensions of communicative situations (e.g., spatial dimensions) may have an impact on their mental representation.

Thus, one of the approaches to this issue could be the research paradigm of Latent Semantic Analysis, developed specifically for the account of word meanings based on a matrix featuring their frequencies in sets of discourses (Kintsch, 1998). Applied to mental models, such an approach would involve situational structures derived from accumulated experiences, an automatic process that appears more related to “objective” frequencies than to an active, constructive and subjective approach to mental models.

A similar perspective is represented in John Anderson’s account of “rational memory,” which defines cognitive strategies in terms of “optimal data selection,” and is based on a history of prior usage of similar data (Anderson, 1990b).

It should be noted though that such approaches seem more relevant for frequently repeated structures, such as words or word meanings. From generative grammar we have learned that most (longer) sentences are unique, and

this is fortiori true for discourses. We do not seem to learn to understand and produce complex discourse structures by accumulated experiences, but rather by the derivation of rules and other principles. On the other hand, discourses and mental models are defined by schemata that are often repeated as such as part of our experiences. Accumulated experiences with everyday situations may thus lead to abstract model schemas in which for instance Settings (Time, Place), Participants (in various roles and relations) as well as Actions are more or less stable categories. Although each mental model of a text or situation is thus unique, because of personal circumstances and the contingencies of the present situation, its abstract structure may be “objectively” defined by people’s accumulated perceptions.

### *Opinions and emotions*

The personal and subjective nature of mental models also explains why mental models do not merely represent the facts as participants see them, but also opinions and emotions. We read about the events of the attacks against the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, or of the war in Iraq started in 2003, and not only construct our “personal version” of these events on the basis of many news articles, editorials and conversations, but at the same time also form evaluative beliefs, that is, opinions, about them, possibly associated with emotions such as sadness or anger (see also Blanc, 2006; Ferstl, Rinck and von Cramon, 2005; Oatley and Johnson-Laird, 1996). This would explain the interesting finding that we are better able to remember past experiences if we are in the same “mood” as we were the original experience (Bower, 1980).

### *Experiences as mental models*

Mental models are the cognitive representations of our *experiences*. In a sense they *are* our experiences if we assume experiences to be personal interpretations of what happens to us. Personal experiences, and hence the models that represent them, are thought to be stored in Episodic Memory, part of Long Term Memory (Tulving, 1983).

Our mental “autobiography,” the accumulation of our life’s personal experiences, is thus a collection of mental models. The vast majority of these mental models or experiences are so trivial and common that after a time we no longer have access to them: they are not meaningfully connected to (many) other experiences and hence difficult to retrieve from our vast episodic memory store. Few people will recall after several weeks, let alone after a year or more, what they bought today in the supermarket, what they read in the newspaper today, or with whom they met this morning. After some time,

we usually have access only to striking, crucial events in our life, to more global events, such as a vacation, a trip, our study at such and such a university or living in a particular city, or to traumatic experiences such as an accident or a divorce (King, 2000; Neisser and Fivush, 1994; Rubin, 1986, 1999; see also Bruner, 2002; Schank, 1990, 1999). That is, where relevant, we tend to construct more global units of these personal memories as we tend to derive global topics from the details of a text: we form more global “macro” models from sequences of “micro” models of everyday experiences (Van Dijk, 1980).

Remembering our personal experiences as well as remembering what we read in the press, or what we told someone, thus consists in the search for and activation of “old” mental models. Except for special cases, such recall is usually difficult. It is much easier to explain what a typical vacation is, or where we like to spend our vacations, than to recall and say what we did in a specific vacation ten years ago. In other words, general, socially shared (and often-used personal) knowledge is easier to retrieve than most of the “personal” knowledge about our own past, that is, our mental models. Yet, while we are living them, and while we are producing or understanding a discourse, models are crucial, because they embody what we mean by intending, planning and understanding events and discourses alike.

Although not always formulated in terms of mental models, recent research on episodic memory details several of the theoretical assumptions made above (see the papers in Baddeley, Conway and Aggleton, 2002). Besides confirming the well-known distinction between episodic and “semantic” memory within Long Term Memory (LTM), these studies show neurologically based differences between different kinds of episodic memory. On the one hand, we have short-term episodic representations of recent experiences, of which we remember many details but only for a few hours or a day. These “memories” in the strict sense are obviously useful for the monitoring and execution of ongoing tasks of the day. On the other hand, we have autobiographical memory or “personal knowledge” of a more abstract kind that may remain accessible for a long time or even our whole life. Thus most people are able to confirm immediately whether they have ever been to Paris, even when detailed models of concrete visits are no longer accessible.

We shall see that such research on episodic memory is directly relevant for the personal experiences of communicative events we call contexts: Thus, I may vividly remember details (time, place, participants, goals, topic, etc.) of a conversation I had this morning with a student, or that I read such and such a book last night, but such concrete memories are hardly accessible at all, except in the case of dramatic events and circumstances (about which I tend to tell stories afterwards, and hence re-activate old models) after many weeks,

months or years. However, even years later I may well remember that I directed student theses at my current university, or that I used to read the newspaper *El País* each day. That is, generalized or abstracted information about context models may remain accessible for a long time. Indeed, much of this personal (episodic) knowledge is closely related to information in “semantic” memory, that is, socioculturally shared knowledge, for instance, about universities and PhD students on the one hand, or about newspapers on the other.

### *Mental models and general, social knowledge*

Personal mental models in Episodic Memory and general or abstract knowledge in “semantic” memory (I prefer the term “social” memory in order to distinguish it from personal, episodic memory, as defined) are of course related. If we are reading about what is happening in the war in Iraq, for instance, we are constructing or updating a complex mental model of this (complex) event. This construction process, however, makes extensive use of general, social knowledge, e.g., about soldiers, weapons and victims, and many other aspects of the war.

Much of the work in modern cognitive science since the seminal work of Bartlett (1932) on the schematic organization of memory has been focused on the analysis of the structures of general, sociocultural knowledge, for instance, in terms of *schemas*, *scripts* or similar forms of organization (Schank and Abelson, 1977). Although such formats are not the same as the typical episodic organization of an event, it is not only a selection of their relevant *contents* (e.g., the typical characteristics of a war) that are instantiated (specified) in mental models, but also some of their *structures* (e.g., general knowledge on the causes of war may be mapped on a story on how a terrorist attack caused a war). For instance, scripts play a fundamental role in story comprehension because such comprehension of discourses of specific events and actions presupposes general knowledge about such actions and events (of the vast literature on script-based story comprehension, see, e.g., Mandler, 1984; see also Bower, Black and Turner, 1979).

Most of this general, socioculturally shared knowledge need not be made explicit – simply because we are supposed to know this already (see below for the contextual strategies used in the processing of knowledge in discourse production). In that sense, texts are very much incomplete or implicit. Their authors presuppose large amounts of “world knowledge,” and readers thus build mental models of the events they read about by activating relevant parts of this knowledge, and thus fill in the model with the information that is implied or presupposed by the text. Much of the current research on discourse comprehension in terms of mental models deals with the kind of

knowledge-based inferences made by language users, for instance, in order to make discourses locally and globally coherent, and to construct viable mental models of such discourse.

How *much* of our general knowledge is thus activated and included in mental models depends on the context (Setting, readers' knowledge, goals, interests, etc.), but it may safely be assumed that people can only activate and integrate small fragments of this general knowledge in the few seconds they spend reading or hearing a sentence or paragraph. Indeed, most of the detailed knowledge we have about the things we read or hear about may not be *relevant* in order for us to understand the text, that is, in order to construct a coherent mental model for the text (for details on the relations between mental models and general, socioculturally shared knowledge, see, e.g., Graesser and Bower, 1990; Graesser, Gernsbacher and Goldman, 2003; Oakhill and Garnham, 1996; Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983; Van Oostendorp and Goldman, 1999).

Mental models and knowledge are also related in the other direction: much of our everyday learning is based on our personal experiences. In other words, general knowledge may be derived from mental models, for instance by abstraction, generalization and decontextualization (Baudet and Denhière, 1991). If we regularly read in the paper about terrorist attacks or wars, we gradually learn about such attacks or about wars in general. Although in formal schooling, as well as through parental discourse, we may also learn many abstract or general things in a direct way (typically in expository text and talk), learning from personal experiences usually takes place through generalization and abstraction from mental models.

These few remarks about the relationships between personal mental models and general social knowledge show that we should distinguish between different kinds of knowledge. Indeed, if we experience an accident or read about a political event in the newspaper, we acquire specific, subjective "knowledge" about such events, and such specific knowledge is apparently related to the general knowledge about similar events.

The notion "knowledge of the world" that has been widely and vaguely used in linguistics, psychology and other disciplines, needs to be made much more precise. Within a multidisciplinary theory of knowledge, thus, we need an explicit *typology* of knowledge (Van Dijk, 2003, 2004). The differences between "specific," "personal," "general," "abstract," "fictional," "social" and "cultural" *knowledges* are just some of the several types in such a broader typology. We shall see that knowledge also plays a fundamental role in context models. Indeed, management of knowledge in discourse production and comprehension, requiring language users to strategically "calculate" how much knowledge to presuppose (and hence not to assert) in discourse, will be assumed to be a fundamental task of context models.



*Model schemas*

As yet we have only fragmentary insight into the internal structure of mental models as representations in episodic memory. Maybe mental models of situations, events, actions and processes are quite different; maybe there are cultural and even personal differences in the way people represent their interpretations of events or their plans for future action. Despite these possible variations, however, it may be assumed that the structure of mental models is not arbitrary. As is the case for memory in general, mental models are probably organized by a limited number of fixed categories that make up an abstract form or “schema,” a *model schema*.

Since we are daily engaged in, witness, hear or read about many experiences or events, it is very unlikely that we need to design mental models from scratch in each situation. We are probably able to understand most events in terms of previous learned categories of a model schema, and thus process the relevant information as quickly as necessary, often within seconds or fractions of seconds. Of course, this also means that we are able to define “relevance,” e.g., in terms of specific selection criteria for perception/attention or further processing.

In their review of the literature on “situation models,” Zwaan and Radvansky (1998) emphasize the multidimensionality of models, and specifically focus on the following five “dimensions” of situations: time, space, causation, intentionality and protagonist. I would suggest, however, that apart from spatiotemporal Setting and Protagonists, we need Events (and their relations, such as causation) and/or Actions, which in turn need analysis in terms of intentions: Intention and Causation are not, as such, independent categories of events or situations; they become relevant when readers want to understand and explain actions or events. Obviously, mental models of natural events do not feature an Intention category.

Because the vast majority of experiments on discourse comprehension use stories as materials, much of the experimental literature on event or situation models is on the role of causation in modeling situations when understanding discourse. This shows that, apart from theory, we need empirical evidence on the correct “parsing” of the way people understand situations and discourse about such situations, and then more specifically construct or understand communicative situations. Below and in the chapters of *Society and Discourse* I focus on these and other categories or dimensions of context models.

It should be stressed at this point that our analysis of the internal organization of mental models is framed in terms of schemas and their categories, and not in terms of network structures, links, and the strength of such links – a representation that might be closer to the neurological basis of mental models, but about which I have nothing to say here (see the literature on

connectionist – parallel distributed – processing and its application on discourse comprehension, e.g., Golden and Rumelhart, 1993; see also the contributions in Van Oostendorp and Goldman, 1999).

It is also likely that somehow such situation categories show up in the way we write or tell about personal experiences and other events, for instance in the “case structure” of the meanings of sentences (Fillmore, 1968) or the global meanings of personal stories (Labov and Waletzky, 1967). Thus, we often find such categories as Time, Place, Participants in various roles, Action or State of affairs and so on, as we also do in the semantic structure of propositions. A schema with such categories applies to many events or experiences if we are able to strategically adapt it to the multitude of variants that events may have. Conversely, such a schema also allows us to search, find and activate old models more efficiently, and to abstract from models in one or more categories (such as the events occurring in one period, or in one place, or with one person, or belonging to a more general action or event and so on).

Such abstractions are also crucial in the organization of episodic memory and hence in all forms of recall. Thus, given such an event structure for mental models, we are able to strategically search for our experiences of yesterday, our vacation in a specific country or our recent interactions with a close friend, and selectively remember other bad experiences when we are depressed or good experiences when we are feeling optimistic.

This organization of our episodic memory also plays a role in the process of being reminded – the memories that are triggered when we read about an event (Schank, 1999). That is, model schemas are useful not only for organizing our daily experiences, understanding discourse or telling stories, but also for when we need to search for and retrieve our “personal memories,” that is, “old” mental models.

### *Modeling everyday life*

We have assumed above that it is not only the way we interpret or plan discourse that is represented in mental models, but also, more generally, all our personal experiences as they are represented in episodic memory. We can make a crucial step further along this line of thinking and assume that our everyday life, as a sequence of lived experiences, is a complex structure of mental models, which we may simply call *models of experience* (or *experience models*). This complex structure of our everyday life may be organized in many ways, but it seems plausible that these personal experiences are structured by such basic experiential categories as time (periods), locations (e.g., cities we have lived in), participants (e.g., people we have lived or worked with), causality (causes, conditions, consequences), level (micro and

macro events), salience (what is more or less important) and relevance (what is most useful in our everyday lives), among other dimensions.

There is however another, fundamental, aspect that needs to be dealt with. The experiences of our lives are continuous as long as we are conscious: From the moment we wake up in the morning until we fall asleep (or lose consciousness) we are involved in one long, continuous sequence of “happenings.” This *continuous* sequence is interpreted, however, as a sequence of *discrete* experiences that we can recall and relate as more or less separate units (Newtson and Engquist, 1976; Zacks, Tversky and Iyer, 2001).

Mental models are again the ideal theoretical candidates for such discrete representations of otherwise continuous experiences. Thus, one strip of activity may be interpreted and represented as “I am having breakfast” and another as “I am coming home from work,” or, at a more global level, as “I am now on vacation in Mexico.” Being conscious about ourselves, about what we are doing, observing or experiencing, means – among other things – that we are constructing and updating mental models that interpret, represent and store such experiences.

Note, though, that although much of the classical psychological literature on schemas suggests that we interpret event sequences “top-down” in terms of pre-established schemas, there is also much “bottom-up” processing (Kintsch, 1998), for instance, on the basis of the perceptions of “lower-level” movement properties such as essentially “bursts” of change (Martin, Tversky and Lang, 2006). Recent work using neuroimaging techniques to monitor brain activity during narrative comprehension shows that there is a burst of brain activity when new events (or new models) are being formed during comprehension (Speer, Zacks and Reynolds, 2006).

Although such a technique does not enable us to pinpoint the precise cognitive “content” of such neural activity, it does seem to confirm that narrative comprehension is based on some kind of “segmentation” or on the construction of some kind of (new) units, such as events. Strictly speaking, these are not discourse or narrative units, such as clauses, phrases and sentences, or narrative categories such as Complication and Resolution, but underlying semantic or cognitive units of event representation or model structure. The same method may also be applied in monitoring dynamic context models and their ongoing changes, for instance, of setting, participants, roles, goals or intentions during the participation in a communicative situation.

That is, although knowledge about intentions (as schematic mental models of action) does play a role in the understanding of action, especially in familiar actions, perceptual features of conduct may also be used to understand action. This and other aspects of processing, however, need to be

attended to in the more specific processing assumptions for the execution of context construction strategies. It is crucial at this stage that mental models of everyday life feature Intention and Goal (or Purpose) categories that define and execute planned or observed conduct as meaningful, that is, as action(s) in the first place. I shall come back to this notion of “intention” below, because it is crucial in context models too.

### *Everyday situations, experiences and routines*

Although each situation in everyday life, as well as its interpretation in models of experience, is strictly speaking unique (if only by the unique time parameter of its Settings), many are so similar that they become *routines*. Thus, despite the uniqueness of and variation in the individual events and actions in our everyday life, routines provide the necessary order in such experiences, so that we need not attend to what we understand and do at each moment with all our mental resources, and may focus attention on what is really new, interesting or relevant. Indeed, most people most of the time are engaged in situations they have “lived” before many times: Depending on different cultures and social conditions, these may involve such daily routines as, e.g., getting up in the morning, body care (washing, etc.), getting dressed, having something to eat (breakfast), going to work or doing work at home, engaging in a sequence of work routines, going home, eating, leisure activities and going to sleep.

A routine may be cognitively defined as an experience model with a more or less fixed schematic structure and more or less fixed “contents”: same location, participants (and/or roles), action and goals. A routine is experienced as repeatedly “doing the same thing,” for instance, at various times in the day or at regular intervals – each day, each week, etc. Routines are generalizations or abstractions from specific experience models, and, since they are personal, they are also stored in episodic memory.

However, since many of them are shared by many other people in the same culture, large parts of these “general experience models” have become part of sociocultural knowledge in the forms of “scripts” (Schank and Abelson, 1977). This knowledge may be presupposed in everyday interaction and talk, and, in fact, as routine experiences they are seldom objects of storytelling, but only the background for special, interesting complications. And as socioculturally shared knowledge they also are normal conditions for interaction: not only do *we* do what we normally do in such situations, but also we expect *others* to do so, thus facilitating interaction.

As is the case for general sociocultural knowledge, routines may be activated and applied to the production or interpretation of new experiences or to solve ongoing complications or “troubles.” And because they are largely

“prefabricated” and quickly activated, the processing of routine experiences may be highly automatized: we only need marginal self-monitoring and control to execute them. Everyday *problem solving*, then, especially pertains to those routines where some element is not according to personal or social routine schemas, e.g., when one oversleeps in the morning, the shower does not work, there is nothing to eat, one has lost one’s job, the road to work is blocked and so on.

Many of our daily communicative experiences are also routines: we very often, even daily, speak with the same people (partner, children, friends, colleagues, shop assistants, etc.), and engage in the same genres requiring similar communicative conditions, such as informal conversations at home or at work, service encounters in shops and various kind of professional encounters at work (see also Pickering and Garrod, 2005). Whereas the sociology of everyday life needs to spell out the details of such daily experiences and communicative events, a cognitive approach should detail how context models may be generalized or abstracted to form *routine contexts*. Thus, each day, facing the same daily communicative goals and conditions, people activate the same routine contexts, allowing them to focus on what is currently unique, important and relevant, such as unique contents, an interesting story or a specific request, or what is problematic or troublesome in the communicative event: misunderstandings, conflicting goals or interests, and so on.

### *Experience models are dynamic*

Since the events of everyday life are literally “ongoing,” mental models of them must be *dynamic* and not merely static representations: time, place, people, relations between people, as well as their properties and actions, are constantly changing during an experience. That is, during my vacation in Mexico, I constantly update my personal mental model that globally represents my vacation experiences.

### *Self*

Personal experiences are typically characterized by some kind of representation of Self: they are *my* unique personal experiences, even when partly shared with others. It therefore seems plausible that a central category of the schema that organizes such models must be the Self. The Self, however, is one of the most complex notions of contemporary cognitive science, related to self-awareness, embodiedness, self-representation, subjectivity and consciousness, and our personal experiences as stored in episodic memory (Conway, Singer and Tagini, 2004; Metzinger, 2003). Thus, as a

central participant of the experiences represented in episodic memory, and from whose perspective these events are experienced in the first place, I may gradually derive a more general and abstract representation of my-self, an “identity,” for instance in the form of a self-schema (Barclay and Subramaniam, 1987; Markus, 1977).

This identity is also an interactional accomplishment, because in many explicit and implicit ways co-participants provide ongoing definitions and evaluations of “me” during conversation and other discourses. As is the case for other general knowledge, so too may this general, abstract Self be instantiated or “applied” again in new experiences. The same is true for the different roles associated with this Self, such as my being a man, a professor, Dutch and so on. Of course, the instantiated Self that ongoingly represents the events in which “it” participates, is neither always the same, nor static.

Yet, even if Self may be associated with many role-identities, and even if instantiated Selves may be as dynamic as the models they are part of (the details of my self-representation in an interaction may change continuously), there is also some form of *sameness*, *stability* or *continuity* that allows people to experience these various identities as being constitutive of, and embodied in, one and the same person, and as more or less stable across time and events, that is, as a “constant” with a specific name.

As soon as this integrity of Self breaks down, mental disorders may result, as is the case in schizophrenia, multiple personality disorder and related disorders. Interestingly, it has been found that people may lose most of their episodic memories, and hence their experience models, but they still know who they are in general terms, even when their general knowledge in “semantic” memory is also affected. This suggests that at least one form of “minimal” Self is very deeply embedded in our cognition and brain, resistant even to extended brain damage (for details, see, e.g., Damasio, 2000; Gallagher, 2000; Gallagher and Shear, 1999; Metzinger, 2003; Tulving, 2002).

Even from this very succinct summary of properties of the Self, we may conclude that such a Self needs to play a central role in the *self*-representation of communicative situations by the participants, that is, in context models. Indeed, interestingly, many forms of Self have been defined explicitly in linguistic terms, namely in terms of the use of the first person singular deictic expression “I” as *self*-referring to the speaker, and hence to the Self of the current communicative act. The same is true for the relation between Self, personal experiences and narrative (for details, see *Society and Discourse*). Finally, Self also plays a fundamental role in all forms of discursive and interactional reflexivity, deictic expressions and so on, as we shall see in the [next chapter](#).

### Contexts as mental models

In the broader framework of this theory of mental models of events and personal experiences, the cognitive theory of contexts comes as an elegant byproduct: *contexts are a special kind of mental model of everyday experience*, as defined. There is nothing strange or counterintuitive about defining contexts as mental models, because communicative events or discursive interactions *are* forms of everyday experience like any other. That is, the way we experience, construe, define or interpret what is happening when we participate in a communicative event is not fundamentally different from the way we do so for other events. The only distinct feature of context models is that they represent verbal communication or interaction. *And in the same way as more general models of experience or interaction organize how we adapt our actions to the social situation or environment, context models organize the ways our discourse is strategically structured and adapted to the whole communicative situation.*

Context models have the properties of other models of everyday experiences as described before, such as (for an earlier account of context models, see Van Dijk, 1999):

- They are stored in episodic memory.
- They are personal, unique and subjective.
- They are based on and instantiate sociocultural knowledge and other socially shared beliefs.
- They may feature opinions and emotions about the ongoing event or its actions and participants.
- They represent specific (communicative) events.
- If they are interesting they may serve as the basis of future discourses: we may tell stories about our earlier communicative experiences.
- They are dynamic and ongoingly updated during interaction, speaking/writing, listening/reading or communication.
- They control ongoing verbal (inter)action and adapt it to its social environment.
- They are formed or updated by a strategic interpretation of current events, as well as by the instantiation of general, socially shared, knowledge about such events.
- They may be the basis for generalization, abstraction and decontextualization in the formation of more general knowledge about discourse and communication. That is, we may *learn* from our communicative experiences.
- They are organized by schemas and categories that define various kinds of communicative event, such as genres.

These are quite general properties, but they already explain many things we want context models to do as accounts of the ways language users are able to adapt their text and talk to the communicative events or situations in everyday

life. Thus, our concept of context models explains, for instance, the following properties of discourse and communication that cannot be explained by theories that assume that discourse is directly controlled by social situations, as is the standard (sociolinguistic) theory:

- Speaker/writers and recipients by definition have different models of the same communicative event; such differences may lead to negotiations about the shared aspects of their context models, but also to misunderstanding and conflict.
- The information in context models may easily be combined with that of other mental models. This allows them to bridge the well-known gap between social structure, on the one hand, and interaction–discourse, on the other. In other words, context models are the interface between society, situation and discourse.
- Since context models control (at least part of) discourse production and comprehension, and since they can be combined with other mental models, they also explain how the same personal model of an event (such as a personal experience, or a public event) is usually expressed by different discourses in different social situations. Typically, they explain how news articles of the same event in different newspapers will always be different when written by different journalists, and that we cannot possibly tell “the same story” twice in different circumstances, and for newspapers, with different constraints on reporting.
- Context models explain in detail the processes of recontextualization and how participants are able to actively manage such changes – for instance, how they retell what they have read in the newspaper or seen on TV in subsequent conversations.
- Context models are the basis of an adequate theory of genre, because many properties of different genres are defined not so much in terms of verbal properties of discourse as in contextual terms.
- Context models allow us to present one unified theory of everyday experiences and consciousness, including the Self in various speaker and/or recipient role-identities in such models.
- Context models are the basis of theories of style and register, that is, of the situationally variable properties of discourse.
- Context models integrate the social and the cognitive properties of communicative events, such as participant roles on one hand, and participant intentions and knowledge and beliefs, on the other.
- Context models provide a theory of relevance that is coherent with contemporary cognitive theorizing. Context models provide the appropriate conditions of illocution and hence are the basis of a cognitively explicit theory of speech acts.



We may conclude from this (incomplete) list of the kind of things context models may explain that we are dealing with a very rich and productive theoretical concept. As is the case for the concept of mental models in general, the notion is almost *too* powerful, and it is therefore important to carefully formulate its details, constraints, structures and functions. It is one thing to claim that context models control many properties of discourse, such as their style, and quite another to formulate the exact mental steps or processes by means of which such control effectively takes place.

Specifying the precise control steps of the ongoing, dynamic model of a simple conversation may involve a very long and complex sequence of local moves and global strategies, as well as many interactions between this “pragmatic” dimension of discourse and the semantic and formal dimensions.

For instance, observation of the social situation may lead (via many steps of social understanding of events and situations) to the construction of the *relevant* (see below for this notion of relevance) properties of the setting, our interlocutor, the ongoing action and so on. These and other interpretations will become part of the context model of the current communicative situation, and these representations will, in turn, control the more or less “formal, polite and respectful” style of our contributions to the conversation, such as constraints on the lexicon, speech acts, interaction strategies, pronouns, forms of address, honorific titles, metaphors or other semantic properties related to politeness and showing respect.

All this we know from sociolinguistics and pragmatics, but it still remains to be described, in much more detail, how we get from participation in a social situation to a mental model of such a situation, how the relevant properties of such a situation are selected, how a context model of these relevant properties is constructed, and how this context model and its schematic categories finally operate at all levels of discourse production.

And beyond such a cognitive theory of context, we of course also need to embed it in a broader social and cultural theory of discourse and the ways it is being adapted to social and cultural environments. That is, context models are also the cognitive representations that integrate and combine *both* the personal and the sociocultural constraints on communicative events, and hence explain both the socioculturally shared, and the individual and unique properties of all discourse. Social and cultural approaches to discourse and language use are unable to describe and explain this important individual dimension of contexts and discourse.

In sum, an explicit theory of context models can describe as well as explain how our discourses are (produced as) situationally appropriate in ways current approaches are unable to account for. It goes beyond most current theories, which are basically deterministic or correlative (as expressed in statistical

terms) and hence unable to specify how “objective” aspects of social situations (e.g., gender, age, etc.) are related to properties of text and talk.

### **Properties of context models**

If context models are mental models stored, like all our personal experiences, in episodic memory, then they should have the same categorial structure as other personal experiences. However, this time the interaction involves communication, and hence participants who are speakers, writers, listeners and readers (in various communicative roles), and the local and global social acts consist of text and talk, speech acts or other verbal acts. But this is still quite general, so we need a much more detailed, theoretically sound and empirically warranted way to establish the kind of categories or structures that make up context models. Only then will we be able to say something on the ways these more detailed properties control detailed structures of discourse.

#### *Global and local contexts*

The theory of macrostructure, as well as much linguistic and psychological evidence, suggests that we can mentally represent and speak about events at various levels of generality and specificity (Van Dijk, 1980; Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983). We have also seen that experience models in our autobiographical, episodic memory may represent individual actions at the ongoing local level of experience monitoring, but also global events, situations or whole periods of our life, at the macro level (Zacks, Tversky and Iyer, 2001). From a processing point of view and because of the well-known resource limitations of working memory, not all levels of micro and macro structures are permanently attended to. Rather, in ongoing text and talk processing usually takes place at the local (micro) level, but with macro control in the background, for instance, in some kind of “long term working memory” – from which macro representations can be activated immediately (Ericsson and Kintsch, 1995).

The same macro–micro distinction may be applied to context models (Van Dijk, 2006). That is, language users may represent at the same time the current, local situation and its components (such as teaching a specific class today, responding to a question), and at the same time various higher levels of which the current action and situation is a constituent (teaching this class this semester, teaching at this university).

At each moment of talk one of these levels of social structure may be made relevant. Once it has thus been activated, such a level may influence the production of discourse structure. For instance, during his speech in the Iraq

debate in the House of Commons, Tony Blair at various moments needs to activate, as part of his context model, the institutional information that he is now speaking as Prime Minister (or as Labour leader), in parliament, or engaging in foreign policy. Such structural constraints – as he represents them subjectively – influence many of the properties of his speech, for instance the formal grammatical style, the ways he addresses the MPs, or the selection of topics that may or may not be discussed in such a debate.

Despite such contextual variation of the *situation hierarchy* involved, it may be the case there is some kind of “standard” level of ongoing awareness, context representation and interaction such as we know from perception and other cognitive domains (Rosch, 1978). This may be the case for socially and culturally defined and hence known *social practices* and *activity types* or *genres*, such as an informal conversation, a meeting, an interview, a doctor’s consultation or a class (see, e.g., Graesser, Millis and Zwaan, 1997). Such activity types enable us to segment, plan and recall discrete everyday interactional and communicative events. Thus, we usually plan, ongoingly control and remember specific discrete communicative events, such as <teaching a class> (which consist of other units), rather than sequences, such as <teaching a class, speaking to students and colleagues and working in the office afterwards>, that do not constitute “natural” higher level units.

These standard-level, “local” events are the situation, interaction and context types that will be focused on in this book. However, it should be emphasized that participants are able to represent such local or micro situations in everyday life as part of larger organizational or institutional contexts, especially in planning and recall (after years we remember having taught such and such a class, and at such and such a university, but not specific classes). That is, besides the ongoing contextual awareness of “now” teaching a class, we may occasionally activate awareness of our more general role as teacher, the setting of the university or even the social domain of Education. Similarly, Tony Blair speaking in parliament may need a context model with higher level (macro) actions such as Legislation or Foreign Policy, within the general domain of Politics.

As is the case for all our actions, thus, contexts are also continuously being organized in larger, macro-units, and these may also become relevant for local control as we shall see in the *next chapter*. This distinction between micro (agency) and macro (societal) structures is discussed as part of the sociology of context in *Society and Discourse*. However, at this point I need to stress that the relation between such micro- and macro- level structures – and their control of discourse – is necessarily construed, mentally, by the participants. That is, as I have stressed several times already: societal macrostructures cannot directly influence discourse or interaction.

*Context schemas and their categories*

It has been stressed that one of the crucial questions of context theory is what categories need to be postulated in such contexts, that is, what parameters of (local) communicative situations language users routinely attend to. I have assumed that such categories may have a global and a local level of representation. This is still quite general, however, and I should therefore set out a detailed account of the possible or necessary categories of context model schemata.

On the basis of earlier studies on context categories, the psychology of event and situation comprehension and the literature of mental models, I venture the following candidates as possible categories for a very simple context model schema:

- Setting: Time/Period, Space/Place/Environment;
- Participants (self, others);
  - communicative roles (participation structure);
  - social roles types, membership or identities;
  - relations between participants (e.g. power, friendship);
  - shared and social knowledge and beliefs;
  - intentions and goals;
- Communicative and other Actions/Events.

In other words, we need to examine how participants analyze and represent environments and social situations in general, because it is likely that in the construction of their subjective context models they use more general abilities of understanding that are crucial in their everyday life.

I attend in some detail to most of these categories in the social psychological, sociological and anthropological account of context in *Society and Discourse*, limiting myself here to issues relevant within a cognitive approach, that is, to aspects of mental representation and processing, such as the role of knowledge, intentions and goals of participants.

*Self as the central category of context models*

Context models as a specific type of experience models are by definition subjective. As is the case for all episodic experiences (see the studies in Baddeley, Conway and Aggleton, 2002), they represent how *I* represent my current surroundings, the situation in which *I* am now thinking, acting, speaking, writing, listening or reading. Whatever further social identities the participants may have, it is therefore crucial to represent their own *Self*, and

I shall assume that such is also the case for context models – as is the case for all experience models.

That is, context models are crucially *egocentric*, and we may thus assume that Self is the central, orienting category of context models. This category organizes the relations between Me (whether as Speaker, Recipient or another participant role) and other participants. It also applies to other context categories, such as “here” (the place where I am), action (what I am now doing), knowledge (what I now know), and Goals (what I want).

In discourse production, such an egocentric structure of context models is at the basis of the production of *deictic expressions* (such as *I, we, you, here, today, etc.*) – understood by the recipients because they know how speakers in general represent the communicative situation.

It goes without saying that if this Self (these Selves) is no longer functioning well, the context models will also be affected, and hence the discourses (and discourse interpretations) controlled by these models, as we know from, e.g., schizophrenic discourse (see, e.g., Alverson and Rosenberg, 1990; Rochester and Martin, 1979).

#### *Size constraints of context models*

For context models to be able to be formed, changed and updated online and in real time in everyday interaction and communication, they need to be relatively simple, as postulated above. Thus, we may assume participants to be represented roughly in the same way as we know from the schemas of person perception (see, e.g., Bierhoff, 1989; see also the discussion of the social psychology of episodes, persons, etc. in *Society and Discourse*), in this case adapted to the various communicative roles of participants. Thus, participants may be relevantly represented as members of social categories or groups, as being related in specific ways (such as relations of power or status differences), and as having specific knowledge and beliefs.

That is, communicative situations may be very complex, but participants need to reduce this complex information in terms of a few schematically organized categories so as to be able to apply contextual constraints in discourse processing in working memory. This means that only a few discursively relevant – but culturally variable – participant categories will be used to construct context models, such as gender, age, status or kinship, rather than height or weight.

The same is true for the representation of Settings (various kinds of time periods – seconds, minutes, etc. – or places), ongoing activities, goals or knowledge of participants. Where necessary, for instance, in the representation of action, participants are able to make macro-level abstractions, in order to organize complex situations and discourses, such as a long parliamentary

debate. A detailed discussion of the social and cultural constraints on such context models will be provided in *Society and Discourse*.

### Relevance

In line with previous work on context, I assume that context models represent what is *relevant* for the participants in a communicative situation. In this sense, a theory of context models implies a theory of relevance. However, my approach significantly differs from other approaches to relevance, such as that by Sperber and Wilson (1995), who initially define relevance as follows: “an assumption is relevant in a context if and only if it has some contextual effect in that context” (p. 122), adding other definitions afterwards. This is also the kind of definition I proposed in *Text and Context* (Van Dijk, 1977):<sup>1</sup> “a fact, and hence the knowledge of a fact, is important (or relevant) relative to a context or in general to a situation if it is an *immediate condition* for a probable event or action (or prevention of these) in that context or situation.”

Although in both definitions a conditional relationship is assumed between “facts,” Sperber and Wilson define it (more strongly) in terms of “effects,” thus focusing on the actual consequences of “relevant” facts, whereas my definition is in terms of conditions, and hence focuses on the relevant facts themselves. This allows weaker relations of relevance, such as enablement (possible or probable consequence instead of necessary consequence, as in causation). For instance, being hungry is no doubt a relevant (though not a necessary) condition for eating, but unfortunately for many millions of people in the world, such a condition does not have the “effect” (necessary consequence) of eating.

<sup>1</sup> It is not my habit to criticize authors for ignoring my work. After all, no author can know the whole literature, and I am sure I also unintentionally ignore many other studies that should have been cited. But in this case, and just for the record, I should make a modest exception, deliberately in a footnote few people will read anyway, because during the presentation of my recent work on context in lectures, as well as in earlier versions of this book, it was suggested by several people that I should refer to the seminal study of Sperber and Wilson. Of course, I had read that book, but its study of relevance and context is quite different from my own current approach. The ironical fact is that when just now I reread portions of my own earlier 1977 book on text and context, I was struck by the similarity of some of the ideas in that old book with those of Sperber and Wilson, who, however, do not cite my 1977 study. The same is true, incidentally, for other formal studies on the semantics and pragmatics of discourse of the last decade. Obviously the 1977 book shows that I am not a logician, and it has many other imperfections, but many of the model theoretic ideas on discourse semantics and pragmatics that have since been formulated in other studies had already been expounded in this book. The major difference with my current approach to context is that I now take a much broader, multidisciplinary approach, and define contexts in terms of mental models on the basis of work in psychology of the last decades, including my own earlier work with Walter Kintsch (Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983) – a book that has had much influence in psychology, but which, like many other relevant psychological studies, is also ignored by Sperber and Wilson. This is one of the reasons why Sperber and Wilson’s book on relevance is hardly a “cognitive,” but rather an (interesting) formal, philosophical study.

In other words, properties of situations may be relevant for following situations even when they do *not* have the (normal, desired, etc.) consequences.

We shall see later that the same is true for contexts: given their interpretation of the current communicative situation, language users may notice the absence of specific discourse properties (a topic, a politeness form, etc.) that they would normally expect in similar contexts. Hence, in a theory of relevance and context, we should carefully examine the direction of “fit” or of conditionality between “relevant conditions” and “relevant consequences.”

In my 1977 book I also distinguish between, on the one hand, *semantic* relevance, that is, relevance of knowledge (beliefs, etc.) necessary for discourses to be meaningful, and, on the other, *pragmatic* relevance, that is, conditions that influence its appropriateness, such as the felicity conditions of speech acts. Although Sperber and Wilson’s approach is usually categorized as “cognitive,” also by themselves, their general argument is more formal and abstract than psychological and empirical. They make no reference to the vast literature on discourse processing, very few references to the literature on memory, and no claim about the kind of mental representations of contexts or relevance. They define a context as a “psychological construct” (p. 15), as I do, but do so only in the *formal* terms of a “set of premises,” as a “subset of the hearer’s assumptions about the world, that affect the interpretation of an utterance.” It is, however, not explained where and how such assumptions are represented mentally, or by what processes such a representation influences interpretation – or production of discourse, for that matter. Also, they do not propose any theoretical ideas about the *structures* of context – which most certainly cannot be a (vast) unstructured list of propositions, as shown above. Where relevant (*sic!*) for a theory of language, their work especially provides a more abstract, formal contribution, and hardly a psychological theory of context and contextual influences on discourse production and understanding.

In my theory of context, relevance is a notion that is defined by the very notion of context itself, namely in terms of the cognitive process of constructing a context model on the basis of data from the interpretation of a situation guided by a socioculturally acquired and shared schema of the kind of categories that define such contexts, and by previous communicative experiences (old context models).

Thus, in a way that is similar to the way people are able to understand an infinite number of (possible) sentences or discourses on the basis of a grammar and rules of discourse, they are able to understand a (theoretically) infinite number of social situations. What is “communicatively relevant” in such situations is the kind of information that fits in a context model and is socially, culturally shared categories.

Thus, again we find that attention may be paid to communicative role and social categories or properties, such as “age” or “power” of addressees, in

many forms of conversation, rather than, say, the size of their noses or the color of their shirts. Of course we are able to perceive and interpret these personal or social properties of the *social* situation, depending on a variety of other conditions, but these properties of addressees are not included in the context model of the *communicative* situation, because we know by experience that they are not the kind of situation characteristics that control the structures of discourse. This also shows that context models are not the same as more general experience models or general models of situations or environments.

The same is true for the relevance of shared or new knowledge and the goals of the participants – categories that control many aspects of text and talk. In sum, the conventional schematic structure of contexts, their categories and the current and dynamically changing contents of these categories define what is now relevant for the participants.

### Goals and intentions

If contexts are mental models of social or communicative situations then at first sight it may seem strange (circular, redundant) also to include “cognitive” elements in such mental models. Yet, a moment’s reflection shows that communicative situations not only feature information about settings, participants and their actions, but must necessarily also represent such things as the participants’ intentions, purposes, goals, knowledge and possibly other “mental” properties.

Indeed, many theories of human action, interaction, self-representation and discourse understanding, among others, are formulated in terms of *goals* (Bower, Black and Turner, 1979; Conte and Castelfranchi, 1995; Ford, 1992; Graesser, Singer and Trabasso, 1994; Montefiore and Noble, 1989; Pervin, 1989; Schank and Abelson, 1977; Tracy, 1991; Zacks, Tversky and Iyer, 2001).

The same is true for the notion of *intention*, which has generally been defined in the philosophy of action as crucially constituting action, that is, as the social “meaning” of behavior or conduct (Danto, 1973), but which at the same time has become one of the more problematic notions in philosophy, psychology and the social sciences, and has generated a considerable literature (Brand, 1984; Bullock, 1991; Cohen, Morgan and Pollack, 1990; Gillett and McMillan, 2001; Zelazo, Astington and Olson, 1999). In the literature on discourse comprehension and situation models, intentions and goals of action always have played an important role (see, e.g., Bower, Black and Turner, 1979; Zwaan and Radvansky, 1998).

In work on conversation and interaction, intentions – and mental representations in general – are often ignored, e.g., while deemed to be



publicly inaccessible (see the discussion in Bruner, 1981; Heritage, 1991; Jayyusi, 1993; Schegloff, 1996; see also the special issue 8(1) of *Discourse Studies* (Van Dijk, 2006) on discourse, cognition and interaction, especially the paper by Duranti, 2006).

Simplifying a long theoretical debate, the concept of intention is used here only in the sense of intentions-of-actions, and not as the intentionality-of-thoughts, that is, as being-aboutness (Searle, 1983). In many ways it is equivalent to the concept of “plan,” although in practice “plan” is a notion used more for complex, more distant actions, whereas intentions are co-incident with, or immediately precede, ongoing local action at the micro-level of analysis. In both cases, however, I define intentions as (parts of) mental models. Intending an action is constructing a mental model of an ongoing or future fragment of conduct. And, conversely, conduct only has meaning, and can only be interpreted as such, when it is associated with, or is being attributed, such a “meaning” in the sense of a mental model. Thus, sleeping or unconscious people can “do” something, but not engage in intentional conduct, that is, in (inter)action. People normally know what action they intend to perform by engaging in some form of conduct. But this is different for co-participants who must interpret observed conduct as a specific action, whether or not as intended by the agent.

Since conduct may be ambiguous (a raised hand might be a symbol of a greeting or a threat), observers may make mistakes, or ask what actors “mean.” This is more or less the same for discourse as it is for action in general.

