Essays: General

Theorizing "Context" for Text Analysis

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Although context is often invoked in the analysis of texts, the notion of context itself is rarely analyzed. What is context? Can it be thought of in systemic terms in the way grammar, phonology and even semantics have been? This paper will consider these questions, paying particular attention to the model of context that has been developed within the field of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Three perspectives on context—as it relates to discourse—are discussed: "Field" (the nature of the social action), "Tenor" (the relationship of the interactants) and "Mode" (the organization of the text). From there, we consider the instantiation of context in "contexts of situation," which are construed as constitutive elements of a broader "context of culture." This allows us to not only define "register," but also see why register analysis is a valuable tool in understanding a culture and becoming apprenticed into it. Finally, an alternative view of context is considered by way of comparison: that of critical linguist Teun van Dijk. Although his framework has much in common with the SFL approach, it also raises some serious questions about Hallidayan linguistics. These issues are critically addressed and, finally, rejected.

Introduction

Few would disagree that context, as it relates to language, is an amorphous concept. Some might even argue that it defies description. However it cannot be doubted that it has an intrinsic relation to the identity of any given text. Yet it remains a relatively neglected area of linguistic study. In the field of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), for example, there are numerous systematic frameworks for the analysis of texts along semantic and lexicogrammatical lines—but comparatively few for context analysis. This is hardly surprising, given that the notion of context itself remains ill-defined.

One of the few theories of language that has truly incorporated context as part of the linguistic system in its own right is Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). It does this by conceptualizing language in terms of strata. It begins with two basic strata, text and context—a notion that was developed within linguistics by J. R. Firth, after the work of the anthropologist Malinowski, but fine-tuned in recent times by Michael Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan. Within each of these two basic levels, further stratification can be proposed. Context can be seen as a broad "context of culture" that is constituted by innumerable "contexts of situation." Text, in turn, is formed out of semantics, lexicogrammar, and phonology/graphology. Visually, this relationship could be represented in the following way:

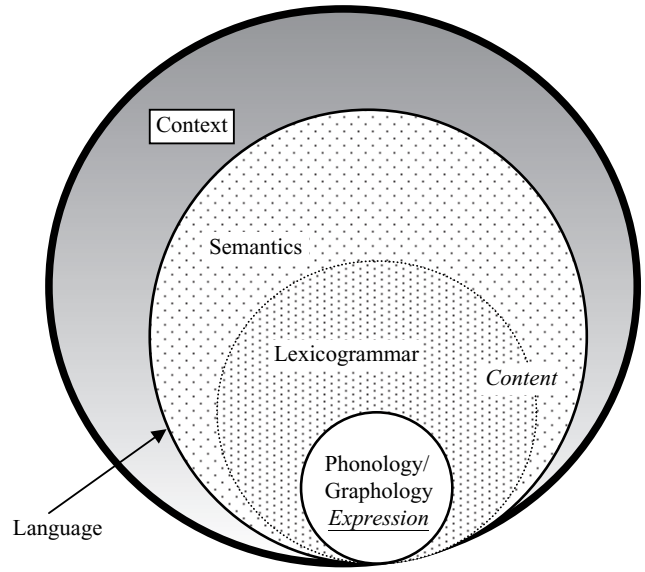

Figure 1: Stratification of Language in Context (Matthiessen, 1993, p. 227)

The diagram, however, presents a misleadingly clear-cut layering of systems. In fact, the relationship between all the strata is one of "realization" (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Each stratum is embedded in a higher one (up to context at the highest level), and serves to "realize," or encode it. The integrated model offered by SFL allows the analyst to show how different orders of patterning bear on meaning, and how these different orders bear on each other.

Context

According to Cook (1990), there are three basic problems that arise in attempting to describe context: identity (of necessary features), quality (of the descriptive system) and quantity (of data this would generate). In a simple everyday exchange, there are so many factors that would have to be considered (such as the physical qualities of the text [graphetic or phonetic], the physical situation in which the text takes place, the intentions of the interactants, and the identity of text boundaries), that transcribing the context would be, for Cook, like attempting to "transcribe infinity." However, as Hasan (1995) has pointed out, we may ask the question: how is contextual data any different to linguistic data? As soon as we attempt to describe language, are we not faced with the very same dilemmas of identity, quality and quantity? A lexicogrammatical description of a text is really just an abstract map, drawn according to a set of selected principles. It is certainly not the text itself. In the same way that Halliday (1994) has argued for lexis as delicate grammar, we can consider language as delicate context since, as Cook, (1990) notes, "If we present *everything*, without operating any principles of selection (assuming for a moment we could) this would be a reproduction of the speech event itself" (p. 4).