For interaction in discourse and talk to be possible at all, participants need to represent the intentions of the other participants as well as their own. It has been shown that children acquire such an ability to “read the minds” of the other participants at a very early age (see the debate generated by the target article of Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne and Moll, 2005; see also Tomasello, 1999b). Given this empirical evidence, we may conclude that the same is true for goals: interaction and discourse presupposes that participants know their own goals and have plausible hypotheses about those of the others. Conduct may be ambiguous, and people’s models of the intentions of other participants are therefore interpretations that may be misguided.

Note that intentions are different from *goals*, which are in my definition the same as *purposes*, namely mental models of actions and their wanted consequences. Thus, I may intend to read the newspaper and my goal is to get information or opinions on recent events. In principle I have control over my own actions – as represented in the mental model of an intention – but I do not always control their consequences, which may depend on other factors. The realization of my goals is contingent on the state of the world and the activities of other people, whereas the realization of my actions only depends on my abilities and the absence of constraints.

As we also know from classical speech act theory, one of the fundamental appropriateness conditions of many speech acts is that the speaker *intends* to do such and such, as is the case for promises, and other speech acts (Burkhart, 1991; Searle, 1969). This means that in order to understand an utterance as a speech act, language users need to reconstruct the communicative intention of the speaker, and in order to do so, they need to engage in various strategies (Bosco, Bucciarelli and Bara, 2004).

In psycholinguistics, “intentions” are defined as the starting point of speaking (Levelt, 1989; Nuyts, 1993), as is also the case for intentions defined as mental models in the psychology of text processing in general, and of pragmatics in particular (Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983).

Though intentions are often ignored in conversation and interaction theories (which prefer to focus on the sequential organization of action itself rather than on hypothetical mental states or processes), there can be little doubt that the very notions of action and interaction and hence of conversation do not make sense without intentions as defined here. It is certainly true that actions in conversation are occasioned by the actions of previous speakers (Schegloff, 1996), but such is only true when we limit our analysis to a more superficial study of action sequences (or conduct) themselves: obviously previous actions can only be reacted to after they have been *understood* by the next speaker, and it is such a *mental* understanding that is the condition for the formation of the intention of the current action.

This may be a fast and largely automatized process, but that does not mean that cognitively it does not take place. Indeed, pauses, hesitation phenomena, false starts and related breaks in the fluency of talk are also to be interpreted as manifestations of “ongoing thought” within and between turns at talk. There is more direct evidence when speakers actually refer to such ongoing thoughts in conversation, e.g., when they say things like “Oh, I thought you meant . . .”

The notion of intention is relevant for a theory of context because as a speaker or recipient I need to construct myself as intentionally engaging in a communicative act, such as conducting a conversation, writing a news report for a newspaper, or reading a fragment of a textbook. That many of the aspects of communicative acts are “automatized” and barely conscious only means that mental models are partly processed in the background, as is also the case for context models.

Once we use the notion of experience model or context model, we no longer need separate models for intentions or plans: context models have intentions as their constituents, namely as “mental” properties of participants – in the same way as being a professor is a social property of a context model when I speak or understand in that role.

## Contextual knowledge management

Shared sociocultural knowledge is a crucial condition for the production and understanding of discourse. Much contemporary cognitive psychology and Artificial Intelligence are geared towards making explicit this relation between discourse and knowledge during discourse processing (see references given above). Knowledge plays a crucial role in communication and has a central function in context models, so knowledge will be examined in more detail than other (“cognitive”) aspects of context models – some of which, such as ideologies – are dealt with in the social psychology of context in *Society and Discourse*.

In the theory of context, I need to attend to a more specific aspect of the role of knowledge in discourse: In order to be able to speak or write appropriately, language users need to have beliefs or knowledge about the knowledge of the recipients. Thus, if they represent the relevant properties of the communicative situation, they not only need to model the social properties of themselves and other participants, but also what the others already know. If speakers had no hypotheses, no running “knowledge model” of what the recipients knew at any moment, they might constantly repeat the same things they want to communicate, or they might talk about things the recipients were unable to understand because they presupposed knowledge the recipients did not have. Indeed, communication – in the very traditional sense of transmitting new knowledge – would be impossible or pointless if we had no idea about what our recipients knew already.

I therefore assume that context models feature a central device that regulates the (non) expression of knowledge in discourse. Since this device plays such a fundamental role in context models, I have introduced a special technical abbreviation for it: *the K-device* (Van Dijk, 2003). At each moment in a discourse, the K-device takes as input the current knowledge of the speaker – as represented in mental models about events, and as more general, socially shared knowledge of the world, etc. – and “calculates” how much of this knowledge is already shared by the recipients.

The *overall epistemic strategy* in discourse production is that shared knowledge need not be expressed, and hence may remain implicit – either because the recipient is believed to have such knowledge already, or because the recipient is assumed to be able to infer such knowledge from already existing knowledge.

Such shared knowledge is sometimes called the “Common Ground” of speakers and recipients (Clark, 1996; Krauss and Fussell, 1991; Pickering and Garrod, 2004); there are, of course, as many types of “Common Ground” as there are types of shared knowledge, and so we need to examine these approaches to “Common Ground” in more detail below.

The theoretical and empirical problem is *how* the K-device actually operates. How do speakers know what recipients know? Obviously, we cannot assume that the huge knowledge set of recipients is part of the K-device of the (relatively simple) context models of speakers (and if it were, we would have no way of explaining how it got there in the first place without previous communication).

Hence, in accordance with a strategic approach to discourse processing (Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983), we must assume that speakers use fast – but imperfect – strategies to arrive at their hypotheses about what recipients know already. Of course, speakers may make mistakes in deriving their hypotheses about what recipients know, and assert or repeat something already known. Since such hypotheses (i.e., whether or not something should be asserted or asked) need to be formulated at each point in discourse, at least for each proposition or speech act, such hypotheses need to be derived in fractions of seconds. This in turn means that they cannot be extremely complex. A central question for a theory of the K-device, therefore, is what the nature is of the operating strategies of this device.

### *Personal knowledge*

In order to form a preliminary, informal idea about the nature of these strategies, imagine a communicative event in which I tell a friend about a health problem I have had. On the next occasion we meet I may still have the same health problem (hence I continue to know my own health problem), but in that case it would be inappropriate to tell “the same thing” to my friend again, because I know that she knows because I told her recently. However, since she might have forgotten, especially if our previous meeting was some time ago and the health problem a minor one, I may *remind* her of the health problem, by saying something like “You remember I told you about. . .” How do I know in this second communicative event that my friend knows about the health problem – a “personal” fact that cannot be inferred from general, socioculturally shared knowledge? Obviously because I remember I told her. In cognitive terms this must mean that I have access to the “old” context model that represents our previous encounter, including at least the upshot (semantic macrostructure) of what I told her during that encounter.

This communication problem of personal knowledge management can be handled by the application of a simple general strategy, such as:

K1: Assume that recipients know what I told them before.

This general strategy applies not only to the contents of previous context models (previous communicative encounters), but of course also and a fortiori to the previous part of the ongoing discourse: in dynamic context

models “previous discourse” (propositions, acts, style, etc.) becomes a condition for the current state of the context. In fact, this is a very general strategy of relative interpretation for sequential discourse semantics: interpretation of each expression in a discourse is always relative to the world (situation, knowledge) construed by the interpretation of previous expressions. And since speakers/writers know this general strategy, they formulate each expression according to such a presupposition.

The more detailed processing corresponding to this general knowledge strategy would involve a search and activation of a previous context model with the recipient, analysis of the (macrostructures, main topics) of the content of the discourse communicated, and inferring whether the proposition I am now intending to communicate is part of that representation. Of course, context models in general are not always accessible, especially those of longer ago. If they are not, it may mean that I no longer remember whether I told the recipient, and in that case I have the option of simply assuming ignorance and asserting the proposition, or first asking the recipient a question something like “Did I tell you about...?”, if I do not want to make an inappropriate assertion.

Obviously, if what I now know is new information, and I know that I have not yet met the recipient and not communicated with him or her since I acquired the new information (a criterion that presupposes a time line in episodic memory), then no further search will be necessary beyond establishing that the moment the new knowledge was acquired happened after the moment I last communicated with the recipient.

Thus, for all *new, personal* knowledge the K-strategy is something like this:

K2: Assume that recipients do not know my personal knowledge that I have acquired since my last communication with them.

Again, the detailed process description of this strategy involves activation of “old” experience models, including context models, comparing the time categories of the experience in which I acquired the new knowledge and of the last context model(s) in which the recipient appears as a participant. The moment we have communicated knowledge to a recipient, this knowledge automatically becomes part of the shared Common Ground, and hence is no longer personal, but now interpersonal, knowledge, and can thus be presupposed in all further communication with the recipient.

Although the strategies as formulated here seem quite simple, and for theoretical reasons *should* be quite simple, this does not mean that we know all details of the actual processes involved, for instance, how context models and other (event) models and their properties (e.g., their Time category) are searched for, compared and partly activated. Nor do we know how “much” of

previous discourse is still accessible as part of old text/context models – surely not much more than the main topics, that is, their macrostructures and some specifically relevant details, as we know from traditional research on memory from texts. In the same way it is usually quite difficult after some time for people to attribute new knowledge to specific sources, to remember the details of what they told others in a conversation some time ago, or wrote in an e-mail.

### *Specific social knowledge*

Whereas the case of personal and interpersonal knowledge is relatively straightforward, and can be formulated in a fairly simple strategy based on (re)activation processes of experience and context models in episodic memory, what about other kinds of knowledge, and for people we do not know?

Thus, journalists (and many other writers) are daily confronted with the task of figuring out what their readers know even when they do not know these readers personally. Again, for simplicity's sake, it may be assumed that the basic strategy for the communication of *specific* public information (e.g., about news events) is quite similar to the one that applies in interpersonal communication:

K3: Assume that recipients know what we (e.g., the newspaper) told them before.

This means that the journalist needs to search for a previous context model in which she (or another journalist of the same newspaper) told readers about a particular concrete event; if such a context model can be found, then any information that was communicated before need not be given again.

Or, since readers may have forgotten, or not have read the newspaper yesterday or recently, the journalist may remind the readers with a variety of formulas, e.g., “As we reported yesterday...” The same is true when the journalist assumes that the readers have probably acquired the new knowledge via other media, for instance, very important, breaking news from television, radio or the internet. Of course, as is the case for our own e-mail messages, journalists may re-read previous news reports in order to re-activate old context models, and activate what has been reported before.

Since this is quite unlikely for new or breaking news, journalists – just like others engaging in conversation – need not laboriously search episodic memory simply because the new knowledge is tagged with a later time stamp than the latest communicative event, that is, the previous edition of the newspaper, as is the case for sharing “new” personal information in conversation. In that respect, the K-strategies for conversation, news reports and many other genres are quite similar. Only, for news reports the source of the old information need not be the current reporter, but may have been another

reporter; also, it will be relevant in the context model in that case that the writer-source is the newspaper as an institution.

### *General sociocultural knowledge*

The examples of personal and public communication all deal with *specific events*, and hence with personal or public mental models of such events. But what about the many kinds of *general* or *abstract* sociocultural knowledge we assume that recipients share? Thus, the journalist may report about new events in Iraq, and such news will usually not be assumed to be known to the readers. However, the journalist does presuppose that most readers know that Iraq is a country, what a president is, what an army and soldiers are, as well as a vast amount of other “general world knowledge,” as we also have seen in Chapter 1 for the example of the Iraq speech of Tony Blair in the UK House of Commons.

Again, the crucial question is: how do journalists know that the readers know such general things? Obviously the earlier strategy (“I have told them previously...”) does not usually apply here, because readers will already have acquired most of their general knowledge, e.g., from their parents, teachers, textbooks, TV or children books, often a long time before starting to read newspapers at all. Thus we need other strategies here, and these have a socio-cognitive nature, as is obvious for socially or culturally shared knowledge.

The strategy at play here is also quite simple, and can be formulated as follows:

K4: Assume that readers have the same sociocultural knowledge as I (we) have.

This strategy involves the notion of social sharing – the fact that the social knowledge journalists and readers have acquired is likely to be more or less the same in the same culture or community, which we may therefore call the Epistemic Community. Thus most educated adults – people who read newspapers – in most literate cultures know what countries, presidents and armies are, so that journalists can presuppose such knowledge in news reports.

There are of course *personal differences*, e.g., related to different levels of education or expertise, but it may be assumed that for most forms of public discourse, there is some kind of shared “base level” of presupposed “general” knowledge – which is higher for the quality press than for the popular press. This, however, is an issue of the sociology of knowledge and context we need to deal with later. My point here is only how speakers/writers are (mentally) able to represent the knowledge of their recipients in their context models of discourse production.

Obviously, the rule applies to different epistemic communities, and may involve knowledge that is more or less universal, cultural, national, or local, or shared by the members of particular groups, such as professionals and experts. Thus, journalists of the *New York Times* will presuppose not only the episodic (event) knowledge they have reported before, but also what they know educated US-citizens know more in general, and such “national” knowledge will be different from the national knowledge shared by the readers of *El País* in Spain. And what I presuppose most linguists to know in a paper or book on a linguistic topic is similarly assumed to be shared by the epistemic community of linguists. And so on for all epistemic communities – that is, communities that have their own, independent forms of learning.

These assumptions imply that just as context models need to represent the now relevant social identities of the speakers and recipients, so the knowledge associated with these identities becomes relevant, namely as the epistemic communities which supply the shared knowledge all members may presuppose in their discourse, as formulated in strategy K4.

Note also that whereas the knowledge of epistemic communities may be overlapping (many people in Spain know many specific things also known by people in the USA – and usually this is the case more than the reverse because of the dominance of US media and culture), other relationships between epistemic communities are inclusive. Thus, as a general (meta) strategy we may formulate the (nearly) redundant rule:

K5: Assume that recipients share the knowledge of all the more inclusive epistemic communities of which they are members.

This means that US psychologists are assumed to share the knowledge of their professional group, but at the same time the knowledge of people living in the US, as well as more general knowledge of western culture and universal knowledge. In other words, and rather trivially, by simple implication or inclusion, we share the knowledge of all the communities to which our own group belongs (see below for the discussion about the shared Common Ground of “nested” cultural communities; Clark, 1996). And these general rules of knowledge management are operated by the K-device of the context models.

We see that instead of assuming the impossible task of representing everything recipients know, speakers apply a few simple strategies based on their *own* knowledge, namely on what they have told the recipients before for specific knowledge, and what they share as members of epistemic communities for general knowledge. In other words, the well-known philosophical problem of Other Minds, applied to the problem of knowing what others know, is simply resolved by some practical strategies that are based on our own specific or general knowledge.



*Special cases*

These *general* strategies work for most practical purposes. For special cases specific strategies may be applied, for instance, when the speaker does not remember whether she has informed the recipients before, or when the general knowledge is rather specialized or new, in which case the recipients need to have the new information explained to them, as is the case for most new scientific or technological knowledge, or for information about relatively unknown peoples or countries. In these cases, such knowledge would not normally be presupposed, but would be the subject of reminders or explanations in the mass media, textbooks or other public discourse (for the role of presupposed knowledge in popularization discourse, and further references, see e.g., Calsamiglia and Van Dijk, 2004).

If we know or believe that the recipients are of a different epistemic community, we need special strategies for intercultural communication, for instance, by not presupposing what we believe is not known by the members of another community, which may lead to discursive strategies for giving reminders or explanations of “our” knowledge (for details, see the vast literature on intercultural communication, e.g., Di Luzio, Günthner and Orletti, 2001; Gudykunst, 2003, 2005; Kiesling and Paulston, 2005).

Again, the same overall strategy applies here, namely that the knowledge of the superordinate set (for instance, cultural knowledge shared by two different social groups) will again be presupposed. In other words, we need to explain only the more specific knowledge of the “lowest” or most specific epistemic group that we belong to and the recipients do not – as when I explain notions of linguistics to non-linguists.

Our discussion has shown that the strategies of the K-device presuppose that there are different kinds of knowledge, for instance, as organized by the scope of the epistemic communities and the process of acquisition and sharing: personal, interpersonal, group, nation, culture or humanity, each implying the knowledge of the next higher level. And each kind of knowledge will lead to different kinds of presupposition in discourse, possibly varying within the same discourse. Thus, in personal storytelling we will typically find all kinds of interpersonal, national and cultural knowledge being presupposed, whereas in international declarations we may assume that only the highest levels (broadest scope) of knowledge are being presupposed – although such declarations in turn presuppose intercultural elite group knowledge, e.g., of lawyers or diplomats. In other words, different discourse genres are also associated with different kinds of knowledge management, that is, with different contexts, as we also know from the role of learning from discourse, for instance in education or science popularization.

*The discursive relevance of knowledge*

The importance of the role of knowledge as a category of context models, as well as the strategies of the K-device, have fundamental consequences at all levels of the production and comprehension of discourse. We have already seen that the management of knowledge controls the production of speech acts such as assertions, and the same is obviously true for questions (when the speaker assumes the recipient has some knowledge she does not have). Similarly, “known” fragments of sentences or discourses may be presupposed, and may be signaled in special ways, for instance, by sentence order (topics in topic–comment structures) and preposed *that*-clauses (e.g., in a sentence such as “That Blair went to war in Iraq infuriated many of his own party members,” the first *that*-clause is assumed to be known to the recipient). We also have seen that doubts about whether or not recipients share some knowledge may be expressed by reminders or questions about such knowledge or about previous speech events. Finally, knowledge strategies are applied in the production and comprehension of pronouns, demonstratives, definite and indefinite expressions, and so on. In sum, many aspects of text and talk are thus shaped by the ways participants represent and manage (mutual) knowledge, as we shall see in more detail in the [next chapter](#).

*Knowledge and contextualism in philosophy*

In philosophy, the relevance of a contextual approach to knowledge has been emphasized especially by various directions of theoretical research in epistemology called “contextualism” (for detail, see Blaauw, 2005; Brendel and Jäger, 2005; Preyer and Peter, 2005). Although the arguments adduced in favor of contextualism vary with the respective authors, the main contention is that knowledge claims are context-dependent. Thus, the standards on which such claims are based may be more or less strict, depending on the knowledge community, so that, for instance, what would be accepted as knowledge (defined as “justified true belief”) in the informal contexts of everyday life, might not be accepted in a scientific context. This argument is especially relevant to counter well-known skeptical arguments according to which, strictly speaking, we can never be completely sure that a knowledge claim is true: after all, what we experience as real might be just a dream, an illusion or a clever construct of sophisticated extraterrestrials.

Some contextualists thus define “know” as an indexical expression, whose interpretation may vary with the person who uses it when attributing knowledge to others – a conception, however, that has little to do with the semantics of indexicals. Alternatively, knowledge is compared to scalar attributes, such as “large” or “heavy,” whose interpretations also vary with

the contexts of their use, even when, of course, “to know” is not scalar and as a verb behaves very differently from these adjectives. That is, contextual interpretations of knowledge claims do not depend, semantically, on different meanings or indexed referents of “to know,” but need to be related, pragmatically, to language users and communities, and their knowledge and epistemic standards.

Without entering this debate here, it may suffice to stress that in my framework not only are discourses that feature knowledge claims context-dependent, *all* discourses are. In this sense, contextualism – in linguistics, discourse studies and psychology – is as critical of traditional formalist approaches in linguistics as it is of abstract formalism in epistemology using context-free, invented examples that have little to do with the way words such as “know,” “believe” and “true” and their justifications are used in natural discourse.

One of the main theses of this book is that discourse is produced and interpreted under the control of mental context models. One of the components of these models is a knowledge device that controls the ways the personal or socially shared knowledge of the speaker (including their knowledge regarding the knowledge of the recipient) is managed so as to produce appropriate discourses or interpretations. Crucial in this management are strategies that for most discourses are based on the socially shared nature of the knowledge of interlocutors of the same knowledge community.

However, speech participants may be of different knowledge communities, each with its own criteria or standards for allowing its members to regard certain beliefs as knowledge, so that what may be “knowledge” for members of one community, may be false belief or simply ignored by members of another community. This also means that generally speaking knowledge need not be explicitly self-attributed (e.g., in the format “I know that *p*”) because such knowledge among members of the same community is presupposed in making an assertion *p*. An explicit use of “know” would be more appropriate in contexts in which speakers believe that (the recipients believe that) there is doubt about their knowledge (for an analysis of knowledge and the special uses of “know” in parliamentary debates, see van Dijk, 2003).

The situation is similar with “understanding.” Recipients interpret discourses – including those referring to knowledge – in terms of the mental model they ongoingly construe of the communicative situation, including the spatiotemporal setting, identity, roles or relations between participants, their intentions and current knowledge.

In sum, contextualist arguments apply to all language use, and the use of verbs such as “to know” is special only because the knowledge of participants is a crucial category in context models. It is on the basis of such context models that recipients may infer from an assertion *p* that the speaker knows

that  $p$ , and at the same time that the speaker believes that the recipient did not know that  $p$  (or had forgotten that  $p$ , and needed to be reminded that  $p$ , etc.). Such an approach also accounts for discourses in non-assertive contexts, such as questions, promises, commands and so on, in which “truth” is not applicable.

Similarly, the theory of context models offers more detailed insight into possible conflicts of communication, including those based on knowledge. Thus, what a speaker presupposes in discourse, assuming shared knowledge, may not be known by the recipient, for instance, because they are of different knowledge communities, with different knowledge sets or different criteria for assessing beliefs as knowledge.

A more detailed account of contextualism in epistemology and its relations to a contextual theory of discourse is outside the scope of this book. However, I surmise that many of its claims as well as its problems may be better handled in a theory that explains how expressions or implications of knowledge are controlled by mental context models.

### *Knowledge and Common Ground*

The strategies of context-controlled knowledge management in discourse processing presuppose earlier work on *Common Ground*, especially by Herbert Clark and his co-authors (see, e.g., Clark, 1996; Clark and Marshall, 1981; see also Pickering and Garrod, 2004). Clark’s theory of Common Ground (CG) was developed as part of a theory of language use defined as “joint action,” with face-to-face conversation as the “basic setting.” He refers to Stalnaker (1978; but see also Stalnaker, 1999, 2002) as the author who introduced the notion of CG, and to Schiffer (1972) for the notion of “mutual knowledge,” a notion also referred to in Van Dijk (1972); see also the brief discussion on the role of knowledge and presupposition in communication in discourse semantics and pragmatics in Van Dijk (1977).

Clark emphasizes that the study of language as joint action needs both a cognitive and a social approach, stressing that CG is essential in defining *context*, a notion he says has often been left undefined in other approaches to language use (p. 92).

Clark defines Common Ground as the “sum of the joint knowledge and beliefs” (p. 93) of participants, and a shared representation that accumulates during the “joint activities” of participants, and specifies its constituent parts as Initial CG (the background facts, assumptions and beliefs presupposed at the beginning of the activity), the Current State of the joint activity (what the participants presuppose to be the state of the activity at the moment) and Public Events so far (events the participants presuppose have occurred in public leading up to the current state) (p. 43). Common Ground includes

discourse representation as textual on the one hand and situational on the other. However, his notion of “situational representation” is broader than that in Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983), which only includes a representation of the properties of the situation talked *about*, that is, the “semantic” context, and not the participants, time, place and surroundings of the communicative or “pragmatic” context. One of the major problems of conversation, and of language activities in general, is coordination, that is, that addressees understand what speakers mean.

Note also that for other authors Common Ground and context definitions appear to overlap. Thus, both Stalnaker (1999) and Sperber and Wilson (1995) define contexts in terms of the shared knowledge of communication participants, thus reducing context to a (formal) notion of an undifferentiated and unanalyzed set of knowledge or beliefs. In this chapter I have extensively argued that contexts need to be modeled in a much more articulated way, and in terms of specific model structure schemas in episodic memory, of which (shared) knowledge is only one aspect.

One of the reasons for this reductionist treatment of context, in terms of sets of beliefs in these formalist approaches, is that “context” is often understood as a basis only for “indexed” interpretation, meaningfulness or truth, and not as a component of a theory of appropriateness. The boundaries between semantics and pragmatics are notoriously fuzzy, even in the most formal and philosophical studies. This is especially the case where meaning or reference depends on the “context,” that is, on current settings (time, place) and speech participants and their (mutual and other) beliefs.

More technically, various types of Common Ground are defined by Clark as in Lewis’ (1968) book on convention, namely, in terms of awareness of a shared “basis” (e.g., some event or situation): participants or members share knowledge about some fact, and reflexively so: they (have grounds to believe) that others know it too. Note that for each participant such representations are individual: I can have only beliefs about what others know, or about whether we share the same information, and such beliefs may of course be misguided. Coordination for joint action requires a shared basis for a piece of Common Ground: for instance, two participants both watch and see the same object (and see the other watching it).

Clark distinguishes between *communal* and *personal* Common Ground. The first is the kind of CG of *cultural communities* whose members share the same “expertise.” Such communities may be defined by nationality, residence, education, occupation, employment, hobby, language, religion, politics, ethnicity, subculture, cohort or gender (p. 103), and their members may share (more or less) knowledge about geography, history, values, jargon, ideologies, know-how and so on. These communities may be nested (New Yorkers are also North Americans, etc.). In our beliefs about the knowledge of others

we obviously distinguish between those who belong to the same community (insiders) and those who do not (outsiders). And both insiders and outsiders can be recognized by many kinds of natural and circumstantial evidence or explicit displays (appearance, clothes, talk, uniforms, etc.), so that we may infer what our likely CG is.

*Personal Common Ground* is based on joint personal experiences, such as joint perception or interaction, and relationships (between strangers, acquaintances, friends, etc.) may be defined with reference to the amount of personal common ground. Of course, personal CG often presupposes cultural CG: my personal knowledge about one of my students presupposes more general cultural knowledge about students.

### *Common Ground and context models*

It is assumed that context models feature a special K-device. For each moment in a discourse, this device establishes the Common Ground of the speaker and the addressee(s), and thus, together with the rest of the context model, the K-device is a coordination device for (joint) action and discourse. It calculates at each moment what sociocultural or personal knowledge addressees share with the current speaker. To link the relatively abstract theory of Common Ground with context models, we need to link it more explicitly to specific cognitive structures or representations. Thus, joint perceptions and experiences of participants need to be made explicit in (for instance) mental models in episodic memory, and in how such mental models are constructed, stored and retrieved. Similarly, personally shared knowledge presupposes old context models featuring information about previous conversations or messages when such knowledge was communicated. Speakers may refer to such context models with such conversational reminding moves as: “You remember I told you about this guy who. . . ?” And the many kinds of sociocultural (communal) CG need to be made explicit in many different kinds of knowledge representation in “semantic” memory: sharing a language, skills, values or geographical knowledge are very different kinds of CG.

We also need to know how such different kinds of socially shared “expertise” are activated and applied in current, ongoing interaction and discourse, and in context models in particular. As is the case for the construction of limited, simple context models on the basis of the potentially infinite information about the properties of a communicative situation, language users also must be able to limit the activation of the vast amount of sociocultural knowledge they share with others. For the interpretation of the (semantic) meaning of discourse, such shared sociocultural knowledge may be partly activated and inferences made, and then de-activated when it is no

longer topically relevant. Most of the work on Common Ground is, thus, geared towards the explanation of *semantic* understanding.

For the construction of context, and hence for *pragmatic* understanding, these strategies are different. Establishing and dynamically updating Common Ground in conversation, despite the strategies mentioned above, is a complex task. This is also why Pickering and Garrod (2004) argue that dialogue in general and updating Common Ground in particular must be based on less complex heuristics. Thus, speakers may routinely align with the mental models and discourse structures of the previous speakers. Also, context models need not constantly be built from scratch, but may be specifications of previous experience models already in place. Similarly, for the construction of mental models, in conversation language users may use large parts of the mental models and knowledge structures already activated in order to understand the previous speaker.

When Tony Blair speaks about Iraq all he needs to do in order to be able to refer meaningfully to Iraq and be understood is to activate the relevant geographical and political knowledge shared with the MPs. The same for his reference to British troops, and so on. It is the K-device of his context model that will at each moment calculate such presupposed knowledge using fast, practical heuristics. However, his speech needs to be not only meaningful, and hence (semantically) understood by the MPs, but also appropriate, and for that, as well as constructing and updating a Common Ground, he needs to construct a context model that construes himself as PM, leader of the Labour Party, British, and so on, and similar identities for the MPs, relations between him and the MPs, as well as goals, political attitudes and ideologies, and so on. This context model as a device permanently monitoring discourse production and understanding needs to be rich enough to control all relevant aspects of his speech, but not to feature so much (instantiated) information as to become unwieldy.

Thus, even more than for the construction of (semantic) mental models of events on the basis of CG, context models need more constraints on the selection of relevant CG information. Much more theoretical and empirical research will be necessary to spell out the detailed strategic processes of the way shared knowledge is applied in the production and understanding of meaningful and appropriate discourse. Within the framework of this book, we especially need to know more on the way CG is strategically established as part of the K-device of dynamically updated context models.

### *Other minds*

Context, Common Ground and mutual knowledge are related to the well-known philosophical issue of Other Minds: How do we know what others

know, think or feel, or whether they have a mind at all? (See, e.g., Avramides, 2001; Malle and Hodges, 2005.)

We shall not further explore this philosophical issue, but simply assume that social actors have the ability to model other social actors, as well as their mental properties, on the basis of a series of socially shared, interactional strategies such as making inferences from perceived action, making conclusions about self-descriptions of others, and making comparisons on the basis of self-perception (introspection).

As is obvious for discourse and context models, such representations of other minds are crucial conditions of all interaction, cooperation and discourse. Thus, the K-strategies are part of a series of strategies that infer what others know on the basis of what it means to belong to the same epistemic community. Although this strategy only holds for shared knowledge, there are other strategies that allow actors to make inferences from personal knowledge about the beliefs and feelings of others, and represent these also as part of their context models.

More than most other linguists, Tom Givón has explored the relations between language, discourse, mind and context. In his recent book, *Context as Other Minds* (Givón, 2005), he deals with a number of philosophical, cognitive and linguistic issues as part of an all-embracing theory of pragmatics: categories as prototypes, semantic networks, coherence and so on. As the title of his book suggests, the notion of “context” is pivotal in this pragmatic inquiry, and, citing Sperber and Wilson from the start, he also defines contexts as mental constructs, as I do throughout this book. Humans can make themselves understood because they assume that their addressees share their grammar and the lexicon, and more general sociocultural knowledge as well, as part of the current context.

As is the case for many other formal approaches, Givón’s too largely defines such contexts in terms of shared knowledge as Common Ground – and it is a matter of dispute whether we call such an inquiry semantic (because reference is involved) or pragmatic (because it is based on shared contextual knowledge). As context types, he thus distinguishes between the “shared generic network,” the “shared speech situation” and the “shared current text,” associated with semantic memory, working memory and episodic memory, respectively (p. 101).

He applies these notions to the description of, e.g., definite noun phrases and indexical expressions. Note, however, that in my model such interpretations are not based on the context model, but on the mental model (also shared in episodic memory) of the events or situation the discourse is *about* (see also Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983). Givón stresses that the mental model we have of the minds of the addressees shifts constantly – speakers need to update constantly what the hearer knows. Such insights are also relevant as



conditions of speech acts (S knows that H knows that. . .) (pp. 104–105). He finally embeds the theory of other minds in a broader evolutionary and neurological perspective. One of the valuable contributions of this book is the exploration of the relations between fundamental properties of language and discourse, such as coherence, on the one hand, and philosophical and psychological aspects of the mind, such as the shared knowledge associated with the “speech situation,” on the other.

Note though that apart from knowledge Givón barely explores the other dimensions of context as complex representation of communicative situations.

### Other cognitive categories?

If attributed and shared knowledge is fundamental in our interpretations of communicative situations, and hence in context models, the same may be true for other kinds of mental representations. For instance, is it equally crucial to know people’s social *attitudes* and *ideologies*? Do we adapt our talk and text to the social or political beliefs or orientation of the recipients?

We probably do. Feminists probably speak differently to other feminists than to non-feminists or anti-feminists. Presupposing the same or related attitudes on social issues or more general ideologies, for instance, fundamentally alters the rhetorical and argumentative structures of discourse: recipients need not be persuaded or convinced of the general norms, values or principles, and the same is true for their application to specific events or acts (for details, see Van Dijk, 1998).

Thus, language users need to know whether recipients belong to the same ideological groups. If they do, general arguments may be presupposed, and less explicit persuasion will be necessary. If not, language users can only presuppose and appeal to higher level ideologies, values or norms that are assumed to be shared by the recipients. For instance, pacifist feminists may appeal in that case to shared higher level feminist values in order to persuade non-pacifist feminists.

Obviously, in many forms of public discourse, and with ideologically mixed audiences, no such ideological presuppositions apply. In that case only higher level, shared sociocultural values may be presupposed in arguments. For instance, US citizens may have different attitudes about the war in Iraq, but may share a nationalist ideology, which allows pro-war advocates to make appeals to the “patriotism” of anti-war recipients. All this will also be true for the ideologically biased understanding of discourse.

Since ideologies profoundly influence many levels, structures and strategies of talk and text, it thus seems plausible that such ideologies are required as part of the cognitive properties of participants – that is, both about Self/ Speaker, and tentatively attributed to recipients.

Indeed, to understand the debate in the House of Commons on Iraq, I need to make explicit such fundamental contextual parameters as the ideologies of the participants – affecting not only (semantically) their judgments about Iraq, but also (pragmatically) who is (now) a proponent, opponent or dissident, a political categorization of participants that controls many aspects of the debate.

Finally, when dealing with knowledge, I exclusively discussed personal or social knowledge “of the world,” and did not pay specific attention to knowledge of (the rules, norms, etc. of) language, discourse and communication. Obviously, speaking appropriately presupposes speaking (more or less) “correctly,” and no doubt people’s context models are also based on such general linguistic knowledge as a fundamental resource (Blommaert, 2001). That is, if their linguistic knowledge is fragmentary, their contexts may be deficient because the general knowledge of the language includes the ability to adapt language use to social situations. This is typically the case for immigrants from other linguistic communities, who may therefore be discriminated in the job market or other domains of their everyday lives (see, e.g., Campbell and Roberts, 2007).

### **The acquisition of context model categories**

We know as yet little about the acquisition of context model categories. Developmental psychology and psycholinguistics have generally focused on the acquisition of grammar, rather than on the ways children learn to understand communicative situations, and in general the pragmatic rules of language use. Yet, from an early age children learn to adapt their talk to the communicative situation, and hence must be able to analyze at least some of the relevant categories used in their understanding.

Recent work in developmental psychology has especially focused on the way children learn to understand the *intentions* of the others with whom they interact (Tomasello, 1999a, 63–75; Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne and Moll, 2005). The authors emphasize that (mutual) understanding of intentions is a crucial development of human cognition as distinct from nonhuman primate cognition, taking place between nine months and a year in the infant. Since intentions define the meaning of action, this means that children around this age begin to understand that others intentionally engage in conduct to realize specific goals, specifically in conversation. Thus, they too learn that by talking they may modify the conduct of others and thus reach their own goals (e.g., get food, toys, etc.).

Learning about intentionality is part of a longer and more complex process of learning to understand one’s interactional and communicative environment. This means that confronted with a complex social environment,

children gradually learn to understand and manage “joint attentional scenes” (Tomasello, 1999b), featuring themselves, other participants and some objects under focus, for instance, being manipulated, shown, searched for, etc. More specifically, they then learn that the same is true for communicative situations, in which this scene of visual or interactional attention is further limited to the things talked about, or the persons participating in the conversation. In that sense, communicative situations, thus construed as context models, act as the interface between discourse and the world.

Obviously, the acquisition of context model schemas involves more than just the mutual recognition of intentions. We have already seen that such must also be the case, at an even earlier stage, for the representation and understanding of goals. Next, children need to learn the processes of establishing an epistemic Common Ground: they must know at least something about the knowledge shared with other participants in talk and interaction. They must learn to organize current experience and context models in terms of Self, and relate other situational categories (Setting, etc.) to such an egocentric organization of context models, and then learn that other participant models have their own (egocentric) context models (including their own intentions, as discussed). As yet, we have only fragmentary and more general knowledge of the processes, representations and development involved (e.g., development of Self, spatial and temporal orientation relative to Self, now and here, person perception, learning of communicative and social roles, etc.), and we need more theory and empirical work to apply such insights in the study of the acquisition and development of context models and their schematic categories.

### **Processing assumptions for context models**

Now we have the first informal design of a theoretical framework for the structures of context as mental models in episodic memory, we finally need to attend to more specific issues of cognitive processing. People form, activate, update or execute context models during discourse production and understanding, but how exactly do they do this, and how is this process related to other processes of interaction and discourse? Obviously, without detailed experimental (and other empirical) studies I can only speculate on the ways context models are formed, activated, updated and applied in actual discourse processes, and I do so on the basis of more general insights into the nature of situation and discourse understanding. Indeed, it would be highly unlikely that the kinds of representations, strategies and other processes involved here would be totally unique. Still, what follows are merely general hypotheses.

*Formation of context models*

It has been assumed that context models are not construed from scratch or out of the blue at the onset of speech, but constitute a special case of ongoing experience models. This means that just before the initiation of a communicative event a large part of the context model is often already in place, namely as an experience model: Setting (current time and place), current participants and their social roles and knowledge and ongoing social actions, at the local level, and similar categories at the global level.

During the ongoing execution of the experience model, thus, a participant may form the wish that other participants in the situation know, believe or do something, and that such a state of affairs may or should be brought about by discourse rather than other forms of interaction. It is at this point that the context model will be construed (specified, adapted) as a special case of the experience model, in such a way that the participant categories involve those of speakers and recipients, among others, and the ongoing action to be planned and controlled is verbal rather than non-verbal.

The K-device at this point will have yielded the relevant assumptions about what the recipients already know (believe, want). The relevant knowledge for this device is being derived from the already established representation of the identity of the recipients as participants in the experience model: We more or less know whom we are speaking or writing to, even when this is a collective, and hence their probable social knowledge.

Another part of the input for the K-device of the context model is supplied by the mental event models (what we know about an event) or the more general knowledge we have about a topic or issue. Obviously such knowledge will largely already exist before the onset of the operation of the context model, which, however, represents the intention that part of such knowledge needs to be shared with the recipients.

During the execution of the context model, the information for the K-device will be dynamically updated, first of all by the feedback from the discourse itself: what has been said becomes part of the context, for instance, as new knowledge and what has been “done” by the discourse also become part of the context, namely, as action conditions for next actions.

Finally, context models (or currently operative states or categories of the context model) are active and represented in short-term working memory (or a closely related control memory: long-term working memory): when speaking we are permanently more or less conscious of who we are, the fact that we are speaking, where we are, and with whom we are talking and why. Other context categories, such as the more global ones, may be kept more or less activated in long-term working memory, from where they can readily be retrieved – for instance, the information that Tony Blair’s Iraq speech takes

place in parliament is part of British legislation and a way of “doing” foreign policy.

### *Context controlled discourse processing*

Once the overall schema and the provisional contents of the relative categories of the context model have been formed, the speaker is able to begin the construction of the structures of the text or talk itself, but under the overall control of a (fragmentary) context model.

This process is assumed to take place in parallel at several levels at the same time, that is, at the levels of expression (sound production or graphical inscription), lexical selection, syntactic structures, local and global semantics, rhetoric, speech acts and interaction, among others (for details, see Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983; Kintsch, 1998).

As suggested in the earlier examples, we notice the control of discourse production here by the context, beginning at the broadest category (interaction) and proceeding down to the most specific ones (phonetic or graphical realization), via general topics and overall schemata (e.g., of narrative), local meanings and sentences.

All that is relevant here is that the context model exercises overall control over the process of production and understanding, first of all in controlling which general knowledge and which information in event models (experiences, news) to express and presuppose in the global and local semantic structures of the discourse.

Second, during actual production, context models control all situationally variable structures of text and talk: sound structures (intonation, pitch, speed, etc.), syntax, lexical selection, and more in general style, register and rhetoric, that is, the way *how* things are said, and not only *what* is being said. For example, as we know from much pragmatic and sociolinguistic research, if the current participant relation is defined in such a way that the Recipient has higher status or more power, or is much older than the Speaker, such a context feature will control, for instance, specific politeness strategies and expressions of deference, and a large set of other discourse properties that are more appropriate in talk with powerful others.

The general *direction* of the process of discourse production is from (given) event (situation) models represented in episodic memory, through context models, to the strategic production of the discourse itself. Event models in this case provide the information for the “content” of the discourse, that is, *what* is said, and the context models control *how* things are said in the current situation: We tell the “same” experience in a different way to our friends at home than to a policeman at the police station. Of course, the experiences precede the communicative situation in which we talk about such

experiences. This means that although the control of event (situation) models and context models is often quite independent, event models may influence not only the content or meaning of the discourse, but also the *current* context models that control its style or interactional strategy. For instance, we tend to tell good news in a different way from bad news, and that presupposes a different kind of context model, in which, for instance, bad news redefines the role of addressees into patients or victims (see also Maynard, 2003).

That discourse contents may change *subsequent* context models (e.g., of addressees) is normal and a crucial element of context theory; for instance, by both the content of his speech and his aggressive style Tony Blair may influence the context models of his recipients, redefining the political relations with his “honourable friends” the Labour MPs who oppose the war in Iraq. That is, in their (subsequent) understanding addressees are construing (updating) their context model at the same time as their comprehension of the discourse and the formation of the event model the discourse is about. So discourse and its (subjective) interpretation may directly influence the context model of the recipients: people and social relations are evaluated on the basis of what they do and say.

At this point I may summarize the whole process of context-dependent discourse processing in a schema (Figure 1). I do so from the point of view of the speaker/writer, that is, in terms of the context model that controls the structures of the discourse – and not the context model that controls the understanding of the discourse by the addressees. In this simple schema I only mention the components and processes relevant for our discussion, and not the many other properties of memory representation and discourse production.

Although details of the processes involved in the contextual control of discourse production and understanding are on the agenda for future work in the psychology of discourse processing, I will here briefly venture some further hypotheses about these processes. After having done so partly for the speech of Tony Blair in the British parliament, I could do this by “hand-simulating” the case of a Spanish journalist writing a news item about some international event for a Spanish newspaper (this was the kind of communicative practice I examined in my first longer study of context models, Van Dijk, 1998). However, it should be emphasized that such a “hand-simulation” is of course very speculative until we have experimental and other empirical evidence of the processes and representations involved. The only plausibility I claim is its overall consistency with the state of the art in (discourse and event) understanding.

For a journalist, writing a news report is one of the routine daily experiences of her professional life, besides other such experiences as reading the

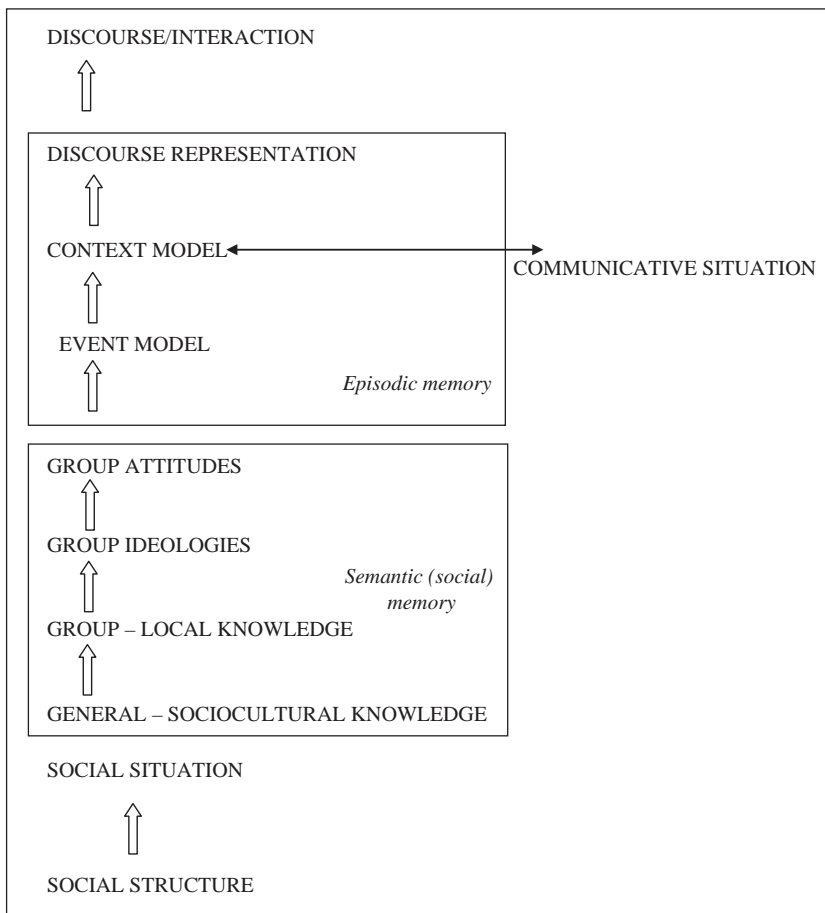


Figure 1 Simple schema of context-controlled discourse production

press and press releases, participating in news conferences, making phone calls, interviewing sources or witnesses, participating in editorial meetings at the newspaper, talking to colleagues, searching the internet and so on (Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978; Van Dijk, 1988b). Many of these activities are discursive practices themselves: news reports in many ways are the result of processing information from many source texts (Van Dijk, 1988b). Journalistic daily experience is thus a continuous sequence of discursive practices, contextually segmented into discrete genres or professional tasks, such as an interviewing or participating in press conferences.

Thus, when initiating the discourse production involved in newswriting, a journalist already has in place a provisional context model, featuring, e.g.,

- the current Setting (Time/Date – deadline – Location);
- possible relevant props (e.g., a laptop computer to write on or use to search the internet or connect to the newspaper editors or databases);
- relevant current communicative and social identities (reporter, employee of newspaper X, Spanish citizen, woman, etc.);
- relations to other participants (e.g., a subordinate relation to the chief-editor for international news);
- new knowledge about a newsworthy international event;
- contextual knowledge about what has been reported before about the event (if it is not new), and hence what the readers (may) already know;
- contextual knowledge about the sociocultural knowledge of the readers;
- applied sociocultural knowledge about general properties of news events;
- applied professional knowledge about newswriting;
- applied professional attitudes and ideologies shared with other reporters;
- applied social attitudes and ideologies about this kind of international event;
- professional ideologies as a journalist;
- intention to write a news report;
- purpose to inform the readers of newspaper X;
- emotions about the reported event;
- emotions about aspects of current context features (an interview, the relation with the editor, etc.).

Much of this context model (and its internal organization) is as routinized as the social practices of newsgathering and newswriting themselves, and hence can be activated by instantiating a more general professional or personal schema for such a communicative event. The “knowledge of the event” to be reported about is also a mental model in episodic memory, and construed with the information of one or more source texts, together with more general political and sociocultural knowledge about such events.

Thus, when starting to write, a journalist has a (semantic) model of the event, as well as a partial context model (a newswriting “plan”) that will control the actual writing and will be locally and ongoingly adapted, e.g., when for each aspect of the event being described it must be calculated how much readers are likely to know already – that is, through the strategies of the K-device. At the same time, the journalist must apply a number of professional norms and values, such as news values, which calculate which aspects of the events are more or less newsworthy, a condition that will control many aspects of newswriting, from the very selection of topics and the formulation of headlines to the structures of foregrounding and backgrounding, style,



rhetoric and local semantics (e.g., whether to provide many or few details on particular aspects of the event).

Remember that generally the event model already exists before the context model: journalists know of a news event before they can plan to write about it. However, how (much of) the information stored in the event model is actually reported depends on the context model. In that respect a context model is an interface – a transformation (filtering, selection, recontextualization) device – between what we know and what we tell. The general pragmatic rule (of assertions and informative discourse genres) is that we only need to tell what we have reason to believe others do not know already. Additionally, the general journalistic norm is only to tell what is deemed to be newsworthy by the norms and values of journalists, themselves controlled by social and professional ideologies.

Thus, given these models and general rules, norms and values of journalistic newswriting, the reporter begins writing her report, with the following contextual constraints on the first part:

### ***Headline***

- (a) Activate professional knowledge about news report writing (overall strategies).
- (b) Activate main topics (macropropositions) of event model.
- (c) Activate knowledge about ideological orientation of newspaper.
- (d) K-device: do readers know about this event already?
- (e) Activate professional knowledge about interests of the readers.
- (f) Activate old context model with information about wishes of editor.
- (g) Infer from information in (a) to (f) above what topic will be found most interesting or relevant by readers and editor, and select that topic.
- (h) Apply ideological preferences to semantic representation, e.g., by emphasizing the negative actions of an out-group (e.g., terrorists).
- (i) Formulate the topic in accordance with (j), (k) and (l) below.
- (j) the genre conventions of the newspaper (headline syntax)
- (k) the ideological bias, e.g., out-group mentioned as agent and subject in first position
- (l) the formal style of the newspaper: formal lexical selection (quality newspaper) and newspaper lexicon (e.g., “bid” instead of “attempt”).

### ***Byline (if any)***

- (m) Formulate personal identity (Self) of reporter: name.
- (n) Formulate Setting: current Location of context model: city from where reporting.
- (o) Formulate Setting: current Date.

*Lead (if any)*

Largely as with headline:

- (p) Maintain activated: topics (macropropositions) of event model, knowledge about newspaper ideology, professional knowledge about leads, preferences of public and editor, and so on.
- (q) K-device: check which topics may already be known to the readers.
- (r) K-device: what inferences can be made by the readers from what has been written already in the previous parts of the lead?
- (s) Formulate in sequence the most important propositions of the event model, as a summary of the events, but with the overall ideological (in-group–out-group) bias – e.g., emphasizing the bad things of the out-group.
- (t) Follow the formal style (syntax, lexicon) of newspaper language.
- (u) Mark sentences expressing propositions that may already have been known to readers (e.g., by reminder).

From this simulated example we see that news report writing does not merely express what journalists know about some news event, but involves a complex process of contextualized selection from event models of propositions, which are then formulated in a way (style, etc.) that is also controlled by the context model. That is, writing headlines and leads is controlled by context model categories and information such as the following: the professional knowledge of reporters about news reports, headlines and leads; their knowledge about the interests of the public; their knowledge about what the editor wants (the assignment, previous context models), the ideology of the newspaper, the ideology of the reporter, the identity of the writer as a reporter, an employee of the newspaper and a subordinate of the editor; newspaper style and so on.

The same will then be true, locally, for the activation, expression and formulation of other propositions of the event model during the production of the rest of the news report, in general under the control of the same context model, but with changes in the knowledge of the K-device about what the readers already know (what has just been written). As is the case for the formulation of the lead, so in the rest of the text the general strategies of local and global coherence will need to be followed, modified for those of newspaper discourse. That is, in the telling of a news story the facts are not reported in chronological order, but are organized by criteria of relevance or newsworthiness: the most relevant (important, interesting, useful, dramatic, etc.) information will come first – and what is judged to be the most relevant will depend on context model information about what kind of newspaper the editor wants to publish or the public wants to read.

The same will be true for the writing of the rest of the report, such as the ordering, backgrounding and foregrounding, lexical choice, level of description (general versus specific), degree of detail, and in general the explicitness and implicitness of the information as derived from the event model. Apart from ideological biases, it will be the overall stylistic “bias” of the newspaper that will influence the final selection of words as appropriate for the news reports. This is true for all levels: overall format of the news report (requiring professional knowledge); overall selection of topics (from event models under the control of the ideological information in the context model); formulation of headline, lead and byline; and then the overall semantic organization and grammatical formulation of the rest of the text. In Chapter 4 we shall examine in more detail which discourse structures are typically controlled by context model structures. At this point we may mention the ideological role of “location” in the context models of journalists as they are based on nationalist ideologies. Thus, Higgins (2004) shows the importance of the “home nation” as a context feature influencing news coverage in Scottish newspapers. Similarly, deictic references to “this country” in interviews with English respondents may be an expression of underlying nationalism and xenophobia of the speakers (Condor, 2000).

We are not concerned here with the details of lexical selection and grammar (see Levelt, 1989), noting only that for the selection of each word, phrase, structure, sequence, etc., contextual information will be relevant (e.g., about type of reader, reader knowledge and interest, type of newspaper, formal style or the aims of reporter or editor).

### *Methods of studying context models*

One of the difficulties of contexts defined as mental models of participants is that we cannot observe them directly. This has undoubtedly led to a general neglect of such a study in linguistic and sociological approaches, although this is a problem shared by all psychological studies of the mind.

One method for a study of context is to systematically study its “consequences,” that is, discourse variations, in different situations, as we do more generally in the study of unobservable phenomena in any science. Thus, for instance, if different pronouns are used to tell the “same” story to different people in situations where only the age of the recipients is different, we have some prima facie evidence that age of the addressee is a relevant category of context models in that culture.

Such a study can be done through experiment, for example, by asking subjects to speak or write to an imagined person in some imagined communicative situation, for instance to write a job application, as is typically done in educational assignments, as well as in classical sociolinguistic interviews.

Similarly, we may use verbal protocols in which language users are asked to formulate how they understand the situation, or why they use such and such an expression here. Note, though, that in such experimental situations people's formulated beliefs about language use may be misguided, normative or ideological. Hence interviews, assignments or protocols cannot match actual language use in spontaneous talk and text; these, however, have the problem that they are more difficult for the analyst to control and investigate.

Third, like any other kind of mental model, context models may be the basis of everyday storytelling: we often speak about what other people told us, or what we saw on television. The naïve description of the context models in such stories typically features some of the relevant categories people used in the representation of such context models. Thus, for a variety of cognitive, social and cultural reasons, I am much more likely to tell my partner that this *morning* in the *university* a *student* asked me to read her thesis, than to say that a *brown-haired person* talked to me for *90 seconds* at a *distance of 10 meters* from my office door. Cultural differences of event and action interpretation (and hence of context models) may lead to different kinds of storytelling. However, it is plausible that some levels and categories of narrative description are more "natural," and hence more widespread, than others.

If communicative situations are indeed constructed and represented as specific mental models in episodic memory, and then dynamically applied and changed in working memory, we should be able to investigate their schematic structures, categories and contents with the usual experimental models of cognitive psychology. Thus, there should normally be better recollection of the relevant context model categories of a social situation than of other social information. (We usually recall better that we spoke with an older woman who is a professor, than the color of her clothes.)

We may likewise predict that context-relevant categories will be better memory-retrieval cues than other aspects of communicative events. Similarly, if context models control local discourse production and comprehension, we may expect what might be called *pragmatic priming* of concepts that are part of such models. For instance, if we speak with a woman, and if this participant category is represented in our context model of the conversation, it may be expected that the concept "woman" will be primed, even when it did not previously occur in the conversation. Note finally that, generally speaking, episodic representations, such as context models and other everyday experiences, are badly recalled, unless they feature very prominent or relevant properties (speaking with a very famous person, a traumatic conversation with a partner, etc.). Most everyday communicative events, such as conversations with friends or colleagues, reading the newspaper, shopping, etc., will soon be forgotten, and the relevant (new) information generalized,

abstracted and integrated into more general knowledge. This is why we have a large amount of knowledge we have no idea when and where we acquired.

Alternatively, such context models will be generalized and abstracted from (my memory of conversations with a friend, or of reading such and such a newspaper in such and such a period in such and such a country, etc.) as we do with other personal experiences in episodic memory (King, 2000; Neisser and Fivush, 1994; Rubin, 1986, 1999).

### **Formal modeling of context**

Although based on current psychological theory formation about discourse processing, the framework sketched above is as yet very informal, and details need to be added at many levels of processing. This future work will need to combine theoretical refinement with experimental and observational sophistication about how people's interpretation of the communicative situation controls the production (and hence the structures) or the interpretation of text and talk.

Some of these processes may be modeled more explicitly in *formal* models of context that – as is quite common in model theory – combine cognitive science, Artificial Intelligence and formal theories of language (see, e.g., Jurafsky and Martin, 2000). Thus, in the same way that we formalize the semantics of natural language, we may formally model some of its context properties, as has been done for time, place and participants, for instance, in order to interpret deictic expressions, verb tenses and coreference, among other properties of discourse (Groenendijk, de Jongh and Stokhof, 1987; Kamp and Partee, 2004; Kamp and Reyle, 1993).

Thus, if language users construct mental models of communicative events, some of the properties of these events may be accounted for in formal models that are more explicit theoretical frameworks for the structure of such models. Ideally, such formal models will be programmed together with systems of automatic discourse production and comprehension, which would allow the production of discourse that is not only well-formed syntactically, and meaningful and coherent semantically, but also appropriate pragmatically.

In the last decade studies in Artificial Intelligence have produced fragments of such (formal) context models (see, e.g., Akman, Bouquet, Thomason and Young, 2001). Many of these “pragmatic” approaches in AI aim to provide models of language use that are more realistic than the traditional ones limited to syntax and semantics. Such studies may show that in real communicative events language users do not know all the implications of what they say, how contexts are being constructed in real time, and maybe only partly, or how reasoning may be constrained by pragmatic factors such as goals or available knowledge (see also Hovy, 1988, 1990).

Thus, at the boundary of AI and rhetoric we find work by Cronkhite (1997) on the analysis of situations – the GOALS/GRASP model – which purports to describe how situations are perceived, and specifically applied to rhetorical (communicative) situations.

It is true that much of this work needs to trade formal explicitness for psychological detail and plausibility, while at the same time usually being limited to the study of only a few properties of discourse. A more detailed discussion of these approaches falls outside the scope of this book.

### Concluding remark

As we shall see in more detail later, there is virtually no level and no structure of text or talk that is not produced (also) under the control of properties of context models. The K-device is operating everywhere. Participant categories often go together with institutional setting. Spatiotemporal awareness is continuously expressed in numerous deictic expressions. In the [next chapter](#) and in *Society and Discourse* I investigate in more detail what social and cultural constraints operate in the formation, acquisition and use of context models.

The fundamental aim of this chapter has been a more detailed elaboration of my general thesis that contexts are not some kind of social or communicative situation, but the subjective constructions or “definitions” of the relevant dimensions of such situations by participants. Such constructs have been defined as specific mental models, *context models*, in episodic memory, and as special cases of more general experience models that control our everyday conduct. It has also been assumed that such context models must be relatively simple, and consist of just a few general categories (and their subcategories), which may, however, be culturally variable.

In this chapter I paid special attention to the more cognitive categories of context models, such as Self, intentions and the important strategies of the use of knowledge. Finally, I have made some general assumptions about processes involved in the formation and application of context models. In the [next chapter](#) I shall finally attend in more detail to the ways context models control various discourse structures.

Although the general hypothesis of this chapter and this book – that contexts should be defined as a specific kind of mental model – is very plausible and consistent with most work in current cognitive science, the details of a psychological theory of context need to be provided in future experimental studies – studies that are beyond the scope of this theoretical book.

My claim is that context permeates language, that contextual assumptions affect how we understand language, and that contexts of speech have to be better understood to develop realistic theories of language and of language learning. (Susan Ervin-Tripp, 1996: 21)

### Introduction

This chapter focuses on the main function of contexts, namely how they enable and constrain the production and comprehension of text and talk. I shall start with a conceptual analysis of the possible relationships between context and discourse. These may be described in many terms, such as “influence,” “control,” “mapping,” “manifestation,” “expression” and “indexing”, among others. Then, I shall examine some of the crucial notions that are often used to describe the product of this contextual influence on discourse, such as style, register, genre, variation and related notions. Finally, I shall review some major dimensions of discourse that are thus systematically controlled by context structures, and conversely, how such discourse dimensions may in turn influence the context models of participants, that is, their interpretation of the ongoing communicative event.

Since much of this discussion presupposes vast fields of earlier research, especially in sociolinguistics, I shall focus particularly on the contextual control of *discourse structures*, assuming that the influence of context on grammar, that is, on phonology, prosody, syntax and the lexicon, is well known. Although contemporary sociolinguistics, stylistics and ethnography generally also work with natural discourse data, much of the analytical focus has been on subtle details of expression, such as pronunciation, intonation, pronominalization, lexicalization and syntax, a limitation repeatedly pointed out by Macaulay (1999, 2002, 2005a, 2005b). There are relatively few studies that examine the contextual constraints on, for instance, cohesion and coherence, topic choice, news or argumentation schemata, news headline style, speech acts, turn-taking, or the strategies of persuasion and manipulation, among a host of other discourse properties.

Speakers can be identified and distinguished not only by the precise sounds of their vowels or the way they pronounce post-vocalic *-r*, as we know from classical work in sociolinguistics. Variation and style, defined as a function of context features, obviously comprise much more than such variation of expression. For instance, if we compare the news reports about the “same” event in London’s broadsheet newspaper *The Times* and tabloid *Sun*, we tend to describe the differences between the newspapers in terms of “style.” These differences are not typically the ones we find in traditional sociolinguistic studies of regional or class-based variation, or different “ways of speaking” (such as use of formal versus casual language). First of all, they are differences between newspapers and not individual speakers (as group members), and second they pertain to a complex set of discourse properties, e.g., printed layout, photos, news report structure, headlines, lexical choice, topic choice and rhetorical structures, among others (Jucker, 1992). This chapter will show how such typical discourse structures also vary with the structures of communicative situations as defined by the context models of the participants.

There are many reasons why there is much less research on the socially based variation of discourse. First of all, especially for spoken discourse, it is very difficult to observe, tape and transcribe large amounts of comparable discourses in their “natural” situations. This means that we seldom have quantitative data that allow reliable comparisons and generalizations on how one situational parameter (for instance, gender or social class) systematically associates with specific discourse features (see, however, Macaulay, 2005a, 2005b).

Second, the tradition in sociolinguistics so far has been to focus on smaller, grammatical phenomena, and not on discourse structures “beyond the sentence,” so that as yet few research projects have been systematically collecting the necessary data (Macaulay, 2002, 2005). It is only recently that studies of language variation, style and register in sociolinguistics have also paid attention to specific discourse structures.

Third, if contexts are defined in terms of mental models that are by definition unique, it is very hard to observe and record data that are comparable and hence analyzable across contexts, or by holding contexts invariable, as one would try to do in a laboratory. This is merely a slightly more sophisticated way of saying that communicative situations and their influences on talk and text are complex and variable.

For instance, if we wanted to know whether women tell more stories about their children than men – a typical result of several studies of the gendered nature of storytelling – we would be likely to abstract from many other dimensions of the social situation dimensions that may be relevant and that may also produce much variation in the data. Thus, we might ask whether this



is true for young women as much as for older women, for professional women as much as for housewives, for upper-class as much as lower-class women, and whether this is true in any social situation, for instance, at work, or when seeing a doctor, or when talking to neighbors, and so on. That is, relevant social situations are so complex that abstraction and generalization may ignore significant conditions of discourse (co-)variation. It is not surprising that on many – if not most – discourse variables, social constraints such as gender or class have hardly any clear main effects. Thus one study may find that women interrupt more than men, and another study the opposite: the result will nearly always depend on the rest of the relevant factors in the communicative situation.

And finally, variation studies often fail to provide a theoretically based account of the very social “variables” they study, as is the case, for instance, for the study of the role of “gender” in language use and discourse, which often uses an unproblematized variable such as “sex” (Wodak and Benke, 1997). Indeed, the very notion of (statistical) *co-variation* as an analytical concept introduced by classical sociolinguistics may be irrelevant or premature for the analysis of how contexts as mental models control the production or comprehension of discourse. Hence the need to examine other ways to define and analyze such relationships.

### *Beyond isolated social “variables”*

It has been proposed that social factors of language and discourse variation should be examined in terms of the *communities of practice* (Lave and Wenger, 1991), that is, communities of people who get together, interact and talk in relation to joint activities, goals, interests and so on (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003). That is, specific properties and variations of the discourse of, e.g., adolescents, women and men, or professionals, should be examined in relationship to the various communities of practice in which they participate. Sessions of parliament apparently constitute one such practice, as do classroom interactions, boardroom meetings and conversations in the pub, among many other situations defined by specific activities, goals and participants. Many properties of discourse adapt to such complex situations rather than being controlled by general social categories or groups, such as class, gender or age.

Note though that the notion of “communities of practice” is vague. As the name suggests, they are defined by situated *practices* (such as classroom interaction) rather than by types of *participants*. Women, youths, family members or professionals do not, in that sense, form communities of practice. And conversely, many joint (or shared) practices, such as family dinners, travel by public transport, going to the movies, do not seem obvious

candidates for a definition in terms of “communities” of participants. Rather, what we have here are types of situations, which of course each need to be analyzed in their own right, and in terms of a context theory. Sociocultural activities and their goals, often defined as genres, are merely one of the categories defining such situation types. In other words, emphasizing that language use and variation in everyday life are (also) defined by the communities of practice, seems tantamount to saying that language use depends on context, and that we should consider not only the social groups or categories of such contexts but also the types of situations, activities and goals of such contexts. Indeed, social categories and group membership are abstractions, and hence not very good predictors of actual language use.

However, of the usual social variables studied in classical sociolinguistics, age, social class and occupation may exert more powerful contextual influences than others, such as gender, because they tend to imply longtime and daily differences of *experiences*, and exposure to rather different types and contexts of discourse. But even then considerable variability remains: one professor writes or teaches quite differently from another, depending on discipline, culture, audience and so on. Obviously, as recalled above, we (as yet) have no large amounts of discourse data for all these different types of situations and how they are construed by the participants in their context models. Specifically because of its everyday character, social class may also indirectly influence and be reproduced by everyday conversation among colleagues or within the family, for instance, when work is being discussed (Paugh, 2005).

One of the few studies that systematically (and quantitatively) compared the separate and combined influences of gender, age and class is Macaulay (2005b). Of the forty-two discourse features of same-sex dyadic conversations by Scottish citizens (with no investigator present), he found that age has most influence on talk (see also Eckert, 1997, 2000, 2003), followed by gender and finally class.

Similarly, Bettie (2003) in her study of high school girls in California stresses that their discourses should be understood and analyzed in terms not only of gender – as many gender-based studies do – but also of race and class. Many of the properties of the girls’ talk, such as the category distinctions between “cholas,” “hicks” and “preps,” go beyond gender identities and style and show awareness and attribution of class membership. It is this class membership that is the basis of the formation of the cliques and subcultures with which these young women identify. This is also the case in Eckert’s studies of the Detroit high school “jocks” and “burnouts” (Eckert, 2000), Mendoza’s studies of Latinas in California (e.g., Mendoza, 1996, 1999), Bucholtz’s (1999) study of “nerd” girls in a California high school, Evaldsson’s (2005) study of immigrant boys in Sweden and the important

earlier study in the UK on “mods” and “rockers” in the 1960s (Cohen, 1980) – a study which, incidentally, is seldom cited in US studies. In her analysis of Chicano English, Fought (2002) stresses that instead of using pre-established social categories, such as age, gender or class, language variation should be studied in terms of the categories as defined by the participants themselves – as is part of the main thesis of this book.

Thus, although my review below – necessarily dependent on the directions of research in sociolinguistics – still deals with the (indirect) influence on discourse of social categories such as age, gender and class, it should be stressed from the start that there is tremendous variety and complexity of combined influences, and that generalizations for just one social “variable”, such as gender, often need “correction” for class or age (see also Romaine, 2003). The crucial problem is how to study combined and complex forms of contextual influence, and do so in a qualitative way, that is, by detailed discourse analysis, rather than in the usual statistical way – e.g., in terms of factor analysis, for which we may not have enough quantitative data in the first place.

Our context model approach to complex social influence does just that, because speakers self-represent themselves and their co-participants in terms of several social categories at the same time – identifications that may change during text and talk. Each communicative situation is thus subjectively represented in a complex way where each of a variety of social properties may be more or less salient in a given situation: sometimes gender identity may be more relevant than age, class or occupational identities, sometimes it may be less relevant and one of the others more so, depending on the nature of the current activity and its aims or other situational factors. Indeed, many theorists today insist that the social identities involved are actually constructed or “performed” with the discourse itself – a position that is consistent with my theory only under a very specific interpretation, as we shall see below (see also Bucholtz and Hall, 2004; De Fina, Schiffrin and Bamberg, 2006). Interestingly, Halford and Leonard (2006), in their study of the contextualization of workplace subjectivities, show that (entrepreneurial) identity is construed not just in terms of gender, age and profession, but also in such categories as space and place – a finding we interpret as supporting a complex contextual and constructionist approach to social influence. This also applies to the contextual role of participant ideologies: the workplace, more than the family or the neighborhood, seems to be the typical setting for cross-cutting (conflicting) political discourse (Mutz and Mondak, 2006).

One of the conditions of this variability is that many of the higher level discourse features are controlled or controllable (e.g., choice of topics, interrupting someone, etc.) and hence much more liable to be influenced by

several contextual factors. For instance, one may decide not to interrupt someone, or not to tell a story, so as to avoid making a bad impression, or because one thinks the recipient would not be interested, and so on.

On the other hand, aspects of pronunciation and syntax are much less consciously controlled and controllable – and tend to be more similar across contexts (at least in the same speech community) – and hence are more generalizable and thus more easily quantifiable. For example, people with a Catalan accent when speaking Castilian Spanish will often show such an accent in many or most communicative events in which they are participating. That is, even when they can be somewhat adapted, accents are more context-free than choice of topics or style.

As my introduction suggested, before I examine context-dependent discourse variation in more detail I need to analyze some of the fundamental notions involved in the relation between context, text and talk. I hope thus to contribute to current developments that go beyond the correlational approach of classical sociolinguistics (which shows only *that* there is a relation between text and context, but not exactly *what* this relation is, and how it should be described and explained).

*Terminology: “discourse” versus “context”  
versus “social situation”*

To avoid excessive jargon and terminological confusion, in this chapter I shall simply use the term “discourse” for any form of language use manifested as (written) text or (spoken) talk-in-interaction, in a broad semiotic sense. This includes visual structures, such as layout, letter type or pictures for written or printed text, and gestures, facework and other semiotic signs for spoken interaction. This concept of discourse may include combinations of sounds and visuals in many hybrid multimedia discourses, for instance, in movies, television, cell phones, the internet and other channels and carriers of communication.

As we have found before, the distinction between “discourse,” thus defined, and “context” is not without problems. For instance, is the distance participants maintain while speaking an element of discourse or of “context?” In *Society and Discourse* I define aspects of space and place of participants as part of the Setting category of the context, and not as a “semiotic” aspect of the discourse “itself.” On the other hand, gestures, touching and facework, just like intonation, applause and so on, are treated as part of the interpretable semiotic dimension of discourse itself, because they are perceived more directly as properties of what participants “do.” And if we admit various gestures and facework, as well as sound and visual structures, as part of the “semiotic” structures of discourse, why not admit “signs” of other semiotic

dimensions, such as body painting, clothes, uniforms and adornments of participants, are aspects of communicative events that I would prefer to analyze as part of the context? Note that such contextual properties of participants should not be confounded with the properties of participants as *represented* in discourse and images, which are the object of a semantic or semiotic analysis of communicative events.

These questions show again that there is no strict distinction between discourse and its environment in communicative situations. Even when we decide to limit discourse to the “verbal” aspects of discourse such a distinction remains arbitrary, because, for instance, we would not know what sound structures to include in the phonology of such “verbal” structures apart from phonemes – pauses, intonation, stress, volume (shouting, whispering), whistling and so on. The same is true for the visual structures of written texts over and above the letters – font, type, layout, color, pictures, art-work, tables, figures, drawings and so on.

In sum, any discussion on discourse–context relationships hinges on a definition of “discourse.” Although more or less arbitrarily, I therefore adopt a rather broad definition including (spoken and written) verbal structures and any semiotic (interpretable) aspect of the communicative event that directly sustains the event, such as relevant sound structures and visual (writing, print) structures, facework and gestures, but not the location or other properties of the participants.

It is obvious, however, that as soon as we take an “embodied” approach to spoken language use, it is hard if not impossible to analytically separate out from a speaker’s bodily activity those elements that more or less consciously “express” or “give off” meaningful information that should be taken as part of the discourse, as we would do with facework and gestures (see, e.g., Hanks, 1996 – and the discussion of his work in *Society and Discourse*).

Similarly, I use the term “context” in this chapter more or less as defined in the [previous chapter](#), that is, as an abbreviation of “context model” or “participant definition of the relevant aspects of the communicative situation.” However, I thereby focus on the non-discursive (or non-semiotic) aspects of the context, that is, on context-without-discourse. As has become tradition in discourse and conversation analysis, I prefer to study “co-text” as “previous parts” of dynamically defined text or talk itself, and not as context as in traditional sentence-based grammars (see also Chapter 2).

In the discussion of terminology in Chapter 1, we already have seen that one can use an inclusive or an exclusive concept of context. That is, “context” can be used as a representation of a whole communicative episode, including the communicative event (text, talk) itself, or as a representation merely of the relevant social environment of such an event. In the first, inclusive, definition, language users represent not only settings, themselves and other

participants, as well as their intentions, goals and knowledge, but also, reflexively, their ongoing talk or text. Although, no doubt, this is what happens in the representation of communicative episodes, such a concept of “context” is far removed from its everyday, intuitive usage. I have therefore opted for the practical solution of dealing with the exclusive notion of context as the subjective definition of relevant social environments of text and talk. Whatever the option one chooses, however, one needs to account for the relation between discourse and its social environment, as part of one communicative episode.

In this chapter I use the concept of context in the exclusive sense of a representation of the situational environment of such episodes – that is, as “external” to the actual discourse – in a way that is closer to the way previous research has done, though from a different perspective than ours. In a dynamic account of language and interaction, this means that “past discourse” is still part of a discourse running “in parallel,” so to speak, with a dynamic context model, although it may have the same effects on current interpretation as the context (it is in this sense that we sometimes say that “previous discourse” becomes part of the context). Note, though, when reviewing the work of others, that *their* use of “context” corresponds to what I have called communicative situation, that is, a sociological construct, rather than a sociocognitive construct. This is even the case for many constructionist approaches to language use, which do define social reality in terms of (inter)subjective constructs of social members, but without the necessary cognitive implications of such “constructs,” which in that case are theoretically abstract or undefined.

### **Relating social situation, context and discourse**

There are many, more or less informal, ways we speak about the *relations* between social situations and discourse. Thus, it is generally assumed that situations, or some of their features – such as class, status, gender, ethnicity, age, power, networks and communities of practice – *influence* the way we speak or write (see, e.g., Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003: Chapter 2), and, conversely, that it is on the basis of such influence that recipients and analysts infer social characteristics of speakers from the way they speak or write.

#### *Influence: the sociocognitive interface*

In *Society and Discourse*, I deal extensively with a fundamental aspect of this “influence” by claiming that features of the social situation do not directly “influence” discourse at all: there is no direct causal or other conditional link between, say, social class and the way we pronounce words or choose topics

of conversation. Rather, the main thesis of this book, made explicit in the [previous chapter](#), is that it is the *definition, interpretation, representation or construction of participants* of their social situation, in terms of subjective context models, that influences how they speak, write, read, listen and understand. In other words, societal or situational structures can only affect discourse through the mediation or the interface of the mental representations of language users (see the references in *Society and Discourse*, and, for sociolinguistics, also Macaulay, 1999, 2005a). My conception of context as participant definition of the communicative situation has also been emphasized by others, especially in social psychology (Giles, 1991; Giles and Hewstone, 1982), although not in terms of specific mental models.

Another researcher who uses the notion of “model” and also emphasizes the relevance of subjective participant definitions of objective societal structures and norms is Kiesling (2003), but his concept of “model” is different from mine, and closer to that of anthropologists such as Holland and Quinn (1987), who deal with “cultural models” that represent general cultural knowledge.

The sociocognitive interface accounts for many aspects of the relation between social situation and discourse, for instance, that such a relation is by definition non-deterministic (see also Johnstone and Bean, 1997), and that it is personally and situationally variable. Most importantly, context models explain that it is not some kind of objective social fact that controls how we talk, but rather our subjective way of understanding or constructing this social fact.

For the same reason, my approach is not compatible with an account of language, discourse and society that assumes that language use has (immediate) “material conditions,” as we know it from traditional Marxist formulations. Of course there are “material” (economic, etc.) conditions of everyday life, but these may influence discourse only if they are interpreted, represented and “lived” as such by language users. I have argued repeatedly that since language users may interpret the communicative situation differently, they also speak differently, even in the same objective situation, and with the same social parameters. That is, my concept of situation–discourse relations is non-deterministic, but (inter)subjective and interpretative.

In sum, in this sociocognitive paradigm (and the same is true for a constructionist perspective), there is no such thing as an *objective* situation, unless I define such objectivity, as I have done for knowledge, as some kind of intersubjective, commonsense definition of the situation, that is, as an understanding shared by the members of a group or community. This, however, explains the *social* dimension and foundations of context models, but not the *personally variable, subjective* aspects of context models that explain unique discourses of individual language users.

The more detailed account of the relations between society and social situations on the one hand and of discourse variation on the other, should thus always presuppose that *the crucial “influencing” force is not in society or social structure itself, but in social members’ representations or constructions of such social structure and social situations.*

It has been emphasized before that this does *not* mean that I reduce contextualization to a pure mental phenomenon, but only that a crucial *component* of a theory of situation–discourse relations should be a cognitive theory about how members represent communicative situations as context models. The solid social foundation of this theory is guaranteed by the fact that these constructs are themselves based on socially shared knowledge and socially acquired schemata, and that they are used in social situations and interaction and embody (subjective) representations of social situations. In other words, situations and situation–discourse relations should neither be reduced to an exclusive cognitive nor to an exclusive social account. Hence the relevance of an integrated sociocognitive theory.

It should be emphasized that what we *analytically* construe as a process of sociocognitive mediation – the formation and use of mental models of social situations – is not the same as the intuitively *experienced* influence of language users themselves. Even when they reflexively monitor what they say and how they say it, and are aware of the biased influences of situations *as they see them*, language users routinely take the social aspects of the situation to be “real,” and their inferences about participants on the basis of their discourse presuppose a more direct “causal” relationship.

*Example: Blair’s speech in the House of Commons*

In earlier chapters (and in *Society and Discourse*) I examined the theoretical details of the contextual control of discourse by using a fragment of one of British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s “Iraq” speeches in the British House of Commons as my main illustration. As a further introduction to my analysis below of how contexts control discourse structures, let me summarize how my multidisciplinary, sociocognitive theory construes this influence.

The traditional sociolinguistic account of context is that some of Tony Blair’s speech characteristics in parliament, such as pronunciation and grammar, *co-vary* with his class, gender, ethnicity, age and perhaps the specific setting. Such an account usually does not tell us much about further aspects of his discourse, such as choice of topics, local coherence, rhetorical strategies, argumentation or various (other) aspects of interaction. In Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), part of such a missing account would be formulated in terms of, for instance, Tony Blair’s powerful position of



Prime Minister, or in terms of his specific (New Labour) ideology (see also Fairclough, 2000).

We have argued that traditional sociolinguistic accounts are not only incomplete, but also incorrect as to the theoretical account of the relationship between social structures, social situations, speakers and discourse. Such an approach presupposes a direct, causal or conditional influence of the social characteristics of the speaker and the way he speaks. If there were a direct, causal, relation between social structures and discourse, all people (Prime Ministers, MPs, etc.) with the same social characteristics would speak in the same way. Such might be true only at a very high level of abstract group description (generalizing over Prime Ministers, MPs, politicians, men, etc.) but would not explain many of the variable details of Blair's speech. Besides the need to integrate the important individual properties of speakers in order to account for variability, such an approach ignores the fundamental socio-cognitive interface that makes explicit how Tony Blair individually (or men, or British citizens, or Prime Ministers) tend to interpret and understand the social environment. Thus, it is more than likely that for sociocultural reasons Prime Ministers (politicians, men, etc.) in different countries and cultures evaluate their social and political position differently and bring it to bear on the situation in different ways.

In other words, once one construes variation and diversity as a crucial property of language use and discourse, one has to do so systematically and all the way down to the specific discourse properties of a given language user in a specific situation. One can always make generalizations and abstractions later.

To integrate these conditions into the theoretical model and at the same time to build in the necessary mental interface between social situation and discourse I thus assume that:

- Tony Blair, before uttering his first words in the House of Commons, has at least a partial mental model of the communicative situation that he ongoingly adapts throughout his speech;
- the same is true of all MPs present before they hear and understand Blair's first words;
- mutual understanding and interaction crucially presuppose these mental models in all participants;
- each word, intonation, sentence, paragraph, meaning and function of this speech and interaction are controlled by these models;
- *without* postulating such models we have no idea of how discourse can be contextually sensitive and appropriate, or how discourse variation functions in the first place.

Thus, Blair will be able to speak and say *what* he says and (especially) say it *how* he says it, because in his context model he more or less consciously represents and ongoingly monitors, e.g., the following:

- Setting: Time: Date, day and hour;
- Setting: Place: House of Commons;
- Position in House (at Government despatch box, etc.);
- his personal identity (Self) as Tony Blair;
- his personal attributes as being democratic, tolerant, etc.;
- his communicative identity as (main) Speaker, and later;
- his communicative identity as Recipient;
- his political identity as Prime Minister, Head of Government, etc.;
- his political identity as leader of the Labour Party;
- his national identity as being British;
- the respective identities of the other participants: addressees, MPs, politicians, members of various parties, English, women and men (some constant, some variably foregrounded or backgrounded), as well as the wider public;
- the relations with the other participants: friends, opponents, etc.;
- the current political action(s): addressing parliament, defending his policies, seeking legitimacy for sending troops to Iraq, etc.;
- the intentions, purposes or goals of these ongoing actions;
- (shared) relevant social and political knowledge;
- the relevant social and political opinions (based on activated social attitudes, ideologies, norms and values).

Some of these contents of the model and its schematic categories are more or less stable throughout his speech (e.g., his personal identity, his communicative identity as speaker, his political identity as PM, etc.); others are more or less variably foregrounded or backgrounded.

Note that some of the properties of the social or political situation are *not* (necessarily) represented here, for instance, his gender identity, his ethnic identity, his class and age, and those of the MPs – nor his being a father, a husband and so on. But more than likely he (re)presents himself – and may actually show so in his speech – as being democratic, tolerant, modern, etc. Obviously, some MPs may represent him in their context models of the “same” situation in ways that are neither known nor relevant to him as Speaker, e.g., as being arrogant or belligerent.

That the list of properties are plausible contents of the context model will need to be demonstrated by the various properties of the speech, beginning with various deictic expressions (“I,” “we,” “here,” “today,” “you”), forms of address (“honourable friend,” etc.), the very action of addressing the House, and doing so first, the topics of the speech, lexical choice, the persuasive

moves and so on – as we see in more detail below and in *Society and Discourse*, where I analyze the rest of this debate.

*Consciousness, awareness and control of context influence*

Although this is a plausible theoretical proposal accounting for what Tony Blair is doing and saying and how and why, there are some theoretical complications. Classical sociolinguistics would hold, for instance, that the way Blair speaks in parliament is also conditioned by, for instance, his regional, class and gender identities. True, his pronunciation and some other features of his talk may indeed index such identities, but it may be doubted that in his own context model he represents himself as such during this speech. These identities may at the moment be neither relevant, conscious nor attended (oriented) to.

However, if they are somehow expressed in his speech, they must somehow exert their influence, and I have argued that *any* such influence must be mediated cognitively. This does not mean that (all) cognitive processing is “conscious,” a complex issue that cannot be dealt with here. It may simply be assumed that contextual control on production or comprehension may be more or less conscious, more or less aware, and (hence) more or less *controlled* and *controllable*.

This question is related to, but different from, the sociolinguistic distinction between “casual” and “careful” speech, for instance, in the sociolinguistic interview and the “attention to speech” as it has been studied since Labov (1966): in order to elicit vernacular forms of pronunciation (for instance of post-vocalic *-r* in New York), Labov observed how informants spoke among themselves, or when emotionally aroused, and compared this with the way they pronounced words when reading them from a list; while reading from the list they were more conscious of their pronunciation and hence tended to say the sounds more carefully and use closer to standard pronunciation (see also the discussion in Labov, 2001).

Thus, when speaking in parliament Tony Blair is assumed to do so under the control of a context model that does feature information about the formality of the event. It is this information that indirectly triggers a host of more or less automatized forms of speech, including the tendency to use standard British English phonology, even as part of a practice he engages in very often and that may be quite “casual” for him, and hence need little conscious self-control. Indeed, in other situations, for instance, speaking with voters on an election tour, he might well (consciously) take more care to speak in a “casual” way that is close to how “ordinary people” speak.

So we may assume that part of the context model is automatically or “subconsciously” construed, but need to leave open the possibility that some

aspects of speech, such as involuntary “accent,” are not controlled by mental models but “wired” more directly to the individual phonetics of speech. Methodologically, the way “hidden” parts of the context model can be made explicit is through various kinds of problems or challenges in interaction. This happened, for instance, with the critical interruption “The main parties?” in Blair’s speech, which obviously made membership of the Labour party relevant, an identity that might not have been very prominent in the first part of his speech. Similarly, feminists or other critical recipients might well have criticized his belligerence as a form of male chauvinism, and in such an interaction his gender identity would have become relevant and hence activated.