Principles for the Analysis of Context

The key to making sense of the context mush is to settle on principles of selection. We can generate such principles in the following way. When a text is produced (whether a conversation, novel, speech or whatever), let us call this an *interaction*—since even a monologue is addressed to somebody, although it may be the speaker him/herself. This allows us to pose the question: what are the elements that the speaker cannot ignore in his/her conception of what is relevant to the interaction? These are what Hasan (1996), following Goffman (1975), refers to as *motivational relevancies*, and summarises as:

- the nature of the social process: what is being achieved through the acts of verbal meaning,
- the nature of the relationship between the interactants, and
- the nature of the mode for message transmission.

In Systemic Functional literature, these three aspects have been labeled FIELD, TENOR and MODE.

Field

According to Halliday (1985a), a statement of Field answers the questions:

- What is the nature of the social action that is taking place?
- What is it that the participants are engaged in?

Field tells us about the sphere of action or, to put it in layman's terms, subject matter. This basic definition has been fleshed out by Hasan, who extends the concept to include both "the kinds of acts being carried out" and the "goal(s)" of these acts (1985a, p. 56). She also points out that this conception of action is relevant only in so far as language is involved—"doing with different degrees of speaking" (1999, p. 274). Whereas verbal action is always present, the presence of material action is merely an option.

Hasan (1996) has also provided a useful conceptual framework for Field, in suggesting that all social processes can be viewed as being situated somewhere along a cline of *institutionalization*. That is, at one end of the cline, the action in which the participants are engaged could be of a highly institutionalized nature (for example, a university graduation ceremony), or, at the other end of the cline, the action could be of a highly individuated nature (such as a casual conversation between friends). She notes that social processes which are at the institutionalized end would likely be "multiply coded semiotically" (1999, p. 46)—in other words, their identity would be announced by a variety of meaning-making systems, such as "ways of dressing, ways of conducting oneself, performance of a ritual set of actions, the presence of a set of recognized locations for the carrying out of these ritual actions and by a communally recognized set of the rights and obligations accruing to participants who enter the various stages of these processes in various capacities" (Hasan, 1999, p. 46).

Although it may be uncontroversial to suggest that social actions have goals, it is of course very controversial to speculate on the degree to which these goals can ever be stated, since this impinges on the intentions of the interactants. We might agree that when a customer puts six bananas on the counter in a fruit store, his/her goal in the ensuing interaction is to purchase bananas—but it may be more complicated than that (if the customer was a personal friend of the person behind the cash register, for example). This has led Hasan (1999) to postulate another

cline relevant to Field: *goal awareness*, with the limiting values *visible* and *invisible* (alternatively labeled *overt* and *unconscious*). Her analysis of a blurb on the back of the book *Emile Durkheim: Selected Writings* is one example which illustrates that the *goal* and the *activity* are not necessarily the same thing. We may agree that the goal of the blurb is *promotion* (of the book), yet the activity seems to be *informing*. Butt (2002) has added the aspects of timeframe (Are the goals short-term or long-term?) and variability (Do participants share the same goals?) to the analysis of goals.

If the notion of goal is allowed, at least in principle, then activities can be classified on this basis. This is what Hasan (1995) does in delineating *relation-based activities*, *action-based activities*, and *reflection-based activities*. The goal of a relation-based activity is the enactment of social relationships—language is constitutive of the activity, and as such it does not necessarily involve any physical action. Action-based activities are of a physical nature, and language is merely supportive—such as in the case of two people moving furniture. Examples of reflection-based activities include explaining, teaching, and arguing. Like relation-based activities, language is constitutive, but for a different reason—because the goal of the activity is semiotic (e.g. producing knowledge). An action-based activity, such as buying stamps, is likely to involve high goal awareness, whereas a relation-based activity is likely to have low goal awareness (Hasan, 1999). Reflection-based activities would most likely tend towards the higher end of the goal awareness cline, since reflection implies a semiotically visible object of interaction—in simple terms, we reflect *on* something. We could also expect visible goals to be short term (i.e., there exists a willingness amongst interactants to achieve the goal within the interaction), while invisible goals would be long-term (no expectation that the goal would be achieved in the interaction).