In other words, apart from various degrees of automatization and direct phonetic expression, there are properties of context models of which speakers are not necessarily aware, but that “subconsciously” influence how they speak. Unless specifically made relevant, class, gender, ethnicity and regional origin are characteristically part of the identity of speakers they “carry” along across contexts – unlike, for instance, being the Prime Minister. Thus, whereas from a dominant, patriarchal perspective, Blair’s speech may be politics as usual, and hence unmarked, a critical gender perspective may well analyze his speech as precisely controlled by the patriarchal values that have always been adduced to advocate or legitimize war. If women similarly engage in such discourse, as did former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher during the Falklands war, then such discourses will often be perceived as (more) authoritarian, and hence inappropriate for a “lady” – hence her nickname the “Iron Lady” (for a discussion of this aspect of gender and discourse in UK and USA politics, see, e.g., Robin Lakoff, 2003; and for an analysis of the identities managed by women parliamentarians in EU parliaments – in interviews or stories about their activities – see Wodak, 2003).

Since models are not construed from scratch each time a speaker begins to speak, we may assume that there are a number of pervasive strategies that automatize part of the representations, such as the more or less permanent personal and social identities of speakers. Thus, Tony Blair is “naturally” speaking British English virtually all the time, and more particularly his own regional and class variant, but he need not ongoingly and consciously construe himself as a speaker of English, etc. – until such an identity is (made) relevant in interaction, for instance, in international meetings with heads of state speaking other languages. There may be other identities that are so commonly experienced and performed that they get semi-automatized, as is his being a man, a politician, an adult and so on. And “on the job” such will probably be the case for his being the PM – an identity he obviously no longer activates in the context models of his conversations at home or with friends and family.

From this discussion we may conclude that there seem to be at least two different kinds of contextual constraints on language use, variation and discourse: the more or less stable ones that are trans-contextual, on the one hand, and those that need to be construed or activated anew for each situation on the other. Because the first typically represent group variables, they are often called “dialect” variables (Ferguson, 1994). It is assumed that they act (more or less unconsciously and only moderately controllably) in much the same way for all the members of a group or community: speakers of English, speakers of a specific region or class, men or women, adults or children and so on (for details, see the papers in Eckert and Rickford, 2001). In other words, recipients may often recognize a man, child, English or Cockney speaker when they hear one, whatever the situation in which they speak.

These are not situationally variable conditions and hence not part of contexts as defined here. Note though that dialect speakers (just like speakers of standard variants) may still speak their dialect in an individually unique way, again depending on idiosyncratic speech properties on the one hand, and – for us relevant – situational variations on the other. The activation and enacting of social identities obviously depend on the person and her or his personal experiences, as well as on the constraints of the current interaction (Johnstone, 2003). In other words, as soon as (regional, class, gender, age, etc.) “dialect” variation can be more or less consciously controlled and thus becomes functional in specific communicative situations, then its corresponding identities will be part of the context model – for instance, when politicians adopt a specific class or regional variant when speaking to voters in order to make a positive impression.

Other identities tend to be more variable across situations, such as professional (being the PM), relational (being friend or foe, being a husband) or emotional (being angry or jealous) identities and properties. For Tony Blair during his speech these are the ones that have been listed above. Again, some of these are probably rather stable *within* the context model (such as Blair’s role as PM in this debate), whereas others are more or less activated and only foregrounded locally – and then backgrounded again – when necessary (such as his party membership), and of course the communicative roles of being Speaker, Addressee, etc.

This summarizing account of some of the theoretical points made elsewhere in this book is relevant here when we theorize about the question of the relation between social situation and language use. Whatever more general or abstract notions we deal with in this chapter, such as influence, conditioning, causation, control, co-variation and so on, the point is that the “real” thing of this relationship is the kind of schematically organized mental model sketched above. Only when we examine such a model are we able to explain

why some social identities are (made) more or less relevant, and others hardly so, how these may vary although the social situation remains the same, and how different speakers or group members, at various moments, bring such identities and other aspects of the social situation to bear in different ways. In other words, the very notion of variation should be taken much more seriously. Only situationally, personally and sequentially variable context models can account for such variation. If we want to account for (nearly) all aspects of structure of the speech of Tony Blair, we need this kind of theoretical and cognitive construct.

### *Contextual variability versus social similarity*

It should be stressed, however, that discourses and interactions are not *only* unique and variable. They also have many properties in common, across communicative events, and across the ad hoc mental models of the participants of such events. Indeed, the participants themselves presuppose they have many things in common, such as language, culture, sociocultural knowledge and specific local knowledge, attitudes, ideologies, norms and values, and so on. Despite the variation and diversity of each (moment of) talk or text, there is also identity or similarity. Most of the properties of Tony Blair's speech (grammar, accent, discourse rules, presupposed knowledge) he shares with the other MPs and many others of the same groups or communities of which he is a member. He can only hope to persuade the MPs when he assumes that they share some basic norms, values and ideologies (e.g., nationalism, democracy). He also knows that he is British and among other British people who share the Setting and are engaging in the macro act of governing the country. This, and much more, then, he shares with others, as we also have seen in the discussion of the notion of Common Ground and as we shall see in the account of social cognition in *Society and Discourse*. This allows him and the others, as well as the analyst, to generalize and abstract, and represent themselves as group members, or think in terms of groups or communities, e.g., when he categorizes dissident voices as being from the "Opposition" and, more generally, when distinguishing between Us and Them along several social and political dimensions (see, e.g., Leudar, Marsland and Nekvapil, 2004).

In sum, as we shall see in the rest of this chapter, the variation of language use as it is displayed and performed in talk and text presupposes context models as well as generalized knowledge about groups; discourse always manifests a combination of these influences. Note though that *both* are mediated cognitively, whether as ad hoc, personal context models, as contextually-shared current Common Ground, or as socioculturally-shared grammars, knowledge and ideologies about social situations and structures.

*Social abstraction and co-variation*

At a higher level of description we may abstract from cognitive processes and from individual differences between speakers, and hence from subjective context models, and simply take the mediating role of models for granted as part of language production and understanding. This is the practice of most “social” approaches to text and talk, for instance, in sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, the ethnography of speaking, and much critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Van Dijk, 1993a). That is, in that case we undertake an “unmediated” analysis of the relations between social situation and discourse, and ultimately between society and language and communication. In this case, the nature of the situational “influence” remains un-analyzed, often implicitly understood as “causation,” or simply operationalized in term of co-variation: if something changes/varies in social situation S and such a change leads to a specific change/variation in discourse D, then we say that S “influences” D.

However, this “influence” is neither necessary nor sufficient, and neither deterministic nor causal: being members of class C does not, as such, and directly, “cause” these members to speak with such and such an accent, and even less to tell stories in such and such a way. Rather, at the abstract level of groups or communities, the correlation is probabilistic, in the sense that so many percent of the members tend to do so in so many percent of the interactional situations.

In less probabilistic terms one might prefer to speak of “conditioning” – which means that a specific condition, together with other conditions, normally leads to such and such a discourse feature. If we were to require an explicit “causal” analysis of the link between social properties of speakers and their language use, we would need a very complex chain of conditional relationships, beginning with the specific conditions of their language acquisition, perceptions and interpretations of social situations, the formation of rules and constraints, life-long experiences and so on. Since none of these relationships is strictly causal, neither is the overall relationship, so that (non-rule-based) social influences on language use are only probabilistic.

*Control*

A notion that may apply both in a cognitive and a social account of the “influence” of situation on talk and text, and that we have used several times before, is that of *control*. This notion is stronger and more specific than the vague notion of “influence,” but avoids the pitfalls of using “causation” or “determination” in the description of human action and discourse. We may say that A “controls” B when A is a *necessary condition* of B. For instance, no appropriate discourse is possible without shared knowledge of the participants.

In other words, we'll say that knowledge "controls" the production and comprehension of discourse. Conversely, because there are a vast number of other (necessary) conditions of discourse, knowledge (like grammar) cannot be said to "cause" discourse. Cognitively, this means that knowledge is a necessary *component* in the *process* of discourse production and comprehension.

More generally, then, we may say that context controls discourse by virtue of the definition of context as the definition of the *relevant* aspects of the social situation. Note that the distinction between context (as mental model) and social situation is crucial here: for instance, the gender identity of participants is hardly a necessary (and maybe not even a sufficient) condition of discourse variation, but once participants make such an identity relevant for the interaction (by including this identity in their context models) it controls how they speak or understand.

Depending on the kind of context structures, control may take a weaker form, and no longer involve necessary, but only probable or possible, conditions. Thus, whereas knowledge is a necessary condition of any (appropriate) discourse, and Setting is necessary or highly probable (meaning that participants are always minimally aware of time or place), Participant categories (such as roles and identities) may have variable control. Communication roles, such as Speaker and Recipient, are by definition necessary conditions. Gender, ethnicity, class or status, exercise more or less strong control, depending on the situation – they are not necessary conditions, although they are often sufficient conditions of discourse variation (recipients are often able to infer these social properties from the discourse of the speaker). They may be part of the social situation, but participants need not ongoingly attend to such identities when speaking. That is, they are not necessarily part of (all states of) context models. They may background such identities. In institutional talk and text some of the participant categories may be necessary conditions of context models and hence control discourse, as we have seen for parliamentary sessions or news production.

For these and other examples, we see that control is defined both in cognitive terms (part of context models and mental processes) and in social or societal terms (verbal action requires speakers and recipients, parliamentary sessions require to be opened by the Speaker, classes are taught by professors, etc.). If the rules or constraints of such cognitive or social control are disregarded, or do not function well because of some disorder, inappropriate discourse will be the more or less likely result.

### *Functionality*

The dominant perception of context–discourse relations is that it is context that influences (controls, etc.) discourse. That the reverse also holds, namely, that



discourse also influences context, is sometimes recognized, but usually added as an afterthought – and seldom systematically studied. Indeed, in September 2006, Google listed only about 600 sites featuring the phrase “functions of discourse,” but more than 120,000 for the phrase “functions of language.” That is, functionality is studied more in general and abstract terms, in relation to language as a system, than in relation to specific (aspects of) text and talk.

One of the reasons for such a bias is the practical problem that influence on text and talk can be studied by analyzing some aspects of discourse itself, whereas discourse influences on the context may be quite diffuse and indirect, and extend far beyond the current situation. Hence, where such influences have been studied, they are sequential, and hence part of the same situation: the (“co-textual”) influence of specific turns or actions on following actions in a sequence. Or else, as is the case in the Iraq debate, some properties of the speech of one MP may be occasioned by those of a previous speech. In other situations, consequences of discourse may be observed, for instance, if these are formally established. Thus, after the Iraq debate in the UK House of Commons, a vote is taken – and the outcome of the vote can be seen as one of the consequences of the speeches of the debate. Note also that according to my theory of context the influence of discourse always runs through a sociocognitive interface. Speeches in a debate do not have a direct influence, as such, on subsequent speeches, but obviously only *through the interpretation of the recipients*.

If discourses influence context, that is, the interpretation of the communicative situation by recipients, and – indirectly – the discourse and other actions occasioned by such interpretations (models), a classical way of describing such a relationships is in terms of *functions*.

We should distinguish between two different types of functions, however, namely *hierarchical* and *sequential* ones. Thus, Tony Blair’s speech may also be analyzed in terms of its various social and political functions, such as defending a motion, manipulating parliament, legitimating his policy, etc. Note that these functions are higher-level, abstract actions (described as “doing X by saying Y”), and not really sequential consequences, such as changing the minds of the MPs (a consequence of the act of discursive persuasion), voting or, indirectly, going to war against Iraq. Hierarchical functionality is often described in terms of components of larger actions: for instance, Blair’s speech may be interpreted as part of the larger act of seeking legitimation for his Iraq policy, as his way of relating to parliament, as one aspect of doing foreign policy and so on. More generally, institutional or organizational discourse is thus hierarchically functional as part of the many kinds of “business” being done in such institutions or organizations. A speech in parliament is thus part of a larger debate, which in turn is the way decisions are made in parliament, and hence the way a political institution “works.”

Although such a “functional” analysis may seem quite traditional in the social sciences, it should be borne in mind that it is not merely a relationship between acts and their components, or between causes and consequences. Rather, with the cognitive interface – the way recipients interpret previous actions – a much more (inter)subjective dimension is introduced, so that higher level or consequent events or actions may depend on the (model) construction of participants or observers. Indeed, whereas some observers or MPs may interpret Blair’s speech as part of a more global act of manipulation, others may interpret it as the “normal politics” of persuasion and decision making. In other words, functions are not “objective” and deterministic, but flexibly adapted to the situation by the interpretations of participants. In this case, thus, the function “doing X by doing Y” may be called interpretative or evaluative. Each of these different parts of interactional functionality may be variable in different context models, as will typically be the case in the context models of Tony Blair and those of his opponents. That is, hierarchical, sequential and evaluative relations between verbal acts are also participant constructs, even when there may be socially based intersubjectivity, and hence similarity of context models.

#### *Other relations between context and discourse*

A more abstract account of context–discourse relationships is in terms of *mapping* in such a way that properties of discourse are described as “functions of” properties of social situations. The complex construct of “gender,” which itself needs much further analysis, has thus variably been mapped onto many structures of discourse, e.g., volume and pitch, pronouns, lexical choice, politeness forms, topic choice, and possibly some rhetorical features of discourse, among others. Since mapping is an abstract notion, it does not tell us anything about the cognitive or social structures or processes involved, but only accounts for a relationship. It simply indicates that we connect two levels of analysis, a social one and a discursive one, and that variation at one level has consequences for variation at another.

A related notion, borrowed from communication theory and genetics (in turn inspired by communication theory), is the notion of *coding for*, but with discourse as its origin. We may say that some pronoun “codes for” gender, status or power. One attractive aspect of this popular notion is that it suggests that such expressions need to be *interpreted* by participants, and that context properties can thus be *inferred* from them. At the same time, such a notion emphasizes the general function of language as a code for the production of social meaning. Obviously, this general notion does not tell us exactly how recipients are able to infer the social identities of speakers or writers.

Similarly, discourse may also be said to *express* or *manifest* context, if contexts, either in a social or a cognitive sense, are described as something that “underlies” discourse, and if context features are seen as part of the meaning or interpretation of discourse. Thus, speaker roles may be described as being “expressed” in text and talk if discourse is primarily seen as form and formulation, and less as meaning or action. Contexts are not observable, and hence discourse may be taken as one of the ways contexts are made “visible” through expression or manifestation. The speaker role may thus be “expressed” as the pronoun “I,” Setting–Place as the adverb “here,” and so on for other deictic expressions (for detail, see, e.g., Hanks, 1992).

A less formal notion, *indexing*, tends to be used in sociolinguistics and ethnomethodological approaches to discourse and conversations (Ervin-Tripp, 1996). This notion recalls the notion of “index” in classical semiotics as founded by Charles Sanders Peirce, namely, as the kind of signs that have some kind of “natural” relation to what they refer to (as is the case for smoke as an index of fire) (see, e.g., Eco, 1978). Given the various technical and non-technical meanings of “indexes” (e.g., as pointers), which suggest a semantic (referring, etc.) relationship rather than a pragmatic one, it would be better to avoid using this notion. Language users may “point to” many things when speaking, but usually do not *point* to context features – except when using deictic expressions – but rather presuppose these, and thus “manifest” them in some other way.

Besides the strictly deictic (referring, semantic) uses of *indexicality*, the notion has been widely used in a looser (semiotic) way to describe how language use and users may (more or less intentionally) “index” contextual features such as category membership, in the sense that if smoke is an index of fire, having a French accent may be an index of being French (see, e.g., Bucholtz and Hall, 2004, 2005, for a discussion on how social identities are “indexed” in discourse).

Classical conversation analysis usually limits the study of context to those aspects of the social situation explicitly *oriented* to by participants, and that are *procedurally consequential for talk* (see my detailed account of the study of context in sociology and conversation analysis in *Society and Discourse*, and many references given there). These ways of formulating the relationship between context and talk are in terms of some (unanalyzed) cognitive interface (orientation), on the one hand, and the mere conditionality of relevant context features, on the other – again, without an analysis of the processes or relations involved (consequence). Indeed, as is the case in much formal grammar, classical CA is more interested in the autonomous ways people engage in talk than in the possible explanations of such talk in terms of social (or cognitive) conditions or processes.

Besides such general and abstract relation descriptions, the context–discourse link may also be characterized in more active, interactional terms, as something that participants “do”: *establish, enact or perform*. Quite typical, for instance, would be the account of social roles as properties of social situations that participants enact or perform “in” or “with” discourse. Thus, many aspects of text and talk do not simply “relate” to the assumed gender role of the participants, but may be more or less consciously and intentionally “performed” by them, e.g., in “feminine” or “masculine” styles of speaking (Butler, 1990).

The same is true for the account of social relations between participants: speakers may thus be “doing” domination or resistance with their discourses and their features. Note that in the latter case, social situation and discourse/interaction overlap in the sense that the social activity engaged in may coincide with the very discourse itself, as is the case in news reporting or parliamentary debates. Obviously this observation is just another way of saying that discourse is a form of social interaction, and, as such, reflexively, part of its “own” context.

This more “active” account of context–discourse relations is congenial with an interactionist approach to discourse defined as something language users are doing, and not as an abstract, verbal product, as is more often the case for the analysis of written text. In my view, this *ongoing* interactional approach is consistent with a cognitive–strategic approach that describes the *online* processes of discourse production and comprehension. These are not competing accounts of what happens in discourse or interaction, but only descriptions of different levels or dimensions of a complex phenomenon. The same is true for an analysis of expressions (phonology, syntax, lexicon) on the one hand, and meaning on the other. Indeed, meaning *is* a cognitive object – besides being a social one.

Although a more “active” approach, such as this, to context–discourse relations is both theoretically and empirically more satisfactory, it should be stressed that such an approach does not allow us simply to fail to provide a “structural” account, namely of the structures of context models (and possibly of social situations), on the one hand, and of discourse structures, on the other. That is, “doing authority” or “doing gender” also means selecting and implementing grammatical, semantic or rhetorical structures of text and talk, among others. This happens in a strategic, context-controlled way, but that does not mean that we can ignore the knowledge of language users about the discursive resources, that is, the structures, rules or categories they already “know.”

We are able to speak about context–discourse relations in many ways, depending on the theoretical framework we choose. If we abstract from cognitive processes and social interaction of individual language users, we

may simply speak in terms of relations, links, mappings or even correlations. If we prefer a more process-oriented (psychological) or interactional (sociological) approach, the relationship may be characterized in more active terms, such as control, expressing, enacting or performing. Unless I am describing processes or interactions, the general notion of contextual “control” or “constraint” will be used, assuming that this implies that such control is part of the process of discourse production and part of discursive interaction. And it should be understood that the notion of “control” used here covers the complex sociocognitive processes and interactions involved in the construction, uses and strategic ongoing adaptation of context models.

### *The complexity of contextual control*

It should have become obvious that the contextual control of discourse is not a simple, monocausal form of influence. From the research reviewed in this chapter and the contextual analyses of a parliamentary debate presented in *Society and Discourse*, it may be concluded that text and talk do not directly vary with such social properties of speakers as their gender, race or class, or with participant relations, such as familiarity or power, or with overall situational characteristics, such as formality, among many other situational constraints. That is, if there is a relationship it is mediated by the participants.

Although we are obviously interested in generalizations, as in any scholarly inquiry, it should be borne in mind that each communicative event is a unique and complex combination of situational conditions and their unique discursive consequences. It should therefore come as no surprise that even for the most frequently investigated social conditions of language use, such as those of gender, few unambiguous and generalized results have been found (see, for instance, the critical article of Macaulay, 1978; about the often-assumed female superiority in language).

One of the many reasons for such limitations of earlier research, apart from the usual problems of experimental design, is that independent social variables such as gender or class never come alone in real language use, and they interact with a large number of other relevant contextual constraints. Even when the social situations (e.g., the gender) of speakers are “objectively” the same, or the same for observers, my thesis has been that this does not mean that they are “subjectively” the same for the participants. A woman in a debate may speak primarily not as a woman, but as a mother, an MP, a parent, a psychologist or a socialist, among many other possibly relevant identities ongoingly being activated or constructed.

Hence the theoretical and methodological importance of the notion of context models, which on the one hand emphasizes the subjective construction of speaker identities in interaction, and on the other uniquely interprets,

combines and constructs the relevant parameters of communicative situations. For individual speakers, this may imply not only a variable *salience* or *hierarchy* of (subjective) contextual constraints, but also variable *strengths* of such constraints.

Methodologically, this implies that one would need not only large numbers of very similar communicative events and observations, but also detailed insight into the ways the participants define such situations. No wonder generalizations are hard to find! It is well-known in gender studies and sociolinguistics that many earlier assumptions about the gender differences in, for instance, interruptions, politeness, the use of taboo words or diminutives, etc., are far from being the result of extensive research, and just derive from stereotypes.

It should therefore be borne in mind in the rest of this chapter that the (few) general conclusions about the influence of specific situational parameters are often based on correlational research that abstracts from other situational characteristics as well as from the subjective constructions of the participants. Since we have no direct access to context models, and concurrent think-aloud protocols or later interviews about how participant “see” or “understand” a communicative situation are hardly ever carried out, we may at best hypothesize that, despite autobiographical differences in some situations, some categories of speakers construe their relevant social identities in very much the same way. Any generalization, thus, presupposes one or more levels of abstraction from personally unique constructions of relevant communicative constraints of the situation, that is, from individual context models.

### Variation

A fundamental notion in the study of the relations between social situation and language use is that of “variation,” one of the standard terms of classical sociolinguistics (see, among many other studies, e.g., Chambers, Trudgill and Schilling-Estes, 2002; Eckert, 2000; Eckert and Rickford, 2001; Labov, 1972a, 1972b; Milroy and Gordon, 2003; Milroy and Milroy, 1997).

However, in order for context (however defined) to influence language use, the crucial condition is that discursive structures or strategies *vary* in at least one dimension, or in other words, that language users have a (more or less conscious) *choice* in adapting their utterance to the current social situation. For instance, we may address someone as “Mary,” or as “Ms. Johnson,” or as “Professor,” and such a variation allows us to make our address interactionally and socially more or less appropriate, for instance, depending on the (attributed) status of the recipient or the (e.g., more or less intimate) relationship between speaker and recipient (Brown, 1996; Ervin-Tripp, 1996; Lakoff and Ide, 2005; McConnell-Ginet, 2003).

However, whereas in the English language articles precede nouns, there is no variant that allows articles to follow nouns, and hence no context constraint that could control such an option, except in some cases of intentionally “deviant” language use, such as in modern poetry, word games or advertising, that function precisely by virtue of deviating from a grammatical norm.

The same is true in the production of news articles: whatever the newspaper or the style of a news report, it always has a headline (Van Dijk, 1988b). In other words, since certain structures of syntax, propositions, coherence, argumentation, narrative or turn-taking are obligatory and hence *context-free*, I will pay attention only to variable, *context-bound* or *context-sensitive*, structures of language use or discourse.

#### *What discourse structures may vary under identity?*

The problem is that variation is not a well-defined notion. What may be obvious for two different pronunciations of a word, or the choice of pronouns or other devices of polite address, may be less so for the selection of topics or rhetorical strategies of persuasion. A journalist knows that in a news report she should generally not tell personal stories about her private life, a constraint that is general for many forms of public, institutional discourse. But what about a service dialogue in a shop? Should sellers and buyers limit their topics in such a situation to the business in hand, or are they allowed to make “small talk” about more personal topics, especially if they know each other? Obviously, personal variation, as well as cultural constraints, is significant here: people are quite different in what they disclose in such encounters (Adler and Rodman, 1991).

The question is whether the contextual constraint for topics is similar to that for post-vocalic *-r* or to that for pronouns of politeness. Indeed, in the situation of a service encounter, some people in Spain address the sales person as “Usted,” and some address them as “tú,” depending on whether they already know the person, as well as on the age or status of the speaker and/or the addressee and other context constraints (Brown, 1996). Can we describe topic variation in (for instance) service encounters or newspapers in similar contextual terms?

More generally, the question should be raised as to whether or not contextual appropriateness is quite as strict as “grammaticalness” and other rules, constraints or norms (see also the discussion in Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003). Obviously, in some situations and in some cultures the contextual constraints are quite strict, but in many other situations the rules may be much more flexible. Thus, a news report in the *New York Times* is very unlikely to feature an irrelevant personal story of the reporter. For the NYT, this genre constraint may be even stricter than the rules of polite address that relate

novice reporters with senior editors: when breaking the first (news content) rule, the reporter may be found incompetent (and fired), and when breaking the politeness rule, the reporter may be found impolite or a jerk.

But in other newspapers in the USA or in other cultures, reporting the news might very well be associated with personal experiences – although cross-cultural data on news reporting in the world tends to suggest similarity rather than diversity in news-reporting style (Van Dijk, 1988a).

It seems plausible, therefore, that for each contextual condition or constraint on some dimension of discourse, I need to indicate some kind of degree of normativity or obligation, apart from empirical assessments of the relative frequency with which some constraint is respected as we know them from research on “variable rules” in sociolinguistics. Some rules and norms are categorical (e.g., there is no news when not reporting a recent event), and others are more a question of quality: a “good” news report or scientific article cites various sources.

In this case, then, I am more interested in a detailed analysis of context in order to explain what may otherwise appear as random personal variation. Thus, in the example of the service encounter in a shop mentioned above, one might formulate as a general rule that topic selection should in principle be business-related. Indeed, it would be quite unusual if we were to leave a shop without at least having talked a moment about the business we have there – unless the salesperson knows us so well that she knows what we need anyway, which also suggests that the more knowledge participants share, the less explicit a discourse needs to be. This general rule of topic selection for service encounters may be combined with topic-selection constraints on more informal conversations, under further contextual constraints (such as age of participants, knowing each other, type of service encounter, etc.).

More generally, under special conditions (e.g., of pauses, side-sequences, etc.) informal everyday conversations may occur nearly any time and anywhere in institutional or organizational settings. Although perhaps not all “variation” (in a statistical as well as a general sense) can be explained in this way, and although there will remain personal variation, or random and ad hoc elements in a situation, the idea is to explain as many as possible of the properties of the discourse in each situation in terms of contextual constraints.

### *Types of variation*

The very notion of *variation* needs to be analyzed further. The concept not only implies that expressions may appear in different forms in different social or communicative situations, but also presupposes that something remains the *same* (for debate about this criterion, see, e.g., Lavandera, 1978; Kerswill, 2004; Milroy and Milroy, 1997).



Such a condition is easily met when we limit ourselves to the usual sociolinguistic variable of *sound*: a word pronounced in a different way is a different token of the “same” lexical item, with the “same” (semantic) meaning, even when one of the variants is used in more formal situations and the other is used more colloquially (and hence has a different “pragmatic” meaning).

This may still be more or less true if we use different *lexical* items to speak about some thing or person: “man” and “guy” have more or less the same meaning (for one of the meanings of “man,” namely “adult male human being”), but the second variant is used in more informal situations, especially in US English. The differences of meaning in this case are largely situational or pragmatic rather than semantic. Indeed, “I saw the guy” in most situations implies the proposition “I saw the man,” and vice versa, which means that these expressions are (formally) semantically equivalent.

Similarly, if we address someone with the forms “Juan” or “Sr. López,” or with “Usted” or “tú,” then the forms of address vary, but what remains the same is that these forms deictically *refer* to the (same) person we are talking to. Semantic equivalence in this case is not intensional (meaning based) but extensional (reference based). Lexically variable expressions that are referentially equivalent may have both different (intensional) *semantic* “meanings” (e.g., “the man” versus “Mr. Smith”), and different *pragmatic* meanings or functions, given different contextual conditions, e.g. the addressee has a higher social status (power, age, position, etc.) than the speaker, so that a more “polite” or more “respectful” form is obligatory or more appropriate (“tú” versus “Usted”).

Although the notion of the “same meaning” (or reference) in these cases is not without problems, it usually provides a fairly explicit condition for the use of variants: the use of the concept of “variation” presupposes that at least something remains (more or less) constant, and such is the case for some kind of semantic “meaning,” even when the pragmatic or situational or functional “meanings” may differ (Biber, 1995).

But what about different local or global meanings without referential identity? If we assume that a service encounter or a news report requires specific, relevant topics, and if we assume that topic choice and topic variation are controlled by contextual constraints, then what in such situations or discourses remains the same so that we can speak about *variation* in the first place? A strong argument against a variationist analysis in this case is that if we change meaning, then we change the very discourse, and we no longer seem to be talking about mutually *variable* discourses but about *different* discourses. Variation in this case does not pertain to variation of expression, or to variation of choice among several possible options, but to variation between different situations, types of interaction or genres.

Thus, in a personal letter but not in a news report we may write about private matters, and such a topic constraint involves variation only in the way we represent the world, but not a variation of form given identical reference or identical meanings. And yet, there is some sense in saying that two different news reports on the “same” event in two different newspapers are variants of one another. If so, and if we maintain some form of “identity” condition, what then remains the “same?”

If we assume, in the realist ontology of discourse participants, that events have an existence independent of the way they are being described, then we can indeed say that at least at some level of analysis two news reports may be referential variants of one another if they give different “versions” of the “same event” (see also the discussion in Potter, 1996). The two reports may even share the same macroproposition, e.g., as expressed in the same or synonymous headlines. In that case, they are not only referential variants because they are about the “same” event, but also macrosemantical variants because they share the same macropropositions (topics) (Van Dijk, 1980).

In a more constructionist paradigm, however, events, and especially social events, do not have independent existence from the way they are described and discursively constituted (Potter, 1996). In such an approach it would be hard to speak of referential variants – and speaking of two “versions” of the “same fact” no longer makes sense, since the “facts” simply vary with the different “versions” used to describe them. In the same way, we cannot even tell “the same story” twice, because each “telling” has a different context and hence at least slightly different formal characteristics (Polanyi, 1981, 1985).

However, philosophical and theoretical accounts in this case need not run parallel with the commonsense realism of ordinary language users, who take most events to be “real” and “out there,” independent of the way we talk about them. For them two news articles may be about the “same” event, and hence be referential variants, or different “versions” of the same “facts.” It is against this background that we recognize differences of style, e.g., between the way *The Times* of London accounts for an event, and the way the tabloids do.

It is relevant for the discussion of the contextual constraints on language use that these differences of style and register for the same discourse genre are a function of situational control, e.g., they are defined in terms of the kind of participants (journalists, readers, etc.) and institutions involved. Synonymy, paraphrase, alternative versions, and similar notions should therefore be defined in gradual terms because obviously the article in *The Times* may not have many words in common with the account of the “same” event in, for instance, the *Sun*.

From this discussion we should conclude that it is theoretically important to be quite clear about the nature of exactly what remains the “same” when we compare some discourse with possible alternative discourses, so that we have

a basis for comparison, and can speak of variation. At least in commonsense terms, that is, those of language users themselves, this allows us to treat as “variants” discourses belonging to different genres, such as a poem or a novel about the same events, or a police report or my personal conversational story about the “same” robbery.

Note that equivalence in all these cases also implies *partial referential equivalence*, e.g., when two texts provide more or less information about the “same” events, and hence when one is about properties of the event that are not mentioned in the other text, or vice versa. The same is true for trans-level equivalence, for instance, when one text describes the “same” event at another (more general, or more specific) level of description. Such a difference would account, for instance, for the variation between “succinct” and “elaborate” or “prolific” styles. All rhetorical variants could be accounted for in the same way, either at the level of (more or less strict) meaning equivalence or referential equivalence, whether or not expressions or meanings are emphasized or de-emphasized (by hyperboles, euphemisms, etc.).

In sum, I have now examined types of variation based on phonological and lexical identity, or the “sameness” of local and global (intensional) meanings, variable levels of description (more or less detail, more or less specific description), and various kinds of reference. Obviously variation is a relative notion, more specifically, level-relative: as long as there is an “underlying” level that does not change, we may describe the higher-level details as variable forms of expressing or realizing the underlying levels.

#### *Semantic variation under model-theoretic identity*

In order to make such a summarizing account of variation more explicit, I shall return to the solution that resolved the famous problem of co-reference and coherence in discourse, namely, cognitive model theory: *two discourses are variants at some level if they are interpreted as the same event model at that level*. This first of all satisfies the usual referential identity of variant expressions (“speaking about the same things”), and second brings in an important subjective element, since models embody subjective representations of an event. Thus, if for some language user (journalist or reader) two news reports about the “same event” are not interpreted as about the same event, then, *for these language users*, they are, by definition, not variants.

Note that this model-theoretical account of discourse variation is *relative* to the *levels* of discourse and mental models, as it should be. That is, discourses may be macrostructural variants if they have identical macrostructures in the event model, e.g., when language users interpret them globally as being about the “same” global event – even when the details of the texts may be different, about different details of the mental model.

This solution is also nicely consistent with the main thesis of this book, namely to account for situational differences in terms of context models. Thus, to complete the definition of variation, we are now able to say that *discourses are variants (at some level) if they share the same event model (at some level), but if their context models are different.*

All this leaves room for a lot of variation, not only at the levels of phonological (and of course graphical, visual), lexical, syntactic forms or (other, global) genre formats or superstructures (narratives, argumentation, news report schemas, scientific article formats, etc.), but less strictly also for meaning paraphrase, or different “versions” of the “same” events, that is, referential variants as accounted for in terms of mental models. And all these variants may of course depend on contextual constraints.

So far, it has been assumed that discourse variation is contextually controlled. This is plausible in a functional approach to language and discourse, but probably not a necessary condition: We may theoretically have “free” variation, e.g., of phonology, syntax, lexicon or other discourse structures that more or less arbitrarily vary by situations and speakers, but which have no social or situational significance (function, implications, interpretations, etc.). They are just arbitrary, ad hoc variations, often beyond the control of the participants – and described as such as long as we have not found other underlying (neurological?) constraints that condition such variation. In other words, variation without different context models by definition has no pragmatic functions (although it may have other psychological or pathological causes, and then would be diagnostically relevant).

### *Pragmatic variation?*

Most variation is based on local or global equivalence of meaning or reference: saying “the same thing” in different ways. Does this exclude “pragmatic” variation? Some contexts, but not others, allow speakers to issue orders or other directives to recipients, for instance, if the speaker is more powerful, has more authority or fulfills an institutional role. If variation is a useful notion in order to account for context-dependent discourse structures, what remains the “same” in this case? Could we say, for instance, that the propositional content (e.g., to leave the room, to stop the car or to pay one’s taxes) remains constant, and the variation is in its illocutionary function, so that in one context the speaker may *order* the recipient to do something, and in another she has to *request* the “same” thing? Or are we able to say that both are “directives” – in the sense that the speaker wants the recipient to do something – but that the variation consists in the choice of different directive speech acts, such as commands versus requests, as pragmatic alternatives?

Following the (sociocognitive) model-theoretic analysis proposed above, this kind of pragmatic variation holds when two utterances have the same *context model* at some level, for instance the same goals or wish of the speaker with respect to a future action of the recipient, the same roles of the participants, etc.

This kind of analysis is, however, problematic when we think of many other speech acts. Thus, in some contexts we can appropriately congratulate someone, but not in others. But we do not have different sub-types of congratulations, so no choice is possible here, and hence no variation. In other words, one would again require for pragmatic variants that there are two speech acts that are variants of a more general or basic underlying (type of) speech act. In this case one aspect of a context may be different (e.g., the power relation between participants) whereas everything else in the context model is the same. Again, in such a case we should speak of relative, level-dependent, identity of models, of “pragmatic” (contextual) models but not of “semantic” (referential) models. The variation here is defined in terms not of *saying* (more or less) the same thing, but of *doing* more or less the same thing (in the sense of accomplishing the same fundamental speech act). Hence as long as there is a basis of comparison and identity, defined here in terms of some kind of mental model, then we may speak about variation in a broad sense. Most of the kinds of variation we deal with, however, are formal, and meaning or reference based: different ways of saying/speaking (about) the same thing.

### *Interactional variation?*

Finally, extending this analysis of speech acts to a more general theory of *talk-in-interaction*, we may ask whether we can accomplish the “same” act by saying or doing different things, and, conversely, whether by saying the same thing in different contexts, we are accomplishing different actions.

In the first case, we have obvious examples of different ways of beginning, interrupting or ending a conversation, a parliamentary debate, a news report or a scholarly article, and different ways of agreeing or disagreeing, among a host of other forms of interaction.

In the second case, given the utterance of expressions such as “I am hungry,” one may accomplish not only different speech acts (assertions, indirect requests, etc.), but also many other forms of interaction, such as responding to a question, accepting an invitation to dinner, criticizing the policies of the government, and many more, depending on the implicatures allowed by the context.

The question then is whether “recontextualization” of the “same” utterance involves some kind of pragmatic or interaction variation – a different

pragmatic meaning or function of the “same utterance” in different situations, or whether we should rather speak of two different discourses, simply because they have different pragmatic meanings or functions. This is, so to speak, to turn the notion of variation on its head. Whereas we usually speak of variation when different discourses have the same semantic or pragmatic mental models, in this case we have different pragmatic models but the “same” discourse.

Similarly, although different genres have different ways of Beginning or Ending, or other conventional categories or (inter)actions, it would be strange, to say the least, to call two discourses variants because both feature a specific form of Beginning, and are thus both members of the *formal* class of discourses that have some introductory category, such as having Greetings, Announcements, Titles, Summaries or Abstracts at the beginning. Even if there were some kind of similarity that would allow comparison, it would be a formal one, and not a pragmatic or interactional one, for there are no obvious contextual constraints that condition such variation. For instance, there is no contextual condition that requires initial summaries, except a cognitive condition of facilitating processing, understanding and recall, and of course the usual rules or norms of a genre and their institutional conventionalization (such as headlines of news reports in the press).

Although this issue is theoretically still far from clear, it may be assumed provisionally that different contexts tend in general to condition the production of different instances of text or talk. Such discursive differences typically manifest themselves in the variable expressions, forms or formats, of more or less the “same” meaning, function or action. When the utterance is more or less the same, different contexts will generally lead to different (pragmatic) meanings, function, interpretations, etc.

I propose settling the well-known issue of “sameness” in terms of semantic and pragmatic mental models and their corresponding levels or dimensions. This implies that the notion of “variation” has not only a social dimension, but also a subjective dimension: what are “variants” for one language user may not be so for others. This may also lead to conflicts of interaction, namely when one variant for one participant is perfectly appropriate in the current situation (according to her or his context model of that situation) but not for another participant. Indeed, what for one person may count as a compliment, may count as an insult for others. We see that sociocognitive model theory again accounts for an important aspect of text–context relationships, namely the “sameness” condition underlying variation.

## Style

If there is one notion in the humanities and the social sciences that a theory of context needs to make more explicit, it is the notion of *style*. Dozens of

meanings and definitions of style have been used in such diverse fields as (the study of) architecture, painting, literature or fashion, on the one hand, and sociolinguistics on the other (see, e.g., Eckert and Rickford, 2001; Sandell, 1977; Sebeok, 1960; Selting and Sandig, 1997). In this book and this chapter I define and use the notion of style only in the sense of a specific property of language use or discourse as it is controlled by context. Since an adequate context-based definition of style would require at least a monograph by itself, I only briefly summarize some of the properties of the concept of style as used here.

### *Style of discourse*

The concept of style as used here is a *property of discourse*, and not of words, on the one hand, or language users, on the other. Thus, selecting a specific intonation, lexical items, topics or rhetorical features is described as a property of style only when whole texts are under discussion, and not just isolated words or sentences. Similarly, if we talk about the “style” of a person or group, we refer to their discourses or verbal acts, and not, for instance, to their life style clothing, or other specific forms of conduct – other than verbal ones.

### *Style as variation*

Most of the properties of style coincide with those of language *variation* as defined, that is, with context-controlled ways of variable language use, under some kind of identity. For the same reason, style is usually described only for variations of form, on the basis of the same meaning, reference or topic. However, as I have done for variation, there is no reason not to extend the notion to other levels of discourse, as long as there is something that remains the same and that provides a basis for comparison; thus, specific topics or speech acts may be part of the definition of the style of a discourse. Only those structures that are variable can be stylistic: obligatory rules of grammar or discourse are not stylistic – although their violation can be stylistic. Speaking a language or dialect, using a genre, etc., therefore, are as such not properties of style.

### *Style as choice*

More specifically, style is the result of more or less conscious *choices* among alternative, variable structures. This less passive definition of style by its very nature introduces contextual elements, such as intentions or purposes. In other words, choice is the more “dynamic” activity aspect of the more structural notion of “variation.”

*Style as distinction*

One of the typical characteristics of style, in literature, the arts or life styles, is its *distinctive* property: it distinguishes individuals or group members from other members or other groups through their discourses (Irvine, 2001). For speakers as well as for recipients, such a property of style obviously presupposes (implicit or explicit) knowledge about the language use of other persons or groups. More specifically, a distinct discourse style may be defined in terms of *originality* precisely when no or few others have the same or a similar style. Distinctiveness, thus defined, is related to the contextual properties of personal or group identity.

Besides knowledge about one's own and other groups, the distinctiveness of style also has an ideological basis (Irvine, 2001). Indeed, I postulated that group distinction and identity is probably a structural category of ideological schemas (Van Dijk, 1998). In a broader, more sociological perspective Bourdieu (1984) emphasizes the ideological (for instance, class or caste) dimension of "distinction," such as a degree from a famous university, with obvious consequences for the topics and style of conversations (see also Ervin-Tripp, 2001). And Philips (2003) warns us that in different societies and cultures, women (and men) do not just have one gender ideology, but several complex ones, which manifest themselves differently in different communicative events. Remember that context construes the social position not only of the speaker but also of the addressees, as we know from all studies of politeness and deference. Such strategies of "distinction" may also be used to address elites in order to sell goods and services, as is the case in the style used by frequent-flyer programs directed at the upwardly mobile, as was found by Thurlow and Jaworski (2006, 99–135).

*Social style*

At the end of his book on discourse differences as a function of class, gender and age, Macaulay (2005b) dealt with what can be called social (group) styles. As elsewhere, he warned against hasty generalizations about class based solely on data from working class adolescent boys. He stressed that one should focus on carefully defined combinations of social dimensions: women from different classes and of different ages may not speak in the same way. Generally, and as I have indicated at the beginning of this chapter, he found that few of the observed discourse features are statistically significant; all that can be said, and only in very general terms, is that age produces more significant results than gender, which in turn is more significant than social class.



In the Glaswegian conversations analyzed by Macaulay the major (significant) class differences are in the use of adjectives and adverbs. For instance, middle-class speakers use “very” and “quite” more often than working-class speakers, and the same is true of the hedge “sort of.” Gender differences show especially in the more frequent use by women of specific words, such as the connectives “and,” “but,” “so” and “because,” and the pronouns “I” and “she” – obviously because they tell more stories in general, and about other women in particular. On the other hand, male speakers more often refer to places (as we shall see in the stories studied by Soler Castillo in Bogotá). Statistical age differences are, first of all, that adolescents talk less – they use fewer words, and, second, that adults use more discourse markers, such as “well,” “you know” and “I mean,” as well as the adverbs “quite,” “very,” “even” and “maybe,” whereas adolescents more often use such adverbs as “just.” In other words, just from these differences it does not seem to be possible to discern clear discourse styles for age, class or gender. Furthermore, the observations are limited largely to those of grammar.

Thus, heeding Macaulay’s warning, one should study discourse variation not in *women* but rather in, say, *working-class girls, middle-class adult women* and so on, possibly qualifying the subject group even further (by ethnicity, region, etc.). If that were done, identifiable discourse styles, such as ways of storytelling, might be related more interestingly to forms of identity construction that explained the variation. This means that the notion of social or group style is probably relevant for the description of only relatively small homogeneous groups, as is the case for the possible influence of gender on discourse. After decades of gender studies, it may have become obvious that lower-class Chicana girls in (a specific *barrio*) in Los Angeles talk in a different way from middle-class women in Sydney.

Whereas, as we shall see in more detail below, the vast majority of studies of social style and variation have focused on gender, class, ethnicity and professional language use, it should be recalled that there are as many “group” styles as there are groups. Thus, Al-Ali (2006) showed that wedding invitations in Jordan display not only masculine power but also the religious affiliation of the authors.

### *Style as context marker*

Not *all possible* variations of language are called stylistic, but only those that are *context-controlled*. Having an (involuntary) accent is not something one describes as part of the *style* of someone’s talk. That is, the criteria of choice and distinction already bring in some context elements, such as the originality or identity of the language use of speakers or groups, for instance, different youth groups (Eckert, 2000, 2003; Macaulay, 2005b). Such uses of

style are often described with the rather vague term of “social meaning,” which can be made more precise in a more explicit framework by specifying the kind of situation model properties inferred or attributed by participants. Similarly, style is often tied to types of social situations, such as formal, institutional situations, everyday informal talk, or e-mail. It is necessary to give an account of the *functions* of style in these contextual terms.

### *The functions of style*

As with any complex phenomenon, style cannot be captured in a simple definition, and my characterization so far is hardly more than a first step towards a context-based theory of style as a specific dimension of variable-discourse structure. The contextual nature of style is defined not only in terms of intentional choice among variable options, but also in terms of various functions that may be summarized as notions of distinction: uniqueness, originality, identification and so on. That is, language users are able to interpret a joint set of variable stylistic structures as specifically controlled by a specific language user (personal style, idiolect), personality (e.g., extrovert versus introvert style), group (sociolect), occupation (e.g., professorial style), type of situation (formal versus casual, intimate style), participant relation (friendly style), type of action (aggressive style), institution (academic style), knowledge (learned style) or ideology (biased style), and so on.

Thus, style enables speakers to index and recipients to infer personal and social identities, intentions and situations from talk and text by implicit comparisons with the variable language use of other persons, groups or situations. This function of style is crucial because it provides important information for interaction, namely about properties of the social situation to which recipients may not have access otherwise. We may therefore categorize all these types of style as *social* or *contextual* (for discussion, see the papers in Eckert and Rickford, 2001, e.g., Coupland, 2001). And conversely, when we know the social situation (i.e., if we have a context model), we may evaluate style (and breaches of style) as being more or less *appropriate* for such a situation.

Despite the contextual nature of style and style differences, we have very few systematic data on “overall” styles of text and talk, beyond the usual variation studies of register. We may have valid intuitions about overall style differences between *The Times* and the *Sun*, between parliamentary debates in the UK, The Netherlands and France, or between social science and natural science journal articles. But beyond the often-studied register variations of grammar, there remain many other stylistic discourse differences to account

for, such as type and size of letters, use of colors and photographs, popular expressions, alliteration in headlines and so on, for the differences between *The Times* and the *Sun* – besides the more “popular” lexical style, and other register variables. The point is that once such textual variation has been adequately described, we need to associate it with properties of the context, such as the ideological orientation of the journalists (and especially the editors) or the owners, and the social class or occupation of the readers, thus distinguishing between a “popular” and “serious” (or “up-market” or “middle-class”) newspaper.

### *Style, accommodation and impression management*

Since styles enable recipients to reconstruct the context definitions of speakers, they can obviously also be controlled by speakers so as to influence the context definitions of recipients. That is, styles not only index social situations, but may be part of strategies of *accommodation* and *impression management* and other forms of sociocognitive interaction. Trivially, if we want to come across as friendly (learned, etc.), we have recourse to a friendly (learned, etc.) style; if we want to threaten someone, we use an aggressive style; and if we want to avoid being categorized as racist, we use disclaimers (“I am not a racist, but. . .”) (Van Dijk, 1987).

Thus, style may also function to express *power*. For instance, the bureaucracy or professionals may use their specific style as a way to exercise control over clients (see, for instance, Prego-Vázquez, 2007).

Both in sociolinguistics and in the social psychology of language, “accommodation to recipients,” or “audience design,” has been studied extensively (see, e.g., Bell, 1984; and the discussion in other papers in Eckert and Rickford, 2001; Giles, Coupland and Coupland, 1991; Giles, Mulac, Bradac and Johnson, 1987; Giles and Powesland, 1975). It has become clear in later debate, however, that style is not merely audience-designed, but also “expressive” or “indexical,” e.g., of group identity, allegiance of speaker or reference group (Bell, 1991).

Context models elegantly account for these and other constraints, e.g., by explaining that in order to accommodate to recipients, speakers need to have a model of these recipients, namely as part of their model of the communicative situation. The crucial difference between this and classical theory here is that it is not the social identity of the recipients as such that influences speech styles (if that were so, accommodation would be deterministic), but the way *the speakers define and evaluate the relevance of the identity of the recipients*. This also explains why in some situations speakers tend to accommodate, whereas in others they prefer to distance themselves from the recipients by emphasizing speech differences.

*Style and politeness*

The management of appropriateness and impression often go together, as we know from the use of *politeness* strategies and the management of interactional *face* (Brown and Levinson, 1987). These may be more or less appropriate for a specific situation, but at the same time may contribute to a positive impression of the speaker as someone who has correctly analyzed the current situation and participant relations, and as being a polite, refined or sophisticated person (see also the contributions in Lakoff and Ide, 2005).

*Context-free styles?*

We see that social and interactional styles can be adequately described in terms of context properties. Sometimes such descriptions are quite precise (for instance, when we analyze a “polite” style in terms of the use of honorifics for a special category of recipient), and in other cases style descriptions are very vague and general, for instance when we speak about a “formal” or “casual” style.

It should be stressed again that although style is contextually or socially based, its properties are “textual,” that is, described in terms of grammatical or discursive structures. This allows us to speak about “style” as a form of language use independently of contextual constraint, but for instance in relation to other “underlying” structures. Thus an “elaborate” style would be described as a way of expressing underlying meanings, or topics, or mental models, in many, diverse words or propositions, and similar accounts would hold to describe a “precise,” “vague” or “direct” style. It is a matter of terminology whether we describe such variations or “ways” of speaking as “styles,” as we often do informally, or as registers.

**Genre**

Another notion crucially mediating between discourse and context is that of genre. There have been many earlier studies on genre (see, e.g., Bhatia, 1993), so I shall be brief about this notion. There are as many definitions of genre as there are theories, so my approach will obviously follow the theoretical orientation of this study. The most straightforward definition might be that a genre is a type of text or talk, or, more broadly, of verbal activity or communicative event. For all practical purposes this will mostly do, with all the usual limitations of typological studies: fuzzy sets, overlapping categories and so on.

My concern here is with the contextual nature of genres (see also Bauman, 2001; Macaulay, 2001). When we take genres as types of discourse, the most

obvious focus is on properties of talk or text “itself”: grammar, style, rhetoric, formats, etc. Although there are combinations of such discursive features that jointly characterize many or even most discourses of a genre, usually these discursive properties are neither necessary nor sufficient. I have already suggested, for instance, that there are few discourse properties of parliamentary debates (or their constituent speeches) that uniquely define them as a genre, although this is a very conventional and highly constrained genre where more or less conventionalized forms of talk are prominent. Apart from some specific lexical expressions (“my honourable friend,” etc.), there is little in parliamentary discourse that is not shared with other genres: controlled turn-taking and change, formal style, time control, types of speech acts, topics and so on.

The rather obvious conclusion is that parliamentary debates or speeches are defined as a genre especially in terms of their *contextual* features: the setting, participants (and their roles, identities and relations), the kind of (political) activity engaged in and their cognitive basis (goals, knowledge, group beliefs, ideologies, etc.).

The same is true for most other discourse genres as they are used informally: everyday conversations, board meetings, research interviews, police interrogations, news reports, TV shows, textbooks, novels, advertisements and so on. Large parts of their definitions are not in terms of structures or text and talk, but rather in terms of aspects of the context, as many of the identifying attributes suggest (parliamentary, work, TV, everyday, etc.). Genres defined in terms of context properties may simply be called “context genres.” Given their social, contextual nature, such genres may also be defined as *activity types* or *social practices*.

There are, however, other genre concepts that appear to be closer to the notion of “text type” or “activity type”: conversation, story, argumentation, meeting, manual, report and so on, and which do not seem defined by or limited to specific contexts, or, at least, may occur in many different kinds of situations. In this case, the definitions are largely in terms of the structures of text or talk: kinds of turn-taking and turn control, semantics (e.g., past events and actions in stories), schematic structures (as in stories, argumentation or news reports), speech acts (like recommendations in manuals, advice in all kinds of reports, etc.) and so on. We may call these “discursive genres,” although it might be more appropriate to speak about *discourse structure types*, since they are usually defined only in terms of specific discourse structures (semantic, pragmatic, interactional) and not in terms of all levels.

Context genres and discursive genres usually combine. That is, we may have argumentations in such genres as parliamentary debates, scholarly papers, editorials, everyday conversations and so on, and conversations in virtually all forms of spoken interaction (and hence often defined as the

primordial genre of all genres). Similarly, narratives may be part of everyday conversations, talk shows, eyewitness testimonies and life-story interviews, among many other context genres. Sometimes we may define a genre more in terms of structures, and sometimes more in terms of activities, as is typically the case for narrative (storytelling) and argumentation (arguing). This is the reason why narrative and argumentation should not be defined as genres, but as discourse structure types, and as such they may define the *class* of genres that have argumentative or narrative structures.

We cannot have a parliamentary debate as part of an everyday conversation or a news report (nor vice versa), but we can have conversations (talk-in-interaction), stories, narratives, statements, explanations, etc. in many genres – so they are different kinds of objects. We can and usually do argue and tell stories in everyday conversations (and other genres), but not vice versa, so we should define such “types” in terms of discourse structures, and not as context-based genres.

But, context-genres are not *only* characterized by context properties. We have already seen in Tony Blair’s parliamentary speech that such a speech, as a genre, also tends to be characterized by a number of discursive characteristics, such as formal style (to be further defined, e.g., in terms of pronunciation, lexicalization, syntactic structures), topics, rhetorical devices and so on. Again, few of these, *in isolation*, are exclusive of parliamentary discourse. Indeed, language is not that specialized, and its formal features (must) allow uses in many contexts and hence in many genres. Thus, the formal style of such a speech will be shared by many other forms of talk in public, institutional discourses. Its rhetorical devices may be shared by any other political or ideological discourse, including in editorials or op-ed articles. The topic (sending the military to Iraq) was shared by many other discourses, from everyday conversations to TV programs, news and editorials.

The point of the discourse-structural manifestations of genres, thus, is that these structures appear in specific combinations, collocations, frequencies and distributions. Few structures of parliamentary debates are unique, but *jointly* they explain how we often recognize such debates when we hear or read them, even without contextual information: controlled turn allocation, time control, the kind of interruptions, politically relevant topics, persuasive rhetoric, ideological polarization (Us–Them rhetoric), formal style and so on. At the level of grammar, we might find specific combinations of long (formal) nouns, opinion words, future verb tenses and modals (about what shall or must be done) and so on. All these formal attributes define classes of genres (e.g., formal, institutional, decision-making dialogue, political discourse, media discourse) or, rather, classes of types of text/talk (e.g., formal talk, opinion discourse, argumentative discourse, etc.) or *registers*.

It should be recalled that not all formal (e.g., grammatical) variation in talk is an expression or enactment of context features. For instance, the variation of present tense and past tense (e.g., in expository text versus many kinds of narrative) does not necessarily express pragmatic variation, but rather semantic variation: whether the discourse refers mostly to past or present (or generic) events or actions. Thus, for each of the formal aspects of genres or discourse types, it is necessary to examine what kind of communicative, pragmatic, semantic or other functions they have.

### Register

Another key notion used to account for context-dependent language variation is “register.” As is the case for the notion of “style,” so too “register” has been used in many, heterogeneous ways, from very general characterizations of language use, such as “formal register,” to quite specific uses, such as the register of news reports or parliamentary debates (Biber and Finegan, 1994; for the use of “register” in Systemic Linguistics, see Chapter 2). “Register” appears to overlap with what I have described above as style and discursive genre. Yet, when properly defined, it may have a specific function in a theory of context–text relationships. Thus, Finegan and Biber (1994, 2001) emphasize the relations between social and stylistic variation, where social dialect may depend on register variation, which depends on “communicative constraints of particular situations” (p. 4).

Thus as a first characteristic it shares with style the condition that it is a property of context-dependent language use. With genre it shares the typological dimension, and in fact many examples of registers given in the literature would be better defined in terms of genres – that is, their definition should be given primarily in terms of context structures, as is the case for parliamentary debates.

Register, then, could be defined as the linguistic dimension of genre, or perhaps even more specifically as the grammatical dimension of genre. Thus, if we take parliamentary debate as example again, this is a genre primarily defined in contextual terms: setting, participants, political actions and goals, and so on. If we also want to characterize parliamentary debate as a register, we would look instead at the grammatical characteristics of such debates. However, even if MPs in the UK parliament used a specific variant of English pronunciation (or variants of their respective regional varieties of English), clause structure, sentence complexity or lexical choice, it would still be strange to speak of a parliamentary “register”: it would be strange because such would presuppose significant grammatical differences with other genres, and there may be other genres, such as formal board meetings of large corporations, that would not be significantly different. That is, because of

their definition in purely formal (grammatical) terms, registers often may characterize several (context-defined) genres.

In that respect the notion of “register” also overlaps with what I have called a “text type,” but “text type” is a much broader notion, and also may include semantic, pragmatic, interactional dimensions. Thus, a news report is a text type – because of its meanings, references, organization and so on – which may be used for specific genres, such as a news report in the newspaper, or on television (or delivered orally as was the case with messengers in the old days).

Register description, thus, may be the “grammatical” part of the description of text types, which again may be part of the characterization of genres. But in the same way as text types may be realized across genre boundaries (as we saw for news reports, stories and argumentation), so register description may generalize over the boundaries of text types or genres, as appeared to be the case for the generalizations towards “formal” versus “informal” and “spoken” versus “written” registers. In other words, register is the grammatical–linguistic basis of genre.

Given the contextual basis of genres it may be expected that their grammatical register features have specific functions in the context. However, these are seldom unique: there is no one-to-one mapping between genres, functions or language and formal structures of language. Indeed, as I have stressed several times before, languages and their grammars have many interactional, communicative, expressive, etc. functions, and hence specific syntactic forms are seldom uniquely bound to one genre, text type or register.

Yet, context conditions may facilitate specific forms of language and hence make them more *typical* or frequent in specific genres. Thus, a written register has discourse production conditions (slower, more careful, visual feedback, creating a permanent record and so on) that are lacking in spoken registers, and hence may have longer and more complex sentences. Since at the same time a written register is preferred in many institutional, formal genres, the syntactic forms will also tend to be closer to those of the standard language (absence of contractions, etc.).

The fact that many genres of written letters, on paper, e-mailed or contributed to online chats do not satisfy this general distinction between written and spoken registers, shows that generalizations over genres, text types and registers must be handled with care. Spoken parliamentary debates may be much more formal than written chat messages or even printed editorials in tabloids such as the *Sun*. This means that the characterization of registers is only probabilistic: grammatical properties of text types or genres (say the use of the past tense, or the first person pronoun, in a personal story) are only more or less likely to occur and not absolute conditions (one can also tell a story about someone else, and what she is going to do tomorrow).



We have also seen that specific text types, such as stories and argumentation, may be closely associated with formal features, and hence with registers. Thus, if one of the main semantic conditions of stories is that they are about past events and actions of (usually human or personified) protagonists, we may expect more past tenses and other expressions to refer to the past, actions, private thoughts (intentions, etc.) of people, and so on. And if parliamentary debates have as one aim to make political decisions (policy, etc.) about the future, we may expect relatively more future tenses and adverbs, modals such as “should,” counterfactuals (“what if. . .”), as well as speech-act verbs that indicate future acts (promises, threats, and so on).

In other words, genres may have some contextual, semantic and pragmatic properties that lead to the more or less probable use of clusters of grammatical features definable by various registers. It should be emphasized, though, that the contextual basis of registers is not direct. There is no direct relation between a syntactic structure, such as sentence or word length, past tenses or contractions, and aspects of the context, such as setting, participants and goals. In that sense, grammar is pragmatically arbitrary, as it should be.

However, register *does* have an *indirect* contextual basis through text types and genre. For instance, the contextual constraints (purposes, knowledge, etc.) on storytelling constrain the semantics of narratives to information about past actions (e.g., of the speaker), and such a semantic constraint in turn may need past verb tenses (also depending on the language, the kind of narrative, etc.). That this link is indirect and correlational may also be clear from the fact that we can tell stories in the present tense.

Although the notion of register is still not totally explicit – for instance, it may extend its “grammatical” orientation to other “formal” or “linguistic” dimensions, such as the use of specific sound structures (e.g., volume), repetitions, letter type, etc. – we have a reasonably clear idea about its role with respect to text types and genres.

What about its relation to the equally vague term of “style?” It shares with style the focus on forms of language use, and in that sense it may overlap. Describing the “style” of parliamentary debates may thus feature a characterization of its “register.” However, style is much more general, and may also include aspects of phonetic and visual presentation, semantic variation (e.g., elaborate versus succinct style), speech acts, interactional moves, rhetoric and so on. Moreover, style is defined as indicating, indexing or expressing aspects of the context, such as speaker and group identity and identification, originality and distinctiveness – and hence involves comparison between speakers, groups or genres and so on. Register may overlap with style when we focus on the grammatical aspects of style, for instance, when we focus on the more-or-less typical syntactic structures of parliamentary debates in the UK today. But as soon as other aspects of discourse are involved, we would

rather speak of “style” than of register. Thus, the use of honorifics (whether or not ironically) in a parliamentary debate may be an aspect of register as well as of style, but the persuasive rhetoric, the use of argumentative fallacies, specific speech acts (such as promises), and the nature of interruptions would rather describe the specific style of such debates (a style that may be different in different countries). We would not usually describe these characteristics as part of the “register” of parliamentary language use (for details about register, see, e.g., Biber and Finegan, 1994; for a discussion of the conceptual distinctions between register, text type and genre, see also Biber, 1994).

### **Context control in discourse**

With this general account of the functions and contextual conditions of style, genre and register, I am now ready to examine in more detail these variable forms of language use at various levels and dimensions of discourse. That is, whereas above I formulated the theory of the contextual conditions of language variation, I now need to investigate its discursive properties, and examine more generally how context is expressed, enacted or performed in text and talk.

I shall do so in the usual level-specific way, top-down. I begin by examining discourse variation in grammar (phonology, syntax, lexicon). Then I analyze the “underlying” (interpreted) levels of meaning, action and interaction. And finally I pay attention to some “cross-level” formal dimensions, such as rhetorical structures, as well as superstructures (overall discourse schemas or “formats”), such as those of argumentation and narrative.

Note that for each kind of structure I am able to provide only a brief descriptive and contextual characterization: each of the levels and dimensions of discourse dealt with below has been, or needs to be, accounted for in one or more monographs. The point of the following sections, therefore, is only illustrative of how various aspects of the context are being indexed or “coded” in talk and text.

For context-based variation of grammar, I refer to the vast literature in sociolinguistics, which obviously cannot even be summarized or reviewed here. Research on context–discourse relations in the ethnography of speaking and (linguistic) anthropology are specifically reviewed in *Society and Discourse*.

Also, it should be stressed that most studies referred to are in English and the social variation reported has been observed in the USA, the UK, Australia and New Zealand – a well-known limitation of much work in sociolinguistics, CDA and related disciplines. Although I shall therefore not add the nationality of the people studied in each study reviewed, it should be emphasized that the results of these studies may well not apply in other countries and

cultures. For an example of such differences in the interpretation of context, see, e.g., the cross-cultural study of Tyler and Boxer (1996) on different assessments of sexual harassment.

Instead of focusing on the various levels and properties of the discursive “results” of contextual influence, another option would have been to systematically focus on the properties of the context and show what discursive consequences they have. Whereas in this book, focusing on language, discourse and cognition, the first option appears more useful, *Society and Discourse* systematically focuses on context properties, such as settings (time, place) and participants (their role and relations, as well as their social actions, as embedded in social situations, social structure and culture). In the present book these contextual constraints of discourse are not investigated systematically and theoretically, but mentioned only as possible conditions of discourse variation. Therefore we shall especially pay attention to gender in this chapter, more than to class and ethnicity.

### *Gender and discourse*

Most studies of the influence of situational parameters on discourse have focused on the role of gender, rather than those of class, ethnicity or age. As we shall see for the studies reviewed in this chapter, until the 1990s much of this research presupposed that women and men talk in a different way. This assumption of gender differences in talk found its expression initially in three major paradigms (the three Ds), namely that Deficit, Difference and Domination:

- **Deficit.** Women’s language reflects women’s subordinate position in society in many ways, for instance, in the use of hedges, in hesitation phenomena, in the use of less direct language and in taking less conversational control – in other words, in what were called stereotypical “female” uses of language.
- **Difference.** Women and men have been educated in different ways and live partly in different social domains with different experiences, and hence may be seen as speaking from the perspective of different “cultures.”
- **Dominance.** Differences between men and women should (also) be interpreted in terms of the dominance of men in a patriarchal order. Such power abuse also shows in many other ways in male discourse, for instance, by frequent interruptions of women, or by discriminatory restrictions of various forms of access: access of women to communicative events, topic choice, use of specific words, taking turns and so on.

Much of the research of the last decade, however, has been more or less critical of these paradigms because many studies did not find clear gender

differences of talk or text – or found the opposite of what was predicted (for detail, see the summarizing statement and commentary of Freed, 2003, in *Handbook of Language and Gender*, Holmes and Meyerhoff, 2003, as well as several other papers in the same *Handbook*; see also Lazar, 2005b).

As a result, first of all, the bipolarity of traditional gender distinctions has been called into question: there are many more gender identities than just two, and if there are differences, they are rather gradual: women may sometimes speak “like men,” or vice versa; gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, etc. speakers claim their own, more complex gender identities and so on.

Next, and perhaps most importantly from a theoretical perspective, is the increasing rejection of essentialist categorizations and identities: gender is now often defined not as what people *are* but what they *do* or *perform* in a given situation. And finally, from the perspective of this book, if gender is being constructed as a relevant participant category by the participants, this is seldom the only relevant category. For instance, Ostermann (2003), in an analysis of audiotaped interactions in a Brazilian all-female police station, found that women policemen were much less attentive to the stories of women who were victims of violence than a group of feminist women outside the police station. In other words, there are significant intragender differences here, defined in terms of occupation and position as police officers, on the one hand, and feminist ideologies, on the other hand. Below, we shall find several studies reporting complex gender influences on discourse.

This means not only that it is the whole context that influences talk, with complex influences from other participant identities, such as age, ethnicity, occupation, status or power, sometimes reinforcing but sometimes counteracting the influence of gender. Moreover, and even more importantly, rather than a combination of objective factors, it is a complex, flexible, strategic and subjective definition of communicative context that influences talk. Such a theoretical account is compatible with a constructivist account that defines gender in terms of what participants *do* rather than in terms of what they *are*. In other words, “doing gender” depends not only on the whole context, but rather on the way such a whole context is actively and dynamically construed, and such a construct may continuously change during conversation or during the production or comprehension of discourse.

However, most empirical research is not carried out in such a paradigm, and it is therefore not surprising that, beyond the assumption of normatively based gender stereotypes in society and language use, many studies find more variation within gender than clear cases of gender differences. In what follows, therefore, it should be borne in mind that wherever there appear to be

clear gender differences, they should be assumed to be found in otherwise very similar contexts, or in some case across contexts and hence be more or less context-free. Further research on the role of gender in discourse should therefore take such a more sophisticated theoretical framework as a basis.

One more word of caution. Theorists may find that the bipolar gender distinction between women and men is problematic for all kinds of reasons. This is also true especially for communities that tend to be discriminated against precisely for this reason, such as homosexuals, lesbians, transsexuals, hermaphrodites and so on. However, the traditional gender distinction between women and men in virtually all cultures is so deep-rooted in perception, thought and interaction, as well as in social organization, that it will continue to influence the context definitions of many if not all participants of interaction in most situations and in most societies. In the same way as we avoid an essentialist definition by emphasizing what people *do* rather than what they *are*, we should also be aware that what matters is not whether or not gender *is* (*essentially*) relevant, but whether or not people *think* gender *as they define it* is relevant. There is no doubt that, despite the many situations or groups where gender is irrelevant or differently construed, in the majority of situations and for the majority of language users, traditional gender identities, roles and differences still remain relevant in everyday life, and hence in their context models – even when combined with other contextual categories, and even when applied flexibly and strategically. The results reviewed below should be interpreted in this light, that is, where we find gender differences in talk and text, they may result from the influence of traditional, culturally shared gender definitions in social representations that in turn influence specific context definitions.

There is also a practical and political dimension to this issue. Problematising gender differences as well as simplistic gender polarization between women and men should not be an excuse to deny the relevance of the study of, and the resistance against, male domination of women. It is precisely the essentialist differences between women and men as construed in sexist ideologies that are used as a basis for the sexist discrimination against women (and gay men, etc.).

Finally, it should be stressed that the gender-relevant studies reviewed here are limited to the account of women and men as speakers, and do not pertain to the vast number of studies of gender as *represented* in discourse, which generally find that such representations are ideologically based and commonly quite stereotypical. And even when traditional gender roles seem to be challenged, more detailed analysis may show that dominant patriarchal discourse may still prevail, as was shown by Lazar (2005a) in her study of campaign discourse in Singapore.

*Race and class*

Similarly, the theoretical analysis of “race” – and the grounded denial of the existence of “races” – should not be used as an argument to deny racism (Van Dijk, 1992). The same is true for social class, and classism. Unfortunately, ethnicity, “race” and, especially, class have thus far been much less investigated than gender as the basis of contextual variation in discourse – beyond the correlational study of class-based differences of pronunciation and some grammatical properties. Typically, variation based on (attributed) ethnic properties tends to be dealt with in terms of different “styles,” such as “white” and “black” styles (Kochman, 1981).

From a different perspective, however, I should mention here the work that has been done on discourse and racism, which is generally premised on the contextual condition that speakers or writers of racist discourse are white (Van Dijk, 1984, 1987, 1993a; Wodak and Van Dijk, 2000). As is the case for the other contextual “variables” discussed here, “being white” seldom occurs in isolation, and discourse will at the same time be influenced by other social conditions, such as power, status or occupation. Thus, employers have been found to use specific disclaimers, arguments and rhetorical strategies in their legitimation for not hiring ethnic minorities (Tilbury and Colic-Peisker, 2006; Van Dijk, 1993a). Similarly, Mallinson and Brewster (2005) found that patrons in restaurants are categorized and evaluated (as tippers) not only on the basis of their skin color or other stereotypes, but also on that of class. Indeed, one of the implications of complex context influence is that racism and classism (and sexism) often go together. Thus Augoustinos, Tuffin and Every (2005), in their study of Australian students talking about affirmative action, found that racism is typically masked or denied in terms of individualist or meritocratic ideologies (see also Kleiner, 1998). Such a combination of gender, race and class as a basis for context models can also be observed in institutional decision making, as is the case in West and Fenstermaker’s (2002) study, which analyzed the meeting of the University of California Board of Regents when discussing affirmative action.

No doubt gender studies have been so successful particularly because of the joint effort of many academic women in many countries (Lazar, 2005b). Obviously such a contextual condition of academic discourse is hardly satisfied for the study of class. By the time (the few) students of working-class background become researchers and professors they have usually lost their working-class status – and with it the motivation for academic struggle on behalf of their original class. In this example we also see that we should not only examine the relations between context and discourse generally, but also critically reflect on such a relation for our own academic discourse.

### *Sounds*

Classical sociolinguistics has paid much attention to the social aspects of sound structures, such as the role of sound variation or accent in the use of standard language versus dialects, or differences of class or education (Honey, 1989, 1997). Such accents are variously associated with, interpreted in terms of, or intended to convey, power, status, attractiveness, solidarity and so on, as well as markers of the social or regional identities of speakers.

Sound structures may also signal aspects of the current *situation*. When we are angry, afraid or in love we tend to use a different “tone” (Gussenhoven, 2004). For obvious reasons, a romantic conversation will typically be carried out at a lower volume level than a market trader uses when selling goods (Bauman, 2001). Similarly, when we lower our voice we may be seen to be signaling that we do not want to be overheard, that the topic of our conversation is confidential or taboo; a lowered voice may also be taken to convey a threat. Moreover, ethnographic research has shown that loudness may vary across different cultural groups (Saville-Troike, 2002; Tannen, 1981).

In other words, some relevant aspects of context, such as the emotional state of the speaker, the distance between speaker and hearer or the intimacy of their relations, may affect some aspect of the phonetics or phonology of utterances, such as pitch, speed, volume, intonation or different phonemes (Bachorowski and Owren, 1995; Greasley, Sherrard and Waterman, 2000; Ladd, 1990; Markel, 1998; Palmer and Occhi, 1999; Whissell, 1999). Since we use them in different situations, we know that such sound variations are both under control (or controllable) and potentially functional or relevant.

The same is true for social aspects of situations (Bradac and Mulac, 1984; Cashdan, 1998). Sergeants “barking” orders to recruits tend to do so loudly, as do many angry parents to their children, thus at the same time signaling and performing authority or power. An ironical or sarcastic tone in a question asked by a professor of a student may similarly index power differences as well as marking a difference of knowledge (Ladd, 1997).

Sometimes these differences in sound structure are also a manifestation of biological differences, e.g., of age or sex; but in certain types of situation such different expressions are under control, for example, when children imitate daddies and mommies by lowering or raising their voices in pretend play (Andersen, 1996; Ervin-Tripp, 1973); when a woman in a high place with a high-pitched voice tries to speak at a lower pitch so as to seem more “statesmanlike,” as was the case with Margaret Thatcher (Atkinson, 1984); when homophobic men deride homosexuals by using a “feminine” pitch;

when I imitate the urban dialect of Amsterdam; or when my friends in Spain imitate the Dutch accent of my Spanish. In these cases, different sound structures may be used to signal different contexts, or to convey specific “contextual” meanings, such as the real or the pretend/performed social identities of the speakers.

In other words, even biological influences of sex or age, for instance, on pitch or loudness, may be combined with social constraints, e.g., such as emphasizing/de-emphasizing/performing gender, age or other identities (O’Hara, 1992).

Variable sound structures indexing different contexts and inviting different interpretations may themselves also vary culturally. Women in France learn to speak with a higher pitch than women in Spain, as is also the case for Japanese women compared to Dutch women (Van Bezooijen, 1995; for gender variation of pitch, see Henton, 1995; O’Hara, 1992). In some cultures, apart from showing differences of lexicon or other variants in speech content, women are expected to speak faster than men.

For discourse analysis these studies of gender variation in speech should be seen as an extension of the classical studies in sociolinguistics on sound variation, which generally merely find (but hardly explain) that women (in the UK and the USA) tend to use more careful, standard and prestige forms of sounds than men, who tend to use more vernacular forms in everyday conversations (Labov, 1966, 1990; Trudgill, 1972). Eckert (1989) and others emphasize that in any case, social variables such as gender and age should (also) be reformulated in terms of, e.g., communities of practice, or life stages. Thus, sound variation may be used as an identity marker of a specific youth group in which age and class and other social constraints are combined. The same is true for code switching, for instance, among Puerto Ricans in New York (Zentella, 1997). We see again that it is not social structure or its variables that condition (let alone cause) language variation, but more or less conscious and complex self-definitions of speakers, that is, context models.

Infants and small children are spoken to not only in grammatically different ways, but also with a different pitch in different cultures (Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986). In some cultures (languages) questions are asked with a rising tone at the end of the question, whereas such is not the case in other languages. It is well known that for many people in Northern Europe a conversation in other languages and cultures may be heard as a quarrel, because of the higher pitch, volume and/or speed. In some languages questions are not formulated with a rising intonation, and may thus sound like statements or commands to English speakers. Conflicts in cross-cultural communication may be the obvious consequences of such differences (Kochman, 1981), as is the case in the well-known study of Indian restaurant workers at Heathrow



airport who were interpreted as addressing clients in an “unfriendly” way (Gumperz, 1982b).

We see that, so far, sound differences may express, index or signal different emotions, power, authority, gender, social identity or “keys” of interpretation (serious or make-believe), and often accompany different speech acts (e.g., command versus request) or genres. It should, however, be borne in mind that variable sound structures as “expressions” or “indexes” of different properties of the context may be more or less functional, depending on the extent to which they are under conscious control. The different voice quality of women may (up to a point) be a manifestation of biological sex, but also index social gender that can be controlled so as to appear more “feminine.” We typically raise our voice when we are angry, but such a manifestation of arousal is only sometimes an index of a more or less controlled “performance” of anger (and in that case warrants special interpretation).

That is, it is those variations of sound structure that the speaker is able to control enough to influence recipients’ interpretation in terms of specific context features (power, authority, gender, emotions and so on) that are especially relevant contextually and interactionally.

To distinguish such different relationships between text and context, we speak, in the semiotic sense, of *indexes* of, for example, biological sound differences (in the same way as we do when we say that smoke is an index of fire), and of *symbols* when such sound structures are intended to be conventionally or culturally interpreted as a specific property of the context (e.g., I am angry, I am the boss, I am in control, I love you, I fear you, I have a good education, etc.). Such symbols are generally controlled or controllable. Note, though, that the distinction between “natural” and “social” (interactional) variations of voice is hardly clear-cut, as we know from the expression of emotion: fast, loud or hurried speaking may thus be a more or less involuntary, uncontrolled (uncontrollable) natural *index* of anger or nervousness, but a *symbol* of such emotions when intentionally performed. Similarly, when I speak Spanish with a Dutch accent, such an accent is usually a natural index rather than a conventional “symbol.” Such distinctions also correspond to the question of what social identities are explicitly and consciously represented in context models.

### *Contextualization cues*

Beyond traditional sociolinguistics, interactional sociolinguists, especially inspired by the work of John Gumperz, has gone beyond studies of sociolinguistic variation. They have shown that subtle differences of intonation or other “contextualization cues,” such as gestures, gaze and body posture, may also express or construct various contextual features and emphasized that

contexts are not fixed or given, but dynamically constructed and ongoingly updated (Auer, 1992, 21ff; Auer and di Luzio, 1992; Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz, 1976; Gumperz, 1982a). Obviously discourse has many more ways to signal, index or refer to its context than just these more subtle “surface” features. However, the originality of this research resides in the fact that it points to context-sensitive properties of talk that have hitherto been less studied.

Contextualization cues are not just an expression of relevant dimensions of context, but also *make* specific aspects of the social situation relevant, a point also emphasized in Goffman’s frame theory and his ideas about “footing” (Goffman, 1974), dealt with in *Society and Discourse*. This is especially the case for those communicative events in which context properties are not pre-established by the very situation (such as time and place), or by default assignments of an institution (aims, role expectations), but are reflexively emergent in the very activity itself: events such as telling a joke, being aggressive or showing solidarity. Contextualization cues in this line of research are typically those properties of talk that, as such, have no meaning or reference, but whose use allows various inferences about the situation or the very acts now being accomplished or activities engaged in.

Thus, it is suggested, specific prosodic features (such as intonation, volume or pitch), a gaze, a specific posture or a code switching, may be used not only to “express” anger, e.g., as an emotional state of the speaker, but also to construct a context in which specific acts, such as accusations or critique, become appropriate, or in which specific speech act conditions (such as discontent of the speaker about past actions of the recipient) become relevant. Such cues specifically obtain their interactional meanings or functions because they become salient through *contrast* or *difference*: a *change* of pitch, volume, speed, gaze, posture, register or language.

Note, though, that in line with what has been said above about the delimitation of style and register, it may be asked whether contextualization cues are limited to details of surface structure (sound, intonation). There is no reason why specific words, syntactic structures, or even topics or rhetorical moves might not also be interpreted as some aspect of the context, as, for instance, when doctors or lawyers use technical jargon to convey professional power or exclusivity. That is, all aspects of discourse dealt with in this section may be categorized as “contextualization cues,” as expressions that allow inferences about specific properties of the social situation as represented by the speaker.

### *Visuals*

Most work in linguistics, sociolinguistics and ethnography focuses on spoken language use, specifically on natural conversation, and hence has

tended to favor an analysis of sound structures rather than of visual structures. The latter have been studied more often for literature, the mass media and computer-mediated communication, and more generally in semiotics and art history than in discourse and conversation analysis (Van Leeuwen, 2005).

Yet, in a general theory of context and of text–context relationships, visual structures should also be studied: page layout, size, type and color of letter, the use of headlines, titles, subtitles, captions, tables, figures, cartoons, drawings, photos, footage, movies and so on, as part of the expression of a (multimedia) discourse (Hanks, 1996). We can have a very formal conversation or parliamentary debate, but also receive a formal letter or read a formal editorial in the newspaper, and the formality will also be manifest in the way they are printed or otherwise visually indexed or signaled.

There is an obvious contextual difference between a heavily embossed formal letter from the President or from a prominent law firm, on the one hand, signaling status and power, and a written love note on paper or by e-mail from our beloved one, on the other, indexing informal and close social relationships. Many of these obvious differences have so far been the object of “How to...” type books (e.g., Ryan, 2003) rather than of systematic investigation (but on internet genres, see, e.g., Crystal, 2001; Thurlow, Lengel, Tomic, 2004). There are also visual differences of style between the layout of a serious broadsheet and a popular tabloid, e.g., in terms of the size of the letter type and headlines, the use of color, underscores, pictures and so on (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1998).

In other words, self-presentation styles are also visually expressed, and so are communicative functions and other ways context is expressed in text, e.g., to signal whether a newspaper is more or less popular. Besides expressing its own “class,” a newspaper in this case also addresses different audiences (for the British press, see Jucker, 1992; for an account of newspaper styles in the USA, see, e.g., Barnhurst and Nerone, 2002).

Editorials not only appear in a fixed place in the newspaper, but also in a special format (e.g., italics), or with a special column width (usually broader than the normal column width) (Fowler, 1991, 208; Van Dijk, 1988a, 1988b). This is not merely a visual genre feature, but also an expression of the identity of the authors, namely (one of) the editors of the newspapers, even when no identifying expressions are being used. In the same way, we can observe the following visual discourse variations that may be contextually controlled (see, e.g., Barnhurst and Nerone, 2002):

- News reports may feature a visually separate byline and dateline, identifying the author, the date and place of the report or the setting of the events reported.

- Headlines of most text genres are on top, in larger type, and, in newspapers, printed over several or all columns of the news article.
- Abstracts of scholarly papers appear in a fixed position, usually after the title and with special type (often smaller print and/or in italics).

These and many other visual dimensions of discourse are not only conventional properties of genres, but may also vary contextually. Headlines tend to be bigger when the event is considered to be more important, and articles tend to appear first (on top, up front, etc.) when they are thought to have higher news value. These conditions may still be described in referential–semantic terms (for instance if “importance” is defined as the number of implications of an event) or in pragmatic terms (if “importance” is defined as what is important-for-the-participants). But the same differences of visual presentation (larger or smaller headlines, or the use of color or underlining) may also index class or status of newspapers (as between *The Times* and the *Sun* in the UK) and in that case such variation requires a proper contextual account. Except for reports about catastrophes, the use of large letter type in headlines, as well as the use of colored type or underlining, may be interpreted as indexing lack of taste, and hence associated with vulgarity and lower-class esthetics, depending on the context models of the readers, which, of course, may include their own class identity (Ames, 1989; Berry, 2003; Harrower, 1998; see also Van Leeuwen, 2006). Layout differences may also be interpreted as communicating a different “tone” in news reports (Middlestadt and Barnhurst, 1999) or even political bias (Keshishian, 1997).

Besides observing variations of visual expression and interpreting them in contextual terms, we may also examine the reverse relation and take contextual categories and see how these are typically expressed visually. Indeed, what about visual expressions of the usual context categories, such as (perceived) age, gender, power, authority, intimacy, institutional roles and so on? We have already mentioned above some examples of such text–context co-variation: children, corporate men, female professors, young lawyers or big US companies, may choose different writing styles, e.g., to signal power, formality, intimacy or other relevant aspects of the social situation. Serious broadsheets and lurid tabloids most prominently differ in the many forms of visual layout: more or less variation in typeface, more or less colored text, more or less pictorial material and so on. Countries, companies, scholars, women and artists may have specific styles of websites, and such differences also are expressed visually (Mitra, 2004; Mohammed, 2004; Lin and Jeffres, 2001; Vazire and Gosling, 2004; see also Lemke, 1999). Further semiotic analysis needs to provide the detailed differences in these forms of visual styles as they express or enact different contextual constraints.