It is important to note that Hasan does not identify *goal* with *outcome*. The outcome, unlike a goal, is objectively observable. Social interactions always produce some kind of result, which may or may not be harmonious with the goal:

> To have a goal is not necessarily to achieve it: one may start off with the goal of persuading, but end up with a quarrel on one's hands… Social action always produces something, though this something need not be the same as the goal with which the subject started. (1999, p. 235–236)

Tenor

Taking Halliday's (1985a) definition as a starting point, a description of Tenor can answer the following questions:

- Who is taking part in the interaction?
- What are the statuses of the participants?
- What are the roles of the participants?
- Are the relationships between the participants of a temporary or permanent nature?
- What types of speech roles are they adopting?

Discussion of Tenor in SFL has, therefore, revolved around various ways of conceptualising speech roles. An early attempt at this was Halliday's (1977) distinction of *first order* and *second order* roles. The former refer to roles that are not defined according to function in the speech event (e.g. mother and daughter), while the latter refer to roles in the linguistic system (e.g. questioner and responder).

More recently, two notions have come to dominate discussions of agent roles: power and social distance. Power, according to Hasan (1985a), covers the degree of control one participant can exercise over another in interaction. We can refer to participants' relationships as being *hierarchic* (in which case one agent will have a greater degree of control over the other), or *non-hierarchic* (in

which case the relationship is one of peer-hood). The cline of institutionalisation mentioned earlier can be related to Tenor at this point, by probing for the institutions through which the interactant roles are achieved—for example, familial or civic institutions (Butt, 2002). Social roles that depend on the institution for their identity (such as judge and defendant) are typically hierarchic, which usually results in an immutability of function (the defendant cannot become the judge).

Social distance, in Hasan's terms, covers "the frequency and the range of previous interaction between the interactants" (1978, p. 231). Poynton (1989) and Martin (1992) use the term "contact" in discussing social distance, which is defined as "the degree of involvement among interlocutors … determined by the nature of the fields speaker/listeners are participating in—how much contact they involve, how regularly, whether work or leisure activities and so on" (Martin, 1992, pp. 528–529). Social distance, then, can be thought of in terms of a *maximal-minimal* cline. At the maximal end of the scale, participants have infrequent contact, and know each other only in the capacity of some institutional role. At the minimal end, they encounter each other frequently and know each other in more than one capacity (Hasan, 1985a). Butt (2002) has usefully distinguished *regularity* of contact from *modes* of contact (or *multiplexity*), and introduced *shared local history* and *cultural capital* as further indicators of social distance.

Mode

Once again, we can refer to Halliday (1985a) to see that a description of Mode answers the following questions:

- What part is language playing in the interaction?
- What is it that the participants are expecting language to do for them in that situation?
- What is the symbolic organisation of the text?
- What status does the text have?
- What is the function of the text in this context?
- What is the channel: written or spoken?
- What is the rhetorical mode (e.g. persuasive, expository etc.)? In other words: what is being achieved by the text?

Many of these elements are elaborated by Hasan (1985a). Firstly, with regards to language role, we can consider language as positioned somewhere along a continuum from *constitutive* (all essential aspects of the interaction are manifested through language) to *ancillary* (language plays a supporting role in the interaction—usually supportive of material action). We can also consider the degree to which *process sharing* is possible in the interaction—that is, can the listener(s) play an active part in the ongoing formation of the text, or is s/he the recipient of a finished product? Martin (1992) uses the terms *monologue/dialogue* to discuss the same concept, with immediacy of feedback and openness of turn-taking as central indicators of process sharing.

All these concepts can be applied to written as well as spoken texts. A novel, for example, allows little latitude for feedback, but a critical review could be considered as such. Degrees of *writtenness* and *spokenness* are not easily determined for any given text, although on the surface they may seem so. In SFL, the terms *Channel* and *Medium* have been used to elucidate this essential element of Mode. The former is the actual modality employed by the speaker to transmit the message (Hasan, 1985a). In other words, the Channel could be *phonic* (sound waves) or *graphic* (written images). The temporality of Channel can also be significant—whether the message is emitted in real time, or is mediated in some way (Butt, 2002). As indicated above, the phonic Channel is usually associated with process sharing, although formal public speechmaking would be

one example where this may not be the case.

Medium, on the other hand, is defined by "the patterning of the wordings themselves" (Hasan, 1985a, p. 58). So, a casual email exchange with a friend may be transmitted in the graphic Channel, but the wording is likely to be of a spoken variety (thus Medium: *spoken*), and conversely the wording of a plenary address at an academic conference, although delivered in the phonic Channel, is likely to be closer to written language (thus Medium: *written*). These are, however, non-congruent examples—typically we can expect the graphic Channel and written Medium to co-occur, and the phonic Channel and spoken Medium to do the same.