*Syntax*

One of the characteristic features of style is syntactic variation. Such variation is limited by the grammar of a language, with the exception of poetry, advertising and other artistic or creative uses of language that allow various kinds of “deviant” syntax (Austin, 1984, 1994). Compared to phonological and morphosyntactic variation (such as *ain’t* for *isn’t* or *aren’t*), syntactic variation has been studied much less in sociolinguistics because it occurs less frequently, is less salient and hence functions less as a group characteristic. Indeed, whereas an accent is immediately heard and interpreted as signaling regional or class membership of the speaker, this is hardly the case for minimal (grammatical) syntactic patterns that occur only occasionally. For instance, unlike phonological or morphosyntactic variation, the use of actives and passives does not appear to have obvious class or gender constraints (see, e.g., Macaulay, 1991a, 1991b, 2005a, 2005b).

In a study of sociolinguistic variation in the introduction of new discourse referents (e.g., “There was a car...” by contrast with “A car...”), Cheshire (2005) found gender and class differences between speakers, and concludes that the account for such differences should rather be given in pragmatic terms. Thus, if the boys in conversations (in different English towns) used fewer bare Noun Phrases (NPs) than girls, this may be because they wanted to be more precise in their replies in the interviews and hence were more explicit in their introduction of discourse referents. On the other hand, the girls may have interpreted the interview situation more as a conversation and hence presupposed more knowledge and used less explicit discourse-referent introduction. At the same time, the middle-class boys may have used explicit NPs more than the working-class boys because they have a more independent speaker oriented style than working-class boys, who, like the girls, use a more addressee-oriented style.

In terms of my framework, thus, we see that there is no direct signaling of objective gender or class (as sociolinguistic variables) in this case, but, rather, different ways of construing models of communicative events involving, for instance, different ways of defining the interview situation and its goals. Again, we see how a mental-model approach to contexts allows for much more sophisticated accounts of the relations between social situation and discourse – apart from the necessity of a cognitive interface that explains how discourse can be influenced by social conditions in the first place.

Many syntactic variants have different meanings or functions and hence need to be explained in semantic, pragmatic or rhetorical terms; for instance, active and passive sentences or nominalizations put a different perspective on the description of an event, by emphasizing or de-emphasizing the agency and responsibility of actors referred to. Critical discourse analysis has often

emphasized that such combined syntactic–semantic differences of discourse may also have social or political implications, for instance, when speakers want to criticize actors for, or exonerate them from, the responsibility for positive or negative actions. Thus, in the coverage of “race” in the press, a newspaper may want to criticize the police for excessive violence against black youths and may do so by emphasizing the responsibility of the police in various ways. For instance, it may typically do so by explicitly mentioning the police as the agent of an aggressive action in the initial (topic) position of a sentence (Fowler, Hodge, Kress and Trew, 1979; Van Dijk, 1991).

On the other hand, men’s responsibility for their violence against women may be played down by use of the passive voice in the media as well as in court proceedings or other legal discourse (Henley, Miller and Beazley, 1995; Lamb, 1996; Penelope, 1990; Phillips and Henderson, 1999). This is not only relevant for the biased semantics of gendered discourse, for instance, in news reports in the press, but also for a critical analysis of context if, for instance, men use agentless passives to deny or minimize their own active involvement in violence or discrimination against women. Thus, Ehrlich (2001), in a detailed study of talk by male rapists in court proceedings in Canada, showed how the perpetrators systematically use syntax and lexicon to mitigate their own negative actions (and, similarly, judges may tend to obscure perpetrator responsibility for violent crime by explaining it away in psychological terms; see Coates and Wade, 2004).

Clark (1992), in a study of the British tabloid the *Sun*, showed how the representation of violence against women may be minimized by passive expressions and nominalizations in headlines – in which male perpetrators are notoriously absent. This was also what Henley, Miller and Beazley (1995) found for the US press. Moreover, in a (rare) subsequent experimental study they established that such biased accounts have an influence on readers – who attribute less agency to men when reading reports in which the violence of men is obfuscated by passives.

Whether these news reports are written by men or women, it is obviously the case that they are written on the basis of mental models with a masculine perspective. The same is true, and not only for the same tabloid, for the representation of white (police) violence against black youths (Van Dijk, 1991). We may therefore conclude that this is a general manifestation of in-group bias in discourse and its underlying ideologies and ideologically influenced mental models of events: in-group members tend to mitigate the “bad” attitudes and actions of their own group (Van Dijk, 1998).

As is the case for many of the other context–discourse relations discussed in this chapter, it is not men’s “objective” gender as such that controls such syntactic choices, but their gendered self-representation as men and hence

their failure to identify with the perpetrators of sexist practices, that is, the context model they construe during discursive interaction.

More generally, “semantic” mental models of events (which as such need no discursive expression, and may be used only for other, non-verbal actions or reactions), may be further constrained by “pragmatic” contextual conditions when such “biased” models are expressed in talk and text. We will usually find a pragmatically based difference between media accusations of the police, those formulated by the black youths who are their victims, and the lawyers denouncing such police behavior in court.

So, we may have media style, a legal style and a black-youth conversational style variation at the syntactic level too, for instance, in terms of word order, sentence length and complexity, active versus passive voice, nominalizations and so on. Age, class, ethnicity and social relations (e.g., power, solidarity) among discourse participants, as well as personal or institutional situations, objectives and ideologies of speakers, may thus indirectly influence the syntactic variation of the “formulation” of mental models in text and talk. Jucker (1992) showed how syntactic differences, such as complexity or the use of pre- and post-modifiers in British newspapers, index differences of style between “quality” and “popular” newspapers, with further differences between the sections (international news or sports) within the newspapers.

Parents often address small children not only with a different lexical style but also using different syntactic structures in conversation (Snow and Ferguson, 1977), as is also the case for children’s books and TV programs for children.

News, poetry and advertising differ dramatically from other written text types in their sentence syntax. Generally, this means that the sentence structures of written and formal discourse tend to be longer and more complex than those of talk. Similarly, everyday conversations, poetry and advertising may use more “creative” sentence structures, for instance, incomplete or ungrammatical sentences with special semantic or pragmatic meanings or implications, as has been shown repeatedly in linguistic literary studies (Austin, 1994; Cook, 1994; Ehrlich, 1990; Fowler, 1996; Toolan, 1990; Ventola, 1991).

Much of the earlier work on language variation focused on these and other properties of syntax. Typically, they tend to co-vary. Thus, in an influential study Biber (1988) showed that variations of linguistic features may occur together in different genres, such as various types of tense, adverbials, pronouns, pro-verbs, nouns, nominalizations, agentless passives, *that*-relatives, prepositions, adjectives, type/token ratios, downtoners, hedges, amplifiers, discourse particles, modals, verbs, *that*-deletion and coordination. Factor analysis of the variance allowed him to distinguish several factors that could, in turn, be interpreted in terms of different genres, for instance, through the functions of the syntactic features.



For instance, Factor 1 in his study is characterized by high (> .30) positive loadings on such features as private verbs, *that*-deletion, contractions (such as *isn't*), present tense, second-person pronouns, *do* as pro-verb, analytic negation, demonstrative pronouns, emphatics, first person pronouns, hedges, discourse particles, amplifiers, etc. High negative loadings on this factor are such features as nouns, long words, prepositional phrases, type/token ratio and attributive adjectives. Together, the features on the one hand suggest an “involved” type of language use as we have it in everyday conversation, which is less informational, and (more) interactive, affective, fragmented and about any kind of topic. On the other hand, the features of the same factor may define an “informational” language use as we know it from academic texts, which tend to be carefully edited, more formal, less affective and so on. Similarly, a second factor is defined by the features that typically characterize stories, in which we tend to find past verbs, perfect-aspect verbs and third-person pronouns, because stories are typically about the actions of protagonists in the past (of course, this is not true for personal stories in conversations, which may be about the speaker, and hence tend to have first-person pronouns, as is the case for conversations in general). Obviously, we do not find many present-tense verbs in narrative (as we do in conversation), so that feature loads very negatively on this factor.

It should be stressed that in the framework of this book the results of this earlier work on syntactic variation should be interpreted with care. Obviously, when syntactic features tend to occur together such co-occurrence may be interpreted in terms of various dimensions characterizing different text types or genres for, say, everyday conversations, academic prose and narrative. However, we have earlier observed that syntactic variation has not only pragmatic contextual functions, but also semantic ones. Thus, the frequent use of the past tense in stories derives from the narrative convention that stories are about past events and actions of human beings, which is a semantic constraint. The same sort of thing is true for the frequent use of the present tense in academic prose (which refers to timeless, general events, or specific current events), and in conversations (which refer to what participants do, want or think, when they are speaking). Similarly, academic prose is about specialized topics, and hence will require specialized, that is, longer and more varied words, and a high type–token ratio. In sum, these syntactic variations signal what these discourse types are *about*, not who uses them, when and where, and hence are not contextually based variables of discourse.

On the other hand, contextual constraints and production conditions show in other linguistic features. Thus, frequent *that*-deletions, contractions and discourse particles (such as *well*) index informal talk, as do typically deictic pronouns such as second-person pronouns, generally presupposing the presence of an interlocutor in the current situation, or private verbs (*I think*,



*I believe*, etc.) that express the current opinions of the speaker. Both the “semantic” and the “pragmatic” aspects of these various linguistic features index the typical *functions* of different genres in the communicative context. Whereas conversations among friends typically manifest high personal involvement and interaction by the participants, academic prose mainly functions to describe or explain complex events in nature or society and to inform specialists. In order to match linguistic – and specifically syntactic – features with context, we need to relate them to text types (discursive genres), such as narratives, conversations or expository prose, on the one hand, and contextual genres and their functions, such as everyday conversations, news reports in the press, academic articles or parliamentary debates, on the other. If the main aim of academic articles is to express and transmit specialized knowledge that also presupposes academic knowledge in both writers and recipients, then the (specialized) semantic correlates of specialized knowledge (e.g., different meanings in the field of genetics) will typically be expressed in many different, long, “technical” nouns. Of course, academic prose has many other functions, such as displaying knowledge and enacting power, authority and so on, however these functions are not typically captured by syntactic features, but by other discourse properties, such as citations.

Interestingly, very different genres, such as everyday conversations and academic prose, may also have some syntactic features in common, such as the high frequency of hedges (Hyland, 1998; Markkanen and Schröder, 1997). However, whereas in conversation these typically function to modulate feelings and opinions (e.g., in order to avoid hurting the feelings of recipients, and in general for reasons of face management), in academic prose they function to signal caution in claims or conclusions from research, and to limit responsibility for errors. Again we see that the link between context structures and discourse structures, for instance, at the level of syntax, is rather complex, and often indirect.

If we focus on exclusive or dominant pragmatic–contextual conditions of syntactic variation, we may end up with only a few linguistic features. Thus, Time and Place categories of contextual Settings tend to be more or less directly expressed in deictic expressions such as place and time adverbs (*here, now, today, still*, etc.), as we find them in conversations, but also in letters and news reports. In parliamentary debates in the UK, such deictics may be signaled by definite place descriptions such as *the House* (or *the other place*, referring to the House of Lords).

Participant properties, roles and relations are indexed in many and complex ways, only some of which are syntactic, such as the use of first- and second-person pronouns in conversations and letters, signaling the communicative roles of speaker and addressee. And conversely, the non-involvement of

speakers may be signaled by the absence of private verbs, the presence of impersonal verbs and so on, for instance, in academic prose.

However, as soon as we specify the contextual conditions, for instance, in order to describe parliamentary speeches or debates, as was the case for Tony Blair's speech in the British House of Commons, there are few direct syntactic correlates of participant roles and relations except the use of *I* and *you*, as referring to speaker and recipients as in most forms of spoken language, and more specifically such formulaic expressions as "my honourable friend."

In such debates, pronouns such as *we* may signal, variously, the speaker (as in the "royal" *we*, hence signaling power and authority), *we-the-government* (when the PM is speaking), or any other in-group the speaker associates with (same party, same country, etc.). However, none of this is exclusive – as is to be expected, because the factors only indicate tendencies or the likelihood that some linguistic feature will occur, and in comparison to other discourse genres.

That is, we can say only that the plural first-person pronoun *we* is *typically* or *frequently* used in those discourses in which the speaker or writer signals various kinds of group membership, as is the case in such different genres as everyday conversations, parliamentary debates and political discourse more generally (Beard, 1999; Wilson, 1990), but obviously this is not always the case.

Polarizing uses of the pronouns *we* (*us*, *our*) versus *they* (*them*, *their*), may characterize everyday conversations as well, as indeed it may all forms of polarized ideological discourse, typically including parliamentary debates, political propaganda and Op-Ed articles in the newspaper (Van Dijk, 1991, 1997). But in English there are no syntactic correlates that signal that the speaker is PM, MP or socialist, young or old, friend or foe, unless the speaker makes such roles explicit, as does Tony Blair, when he says "Here we are, the Government,..." And only some languages formally (morphologically or syntactically) express such general speaker characteristics as gender, age or status.

The contextual category for Ongoing Action (such as Tony Blair intending to legitimate his government policy through his speech, as well as any other political action he engages in when addressing the Commons), is hardly signaled by exclusive formal, e.g., syntactic, features either. Typical, though, for parliamentary speeches is the frequent use of modal expressions such as *must* and *should*, referring to actions that "we" (government, parliament, nation) are obliged or recommended to take – a feature it has in common with most speeches in decision-making genres, as would be the case for the meeting of the board of an organization. We see again that some formal features (modal expressions) are related to some general semantic features (obligations), which may be typical in classes of genres (e.g., decision-making meetings) which have special context features, such as representations of roles, relations or actions of participants.

The same is true for such categories as Aims or Goals, of course, which will be typically signaled by future tenses and time adverbs, modal expressions (about what we or they should do).

Finally, as I have argued before, Knowledge is a crucial context category and needs to be managed with care. This means that there are many ways discourse must signal what participants know about each other's knowledge. This is expressed not only in presuppositions in discourse semantics, but also in various syntactic structures, such as the presuppositional use of definite articles (e.g., *The House, the government, the course that we have set*, etc. in Blair's speech), initial *that*-clauses and, of course, all pro-forms, such as the third-person "*he*" or "*it*". Nominalizations are also usually definite and hence presuppose knowledge about the nominalized action (e.g., "*the manipulation of public opinion*" rather than "*a manipulation of public opinion*").

Concluding this section, we see that syntactic features are usually indirectly and in multiple ways related to context properties, often through their semantic meaning or reference – typically deictic expressions referring to setting parameters, participant roles, such as speakers and addressees, in-group versus out-group membership, in some languages gender and age of participants, and, finally, the various indicators of presupposed or asserted knowledge (as in definite expressions or pronouns).

That is, there are very few grammatical features that exclusively and directly have contextual functions. The same is specifically true for syntactic structures. These may occur – usually in combination – more or less frequently in specific genres, and hence require specific contexts, but seldom exclusively so. Rather, some feature may characterize classes of genres or more general dimensions or functions of language use. Thus, private verbs, *that*-deletion, various contractions, and discourse particles, among other linguistic features, are typical rather of informal spoken interaction than of formal, written genres, and, in that respect, also signal aspects of context. On the other hand, although past-tense verbs characterize various kinds of narrative (including news reports, and historical discourse) and hence genres, this is not because of pragmatic-contextual reasons, but rather because of the semantic constraints on these genres, namely that they generally are about events, actions or experiences in the past. Also, within genres there is often considerable variation between texts, so that for this reason we may characterize genres, and hence text–context relations, only approximately and probabilistically in syntactic terms.

### *Lexicon*

Lexical variation is eminently context-sensitive and one would expect it to have been extensively studied in stylistics, sociolinguistics, CDA and other

socially oriented studies of language, as well as in other disciplines. Nothing is further from the truth. At present, there seem to be no monographs (at least not in any western European language) that deal specifically with social context and lexical variation, and only a handful of articles on the topic (for lexical variation in general, see, e.g., Geeraerts, Grondelaers and Bakema, 1994).

By the words they use, speakers show their social identities, participant relations, adaptation to their audience, moods, emotions and values, opinions, attitudes, aims, knowledge and the kinds of (in)formal or institutional situations in which they are talking or writing. In sum, few context categories are *not* somehow signaled by lexical choice, in addition to the choice of deictic expressions, discourse particles and other words mentioned above in the section on syntax.

It should be recalled though that lexical choice is first of all controlled by meanings or by underlying event models of language users: as a general strategy, people select words that express as closely as possible the specific information in these event models. Given words with more or less the same (semantic) meaning, alternatives may be used that in addition signal some contextual constraint as represented in the context model.

It is systematic, for instance, that often there are alternative expressions for different kinds or levels or formality – low, standard and high – as we know from such triples as *pinch*, *steal* and *appropriate* (or *purloin*). Other contextual constraints on lexicalization include such well-known categories and examples as the following (among many other publications, see Barbour and Stevenson, 1990; Downing, 1980; Eckert, 2000; Eckert and Rickford, 2001; Geeraerts, Grondelaers and Bakema, 1994; Singleton, 2000; Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, 1998):

- **Situation type:** formal versus standard versus informal (colloquial, popular) versus vulgar; public versus private; institutional versus non-institutional; class variation; U versus non-U; diglossic H versus L forms; expressions defining register and lexical style variation: *automobile* versus *car*; *man* versus *guy* (*chap*, *bloke*, *dude*, etc.); *lavatory* versus *bathroom* versus *toilet*; *copulate* versus *fuck*; Spanish *lavabo* versus *baño*, etc.
- **Regional-dialectal variations:** British versus US English *apartment* versus *flat*; *gas* versus *petrol*; North German and Standard German *Samstag* versus *Sonnabend*. Such variations may also be used intentionally and then be functional, as, for instance, when US speakers in the USA use British words in order to appear more British.
- **Social identity and stereotyping:** (e.g., gender, class, ethnicity, age, etc.) e.g., *adorable*, *divine*, *gorgeous*, etc. (used by, or attributed to, women or gay men); *cool*, etc. (as a positive quality: young people); *dude*, *nigger*, *punk*, etc. (AAVE; youths)

- **Specialized versus non-specialized uses:** (participant roles and education – speakers and/audience; specialists – knowledge, institutional situations, etc.). e.g., *flu* versus *influenza*; *aspirin* versus *acetylsalicylic acid* in standard and medical language use, and similar examples in law and the sciences
- **Social position:** (participant status, power, fame). e.g., (address) *Excellency, Your Honor, Sir, Madam*, etc. (greetings): *your servant (your fan*, etc.); pronouns of power and solidarity, etc. *Tú* versus *Usted*, etc.
- **Social relations:** (participants: friends versus enemies; intimacy versus distance, etc.) between participants. e.g., *dear* versus *dearest (darling, honey*, etc.); Spanish *estimado* versus *querido* versus *queridísimo* (in address, e.g. in letters)
- **Evaluations, appraisals:** (opinions, attitudes; see also *Ideology*) of speakers and audience-design: (more or less) “positive” versus “neutral” versus “negative” words; euphemisms versus hyperboles; e.g., *slay, kill, murder, slaughter, exterminate; collateral damage* versus *civilian deaths* versus *massacre*
- **Emotions of speakers:** emotion verbs and nouns (indexing emotions of speaker when used in first person): *love, hate*, etc.; adjectives: *lovely*
- **Ideology:** perspective, beliefs and opinions of speaker and/or audience design: *terrorist, freedom fighter, rebel, insurgent, radical, reactionary*, etc.; *Us* versus *Them*; sexist and racist slurs
- **Knowledge:** (see also Participant roles, Specialized use; education; etc.), from *aardvark, abducting . . .*, to *Zeitgeist, zeugma* and *zygote*
- **Activity type:** all (deictic, performative) expressions that indicate what type of social (inter)action is being accomplished by this (fragment of) discourse. e.g., “*I hereby pronounce you man and wife*”; “*In this lecture*”
- **Goals:** all nouns, verbs, adverbs, etc. that index the intentions, purposes, aims or goals of the speaker/writer: “*With this lecture I hope to*”; “*The goal of this book is . . .*” etc.

Although this list of types of context control of lexical choice and variation is hardly complete, it does show that nearly all context categories dealt with before show some form of lexical expression or enactment. Each of these types would need extensive analysis and further commentary, as well as further empirical research. For instance, gender variations in lexical choice vary not only between different languages and cultures, but also within the same language or culture, for instance as a function of other social constraints (class, education, ideology, etc. of men and women speaking or being addressed), with important and fast changes between and even within generations. Thus, whereas Vincent (1982) found that older men in Québec tend to use swearwords more than older women, there is very little difference

among boys and girls in that respect. Macaulay (2005a, 177) cites an example of a Scottish woman, reflexively commenting on her own language use in a typically male work environment, who emphasizes that she may use swear-words like any man, but she feels less feminine for doing so – backing this up with examples of what it means for her to be a woman. We see how settings, such as workplaces, class, gender and questions of identity may be related in complex ways as conditions of lexical variation.

Thus, although it is hard to generalize for vast social categories, gender differences have been reported for directness and indirectness in talk, as well as of using more or less “tough” expressions (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003: 188ff; Gidengill and Everitt, 2003; see also the discussion in M. Macaulay, 2001). Also in detective fiction male detectives are represented and identified in terms of their ways of talking “tough” (Christianson, 1989, 151–162). Again, note that such traditional gender-based differences are also relative to class, and may reflect middle- and upper-class values, if it is found that lower class women tend to be less afraid to talk “tough,” for instance on the job or in a bar (see also Macaulay, 2001).

On the other hand, at a higher level of explanation, Meyerhoff (1996) argues that similarly middle-class men tend to feel free to use popular or tough (“lower class”) expressions or accents in conversation, something middle class, professional women can hardly permit themselves. This again suggests that contextual constraints such as the gender constraints shown in traditional sociolinguistics may need to be reformulated in terms of more complex context constructs, featuring not only discrete categories such as gender and class, but higher level constraints of power, rights and entitlements.

One of the contextually based variations of style that have been examined in most detail is racist slurs, generally assumed to be uttered by white speakers (Essed, 1991; Mieder, 2002; Van Dijk, 1984, 1987). Racist slurs usually function as a means of ethnic domination, as is also true for many other properties of discourse, both when speaking to minorities, or when speaking about them. Interestingly, Stokoe and Edwards (2007) found how such racist insults may also be used as a means of defense or legitimation by suspects of neighborhood crimes during police interrogations, namely as “counter-complaints.”

As is the case for gender, many other contextual constraints on lexical choice and variation may combine in various ways, so that, for instance, male or female, highly or poorly educated, etc., speakers may or may not use more or less, higher or lower style levels, or regional variants, or “intellectual” words and so on – thus producing a vast range of lexical variations. Thus, in order to account for the contextually constrained lexical choice of one fragment of text or talk, we may need to reconstruct contexts and speakers such as, for instance,

a furious, socialist, middle-class, young, African American, feminist journalist writing, from New York, in an informal e-mail message, to an older, male, Jewish, close friend and colleague, etc., and similar specific events. No wonder it is hard to generalize from such contextual specifics!

This definition of complex situations is also relevant for the construction of the social category to which we assign actors talked about or recipients talked to: the many *labels* we have to describe people are a function of such definitions and constructions (McConnell-Ginet, 2003).

Although examples have been given of lexical variation as a function of various contextual categories, perhaps the most obvious or “pure” examples are controlled by (e.g., formal versus informal) situation types.

These situations are traditionally characterized by spatial metaphors, such as high, middle and low varieties, and sometimes also associated with high, middle and lower class or status; situational variation is thus linked with societal (dialectal) variation (for debate about this relationship, see, especially, the papers in Eckert and Rickford, 2001). Although such systematic situational differences also exist for English, there are languages and cultures where such level distinctions are quite systematic, both for descriptions of objects as well as for forms of address. Thus, Irvine (2001) refers to studies of Javanese stratified speech styles by Errington (1988), in which a distinction is made between “high” style (*krama*), associated with values such as refinement, detachment, tranquility, etc., “low” style (*ngoko*), a “coarser” style, in which “one can lose one’s temper,” and which is accommodating to the sensibilities of the recipient, and an intermediate-level style (*madya*), used, for instance, to refer to rice or eating. A related analysis is provided by Duranti (1992) of respect vocabulary used in Samoan for chiefs and orators (see *Society and Discourse*, for detail). As elsewhere, expressions of respect and deference not only index hierarchical relations, but also have persuasive functions when used to get what the speaker wants from powerful recipients; this obviously requires the representation of the goals of the speaker in the context models of the recipient.

Actually, this distinction of (three) levels of style had already been made in the classics, for instance, as Virgil’s wheel, a set of lexical items and associated genres of literatures, heroes, etc. for three styles: *gravis*, *mediocris* and *humilis* (see, e.g., Lodge, 2004). English also has the same sort of situational variation, as we know from high (formal, literary) level *purloin* or *appropriate*, middle (standard) level *steal*, and a host of lower (popular, vulgar, etc.) level synonyms, *pinch*, *nab*, etc.; situational variants may also be associated with various social and regional dialects as well as social-situational meanings.

We also see from these examples that such forms index not only various types of situations, but many other social dimensions as well, such as being



refined or delicate (as opposed to coarse), being more or less educated, being “in” or “cool” (and hence identity), moves of politeness and tact, and, in general, social stratification. Hence, the often observed parallelism between “situational” style variation and “social/dialect” style variation: “lower” style forms (pronunciation, words) are often the same as lower-class style forms.

If we summarize these various sources of contextual variation of lexical choice, we see that they again suggest that context should be defined in terms of the way speakers represent themselves and the other participants, as well as other relevant dimensions of the communicative event in a dynamic mental model. Thus, it is the spatiotemporal setting as perceived (experienced), the nature of the event and the interaction as defined, and the various identities and relations (gender, region, class, ethnicity, occupation, education; power, distance, etc.) as assumed, performed or attributed, that constitute the crucial condition of language use and variation, and not the “real” or objective dimensions of the social situation.

Notice also the important role of “psychological” dimensions of the context, such as the relevance of emotions, opinions, knowledge and ideologies. Thus, Gleason, Perlmann, Ely and Evans (1994) found that parents use more diminutives when addressing girls than when they address boys, and thus show that the recipient category of their context models must feature not only a gender dimension, but also an evaluative dimension of girls (cuteness?) that may be expressed by diminutives. Indeed, more generally, diminutives may be used by men when referring to women not only as terms of endearment but also as explicitly sexist ways of belittling women (see also Makri-Tsilipakou, 2003).

The list of contextual constraints summarized above for lexical variation does not feature a category of *genre*, for reasons we have formulated earlier. Contrary to other approaches to context, we hold that genre is not a discrete category of context, but a complex notion that embodies both contextual and textual properties.

The same is true for *themes* or *topics*, which are defined either in terms of the semantic macrostructures of discourses (which of course as – textual but not contextual – structures may control local meanings and hence lexical items) or in terms of knowledge items, possibly defined as mental models of participants. That is, themes and topics are contextual only if they are part of the “cognitive” dimension of context, as goals, beliefs or knowledge, but in that case we do not call them “themes” or “topics,” which are notions reserved for the description of discourse.

I mention this point because in many variation studies “topics” are mentioned as contextual conditions (see also Chapter 2). This confusion is probably due to the fact that variation studies were traditionally limited to “surface” structures (sound, syntax, lexicon) of words or sentences, and anything controlling such variation would thus become “context,” and also



underlie discourse meanings or topics. Since sociolinguistics did not have a proper (macrosemantic or cognitive) theory of topic, this notion was taken simply and vaguely as a context constraint – even when there is obviously no such discourse-independent social or situational structure called “topic.”

### *Discourse markers*

Most examples mentioned above are the familiar lexical variants of nouns, adverbs and adjectives as studied in traditional sentence grammars and sociolinguistics. However, such variation may also extend to other lexical items, such as the use of *discourse markers*.

For instance, Andersen (1996, 131) showed that in their pretend play children are aware of the power- or status-based use of *well* (or, in French, *bon*, *alors* and *ouais*) by their parents, and use it to imitate their style (for the development of the use of discourse markers, see also Pak, Sprott and Escalera, 1996).

As Dines (1980) found for Australian working-class women, Macaulay (2005b) reports that women generally use the discourse marker *you know* twice as much as men, that middle-class women use it twice as much as working-class women, and that Glaswegian adults use it much more often in conversation than adults in Ayr. Among girls and boys in Glasgow, however, it is only middle-class girls who use *you know* to any significant extent (see also Macaulay, 2005a; Macaulay, 2005b).

Discourse markers such as *innit* (for *isn't it*), though with different pragmatic politeness functions, also appear to be used more often by working-class speakers, although the pattern is hardly clear for different cities or different age groups. Similar findings have been reported for gender variation of discourse markers such as *you know* in New Zealand English (Stubbe and Holmes, 1995) or the London-Lund Corpus (Erman, 1987, 1993, 2001), but the authors emphasize that women and men use such markers differently: men, for instance, may use them to get attention or to repair utterances, whereas women use such expression rather to signal affiliation.

Norrby and Winter (2002) do not find very clear differences between discourse markers used by boys and girls – who both use such markers as expressions of group affiliation, which means that the speakers are constructing a context model in which group membership is crucial. It remains to be seen whether gender and class differences of discourse markers are similarly related to group membership and hence to representation in context models.

This is more clearly the case for the marked use by young people of the focus marker *like*, first in American English, and now also in Canada, the UK and elsewhere (Tagliamonte and Hudson, 1999).

Whatever the distribution of the various discourse markers – by age, gender, class or geography – their uses need to be described in terms of the categories of the context models of the participants defining the properties of the interaction. For instance, the uses of *innit* in British English are to be described in terms of speakers' models of the (shared) knowledge and opinions of the recipient, possibly in terms of the age identities of the participants, and perhaps also involving self-representation in terms of class-identity. These pragmatic or interactional markers should therefore be carefully distinguished from discourse markers that operate at the semantic level, for instance, to focus on, or to emphasize meanings – which of course may also vary as a function of gender and class.

### Meaning

How does discourse meaning vary with context? The answer to such a question depends on our notion of variation, as discussed above. If discourse variation presupposes strict semantic equivalence (intensional synonymy), there would probably be very little variation, if at all, depending on what theory of meaning one uses. If we relax the criterion somewhat, then paraphrases may be taken as expressions of “more or less the same” meaning, which again presupposes a more general “underlying” meaning. Lexical variation usually involves at least some variation of meaning. Since comparison in this case presupposes that something remains equivalent, it must be assumed that meaning variation requires higher-level conceptual relations (e.g., when both “rebel” and “freedom fighter” entail the higher-level and more abstract notion of “armed resistance,” for instance) or semantic macrostructures (discourses with different local meanings may be about the same topics).

Discourse meaning is a vastly complex notion, and for practical purposes I shall limit it here to the following aspects of meaning:

- concepts expressed by words;
- propositions expressed by clauses and sentences;
- coherent proposition sequences expressed by sentence sequences;
- overall meanings (topics, macrostructures) of discourse fragments;
- (episodes of various kinds) and whole discourses.

We have already dealt with concepts when discussing lexical variation, so I shall now focus on propositions and their structures and relations. Let us further assume that propositions represent sentence meanings, and that we may analyze their structures in the classical way, that is, in terms of *n*-place predicates, of which the arguments are labeled for their “case” functions (Agent, Patient, etc.). Propositions may form compound propositions by adding various kinds of modalities (such as, “It is necessary that . . .,” or “It is

known that. . .,” etc.). A discussion of the (in)adequacy of such a “logical” approach to the meanings of natural language is beyond the scope of this book, and I only adopt it for the sake of simplicity (see Saeed, 1997). My aim here is only to examine briefly what aspects of discourse meaning typically change with context. Let us therefore consider some possibilities:

### *Synonyms*

A case already discussed above is lexical variation: words may be more or less close synonyms, but are used in different (e.g., more or less formal) social situations. This will often imply at least some minimal variation of meaning or evaluation or other implication. Thus, whereas *rebels* or *guerillas* may be used both in formal and informal situations, the more formal word *insurgents* was until recently not the kind of word being frequently used in everyday conversation. Such uses may depend on who uses them and with what kind of ideologies: rebels may call themselves “freedom fighters” whereas others may call them “terrorists,” in both cases implying an evaluation, the former positive, the latter negative (see, e.g., Chomsky, 1987, 1994; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Herman, 1992; Van Dijk, 1998).

The same is true for medical versus lay names for diseases, and bureaucratic versus citizen’s denominations of formal papers, processes or procedures (for detail, see Edmonds, 1999). In all these cases, some aspect of the context, such as the category or the relations of the participants, as well as their ideologies, preferentially selects the more appropriate concept (and word) for each situation. This is typically the case for those alternatives that have positive or negative implications. One would hardly describe one’s own (negative, illegal, etc.) actions in terms of being “perpetrated,” although one might confess to have “committed” them.

### *Metaphor*

Conceptual metaphors offer a rich source for the discursive construction of the world as a function of contextual constraints (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Where they construe very general concepts, at the same time they index and construe culture. For more specific contextually construed differences, e.g., of gender, class or ethnicity, it has often been observed that men use gender-based, aggressive metaphors to represent their violence, for instance, in military discourse (Cohn, 1987).

Studies of racism in the “white” press in Western Europe consistently find the use of similar metaphors in accounts of immigration: immigration is an invasion, or a threatening amount of water or snow in which we may drown: immigrants are routinely portrayed as arriving in “waves” or “avalanches,”

uses that have become totally normalized and are even used in dictionaries. Besides such natural-disaster metaphors, anti-immigrant discourse may feature metaphors that represent countries as containers or as ships: the country is full or, as in the German anti-immigration slogan, *Das Boot ist voll* (Charteris-Black, 2006; Jäger, 1998; Van Dijk, 1991).

### *Perspective*

Perspective or point of view is one of the classical ways events may be described relative to the location of speakers or recipients, and hence as controlled by context variables. Thus, in the media accounts of a police action against a demonstration, the position of the journalist may be signaled as being “with” the police or “with” the demonstrators, and thus give rise to a description of the police in terms of “going” or “coming” to the demonstrators, respectively (Van Dijk, 1988a). One might also categorize such context-dependent variations of meanings as “deictic,” although obviously perspective and point of view are not just spatial, but also metaphorical, that is, based on variations of personal opinions (mental models) or socially shared attitudes or ideologies – a contextual constraint that needs to be described in other terms, namely as one of the forms of social cognition of the participant. The well-known lexical pair, “terrorist” and “freedom fighter,” is a classical case and may also be defined in terms of variation of perspective. Finally, perspective or point of view (in storytelling) may involve the kind of variation in narrative that has been extensively dealt with in literary studies (see, e.g., Ehrlich, 1990).

### *Agency*

A specific case of perspective variation is that of agency variation, and its expression in the syntactic variation of active and passive structures. In semantic terms we may describe an act as being engaged in by someone (an Agent), or as being undergone by someone (a Patient), depending on who describes it to whom (Saeed, 1997). Syntactic variation (e.g., active versus passive voice) may express different emphasis on such agency, but variation may also be observed semantically by whether we represent actions from the perspective of agents or patients. Thus, underlying ideologies and the social attitudes they organize control a general discourse strategy we have called the “ideological square.” This applies to all levels of discourse, from topic selection to the lexicon, metaphors and visual structures: dominant in-group members tend to emphasize *Our* good things and *Their* bad things, and to de-emphasize *Our* bad things and *Their* good things (Van Dijk, 1998).

### *Time*

Similarly, the account of events may vary with the temporal dimension of context. Thus, *at the time of my writing* this chapter references to the “current” war in Iraq need to be framed in the present tense, whereas *when readers read* this chapter the war will (hopefully) be in the past – thus requiring an interpretation of the word “current” in terms of a time frame associated with the mental model of me as the writer. The same is obviously true for my references to future events that may be contemporaneous with the time frame of the context model of the readers. Obviously, similar remarks hold for the meaning of verb tenses. In other words, context relevance of meaning is deictic in this case. We shall not deal further with this well-known and often-studied aspect of indexical expressions, which is a property of semantics rather than of pragmatics.

Specific deictic expressions of time, such as “modern,” “old-fashioned” or “backward,” do not just express or imply relationships of time with respect to the temporal position of the speaker or writer. They express an evaluation and at the same time an ideological position of the author. So, on the one hand, such attributes of appraisal express underlying opinions of the personal (semantic) model or the socially shared attitudes the author has of the people referred to. On the other hand, when, for instance, Western speakers derogate people from other cultures as “backward” or “living in the stone age,” they also signal something of their own identity or ideology (see, for instance, Fabian, 1983). In the latter case, such meanings are contextual and hence pragmatic, because they say something about the speakers. This is probably the case for all expressions of opinion: they say something about the person who expresses the opinion as well as about the thing referred to. Here is one of these areas where semantic and pragmatics appear to overlap.

### *Modality*

Modalities such as those of necessity, probability, possibility, obligation, permission and so on, make new propositions out of propositions. (So, a modal operator “it is probable that” can turn the proposition “Sue is in the UK” into another proposition “It is probable that Sue is in the UK.”) They depend not only on the way events are being represented in mental models, but also on some properties of context, such as roles and other identities of participants, objectives and actions being carried out. There are standard modal ways to formulate (context relevant) speech acts, such as a request, as in “*Can (could) you pass me the salt,*” or a command or recommendation, as in “*You should go to the doctor,*” which express social obligations of the

participants and hence features of the context. Note the usual restrictions though: one may describe an obligation on others or on ourselves in terms of “*You must go now*” or “*I must go now*,” and give another permission “*You may go now*,” but hardly give oneself permission, as in “*I may go now*.”

Variations of epistemic modalities should obviously be controlled by the knowledge states of speakers and recipients. Thus, it is routine to describe and communicate one’s own inner states, but much less common (and possibly odd) to describe those of a recipient – who has better access to them than the speaker. Thus “*I believe (doubt, etc.) John will come*” is fine, but “*You believe (doubt, etc.) that John will come*” is odd, and would require a very specific context model, whereas the reverse will be true for the same proposition in questions (for details on the pragmatics of modal expressions, see, e.g., Palmer, 2001; Van Hout and Vet, 2005).

Macaulay (2005b) examined class, gender and age differences in the use of modalities. He found that although Glaswegian working-class men tend to use them more than middle-class men, overall there seems to be little influence of class on the choice of modal expressions. Women on the other hand tend to use more epistemic modals than men, and adolescents more than adults. Macaulay concludes that the lack of clear gender, class or age differences in the use of modal auxiliaries suggests that such modals are controlled rather by content than context. Indeed, there are only a few modal expressions to denote obligation (*must, have to, got to*, etc.), and there is little reason why these would be used more or less by women or men, other than when these people are speaking about obligations.

#### *Levels and completeness of description: granularity*

One of the interesting aspects of discourse meaning that has received little attention in the literature is the variation in the *levels of description* (briefly discussed in Van Dijk, 1977), today sometimes analyzed in terms of *granularity* in computer science. That is, we may describe events either in very general terms, as is typical in headlines (“Car bomb in Baghdad. 24 dead”) or in more or less detail at lower levels of specification. At the same time, at each level, we may be more or less *complete* in our description of details: certain details are given, and others not, depending on their relevance for a story or argument. Generally, within a discourse, as soon as aspects of an event become more important for the participants, the description becomes more specific and more complete.

This variation of levels of description and degrees of completeness is an operation on mental models of events that may be controlled by context model information, such as the assumed previous knowledge, the interests or

the ideologies of the recipients or those of the speaker/writer and her or his objectives.

Thus, news reports will typically detail the negative actions of *out-groups* (black youths, communists, terrorists, etc.) and be much less specific about negative things about *Us*, such as racism (Van Dijk, 1991). This is one of many moves in the overall strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other presentation that we find in much ideologically based text and talk (Van Dijk, 1993a; 1998). That is, such discourse shows not only the underlying biased event models of journalists, but also properties of the context, such as settings, occupation, institution, communicative intention, etc., of the journalist.

### *Degree of precision/vagueness*

The same is true for the *precision* versus *vagueness* of descriptions of people and events, a variation in the way mental models, e.g., of personal experiences or public events, are being formulated in discourse, and with a variety of interactional functions, e.g., of impression formation, politeness and so on (see, e.g., Adelswärd and Linell, 1994; Ballmer and Pinkal, 1983; Jucker, Smith and Ludge, 2003; Myers, 1996; Wierzbicka, 1986). We typically tend to be vague when *Our* negative characteristics are being talked or written about, but quite precise when we are describing those of *Them*, as we know from much research on in-groups and out-groups and on the discursive manifestations of ideology (van Dijk, 1993a, 1998).

Obviously such variation depends first of all on the way events are being represented in mental models of events, which in turn depends on underlying attitudes and ideologies. However, the point is that we may adapt our description to context constraints, such as our objectives (e.g., to defend ourselves, to attack opponents), our position (being a defense lawyer or a prosecutor) or the perceived ideology of recipients (as is the case in using politically correct language: a male chauvinist applying for a job may want to avoid using sexist descriptions when being interviewed by a feminist employer).

### *Disclaimers*

A well-known example of the contextual constraints of self-presentation and face-keeping is the pervasive use of disclaimers, such as the apparent denial “I am not a racist (sexist, etc.), but . . .” (Van Dijk, 1984, 1987). Such semantic moves, combining a positive self-description (or the denial of a negative property) with a negative description of out-group members, may be based on the ambivalent social attitudes of language users (Billig, 1988a). But more often than not disclaimers introduce negative fragments of discourse

liable to provoke criticism of the speaker by the recipient. In this way, disclaimers combine in one move the opposite general strategies of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. We know that a denial is part of a disclaimer, and hence a form of face-saving, when the negative part following *but* is much longer and more dominant than the first part, that is, when the topic or macroproposition is negative. Ambivalent discourse features both positive and negative topics about an out-group.

We see that disclaimers are profoundly contextual – they do not simply express what we know or believe, but adapt what we say to the assumed beliefs of our recipients, and hence are a form of impression management (Tedeschi, 1981), and more specifically a way to avoid giving a bad impression (Arkin, 1981).

### *Presupposition and entailment*

Two crucial properties of discourse meaning are its presuppositions and entailments. We know that discourse is never fully explicit. As we have seen for the epistemic strategies examined in the previous chapter, language users presuppose that recipients have vast amounts of general sociocultural knowledge and more specific professional knowledge or interpersonal knowledge (e.g., communicated in previous encounters), as explained before. We have also seen earlier that such assumptions about mutual knowledge are at the center of a contextual account of discourse (see Peräkylä and Vehviläinen, 2003, for a study of the role of professional knowledge and a context constraint in conversation with clients).

Language use may signal presuppositions in many ways, for instance by *that*-clauses in first position (“*That John cannot be trusted*, is a big problem for the project”), the use of specific fact-presupposing verbs such as “to realize” (“John realized *that he was not liked by the members of his team*”), or adverbs such as “even” (“Even John *had problems with his team*” presupposing that John is not the kind of person to have problems with the team) (for detail, see, e.g. Gazdar, 1977; Kay, 1997; Petöfi and Franck, 1973; Van der Sandt, 1988; Wilson, 1975).

Similarly, discourse has many meaning implications (entailments) that are not explicitly spelled out by the speaker or writer, but that are either not expressed because they are easily inferred by recipients from shared sociocultural knowledge, or because such implications are irrelevant.

Sometimes implications are not made explicit because of communicative or interactional reasons explicable in contextual terms, for instance, because they might hurt the feelings of recipients, because they are taboo, or because the speakers do not want to take the responsibility for explicitly asserting such propositions, that is, as a form of self-protection or positive self-presentation.



Many forms of racist or sexist discourse are implicit or “coded” in this way. We may find media stories in the USA about rising crime vaguely localized “in the inner cities,” but without explicitly stating that many black people are delinquents, although that is obviously implied. Again, such meaning variation may be based on more or less biased notions of events, but may also be controlled by context features, such as the intentions or the social identity of the speaker, and so on (Van Dijk, 1993a).

The most general constraint of implicit or entailed meanings is of course that of the knowledge represented in the K-device of the context models of the participants: We do tend to leave implicit all propositions that we believe to be known or derivable by the recipients (see Chapter 3 for details). The semantics and pragmatics of presupposition and implication should hence be formulated in terms of this contextual device.

### *Coherence*

One of the aspects of discourse meaning that remained most conspicuously ignored in the traditional linguistic semantics of word and sentences, is the notion of coherence. Although there have been many definitions and theories of coherence, its basic conditions are referential (extensional) and not based on conceptual meanings (intensional) (Van Dijk, 1977; see also Tannen, 1984).

The simplest definition of discourse coherence is that discourse as a sequence of propositions is coherent if the facts (events, actions, situations) it refers to are related. This relationship may be causal, temporal or enabling. In formal terms, such a definition may be summarized as follows: a discourse is coherent if it has (satisfies) a model. In more realistic cognitive terms, we would say: a discourse is coherent for language users if they are able to construct a mental model for it (Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983). That is, coherence is relative to one or more of the participants, as it should be: what may be a coherent discourse for one person, need not be so for others.

In order to be able to construct such a mental model, and hence relations between the facts denoted by the propositions, the participants of course need a vast amount of world knowledge. More shared knowledge thus allows discourses to be more “incomplete” or less “explicit.” On top of this kind of *local or sequential coherence*, discourses are *globally coherent* if their propositions can be subsumed under one or more global (macro) propositions, typically expressed in headlines and summaries (Van Dijk, 1977, 1980).

Besides this form of referential (extensional) coherence of discourse, we may distinguish a more “internal” kind of discourse coherence, when we speak about “functional” relations between propositions, for instance, when proposition B is a specification, generalization, example, contrast, etc. of proposition A.

We repeat these basic definitions here because, despite decades of discourse and conversation analysis, these semantic accounts of coherence are still not commonplace, and because of the still dominant sentence-based orientation of linguistics. Indeed, semantic coherence is still often confused with grammatical cohesion, that is, the linguistic signaling of underlying coherence, for instance, with pronouns, proverbs, conjunctions, adverbs and so on (Halliday and Hasan, 1976).

These definitions are also necessary to allow for the possibility that context models influence coherence of text and talk. Given the cognitive definition of coherence in terms of mental models of events, we have already allowed for contextual variation by emphasizing that different language users may construe different mental models of a text. For instance, newspaper readers who have been to Iraq, or have family or friends there, probably read news on the war in Iraq in a different way, for instance, because they are more concerned, better informed or have different goals – and these are obvious properties of their context models of newspaper reading.

Thus, knowledge, emotional involvement and goals as contextual properties of participants may influence the way they construe more or less complete, more or less detailed, more or less personal mental models of the text. This may mean that the interpretation of texts by the readers (their models) may be very different from that intended by the writer (her model). Note though that in actual discourse production or comprehension such models are dynamic, and constantly changing – as it should be: we actually “learn” from discourse or the ongoing context, and hence must continuously change our models of the discourse.

The same is true for conversation. Here we have one of the most common sources of misunderstanding and interactional conflict – as is also suggested by the titles of Deborah Tannen’s popular books *That’s not what I meant!* (Tannen, 1986) and *You just don’t understand* (Tannen, 1990). However, whereas Tannen tends to interpret such conflicts in terms of cultural differences between women and men (they have been brought up in different ways), other authors prefer to account for them in terms of (male) power and domination (see also Cameron, 1998). Besides the different goals and interests that define differences between groups or categories of speakers, differences of knowledge are of course fundamental in this respect, and hence will be the basis of the lack of understanding by novices of discourse by experts, of outsiders of discourses of insiders and so on.

Actually, Tannen (1996) is also one of the researchers who have investigated gender differences in conversational coherence among children in the USA, interestingly relating coherence with positional (bodily) alignment. Yet, strangely, she defines conversational coherence in terms of “topic cohesion” in the very paragraph in which she limits cohesion to “surface level ties,” and

hence mixes meaning levels as well as grammar and meaning. Informally defined, speaking on the same or related topics is an important criterion of conversational coherence – but we must of course go beyond the vague definitions she cites of “what the speakers talk about,” which would include all non-topical events, persons or objects referred to.

Relevant for this discussion, again, is how in Tannen’s study gender influences the coherence of the discourse, as well as the bodily alignment, of the children (eight pairs of friends). Age is also an influence she studied, as she observed second-, sixth- and tenth-grade children, as well as 25-year-old women and men. Among the findings of her study are that the girls and women “focused more tightly and more tightly on each other” than the boys and men. The girls found it easier to tell (longer) stories, which were typically about the personal concerns or troubles of one of them (or absent girls). The women were more interested in topics concerning interpersonal disagreement and harmony. The younger boys seemed restless and talked about what they should *do*. The tenth-grade boys talked about their own personal concerns (and less about the concerns of the others). The men talked about personal topics such as marriage, but in general, more abstract, terms. Although this study of a few conversational pairs obviously has no quantitative pretensions, the observations of Tannen on posture and gaze alignment and their relation to topic selection, continuity and change – vaguely summarized in terms of “involvement” or “focus” – do offer suggestions for a more detailed study of contextually defined differences of talk. In this sense, her study is more a contribution to the gender-based conversational management of (global) topics than a study of (local) coherence.

### *Topics*

Beyond the local semantics of propositions and propositional relations, I must finally address the global semantics of discourse, and deal with higher-level topics (defined as semantic macrostructures). Throughout this book and this chapter, I have stressed that topics are *not* properties of contexts (as most sentence-based linguistics assumes), but a property of text or talk “itself.” Second, such topics vary with contextual parameters: for instance, news reports, parliamentary debates and most other organizational or institutional discourse genres (unlike everyday conversations, personal letters, e-mails and chats) do not usually feature personal topics (see, e.g., Van Dijk, 1988a, 1988b; Van Dijk, 2000). There are many topics MPs may talk about, but Tony Blair (in our example of the Iraq debate) cannot just talk about *anything* he likes. That is, in institutional text or talk, it is institutional business topics that need to be attended to – with variable ranges of freedom to talk about non-business-related topics in different situations.

Whereas such constraints are fairly straightforward, we can expect social variations, e.g., based on class, gender, age, ideological groups or communities of practice. Thus, Wodak (1985), in her earlier work on courtroom interaction in Vienna, showed that a (male) judge rejected the explanation a lower-class woman gave about the circumstances of her getting a parking ticket, whereas he did accept such a personal account from a middle-class man.

Similarly it is often assumed that women and men talk among themselves about very different topics. However, this may be just one of the many stereotypes we have about gender differences of discourse. Aries and Johnson (1983) hardly found any such differences, except a few stereotypical ones (like men talking more about sport and less about personal problems and fears; see also Bischofing, 1993). They also found that women also have more and longer conversations on the phone with their best friends. On the other hand, in their focus-group study of gender in Spanish organizations, Martín Rojo and Gómez Estaban (2005) found that men have difficulty talking about personal issues, and tend to focus on stereotypical topics such as soccer. But men who talk with women about personal topics tend to be evaluated more positively by the women (as being “nice” or “sensitive”) than women who do so.

More generally, topics are obviously related to people’s experiences, whether personal or occupational ones. Trivially, both male and female professors probably talk more about students or research, and less about bread or pastries, than bakers do. Thus, in their interview study of male upper-middle-class offenders in Great Britain, Willott, Griffin and Torrance (2001) showed that these economic offenders tried to legitimize their crimes not only in terms of their responsibilities towards their families and employees, but also from their class perspective, now that they share prison with mostly lower-class offenders and hence have lost status. Thus here, as elsewhere, the context models of the speakers show a complex combination of gender, class, occupation and status.

Hence, topic choice, argumentation and legitimization strategies are controlled by complex context models, rather than by gender, class or occupation in isolation. Similar conclusions can be drawn from a study by Riley (2003) of the discourses of professional white men in the UK, who legitimated their traditional male roles in terms of identifying themselves as providers. That is, it is not merely the social role, status, position, ethnicity and gender of the speakers that jointly define the context, but also relevant ideologies, in this case gender ideologies (see also Adams, Towns and Gavey, 1995).

Where gender differences exist, these are usually related to different gender spheres. Soler Castillo (2004) in her book on the life stories of women

and men in Bogotá found that the topics of their stories were not very different, except that the stories of the women tended to focus on home and children, and those of the men on street events and politics; the men's stories were also more abstract and general than the women's. Egging and Slade (1997) found that during coffee breaks men tend to talk more about work and sports, whereas women "gossip" and tell stories, and don't engage in teasing as men tend to. On the other hand, Cameron (1997a), examining the talk of fraternity boys in the USA watching TV, concludes that their sexist and homophobic talk about other men might just as well be categorized as gendered "gossiping."

As I have stressed before, such gender differences should be interpreted partly in terms of further situational parameters, such as location and the occupation of the (generally poor) women interviewed. Whether in Bogotá or Sydney, there is likely to be less difference between the topics in the everyday conversation of female professors and lawyers and of men in similar occupations than there is between the conversation topics of women and men in lower-level occupations. In other words, for the social variation of discourse topics, contextual characteristics should be considered together. The combination of gender, age, occupation, aims and so on, tells us about topic variability more reliably than any one parameter.

It is not surprising that gender, class, age or occupation alone hardly yield solid topic differences. If we want to abstract and generalize in this case, we might want to do so for the rather general context category of "experience," which is the commonsense term for (semantic) event models. Such event models are the basis of storytelling, and it is no wonder that relevant (interesting) selections from such models may lead to storytelling and its topics. Similarly, the experience of racism and discrimination by African Americans is bound to be a more frequent topic in black than in white families (Phinney and Chavira, 1995; see also Essed, 1991).

Besides (limited) gender differences of topic choice, there has also been research on the ways women and men in the USA introduce, change or support each others' topics (e.g. Tannen, 1996: 75). Thus men are often seen to give less active support to women's topics, to change topics initiated by women, or to usurp topics initiated by women, for instance, in meetings. Such differences have been variously explained in terms of cultural differences between men and women and in terms of power differences, where men are analyzed as being dominant in interaction in general, and in conversation and hence in topic choice and change in particular. Much later research on gender and discourse, however, does not show such clear differences, and it all seems to depend on the "further context," such as the types of situations, institutional settings, occupation, age, aims and other characteristics of women and men (for detail, see Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003).

Note finally that the observations on global semantic variations in discourse, such as who speaks about what topics, when, with whom and in what setting, needs to be based on a more general – and still lacking – empirical study of topic that goes beyond macrostructure theory (Van Dijk, 1980). Thus, most studies in linguistics, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis and narrative studies are rather about *form*, about structures, and not about content. We need to know who speaks about what topics, with whom, in what types of social situations. It is likely that topics are generally occasioned by social practices – job topics are likely to come up at work, and topics about family matters at the dinner table, etc. – but this is a very general generalization: people do tell personal stories while they are at work, and parents at the dinner table sometimes talk about work. What we need is multi-disciplinary, empirical, ethnographic research projects that go beyond such stereotypes or the limited data we now have about, for instance, storytelling (see also Louwse and Van Peer, 2002).

#### *Concluding remarks on semantic variation*

We see that many of the semantic variations discussed here have double underlying constraints. On the one hand there are the constraints of models of events (the experiences of the participants and their biased beliefs about events). On the other, there are contextual constraints: people's specific intentions, their interactional strategies (such as those of positive self-presentation, politeness and political correctness), social identities of various kinds (category, role, position, status, etc.), and of course the general epistemic features of contexts: what participants know or want to know.

Often these semantic and pragmatic constraints are hard to distinguish, as is the case for the ideologically biased representation of events in mental models and the ideological control of context models: a journalist may report a story about black youths in racist terms because he has a racist mental model of some news event in which young blacks are involved (e.g. "riots"), or he may report the events in a racist way because he knows that his boss or readers want to read such stories or because such stories sell better among a white readership. Note that because of contextual constraints racist mental models may also be hidden in discourse, because, for instance, the journalist knows that he may be fired or disliked by the readers.

Context models may change the information of underlying semantic models of events talked about so as to adapt the meanings or the content of discourse to the communicative situation. That is, context models not only control, in general, *how* we say things, but often also *what* we say in a given situation – even when this is different from what we believe to be the case (as we know from various kinds of lies). This is one of the reasons one

cannot simply “read” racist or non-racist (sexist or non-sexist) beliefs from discourse, because of the fundamental interface of the context model. It is not just what people know or believe that is expressed in text or talk, but rather also what they think is now relevant, interesting, acceptable, adequate and so on.

In other words, opinions and attitudes, as such, may be relatively stable across contexts, but the way they are expressed in a specific situation may vary with the context model of the speaker. This is one of the reasons why it is sometimes assumed that attitudes do not exist as stable, internal dispositions, but should rather be described in terms of variable discourses (see, e.g., Billig, 1987, 1988b).

In this section we have seen that the context control of meaning and semantic variation first of all requires a base level that allows comparison and some kind of “identity”: conceptual identity for synonyms and paraphrase, semantic macrostructures (topics) for variable meanings at the local level, event models (subjective knowledge about events, e.g. identical reference) for local and global meaning, and partially identical context models for the various ways these may be implemented semantically. It is crucial that for one or more participants some local or global meaning, referent or contextual element (e.g. goals) remains identical. These conditions provide definitions of such stylistic options as providing different “versions” of events in different newspapers, different perspectives of the “same” story, different levels and details of description, ideological paraphrases and so on.

## Rhetoric

Many discourses have “rhetorical” structures of various kinds, as we know them from the “figures of speech” discussed in the “*elocutio*” part of classical rhetoric (Corbett and Connors, 1998; Lausberg, 1960). The main functions of such specific structures at various discourse levels (sounds, syntax, meaning, etc.) are persuasive: they typically enhance (or mitigate) discourse meanings and thus also emphasize (or tone down) interactional and communicative intentions. If news reports want to enhance the threatening nature of immigration, they routinely do so by describing immigration as an “invasion,” that is, with a metaphor, using hyperbolic expressions such as “massive influx of immigrants,” or repeated numbers (“Thousands of . . .”) as part of a rhetorical number game. The same is true for rhymes and alliterations at the sound level, repetitive syntax at the form level, or euphemisms, comparisons, metonymies, and many other well-known (and lesser known) figures of speech at the semantic level (for this rhetoric of immigration discourse, see, e.g., Reisigl and Wodak, 2000, 2001; Van Dijk, 1984, 1987, 1991, 1993a; Wodak and Van Dijk, 2000).

The characteristic enhancing or mitigating functions of rhetorical structures may be “semantic”: that is, correspond to how things are represented in the possibly biased mental-event models of the participants – how the participants actually see or experience reality. But they may also be “pragmatic,” that is, they may be deployed to make discourses more or less adequate to the social situation, as is typically the case for persuasive text and talk.

Cognitively, this persuasive dimension of rhetoric may have the specific function of drawing special attention to specific meanings and hence to enhance the possibility that these are being constructed as important parts of intended event models. For instance, for a number of sociocognitive and emotional reasons, the “threatening” associations of a metaphor like “invasion” are more likely to be attended to by readers and to be integrated into their event models (and subsequent social representations) about immigration than “bland” non-metaphorical expressions such as “many immigrants arriving in the country.”

Given the persuasive – and hence contextual – functions of metaphors, it is likely that they are not only used more in some social situations than others (e.g., more in parliamentary debates than in textbooks), but also that they are being used differently by and for different social categories or groups.

Gender differences in the use of metaphors have been one field of investigation, assuming that metaphors tend to be drawn from fields with which speakers have more experience or which they find more interesting. It is not surprising, for instance, that men in the USA make more frequent use of sports metaphors than women (O’Barr and Conley, 1992).

There is no need to review all rhetorical operations for their specific contextual roles. Suffice it to say that they are typically deployed as discursive resources that (de)emphasize meanings for interactional and communicative reasons, e.g., to persuade recipients or for positive self-presentation.

Thus, the well-known ideological polarization between in-groups and out-groups, as we know it from racist discourse, typically involves rhetorical emphasis (metaphors, hyperboles, etc.) on any positive attributes of *Us*, and on any negative attribute of *Them*, and vice versa, mitigation (euphemism, understatements, etc.) of *Their* good attributes and of *Our* bad attributes (among other studies of discourse and racism referred to above, see, e.g., Van Dijk, 1993a; see also Carnes and Tauss, 1996; Römer, 1998; Triandafyllidou, 1998, 2000). Such polarization may also appear in anti-feminist discourse or media coverage (see, e.g., Jenkins, 2002), feminist resistance rhetoric (Gray-Rosendale and Harootunian, 2003), and of course in such heated debates as those on abortion (Condit, 1994). In political rhetoric emphasizing ideological differences between in-groups and out groups is rife (see, e.g., King and Anderson, 1971).



From these few examples, we may conclude that few types of discourse mark the social (ethnic, ideological) identity of the speaker as explicitly as racist, sexist, anti-feminist and other forms of discriminatory, intolerant or radical discourse. This is why recipients (and analysts) are often able to identify the ideology or group (co)membership of speakers not only on the basis of what these speakers say (meanings, mental models) but also on how the speakers emphasize or mitigate such meanings rhetorically.

It may be somewhat strange to apply the pragmatic criterion of “appropriateness” in such a case, but since this notion is relative to the participants, a more or less “extreme” (or mitigated) way of formulating meanings or opinions, for instance, on immigration, abortion, homosexual marriages and so on, may well be found to be more or less appropriate for the members of a group or community. This also informs the common descriptions of political positions in terms of “being tough” or “being soft” on, e.g., immigration or abortion. The same is true, for instance, for well-known semantic and rhetorical hedging in academic discourse, e.g., so as to limit the risk and responsibility of errors of overstatement or overgeneralization (Hyland, 1998).

Rhetorical emphasis or mitigation may index not only social or ideological identity, but also social (e.g., power) relations between participants. Powerful discourse typically involves hyperboles and metaphors that enhance meanings or speech acts, and “powerless” discourse similarly makes use of mitigated expressions to index recognition of – or submission to – recipient power or status, as we know from research on powerless speech styles manifested at other discourse levels (see Bradac and Mulac, 1984; Erickson, Lind, Johnson and O’Barr, 1978; Hosman, 1989).

Similarly, contemporary anti-terrorist rhetoric extensively emphasizes the “evil” nature of terrorists, and thus expresses the mental models about terrorists of the speakers. But it may also directly address terrorists or terrorist states (“evil empires”) in such hyperbolic terms (see, e.g., Lakoff, 2001).

The examples given above suggest that the contextual domain of rhetoric is not only that of the group identity and relations of participants, but essentially that of their socially shared opinions. Persuasive text and talk indexes ideological group membership, and rhetorical structures are among the typical discursive ways to contribute to the process of persuasion. We thus signal to which ideological group we belong, how we distinguish ourselves from the group of the recipient, or how we may try to win opponents round to our case or beliefs. In this sense, rhetoric is eminently contextual.

Finally, similar observations hold for the role of rhetorical structures in the interactional communication of other beliefs, such as knowledge. Didactic discourse in general, and popularization discourse in particular, is replete with rhetorical means, such as metaphors and comparisons, that allow the

formulation of complex, new or specialized meanings in terms that can be better understood and integrated by recipients. Although such a function of metaphor holds more generally for metaphorical meaning, more specific rhetorical metaphors may further enhance understanding, while at the same time indexing the knowledge (group membership, occupation, etc.) of the speaker, and the lack of knowledge of the recipients. Popularization of modern genetics, for instance, in the press or textbooks, thus constantly makes use of the metaphor “The genome is a code/text” (Calsamiglia and Van Dijk, 2004; Martins and Ogborn, 1997).

### Argumentation

Similar remarks may be made for the specific *superstructures* that organize text and talk, such as those of argumentation, which also have persuasive functions. Used to defend or attack “positions” such as opinions or attitudes about relevant social issues, argumentations typically, implicitly or explicitly, feature cognitive steps that suggest, or force people to draw, conclusions from arguments that are accepted in rational interaction and communication (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1992; Van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Blair and Willard, 1987, 1992).

Thus, crucial for arguments is not just the assumed “psycho-logical” relation of inference or reasoning between premises and a conclusion, presupposing mental models, social representations and general sociocultural knowledge. Rather, argumentation fundamentally involves interaction between speakers and real or imagined recipients, namely as proponents and opponents, respectively. That is, argumentation is about *positions* of participants, and hence about intentions and beliefs of language users and relations between participants, and hence contextually based and controlled (Christmann, Sladek and Groeben, 1998; Tindale, 1992; Wegman, 1994).

Arguments presuppose that speakers have beliefs about the beliefs or positions of addressees, and it is this contextual condition that controls the formulation of counter-arguments against real or imagined opponents. As is the case for biased semantics and persuasive rhetoric, positions defended and attacked in argumentation, especially in public discourse, tend to be socially shared, and hence ideological (Sillars and Ganer, 1982).

This means that what is presupposed in tacit arguments and fallacies is similarly controlled by the polarized opinions and ideologies of the participants (Van Dijk, 1998). Recipients routinely infer speakers’ membership of groups and ideology on the basis of their arguments. The German slogan used as an argument against immigration *Das Boot ist voll* (“the boat is full”) is used by and routinely attributed to conservative, xenophobic or racist groups

(Jäger, et al., 1998). Similarly, fallacies may be controlled by contextual constraints. Thus, the authority fallacy will obviously vary with the kind of authorities recognized by the group of the speaker and hence by its political, moral or scientific leaders (the Pope, the Dalai Lama, the president, the Nobel Prize winner, Amnesty, etc.). Verkuyten (2005), in a study of accounts of discrimination in the Netherlands by members of majority and minority groups, focused on different discursive strategies (e.g., questioning discrimination versus assuming its factuality) and found that the choice of such strategies depends rather on subject positions than on whether the speakers are members of majority or minority groups. He concludes that the same strategy may function in different ways in different contexts. Again, we see how context should be analyzed in terms of participant definitions, rather than in terms of objective ethnic-group membership.

Within a variationist perspective, it may again be asked whether members of specific social groups or categories also argue in different ways. And again it is hardly likely that such a general discursive resource is participant-dependent: women and men, blacks and whites, poor or rich, may have different interests and different experiences, and hence use different arguments, but hardly different argument structures or fallacies. Goodwin and Goodwin (1987) show that argument is as common among boys as it is among girls. Moreover, girls in the USA are just as good at issuing directives as boys (see, e.g., Harness Goodwin, 2003).

Rather, argumentative variation is dependent on genre, as is the case for, e.g., scientific versus everyday argumentation, and hence only indirectly on those present in such situations (e.g., scholars or lay-people).

Gender differences may be involved when argumentation-style is defined as aggressive, as Moulton (1983) suggests as an explanation for the lack of women in US philosophy departments (for the disadvantaged position of women in argument, see also Meyers, Brashers, Winston and Grob, 1997).

Indirectly relevant to the role of gender in argument is the study of Burgoon and Klingle (1998), who discuss assumed differences of persuasibility between women and men in the USA. They argue that if it is true that women are more easily persuaded, the same data can also be interpreted as showing that men do not easily change their minds and hence are less flexible than women.

Apart from these few studies, and despite the impressive amount of research on gender differences in language and discourse as well as about argumentation, there is no systematic research I am aware of about gender differences in argumentation. This is a fortiori true for a field that is much less researched, namely the influence of class – unless combined with obvious differences of education: complex, and especially scientific argumentation,

of course, presupposes advanced education and only in that sense may argumentation vary across social groups.

This suggests that apart from the opinions and ideologies defining the “positions” of speakers, the context factor most relevantly related to argumentation is *knowledge*. Speakers are able to persuade recipients with arguments only if they share the general sociocultural knowledge or the specialized knowledge of the recipients, so that the necessary inferences can be made that are the basis of argumentation. In this sense, however, argumentation is hardly different from other kinds of discourse structures (e.g., narrative or news structures) that require general or specific knowledge for their understanding.

### Narrative

Besides everyday conversation, literature and mass-media messages, few types of discourse have been studied as frequently and systematically as various kinds of stories (among a vast number of other studies, see, e.g., Bamberg, 1997; Bruner, 1990; Fludernik, 1996; Linde, 1993; Ochs and Capps, 2001; Quasthoff and Becker, 2004; Toolan, 2001). Most of these studies focus on the structures and strategies of storytelling itself, following the usual autonomous paradigms we also have observed for linguistics and discourse analysis more generally. So, we still know very little about who tells what kinds of stories, how, to whom and in what situations.

In my own work on racism and discourse, I examined how white Dutch people tell stories about immigrants and other “ethnic” issues (Van Dijk, 1984). One of the results of that analysis was that the classical narrative schema (Labov and Waletzky, 1967) was realized in only about half of the 144 stories analyzed. In the other stories the typical Resolution category was missing, so that the stories ended with the Complication category, typically featuring a complaint or a negative experience with a foreign neighbor. These complaint stories, however, were not evenly distributed over our interviewees. As might be expected, they were more typical of those storytellers who in the rest of their interviews appeared to be more explicitly prejudiced. Since I have no explicit means of measuring ethnic prejudice, I was unable to establish a reliable quantitative link between prejudice and “negative storytelling,” but my findings do suggest that underlying ethnic attitudes influence many aspects of talk (such as topic selection and lexical choice), including the ways people tell stories about minorities (see also Van Dijk, 1985, 1993b).

Future work that is able to elaborate a reliable diagnostic for ethnic prejudice may be able to confirm these qualitative observations. What is relevant for this book and this chapter is the conclusion that context models are influenced not only by socially shared knowledge but also by prejudices,

and that these may influence the structure of narrative. Or, in terms of the identity and group allegiances of the language user, the nationality or ethnicity of the speaker may in this way (indirectly) influence the way they talk about out-group members, such as immigrants or minorities.

More generally, storytelling is common in the reported experiences of people with their foreign neighbors or colleagues. In another analysis (Van Dijk, 1993b), I examined the narrative structure of a story told in California by a white US citizen about foreign, and specifically Mexican, drivers. This man complained about the immigrants' alleged lack of knowledge of English and the enhanced probability of them causing accidents when they can't read street signs. And it's not just in California. The same sorts of complaint stories about alleged lack of knowledge of the language are quite common in the Netherlands too (Van Dijk, 1984, 1987). Apart from the ethnic prejudices or the xenophobia these storytellers share, we can safely assume that the topic, the focus and, especially, the tellable complication of these stories are controlled by the group membership of the storyteller, as is also shown in consistent Us–Them polarization in the rest of the interview. More generally, talk and text about out-groups is organized by an overall polarizing strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation.

More research has been done on gender and storytelling, focusing mostly on the contents or topics of stories told by men and women. Johnstone (1990) collected 68 stories told by men and women in Indiana, USA, and concluded that women's stories tend to be oriented to other people, personal roles and the community, whereas men tend to focus on their own abilities, courage, contest and honor and the events in which they can show their prowess. Other work also suggests that men tend to tell stories about themselves and women about others. Thus in Sweden Nordenstam (1992) found that women telling stories among themselves mentioned others by name twice as much as men did when telling stories to other men. This means that when highly successful women tell their life story, part of their self-presentation strategy may feature various forms of ambivalence when they "perform" their success (Wagner and Wodak, 2006).

I have already referred above to Soler Castillo's (2004) study of gender and storytelling in Bogotá, Colombia, in which she compared how women and men tell their stories as part of sociolinguistic interviews. Generally, she concludes that there are few marked differences between men and women on sociolinguistic variables such as those of grammar (adverbs, adjectives, coordination and subordination, etc.). Women tend to use more diminutives and men more tag questions. Women also use different tag questions than men, using them less as fixed expressions (as the men tend to do) and more as a means of seeking confirmation from the interviewer. On many topics

women and men are quite similar (most topics for both are about work, family, studies and insecurity), but men talk more about politics, projects and sports. Many stories are about negative events, which meet the condition of the negativity of tellable Complications. Soler Castillo also analyzed the narrative structures of thirty of the stories told by the interviewees. Applying the method of Johnstone (1990), she found that the men tended to talk about themselves, and the women rather about others – but in both cases these stories tended to be about negative actions. The negative experiences of the men focused on work and aggression, those of the women on assault and accidents. However, if we collate the various topic categories used by Soler Castillo (assault, physical aggression, murder, rape, gangs) nearly half of the women's stories were about some form of violence. The women's stories were nearly twice as long as the men's, but the narrative structure (Summary, Orientation, Resolution, Coda) was very similar. The women tended to be more detailed in their description of time, place and people, but the men tended to give more detail about the names of people and places. The affective evaluations of the stories showed hardly any gender-based differences. The stories of the men are generally shorter than those of the women. The men also use more metaphors than the women, especially those that reflect their specific interests, such as sports and war. The women were interested in more ordinary things; their metaphors focused on the struggles of everyday life and they used many voyage metaphors. For the men other people were a means to an end, for the women they were objects to be modeled or recipients to be filled, for instance, with love. The narrative space of the women and the men tended to be organized according to their experiences, women telling stories with a focus on the home and places within reach of home, the men, by contrast, relating their own activities on the street.

Thus, although there were differences between women and men in regard to some of the properties of storytelling, these differences were seldom very prominent – and seemed to be controlled rather by their experiences, activities and location than by (other) gender differences. The dominant topics in storytelling were not generally influenced by class and gender differences, but rather reflected the general experiences of life in the big city, for instance, with crime and violence.

Holmes (1997) found that the stories of men and women in New Zealand also primarily reflected their daily experiences and worries, and there too the women were more interested in family, children and friends, and the men in work, sport and activities. Günthner (1997) reports on a study showing that (in Germany) complaint stories tend to be told particularly among women, who find solidarity and sympathy from other women while displaying the

kind of vulnerability that apparently men are less likely to allow to be exposed.

Sidnell (2003), in an ethnographic study of male storytelling in a rum shop in Guyana, showed how men manage such interaction as a male-exclusive event, even when women are present. Note again that it is not merely (male) gender that is relevant here in the context model of the participants but also the Setting: the rum shop. Indeed, it is likely that in some other settings, at home perhaps, stories may be told less female-exclusive.

During family dinners, a woman in her role of mother may stimulate her children to tell their father about their experiences of the day. This ritual reflects the power and the role of the father as the evaluator of the children, as well as of the relationships within the family (Blum-Kulka, 1997; Ochs and Taylor, 1995; Tannen, 2003). Obviously, in order to be able to account for the properties of storytelling in such conversations, we need to postulate complex mental models for all participants. These models should show that the women in these interactions display or perform various social roles or identities, such as those of mother, spouse, mediator and stimulator of pleasant dinner conversations. At the same time, the models that control appropriate dinner-table stories, should specify the occasion (dinner), place (home) and time (end of the day), as well as the knowledge of the mother about what the father does not (yet) know.

Macaulay (2005b: 51ff) showed that gender constraints combine with those of class. Middle-class women in a Glasgow study tended to tell stories about holidays, visiting friends and relatives, education, jobs, their children and decorating the house, whereas working-class women talked about their families, shopping, bingo and drinking. Middle-class men talked about their professional work, traveling and sports (as did the men in Holmes's 1997 study just mentioned), whereas working-class men told stories about the past and how things have changed. Day, Gough and McFadden (2003) examined UK working-class women's stories about drinking and fights – stories typically based on experiences of “nights out” (e.g., in the pub) – to gain a better understanding of the specific contexts of women's aggression.

Natural, everyday storytelling is seldom a smooth account of what happened. It may be fragmentary, repetitive, contradictory or interrupted by recipients (see, e.g., Quasthoff and Becker, 2004). Contextual features may further contribute to such a fragmented nature; for instance, men in prison telling their life story may try to convey their own victimization, suffering and powerlessness, thus avoiding recognizing their responsibility (McKendy, 2006; see also Auburn, 2005).

We see that although storytelling partly reflects the class-based and gendered experiences and activities of storytellers this does not explain all the

variation. Thus, although they may have jobs, many of the women studied do not talk about them very much in storytelling. And both women and men have family and friends, but women generally talk about them more than men do. There are probably other gender-based differences too – of interest and storytelling aims – between men and women as storytellers, such as the fact that machismo is likely to be in evidence only when men tell about their prowess.

This again shows that it is not the social gender (or class, or age) constraint that by itself “causes” different types of storytelling and topicalization. Instead it is a complex structure composed, on the one hand, of socially shared experiences, activities and aims, as well as the norms and values associated with gender, class and age, and on the other hand, of course, of personal experiences and aims.

Kipers (1987) used the stories told by teachers in the faculty room of a school in the USA to show that many gender differences exist across class and occupation boundaries: the women tended to tell stories unrelated to work – about home and family and social issues, whereas the men largely talked about work.

Since class, occupation, location and (presumably) many experiences are comparable for these teachers, the differences in story topics might be interpreted in terms of the different mental models male and female teachers construct about their everyday life. However, the gender difference in this case may be not only in the construction of mental models of their experiences, but also in what kinds of topics men (women) prefer to talk about with other men (women). That would be a context model effect, for instance, in terms of what men (women) think other men (women) are interested in, or in terms of what kind of personal information they are willing to share with other men (women).

Unfortunately, the social-class backgrounds of storytelling have seldom been studied systematically (but see, more generally, the pioneering and controversial findings on class differences in speech in the UK by Bernstein, 1971). Horvath (1985) found that lower-class storytellers in Australia generally prefer to talk about themselves, whereas middle-class people talk about other people as well.

The most extensive work on this aspect of context control – a study of lower-class storytellers in Scotland – has been done by Ronald Macaulay (Macaulay, 2005b). He found that lower-class storytellers tend to use more discourse markers and highlighting devices, whereas middle-class people use more evaluative expressions. As is the case for gender differences, these class differences need further interpretation and explanation, in terms, for instance, of different personal experiences on the one hand, and, on the other, of different linguistic experiences.



As Soler Castillo (2004) has also shown, Macaulay (2005a) found that, in general, women talk more, tell more stories and talk more about other people than men, and that women talk about other women, girls about other girls and men about themselves. Women typically include more (represented) dialogue in their stories (up to 27% of their stories are dialogue, compared with only 8% of men's stories), thus dramatizing scenes and making stories more lively. Wood and Rennie (1994) in their study of "formulating rape" found, among other things, that traumatic everyday experiences may make it difficult to talk about a topic such as rape. Theoretically, we see how event models (of traumatic experiences) interact with context models of current conversation that may influence problems of formulation.

The recent book edited by De Fina, Schifffrin and Bamberg (2006) is especially relevant for this review. This book is about discourse and identity, but most articles in the book deal with identity in stories and storytelling. The dominant theoretical approach in the book is a constructionist view of identity, that is, identity defined as contextual construction or performance: people "position themselves" in specific ways with their discourse. In *Society and Discourse*, it is shown that this currently very popular but reductionist approach to identity is much too vague and theoretically inadequate. All that is relevant here is that stories in many ways express, construe or perform the social identities of storytellers, recipients or protagonists. One of the prominent studies in the collection that clearly shows how identities are narratively performed is the article by Holmes (2006) on identities in organizational storytelling, part of a large project on discourse in the workplace. She showed how, in organizations, more or less irrelevant stories told in conversation can have a number of important functions, such as promoting cohesion and solidarity among team members, as well as construing complex personal and professional identities. She noted that during such conversations participants draw on their social and personal identities – being a leader, or the notorious drunk of a team, for instance. Thus a leader may confirm through telling a story (about how she ridiculed someone making a blunder) that she is a tough and professional leader – an identity which of course is not constructed from scratch, but already known to her team members, but which needs to be discursively confirmed – or possibly adapted – in the current situation. Holmes also emphasized another important point of the relations between discourse and context, namely that it is not only context factors (such as professional identity) that influence talk, but also that such talk has many *functions* in the current situation, such as solving problems or enhancing solidarity among colleagues, among many others. That is, even "irrelevant" personal or work-related anecdotes may thus become functional for the organization (for a related study of gender identity and authority in the workplace, see Kendall, 2004).

### Speech acts

The very definitions of the appropriateness conditions of speech acts are to be formulated in terms of context categories, such as the knowledge, wishes or purpose of the participants (Searle, 1969). For example, information questions (Wh-questions) presuppose that speakers do not have knowledge that they assume recipients have, and commands are appropriately issued only if the speaker wants the addressee to do (or *not* do) something, has a specific position of power or authority, etc.

Robin Lakoff, (1996) showed that in order to be able to make appropriate confessions in criminal cases in the USA, many other context features, such as power differences, need to be taken into account. She showed that a suspect needs to have full pragmatic competence in order to be able to make an acceptable confession, such as various forms of communicative competence, including understanding of his role as a suspect in a criminal conversation.

The question here is whether speech acts may vary in the sense that, for instance, different kinds of speakers use different kinds of speech acts. The standard example here would be the use of commands, which presuppose that the speaker has a higher position, role or status than the recipient, or a related condition. Thus, a sergeant probably issues more commands than a soldier and a policeman more than a suspect, and so on. Power and role relations of participants obviously influence interactions and hence also their speech acts.

Although speakers' institutional power may control the nature and effects of speech acts (Wang, 2006), as is the case for questions in police interrogations (where there is not merely a preference or norm to reply, but an obligation), we should at the same time examine the influence of other context features. Thus, Haworth (2006) showed how police officers' questions may be constantly challenged and resisted by suspects who have social status. In many institutional situations questions are used as a means of control. For instance, Speer and Parsons (2006) found that hypothetical questions about their possible future may be used as gate-keeping moves in the psychiatric assessment of transsexual patients.

Holmes (2005) showed how managers, using the power of their position, give directives to their employees in order to get things done. In other words, classically, social power may be manifested in specific speech acts. In abstract pragmatic terms this means that social positions and hierarchical relations are among the appropriate conditions of directive speech acts.

However, in real life, and in real interactions, things are somewhat more complex. First of all, following the logic of this argument, the participants must construct such social positions in their context model. Thus, a manager who does not consider herself to be in a superior position is unlikely to use

directives, but rather requests. Second, it is not just social position, but several other situational characteristics (as construed by the participants) that may be involved, such as the setting, the rules and norms of the organization, the (other) relationships between the speakers and so on. Despite formal power relations, participants may well be good friends, or the occasion (like a birthday celebration at work) may be less formal, in which case too blunt directives may be less appropriate. On another topic related to the different situations of professional women and men, Martín Rojo and Gómez Esteban (2005: 82) provide examples showing that in some office parties, women may feel out of place with respect to (or be excluded from) the informal “fun” of men.

Directives need not always be in the form of commands, but may take the form of polite requests – although the context model of the recipient in such a case will tell the recipient very clearly whether or not the utterance should be interpreted as a directive or as a request. Holmes (2005) also showed how much of the power in offices in New Zealand is exercised not by explicit directives, but by direct, indirect or implicit reference to procedures, norms, precedents and so on assumed to be shared by the participants. Such examples again show that it is not merely formal position or power that directly controls language use, but a complex analysis of the whole communicative situation. Formal position and personal relationships, shared knowledge, norms and other social representations may be activated so as to control how participants speak or how they understand such talk. This also applies to the role of gender in such situations. Holmes showed that women managers may exercise their power straightforwardly, in a stereotypically blunt “masculine” way, but that traditional gender restrictions and presuppositions remain relevant when such conduct appears to be interactionally challenged by subordinates.

Similar conclusions are drawn by Martín Rojo and Gómez Esteban (2005), who examined “female style” in Spanish organizations. In a study of focus-group discussions, they found that female managers feel they need to act in an especially tough, authoritarian and hard-working way to show they are able managers. However, they pay a price for that in being less liked by subordinates (especially women) and seen as less feminine. On the other hand, men do not have to perform in any special way or put on an act of being something they are not, and they are seldom seen as especially tough or authoritarian, because their authority as managers is stereotypically presupposed anyway.

Other research documents further gender and age differences in the use of speech acts. Thus, Gleason, Ely, Perlmann and Narasimhan (1996) show that mothers in the USA tend to use more prohibitives to boys than to girls (see also Gleason, 1985), and Ervin-Tripp, O’Connor and Rosenberg (1984) found

that US children use less polite speech acts (e.g., orders) to their mothers than to their fathers. (For a more ethnographic, self-report description of gender and other variations in family talk, see Nader, 1996; for an analysis of similar patterns in the pragmatic development of Kaluli children, see also Schieffelin, 1990; and Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986.)

In a study by Kyratzis and Guo (1996), comparing gender differences in the USA and China, it is shown that dominating speech acts and interaction is a question not simply of gender, but also of Setting and other situation parameters: in China women tend to dominate men at home (where they order them around), and the reverse is the case outside the home (women tend to be silent and invisible) – as if their lives inside and outside the home are different worlds or cultures. In the USA, where individualism is more prominent, the context differences are less pronounced: women and men maintain their own individual identity, whether at home or in the public sphere.

As is the case for all action, speech acts are carried out under the control of “cognitive” context factors such as *aims* or *goals*. Classical speech-act theory formulated these in terms of speaker intentions or “wants”: S wants H to know (do, etc.) *p*. And conversely, speech acts are understood if the recipient is able to attribute such an aim or goal to the speaker. I have proposed that such cognitions are regular parts of context models.

And finally, speech acts also presuppose knowledge of speakers about the assumed knowledge of the recipient, as I just suggested for Wh-questions. These presuppose that the speaker believes that the recipient knows what the speaker wants to know.

We see that, as assumed, appropriate conditions of speech acts require formulation in terms of various context properties. Recall though that this context is not the objective social situation, but rather the way the participants interpret it. Hence the possible confusion and forms of miscommunication, stereotypically summarized by the slogan “Is that a promise or a threat?” when recipients do not have enough information about a speaker.

### **Talk-in-interaction**

Many of the structures discussed above also have important interactional features, as we saw for argumentation, disclaimers and so on. In addition to what has been argued before, however, we should finally attend to some of the many properly interactional features of discourse, such as turn-taking, interruptions, corrections, sequencing, opening and closing conversations, organizing communicative events, and a host of other interactional practices, such as promising, agreeing and telling stories, among many others. Obviously, what has been said above for style, register, genre and their manifestation in

grammar, semantics, speech acts and so on, also holds for conversations, even when these properties are less focused upon in conversation analysis.

Despite the reluctance in early conversation analysis to examine the role of context, as extensively discussed in *Society and Discourse*, it should be borne in mind that the very account of interaction is couched in “contextual” terms. Whereas traditionally utterances or “texts” were studied as independent entities or phenomena, without much being said about their authors or readers, everyday conversation as well as institutional talk-in-interaction fundamentally features several *participants* and the *relations* between them – properties of the interaction that we have analyzed thus far as part of the “context” of talk as abstracted from a communicative event. The same is true for the many (social) acts being accomplished by talk, as well as the norms, rules or “methods” members use to conduct conversation.

Without being able to account here for the vast amount of interactional features of talk, let us examine at least some prominent ones in relation to their contextual constraints (for details, see, among many other studies, Drew and Heritage, 1992; McHoul and Rapley, 2001; Sarangi and Roberts, 1999; Ten Have, 1999).

### *Turns and turn-taking*

The system of turn-taking, among the most “observable” and characteristic properties of conversation, was one of the first explicitly attended to (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974). Research summarized in *Society and Discourse* suggests that there are many contextual constraints on turn exchange, including who may or must speak first or last in a conversation, who may or may not speak at all, for how long, and whether or not explicitly invited to do so. Generally, age, social-hierarchical relations, such as those of rank, status or power, also define various kinds of turn rights. In the Wolof community, people of lesser rank are expected to speak first (Irvine, 1974). In many western cultures, people of higher rank or age speak first, and there is a general rule in that case not to speak until spoken to, and not to interrupt a speaker until given a turn. In some cultures children are not allowed to speak in the presence of parents unless invited to do so.

The same is true for *gender*. In many cultures women are subjected to similar constraints on their speaking rights in the presence of men. One might venture that there is only a difference of degree between formal rules of cultural appropriateness defined in terms of gender and the de facto male domination in western cultures. Traditionally, such domination was inferred from interruption patterns: it has often been found that men take the floor more often and for longer than women, and interrupt women more often than women interrupt men (Bergvall, 1995; Edelsky, 1993; James and Clarke,

1993; West and Zimmerman, 1983). In a study of debates in the UK House of Commons, it appeared that male MPs more often violate the rules than female MPs in order to get the floor (Shaw, 2000). And even if women get the floor as often as men, they may still have to have to overcome the challenge of derisive asides from the male audience (Bergvall and Remlinger, 1996).

The picture is however is more complex. Redeker and Maes (1996) showed that in specific kinds of professional interactions in the Netherlands, there were no interruption differences between men and women in mixed groups, but there were more interruptions among all-male groups and fewer among all-female groups. Ahrens (1997) showed that all content and context criteria should be taken into account when interruptions were examined, and that these were not necessarily manifestations of dominance. In their critical review of 25 years of research on gender-related interruptions, James and Clarke (1993) also concluded that this research does not confirm this gender-based variation in interruptions.

With the change of social relations towards more equality, contextual turn-taking conditions have also changed, as may be observed most readily in children interacting with parents in many parts of Western culture. Yet politeness and respect, e.g., based on age or status difference, still constrain turn-taking in the sense that people of higher status are interrupted less.

In formal, institutional situations, turn-taking may be managed by explicit rules, with turns being allocated by someone with this specific function (chair, speaker, etc.), as is the case in most formal meetings, such as board meetings and parliamentary debates. In the latter case, turns may also be allocated with reference to time – speakers may have so many seconds or minutes to speak, as happens, for instance, in US presidential debates. These examples show that it is not merely the status or role of the participants that defines certain conditions on turn distribution, but also the *relations* between participants: more egalitarian social relations condition (and are enacted by) more egalitarian distribution of turns.

Much research has been dedicated to the assumed “stylistic” differences between women and men in conversation, traditionally (and often also stereotypically) summarized in the attributes “cooperative” and “competitive” and assumed to characterize gender-based action and interaction in general, and variously explained in terms of biological, cultural and social (power) constraints. Thus, interruptions, topic selection and continuity by men have been interpreted as typical of a competitive struggle for the floor, and those by women as being rather cooperative and supportive of the previous speaker (see, e.g., Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003: 122ff; Coates, 1996, 1997).

As holds for most research reviewed here, however, these generalizations are at most general tendencies, and as usual it all depends on cultural and

social situations and how these are constructed by the participants. Depending on such contexts, women will also be competitive in interaction, but may compete for other things, such as popularity instead of power, hierarchy or leadership (Eckert, 1989, 1990) – and of course many men are able to cooperate (see also Cameron, 1997a).

Thus, whereas traditional sociolinguistic studies simply used unproblematic social “variables,” such as gender, contemporary research examines language use rather in terms of (more varied) gendered identities and relations, and in complex relations to other social identities or structures (see also, e.g., Cameron, 1997b; Wodak, 1997; Wodak and Benke, 1997).

As a general socioculturally based tendency, women are sometimes found to construe their competitive role in the interaction, and the relations between women and men (or among women), in different competitive terms, with different norms and values. Thus, Marjorie Harness Goodwin (1990) showed how girls may competitively organize conversations in such a way that some African American girls are accepted as friends or members of a clique, whereas others are excluded. And in Sheldon’s research it was found that girls in the US Midwest were perfectly able to handle and negotiate conflict with a kind of “double talk” that combined the gendered value of “being nice” with being assertive (see, e.g., Sheldon, 1990, 1997).

With the usual caution against overgeneralization and the need for more complex contextual analysis of these results in mind, it should also be recalled that the vast majority of these studies have been carried out in North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand; thus they are relative to contemporary gender identities and relations in these cultures and societies – a contextual constraint that is not always explicitly formulated in such studies but which obviously presupposes that “Western” social situations are seen as the norm.

### *Openings, closings and sequencing*

As we have seen for turn distribution generally, there are obvious contextual conditions on who may or should open and close conversations. The most conspicuous examples in many cultures are formal, institutional meetings of many kinds that are opened and closed by a specific participant, such as the chair. In informal situations, age, gender, rank, status or power may be a more or less strict condition for who may (or *must*) speak first, second or last (see, e.g., Aston, 1995; Heath, 1981; Rostila, 1995).

The same is true for the transition of one sequence to the next in a conversation, for instance, initiating a closing sequence, or going from initial greetings to topical categories (the “business in hand”). Rather general in

formal and less egalitarian situations is the rule that more “powerful” speakers are allowed or expected to initiate new sequences, changes of topic and closings, where “powerful” is again defined in terms of age, gender, social role or status, as well as formal position, for example, the chair (Okamoto and Smith-Lovin, 2001).

Openings of informal conversations may depend on self-selection of speakers in situations of (new) recipient selection, for instance, when asking directions of a stranger in the street. Addressing strangers in many cultures and conditions is subject to strict rules: as part of a more general social system of protection of interactional space and privacy, we may not simply address anyone anywhere whenever we feel like it, just to begin a conversation. Generally there must be a “good reason,” such as need for help (asking directions), offering help to someone demonstrably needing it, initiating a service encounter, supplying information and so on.

In institutional settings, these “good reasons” are defined in terms of formal roles and relations between participants, as when bosses address their subordinates, and professors students, whenever there is a institutional reason to do so, e.g., requesting information or engaging in some task. This means that the “good reasons for engaging in talk” are general appropriateness conditions for interaction, e.g., when help, service or other forms of interaction are permissible or necessary. Violation of such rules may be defined and sanctioned in terms of a scale running from mild inappropriateness to legally prohibited harassment and aggression. The characteristic example is that of sexist harassment of women by men (see, e.g., Conefrey, 1997, for a study of the “chilly” climate for women in a university lab).

Opening conversations may also be controlled by (awareness of) *place* and *space* constraints. We do not greet *all* the people we see on a busy city street, but if we meet someone when we are walking on a lonely country road it is acceptable, perhaps necessary, to greet them; and closeness of participants in a situation is more likely to give rise to spontaneous conversation than distance: rather trivially, we tend to talk more to someone sitting next to us on a train or plane, or standing next to us in line, in an elevator or in a shop, etc., than to people at the other end of the train, plane, room, shop or space in general. Closeness in this case is also associated with other aspects of face-to-face interaction, such as sharing an interactional space, eye-contact, sound range of normal speech and so on. See Ubel, et al. (1995) for a study of inappropriate elevator talk by hospital employees in the USA.

*Time* constraints on openings, closings and other sequences are the rule in most institutional forms of interaction. Most types of meetings are scheduled to begin “on time,” and are conducted under more or less strict time constraints, such as speaking times in minutes for MPs in parliament. Similarly, time constraints and the agenda of formal meetings may require participants,



often invited to do so by the chair, to wrap up one topic or point of the agenda and move to the next one. In informal conversations too there are time constraints, as we know from the familiar gesture of looking at one's watch ostentatiously as a way of bringing a conversation to an end. Many informal conversations begin with participants expressing such time constraints ("I only have a minute . . .," etc.). Such time constraints control a host of other aspects of talk, such as speed of talking, body posture, repeated looking at one's watch, interruptions, fast topic changes and closures, and so on, all signaling that the speaker is "in a hurry."

Openings and Closings are special (first and last) phases of the more general *sequencing phenomena* in talk that I looked at earlier under the label of "superstructures" in discourse and that have been described in terms of "schemata" or "formats" (see, e.g., Atkinson, 1979; Piazza, 1987; Schegloff, 1968). Thus, more or less in the same way as stories begin with some kind of Announcement and Summary, and close with a Coda, and argumentations begin or end with some kind of Conclusion followed or preceded by different kinds of arguments, so talk may be organized, at various levels, by sequentially organized fragments, two of which, Openings and Closings, were mentioned above. Thus, after various kinds of Openings, talk-in-interaction usually moves to "the business in hand," a sequence of turns or moves that may be organized by various topics, or by other formal categories that may be dependent on the institutional context, as appeared to be the case for parliamentary debates.

Thus, a lesson in the classroom, a service encounter in a shop, or a job interview in a business company, will have recognizable parts, segments or units that may be routinely attended to by the speakers, such as Explaining the Aims of a meeting, Introduction (e.g., formulating a problem by the chairperson), Asking Questions, Deliberations, Decision, Voting and so on (see, e.g., Komter, 1992).

Thus, in a service encounter in a shop, we may typically expect, after initial greetings and possible "small talk" (e.g., about the weather, especially if the interlocutors know each other), a Request for service or a product, possibly questions about the nature of the product or service required by the service provider, offering of the product or service, payment, and final small talk and greetings – depending on the institutional scripts (for details, see, e.g. Ventola, 1987).

Similarly, a trial is an activity sequence organized into more or less independent discourse units, such as Openings, Indictments, Defense, etc., each in turn structured in conventional ways (Cotterill, 2002; Drew and Heritage, 1992). Similar observations hold for interrogations in general, and for police "interviews" in particular (see, e.g., Cotterill, 2002; Heydon, 2005; Shuy, 1998).

Each institution, interaction activity or genre is thus (also) structured and sequenced by “functional” units or categories that organize its overall meanings and interaction, for instance, in various kinds of “pre-allocated” turns, turn sequences, turn lengths and so on (Ten Have, 2001). Thus, Requests of a client allow service providers to infer what clients want and to organize their own actions and discourse accordingly.

This is only a very rough general picture, and for each genre or activity such a “schematic” analysis of talk may go into very fine organizational detail. Note that this kind of schematic or “superstructural” analysis of talk or text should not be reduced to local “sequential” analysis, e.g., at the level of turns or even turn-internal structure. That is, Openings, Closings, Greetings, Questions, etc. are higher level, complex units that may organize many turns of the actual sequence of talk, as is also the case for written discourse. Actually, they organize meaning, function or action rather than lower-level sequential turn-taking. These categories may themselves include interaction, e.g., in a Negotiation or Greetings category of a meeting. As we know from adjacency pairs such as Question and Answers, schematic categories may consist of just one turn or one proposition each, or a Question sequence or Answer sequence consisting of many turns or propositions (depending on the level of analysis). Many of the usual descriptions of such adjacency pairs, for instance, that questions typically construct “obligations” for recipients to answer, are again contextual rather than purely discursive notions (as would be the case for turns, syntactic structures, lexical items, propositions, etc.).

From the way I have summarized the nature of global-level sequencing (schematizing, superstructuration, etc.) in talk, we see that it also has contextual constraints, as we already saw for Openings and Closings.

For instance, in many types of job interview, the interviewers want to have (more) information from and about candidates so as to be able to evaluate them for the job. Generally, there is an unequal relation of power between interviewers and interviewee, since the former can decide about someone’s job future and usually also have the power to organize and direct the interview. This means that they have the opportunity to engage in a fairly long sequence of information-questions that the interviewee will generally feel obliged to respond to as well as possible and which he or she cannot choose to end. And in some job interviews, the interviewees are expected to show interest by asking questions of the interviewers as well. In other words, a schematic category of Questioning in job interviews (as well as in interrogations, exams, etc.) is to be defined not only in purely sequential terms, e.g., as a category that follows (say) Opening, Introduction or Aims, but also in terms of which of the participants may or must engage in them, as what, with what aims or knowledge (or lack of knowledge), and so on (see also Komter, 1992).

That is, each superstructural category of talk may have a more or less precise sequential order and function, as well as contextual constraints (Time, Place, Participants, Aims, Knowledge, etc.), as is the case for discourse as a whole. Moreover, especially in organizations, such routine formats of talk may become conventionalized, and even (explicitly made) normative, e.g., by rules or a practical guide, as we know from parliamentary debates as well as from interview procedures in organizations and interrogation strategies of the police. These categories may organize meanings (as the schematic category of a Headline organizes the global, macromeaning of a news report) and actions – such as their Openings and Closings – but on the whole they must be defined in contextual terms.

### *Other context influences on talk-in-interaction*

Since the ways various context parameters influence other interactional aspects of talk are multiple (a study that would require several monographs by itself), I can only briefly review a few empirical studies. The most powerful contextual factors – besides the always relevant categories of the Aims and Knowledge of the participants – are the (constructed) Participant categories: roles, gender and cultural identities, and social class, as well as relations between participants.

However, it should be recalled again that very few situational constraints are uniformly construed as context factors by most participants of talk, and where we seem to find obvious gender differences, they may still depend on more complex factors and interactions in the context. Thus, whereas several studies find that in Spain men conversationally dominate women in high-status communicative events, such as television talk shows (more, longer, turns, more often treated as experts by hosts, etc., see also Kotthoff, 1997), Bierbach (1997) showed that women in Spain in other social situations, such as neighborhood associations, are not at all dominated by men. In another prestigious setting (research seminars in the university), men again talk more than women (though this is more the case for the students than for the professors), but the situation is different in the humanities from what it is in the social science faculties, as Swedish data show (Gunnarsson, 1997).

The traditional sociolinguistic “variables,” therefore, should be studied in relation to such broader notions as “communities of practice” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992) or at least with respect to a combination of (constructed) social categories as represented in context models. Indeed, women, men, adolescents, students, lower-class and middle-class people talk and communicate quite differently in such different community settings, e.g., while at work, at home or in the gym (see, e.g., Coates, 1997). Thus, all findings summarized in this chapter should always be relativized to such more

complex situation analyses, and, of course, to the fundamental notion of the subjective model people construe of such situations.

One of the many assumed gender differences is that women talk more than men. But, as is the case more generally for the influence of gender on discourse, this depends on other context constraints. Thus Swacker (1975) found that US men in an experimental situation (describing the drawing of a room from memory) talked much more than women, maybe to show off in a test situation. James and Drakich (1993), as well as several other researchers, found that in the USA more generally men talk more, and do so in most “mixed-sex” situations, where they also get their discourse and ideas attended to more often than those of women (see also Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003:114ff).

We have earlier seen that much of the originally assumed conversational differences between women and men were largely stereotypes – and as such also powerful as norms of “appropriate” language use (see also the debate of Robin Lakoff’s original 1975 study of women’s language, Lakoff, 2004). Decades of research on language, discourse and gender has debunked or at least refined such earlier observations (see, e.g., the chapters in the handbook edited by Holmes and Meyerhoff, 2003). Yet, it has also been stressed that exchanging negative stereotypes about women’s talk for positive ones still presupposes differences between women and men (Talbot, 2003). On the other hand, denying any systematic differences of gender in language use may be interpreted as denying the general influence of women’s subordinate position in most if not all cultures and societies. The point is, again, that it all depends on context and how participants define them.

### *Refusals*

Although precisely not intended to demonstrate gender differences in talk, the study by Kitzinger and Frith (1999) on British women’s *refusals* of men’s sexual proposals or aggression is relevant here. Against the common recommendation for women to learn to just say “No” to unwanted male sexual offers, the authors stress that conversationally refusals are dispreferred and hard to make, and hence are typically formulated in hesitant forms. Men, who share the same conversational rules, perfectly well understand such refusals, whereas a plain “No” may be misunderstood.

One of the ways to interpret this critical study in my framework is to recall that “hesitant” language use is not, on the one hand, an expression of stereotypical female insecurity, but a more general conversational move for dispreferred (difficult) refusals, and a way of saving face for the recipient. On the other hand, gender is of course relevant in this particular kind of refusal

because the conversational moves implement the gendered interaction predicament occasioned by sexual offers or requests. That is, refusals in this case are based on the definition of a complex communicative situation as represented in the context models of women. Indeed, no such problem arises in everyday, standard, refusals, such as refusals to an offer of a lump of sugar in one's tea, which are typically made with a simple and polite "No, thank you!" One of the fundamental differences is that a large number of presuppositions about the possible implications of such a refusal for the image, the popularity, the reputation, etc. of the woman, are implicated in the context model of a refusal of sex. All of these, in turn, are based on social representations about sex, women and gender relations – and not merely considerations of face for the recipient. Thus, the hesitation phenomena are not just polite ways of "doing" difficult refusals, but also a manifestation of such complex "deliberations" in the ongoing construction of the context model that governs such refusals.

As is generally the case for social interaction involving questions of "face" or politeness, we may also expect cultural differences here. Thus, Jiang (2006) found that direct refusals to answer questions of journalists were much more common in press conferences in the USA than in China, where avoidance and incomplete answers were the preferred mode of reply.

### *Compliments*

One of the few clear gender differences that do seem to exist is the positive-politeness strategy of making and receiving *compliments*. Thus, Holmes (2003) found that, at least among white (Pakeha) New Zealanders, women both give and receive more compliments than men (68% and 74% respectively), and that only 9% of men compliment each other; a finding that confirms an earlier study of compliments in the USA. Brown (1993) showed that Tenejapa women in Mexico did more than men to protect each others' (positive and negative) face needs – but her explanation is not just a question of gender, but also especially framed in terms of the low social status and the mutual dependency of the women.

### *Humor*

Lampert (1996) showed that *humor* in conversation also varies across gender and cultural boundaries. Thus, women in all-female groups use self-directed humor to express their feelings about a personal experience and to seek response, whereas men in mixed groups use humor rather to avoid criticism or to downplay unacceptable behavior. And generally, Euro-American women

are less inclined to use self-directed humor than Latina or Asian-American women. Holmes and Stubbe (2003a, 2003b) found evidence that the stereotype that men use more humor at work than women was not borne out in the workplaces they studied in New Zealand, where, for instance, women chairpersons did more to encourage workplace humor and tolerated more off-task social talk than their male counterparts (for a review of gender studies of humor, see Crawford, 2003).

### *Politeness*

Another topic investigated in sociolinguistic and pragmatic research is the social conditions of *politeness*. Thus, Holmes (1995) found that Pakeha New Zealand women tend to be more polite than men, but in his brief review of this study Macaulay (2002) pointed out that the reason for the less “polite” attitude, especially of (young) men in Britain, may have many reasons, and need not be a main gender effect. (See also Brown, 1993; Macaulay, 2001, 2005a; Mills, 2003; for other studies on gender and politeness in the UK.) On the other hand, in a Moroccan study, Kharraki (2001) found that in bargaining men use more solidarity devices than women, for whom tough (and hence more face-threatening) bargaining is seen as a housekeeping skill.

Indeed, in a social–psychological study of the influence of speech styles Steffen and Eagly (1985) found that a less polite style is associated with high status and power in the USA. If such status and power is rather associated with men and their positions then there is also an additional, indirect, relation between politeness and gender. Thus high-status women using a less polite “powerful style” may on the one hand be seen as more competent, but on the other hand as less persuasive, because they are seen as less feminine. Similarly, lack of respect, manifest in many forms of interaction, is experienced by African American and Latin American people as one of the basic ways racism is being expressed in the United States (Buttney and Williams, 2000).

Only an (often unconscious) strategic analysis of the social situation by both speakers and recipients will influence how people speak and how they will be understood, and whether it is rather gender, or status, or position, or a combination, that is construed by the participants (for details on the role of gendered communication in the workplace, see, e.g., Thimm, Koch and Schey, 2003). Holmes and Stubbe (2003a) stress that women managers in New Zealand may be quite direct in meetings or giving instructions for simple tasks, just like men, but will generally be less confrontational in interpersonal talk with employees.

Contrary to first assumptions on gender differences of talk, *tag questions* are not necessarily used more by “insecure” women (Lakoff, 1975). I have

already mentioned above the finding of Soler Castillo (2004) that in life stories in Bogotá men use more tag questions than women. Dubois and Crouch (1975) found that *all* tag questions were made by men, and Cameron, McAlinden and O'Leary (1989) found that men used them twice as much as women. On the other hand, Holmes (1984) found more tag questions in New Zealand (Pakeha) women's talk, although these were especially facilitative.

Again we see that apart from possible gender differences – based especially on different experiences and interests for at least some groups of women – other contextual conditions are also involved, such as different types of interaction (e.g., facilitative versus challenging). This also implies that women in the same social situations as men (e.g., in professional encounters) may well use tag questions in a very similar way. An interesting aspect of tag questions is that they are one of the discourse properties that are largely automatized, and hence less easy to control permanently during talk. Thus, if they are situationally variable, this may be because they are part of the overall style of the participants.

## Conclusion

This chapter has discussed some fundamental notions that relate contexts, as represented by participants, with various properties of language use or discourse, such as style, register and genre. If context influences language use, this influence operates specifically on those properties of discourse that can vary. We have therefore examined in some detail the very notion of variation, which presupposes that something remains “the same” between variants. Beyond a traditional approach to sound and grammar variation, we proposed a much broader concept of variation, ultimately based on underlying event and context models. Thus, it was also shown that the very definitions of such classical notions as style, register, text type and genre all need a more explicit context theory.

More generally, the relations between discourse and society need much more explicit and theoretical analysis, and I have shown that a sociocognitive approach in terms of context models provides the necessary interface. Of the many possible relations between social situations and discourse structures, as represented in participant models of participants, we decided to focus on the notion of *control*, namely, how context models control the process of discourse production and comprehension. Only in this way are we finally able to escape the superficial sociolinguistic notion of correlations between variables, deterministic, monocausal accounts of the influence of society on text and talk, or vague conversational notions, such as participants “orienting” to context parameters.

Within this new theoretical framework we have reviewed many studies, especially in sociolinguistics, on the relations between social “variables,” especially gender, and discourse structures. Although there are many studies that report variation of discourse features at various levels (sound, syntax, lexicon, meaning, rhetoric, formats such as argumentation or narration, speech acts and interaction) as a function of gender, class, age, status, position and other participant properties, the general conclusion that can be drawn from all these studies is that clear effects of “monocausal” social conditions are rare. Results of different studies are often contradictory. Also, clear main effects are seldom found for social “variables,” and generally depend on different situations or circumstances.

It should therefore be concluded that the social and cultural study of language use and discourse should be based on a more adequate theoretical basis, taking into account, on the one hand, variation at all levels of complex, multimodal communicative events (beyond correlation of simple phonological or grammatical variables), and, on the other, a similarly sophisticated analysis of complex communicative situations and how these are understood and represented by participants. Nearly always a well-known “factor,” such as gender, class, age or ethnicity, will exercise its indirect influence in combination with other conditions – and always in relation to how the participants construe such conditions subjectively. For instance, what is often attributed to gender, may well more generally be attributed to life experience, position, status or power – again, as interpreted and constructed by the participants.

In other words, any adequate way of accounting for such complex social conditions of talk and text will need to be in terms of the complex interplay of such conditions in the mediated structures and strategies of context models. In *Society and Discourse* I examine in more detail the social dimensions and bases of these context models. Thus, we need to know how participants construe social settings, participants as group members, social relations between participants, or social groups and institutions as relevant parameters of their subjective and intersubjective constructions of the relevant aspects of communicative situations. Indeed, what a theory of context models strongly suggests is that to produce and understand text and talk adequately and strategically, generally as well as situationally, presupposes that participants are able to analyze, understand and represent social situations, both individually and in accordance with the norms of a group or community. In this sense, the contextual understanding of discourse is an inherent part of the understanding of the everyday lives and experiences of people, and how they are able to act adequately in any social situation.



## 5 Conclusions

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Although it is generally recognized that context plays a fundamental role in the production, properties and comprehension of discourse, theories and analyses of context have been scarce. Contexts tend to be conceptualized intuitively in terms of properties of communicative situations, such as the gender, age, class or ethnicity of the speakers. Moreover, where the influence of context is being studied, for instance, in sociolinguistics, anthropology and Critical Discourse Analysis, it is generally assumed that these properties of social situations have a direct impact on the structures of text and talk.

In this book a more explicit and empirically more satisfactory theory has been presented that defines contexts in terms of subjective mental models – context models, of participants. Such a theory avoids the determinism of direct social influences or causation, accounts for differences among speakers, and hence accounts for the uniqueness of all discourse and discourse comprehension, even in the “same” social situation, offering a much more sophisticated analysis of the complex structures of contextual influence on text and talk.

This study shows first that most researchers in the humanities and social sciences after World War II engaged in structuralist, formalist and autonomous theories focusing on text, talk, signs, literature or art itself, thereby largely ignoring the social and cultural environments of language and discourse. It was only in the 1970s and 1980s that new (sub)disciplines and approaches, such as the ethnography of speaking, pragmatics, sociolinguistics and critical discourse analysis, began to emphasize the importance of an integrated “text-in-context” approach to language use, verbal interaction and communicative events. Thus in sociolinguistics social “variables,” such as gender and class of speakers, correlated with variations of language use, initially, especially at the level of sentence grammar, sounds, syntax and the lexicon. In pragmatics, the new focus on language use as speech acts formulated appropriateness conditions in terms of situational conditions, such as the wishes, intentions or knowledge of the speaker and hearer. Critical discourse analysis specifically examines the role of discourse in the (re)production of social inequality, for instance, by studying text and talk as forms of power abuse.

Although these various approaches informally accounted for the relations between social situations and language use in terms of “contexts” or “contextualization,” the nature of the relationship, as well as the more explicit theoretical account of the structures of contexts themselves, was seldom addressed in detail. Why, indeed, is gender or age of speakers generally taken as a property of context, and why not a host of other properties of social situations? And if gender and several other social parameters are assumed to influence discourse, why is it that so much variation is still unexplained – if reliable main effects can be found at all? These and many other questions may be asked about the relationships between social situations and language use, and which a new theory of context should be able to resolve.

### **Language and context**

In order to examine the relationship between language and context more closely, I first examined the most prominent theory of language dealing with context, namely Systemic Functional Grammar, as developed by Halliday, under the influence of Firth and Malinowski. This critical study of the SF-account of context has shown first of all that Firth and Malinowski had very little to say about contexts and their relations to language. Moreover their empiricism implied a fundamental denial of the role of cognition in language use and context. This denial influenced SF-linguistics from the start, leading to an incomplete and biased account of language. For instance, conditions of semantic coherence of discourse are thus reduced to a study of superficial cohesion while ignoring underlying semantic relations based on knowledge and inferences. Context itself was defined by three rather obscure notions, Field, Tenor and Mode, which on closer analysis appear to be so vaguely and inconsistently defined that they provide hardly any systematic insight into the ways social situations influence language use. Similarly, the anti-cognitivist stance of SF-linguistics does not admit mental properties of contexts, such as the knowledge, goals or intentions of the participants. For the same reasons they cannot define the appropriateness conditions of speech acts, which also often feature the knowledge of speakers. Despite its vast influence on linguistics and critical discourse analysis, the SF-approach to context thus appears totally misguided, and it is surprising that it remained without modification for decades.

### **Context and cognition**

The cognitive psychology of text production and comprehension, emerging in the early 1970s together with other new approaches to language and discourse in the humanities and social sciences, focused on the mental processes and

representations involved in language use. Besides emphasizing the fundamental role of knowledge in discourse processing, as well as the dynamic, flexible nature of strategies of production and comprehension, it introduced the fundamental notion of mental models as the basis of language use. Such models combine meanings of discourse with knowledge of the world by representing the events a discourse is about, and thus for the first time provide an explicit cognitive account of reference, co-reference and coherence of discourse.

Although the psychology of text processing thus offers a powerful theory of the way people produce and understand discourse, it fundamentally lacks a theory of context. Apart from some ad hoc independent variables manipulated in laboratory experiments, the theory itself does not account for the fact that language users adapt the structures of discourse to the social or communicative situation, and, vice versa, that they understand text and talk as a function of the situation.

It was therefore proposed that, between events models and the actual formulation of discourse, participants also need a representation of the communicative situation in which they participate, that is, another model, but not a semantic but a “pragmatic” one: a context model. Such models are like any other personal experience, but specific for verbal interaction. These context models control the way the speaker adapts the utterance to the communicative environment, but not in a direct, deterministic way, but through the subjective interpretation of the social environment by the participants. That is, context models account for social and personal variation at the same time, and hence also for style and any other form of significant language variation. And since participants may thus subjectively represent not only the aspects of the communicative event relevant for them, but also broader social structures, such as groups, organizations and institutions, context models are the general interface between society, situation, interaction and discourse. They embody not only personal experiences of autobiographical (episodic) memory, but also relevant inferences of socially shared beliefs, such as knowledge, attitudes or ideologies. In the same way subjective event models may thus be biased in the way they represent the real or fictitious world talked or written about, so context models may well be biased by the specific group knowledge or ideologies of the group of which the speaker or recipient is a member. But again, unlike deterministic theories of ideology, at the same time they allow each member to “apply” such group beliefs in a personal and ad hoc way. We see that the cognitive theory of context models is not only the crucial missing link that relates discourse processing to communicative situations and social structures, it also accounts for individual variation and uniqueness, thus connecting society, discourse and mind, the personal mind and the social mind, and social discourse with individual discourse, groups and their members, structure and agency.

The theoretical account of the properties of these context models first of all assumes that they are just like other mental models representing personal experiences in episodic memory. Thus, they probably feature such categories as Setting (Time, Place), Participants in various roles and identities, relations between Participants, and the social activity in which they are currently engaged. Whereas these “social” dimensions of context models are explored in *Society and Discourse*, it is emphasized in this book that context models also have “cognitive” categories, such as knowledge and ideologies, reflecting those shared by the social group or community of which the participants are members. Most crucial in this case is the mutual representation by the participants of the knowledge of the others, which is a fundamental condition of all interaction, communication and discourse. It is therefore postulated that context models have a central knowledge device, or K-device, that at each moment during interaction calculates what the recipients already know. In order to manage such a complex task (after all, the knowledge of recipients is vast), speakers apply powerful strategies that are rooted in their membership of epistemic communities. For instance, a speaker may simply assume that all they know is also known by other speakers of the same community, except personal and new facts. The same is true for interpersonal, local, national, cultural or international communities and communication. We thus account in a more dynamic way for the notion of Common Ground as the shared basis for all interaction, discourse and understanding.

Finally it is assumed that all interaction – and hence also discourse – needs to be controlled by intentions-of-actions as well as the further-reaching goals to be attained by such discourse-as-action.

Since context models ongoingly control discourse and interaction, and hence must – at least partly – be kept active in working memory, they must be relatively simple, and feature only a limited number of categories and sub-categories. That is, of the infinite richness of each social situation, they select only a few properties that are usually relevant for talk or text, such as the setting, the ongoing action and the participants (and their identities, roles, relations, goals and knowledge). Language users use it dozens or hundreds of times each day, and hence have routinized the construction and application of context models, and hence may simply apply a standard schema for specific kinds of communication strategically, adapting it to variable circumstances. Thus, we see that context models are a powerful device that links discourse with its communicative and social environment. At the same time this theory of context shows how discourse is strategically and flexibly adapted to unique situations. Such cognitive flexibility is systematically related to interactional flexibility. Participants may constantly renegotiate their interpretation of the relevant aspects of the communicative situation. That is, the cognitive

account of context is intimately related to an interactional account, which is also dynamic, strategic and ongoing.

### **Context, language use and discourse**

On the basis of this powerful sociocognitive theory of context in terms of context models, I have finally explored in detail the relations between context and the properties of various levels of discourse. I did so initially by examining the beginning of a speech by Tony Blair legitimating pending military action in Iraq. I showed how the understanding of this speech by the Members of Parliament as well as the analyst cannot be limited to an account of grammar, discourse rules, world knowledge or interaction. It is crucial to an understanding of the political significance of this speech to postulate a context model of speaker and recipients representing who is participating, in what political role and with what political intention and so on. A question asked in an interruption may thus not only be heard as a question, and not even just as irony or criticism, as in everyday conversation, but fundamentally as a form of political opposition, to which the reply will be heard in political terms, namely, as an attack by the Opposition. Standard conversation analysis is unable to account for such fundamental aspects of institutional interaction without making explicit the way participants construe the communicative situation as relevant context.

On the basis of this example and the sociocognitive theory of context, the next question is exactly how we should analyze the relations between such contexts as mental models and structures of discourse. I have already concluded that a direct, causal relationship is theoretically and empirically impossible, and hence postulated context models as an interface. After examining other concepts of relations, such as correlation, mapping or influence, it is finally concluded that the relationship is one of control. Contexts as models do not cause or condition text or talk but control the way they are executed, as is the case for grammar and knowledge as well.

The way context models control discourse is by controlling its possible variations. That is, given the subjective model of an event, sociocultural knowledge, or group attitudes and ideologies, context models show how speakers formulate (or presuppose) such specific or general beliefs at all levels of discourse. Traditionally, for instance in sociolinguistics, the way speakers communicate has been studied particularly with respect to the variability of sounds, syntax and lexical items. However, given some underlying level that is kept constant, many other discourse aspects may vary and hence be controlled by context models, such as visual structures in the mass media, various local meanings realizing a global topic, different ways of telling a story, or different speech acts realizing an illocutionary meaning – such as a directive.

Such a context-controlled account of discourse variation at many levels is in fact a theory of style, and the question is therefore examined of how various approaches to style can be made more explicit in terms of context models. Thus, personal style variation may be accounted for on the basis of the episodic nature of context models, that is, in terms of autobiographical experiences and how they shape personal ways of doing things (“personality”). Similarly, by the very nature of context models, uniqueness and distinction of style are defined as unique representations of communicative events, and by the ways such context models are different from those of other group members. And social styles are controlled by the shared social basis of context models, controlling how discourse is adapted to the ways social members interpret social situations (e.g., as formal or informal, or as controlled by institutional rules, as is the case for speeches in parliament).

Whereas style is thus the context-controlled way discourse may vary and adapt to different social situations, similarly defined in more specific linguistic terms, register is the way grammar plays a role in such situations. For instance, speakers routinely have recourse to the use of verb tenses that express or signal such past events when telling stories about past events, and informal conversations (unlike scientific discourse) typically feature the preferred use of first- and second-person pronouns. That is, register is the routinized way language users bring to bear grammatical resources to express the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of discourse.

A related and important contribution of a theory of context is a more explicit account of the theory of discourse genres. Although genres do have preferred grammatical and discourse structures at various levels, their distinctive characteristics are rather contextual than “textual.” For instance, a parliamentary speech or debate is primarily defined not so much by its topics (which may be debated in much other public discourse), nor by its formal style (typical of many other formal institutions) or turn-taking constraints (which characterize many formal meetings), but rather by the roles and identities of the participants (MPs, party members, etc.), their relationships (e.g., Government versus Opposition), their political goals and the political actions in which they participate (legislation, etc.). That is, an explicit theory of context at the same time provides a solid basis for theories of genres.

Having thus defined some general properties of the relations between context and discourse, and some crucial notions related to these properties (style, register, genre), the rest of the last chapter provides a systematic review of the current state of research on the influence of context on various structures of text and talk. As observed above, and throughout this book, most of this research assumes a direct relation between situation, society and discourse, and not the indirect, cognitively mediated one as defined by context models. This means that my account of the research on context-dependent

variation of discourse is necessarily limited to the theoretical perspective of these earlier studies. Indeed, I have had to explain many times that one of the reasons why stable social influences on discourse are hard to find resides in the limited, mono-causal and unmediated explanations in these studies. Thus, many studies focus on the role of gender in discourse, but very few research results appear to be clear and stable across different situations. One of the reasons is, obviously, that gender is not first of all a question of the biological conditions of discourse, but a social construct, and, second, that for each speaker the relevance of gender identities may be construed differently, and that gender never comes alone but is accompanied by other social conditions, such as age, ethnicity, social class, power, the social practices engaged in, as well as goals, knowledge and ideologies; in sum, complex context structures. That is, one would need a large body of comparable empirical studies to establish, statistically, a main factor of gender in context–discourse relationships. Similar observations hold for other social “variables,” such as social class, ethnicity, age and so on – and these are only a few of many other properties of social situations. And even when stable correlations could be found, they still would not tell us how these are related to actual processes of production and comprehension.

With these caveats in mind, I explore how various aspects of discourse, from sound structures, syntax and the lexicon, to topics, local meanings, speech acts, style, genre, rhetoric and interaction properties, such as turn-taking and interruptions, seem to be sensitive to social “influences” that may also be reflected in different context models. As just suggested, it is surprising to see how decades of extensive research have produced so many inconclusive (or at most quite limited) results that go beyond trivialities or that also may be explained in other terms. For instance, if it is found that men take the floor more often and interrupt more than women in at least some types of communicative events, such a difference may be attributed to differences of power or status rather than to gender. And obviously most professors of literature will be found to talk more about literature than professor of physics or carpenters. Daily experiences (knowledge, interests) of speakers or different social groups or categories may thus be a better predictor of discourse variation than gender, class or age per se. Indeed, many earlier findings appear to be the result of stereotyping rather than results of solid empirical studies.

However, it will not do to correct traditional studies of objective social variables by simply adding more variables – even if we had enough empirical observations to reach statistical significance for such complex combinations of variables. The point of context models is that language users themselves subjectively interpret and assign different relevance to each of the dimensions of the communicative situation. And if we want to study these context models themselves, we face the same kind of methodological problems of indirect

observation of mental structures we know from cognitive and social psychology. There are methods that tap into such mental representations and processes, such as priming, think-aloud protocols and recall measures, among others, but many of these are limited to the laboratory and precisely for this reason do not provide insights into the huge variety of social situations and discourse genres. Participant observation, field protocols, diaries and other methods will then be necessary for getting an insight into the ways at least some participants, and especially the participant-scholar(s), construed the communicative situation – methods that of course are also fraught with all kinds of observer biases.

Besides such well-known empirical methods, detailed discourse analysis in that case probably yields more systematic results when we try to explain, within a theoretical framework, why specific discourse structures are being used and not others. Thus, by some kind of psychological or methodological reverse-engineering, we may go back from discourse properties to probable context-model structures, event models, and their underlying belief systems, each related to the situational and social structures as known and perceived by the participants.

Often some of these underlying structures are made explicit, for instance, in misunderstandings, conflicts, negotiations and other “problems” of interaction and communication. And since language use is often highly reflexive, discourse may show many explicit signals of the structure and contents of context models. We thus need not only new theory, of which many issues still remain obscure and unexplored, but also new methods, and a vast research program that goes, on the one hand, beyond variations of grammar, focusing on all discourse structures, and, on the other, from isolated social “variables” to the complexity of situations and social structures as they are construed by participants in their context models.

This first monograph is dedicated exclusively to the theory of context and focuses on the general arguments and the sociocognitive theory of models. It applies these in the critical analysis of earlier work in linguistics (and especially in Systemic Linguistics) and in sociolinguistics. By contrast *Society and Discourse* investigates the contributions of the social sciences to a theory of context. In that book we see how in social psychology proposals have been made to analyze social episodes, how social environments influence human conduct, and how various forms of socially shared representations, such as knowledge and ideologies, influence the construction of context models. Similarly, the history of sociology and contemporary conversation analysis will be examined for its analysis of social situations as the micro sites of human interaction. We shall see that anthropology, having already focused its attention in the 1960s on the ethnographic analysis of discourse as communicative events, beginning with the seminal work of Dell Hymes, began the



analytic reflection of the nature of contextual influences. Thus, a cultural approach to contexts at the same time should answer the question about the cultural variations of contexts and their categories.

This book begins with a first, informal contextual analysis of fragments of Tony Blair's Iraq speech in the British House of Commons. The last chapter of *Society and Discourse* provides a much more detailed illustration of the theory of context by analyzing the many contextual properties of the whole debate on Iraq. At the same time, this analysis shows how context analysis may be applied in, and be inspired by, political science. Indeed, Prime Ministers and Members of Parliament not only engage in grammatical and meaningful talk, and not only follow the rules and strategies of interaction, as we have learned in discourse and conversation analysis, but also and especially engage in political action. *What* they say, and *how* they say it, may also have political functions, such as defending or attacking policies, "doing" opposition and so on.

It is here that the ultimate rationale of discourse and conversation analysis should be assessed, namely in the multiple social, political and cultural functions of text and talk in society. It is precisely the sociocognitive interface that links such forms of language use to their social and communicative situations that has been missing so far in the increasingly complex theories of language, discourse, conversation and communication of the last decades. This and the next book on context provide the first steps of a theory of that interface.

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