The most problematic area of Halliday's (1985a) notion of Mode is the aspect *rhetorical mode*. Martin has commented that:

> "Rhetorical purpose" is the wildcard in contextual description. The main reason for this is that purpose is difficult to associate with any one metafunctional component of the lexicogrammar or discourse semantics. (1992, p. 501)

The problem may simply be one of definitions, however. According to Leckie-Tarry (1995, p. 26), the expression "rhetorical function" is used by Halliday to mean "the organisational structure of the text"—and she cites "personal communication" with Halliday as support for this. If this is the case, then rhetorical function would sit quite comfortably within Mode, as long as we do not extend the definition to "rhetorical purpose" —i.e., we do not expect it to tell us *what* the text is intended to achieve. Once we begin asking questions about the purpose of actions, we may be straying out of Mode and into Field. An action can be verbal as well as material, a fact that has led Hasan (1999) to argue that verbal action should be considered part of Field, not Mode, since verbal actions define what the interactants are doing (just as material actions do).

Mode is concerned with the *way* in which speakers and their audiences are brought in contact through language. This issue is especially salient for activities which cannot be undertaken in any other way than through language. A reflection-based activity (such as parliamentary debate) is one such example: the activity is entirely semiotic—language is constitutive of what is going on (not merely of the *way* it is going on). If the activity is purely verbal, and we subsume this aspect under "rhetorical mode," then what do we describe the "activity" as (in Field)? Is there no activity to speak of?

Strata of Context

A calibration of Field, Tenor and Mode is referred to as a *Contextual Configuration* (CC) (Hasan, 1985a). The CC defines the *context of situation* of the text. That is to say, a CC defines a *type* of situation, rather than one specific situation (Hasan, 1985b). The context of situation is therefore different to the physical setting of the text, which is labeled by Hasan (1985b) the *material situational setting*. Of course, the two may overlap somewhat, usually in relation to the degree to which language is constitutive of the activity in question. Where language is constitutive (as in the reading of a poem), the material situational setting would most likely not impinge on the context of situation. However, if language is playing a supporting role in the social process (e.g., two mechanics cooperating to fix a car), then aspects of the material situational setting will be included in the context of situation.

A situation type is instantiated by texts. In this way, the situation can be viewed as "an instance, or instantiation, of the meanings that make up the social system" (Halliday, 1977, p. 200). We are thus moving to another level of abstraction above context of situation—to "social

system," or culture. In defining contexts of situation, we are defining the situation types that recur in response to contextual demands of a particular culture. Thus we can now speak of a *context of culture* that frames the context of situation. These strata are permeable and mutually constructive: that is, context of culture both determines and is determined by situation types, and context of situation both construes and is construed by the linguistic system.

The situation type and the types of expression that go with it are what have been defined as *register*. Matthiessen (1993) states that "Each context of situation corresponds to a location along the dimension of register variation—that is, to a register" (p. 236). This suggests that although there is a correspondence between the two concepts (*register* and *context of situation*), they are not the same thing. Taking Halliday's (1985b) definition, we can see that register refers to the meanings and wordings that occur given a particular CC:

> A register is a semantic concept. It can be defined as a configuration of meanings that are typically associated with a particular situational configuration of field, mode and tenor. But since it is a configuration of meanings, a register must also, of course, include the expressions, the lexico-grammatical and phonological features, that typically accompany or REALISE these meanings. (1985b, pp. 38–39)

So, without a thorough statement of the values that make up particular contexts of situation, we cannot begin to speak of instances of language as constituting this or that register. Yet it is crucially important that we be able to have a meta-awareness of the registers that are in play in any given culture since, as Matthiessen (1993) has argued,

- registers constrain the meanings that are likely to be made in situational contexts in society;
- not everyone has access to all registers—people have registerial repertoires;
- these repertoires determine the number of contexts that people can successfully operate in;
- defining registers defines the overall semiotic space of a culture—they need to be described and systematized in the same way the linguistic system has been.

We can identify different registers as long as we can identify different CCs. However, do CCs remain stable over stretches of text? It is not hard to imagine that, across the ebb and flow of everyday interaction, it is unlikely that the CC would remain the same. It only takes one aspect of a CC to change, for a whole new context of situation to come into play. This has been clearly demonstrated by Hasan (1999) in her analysis of contextual consistency in mother-child interaction where, in one example, a care-giving activity (discussing what to have for lunch) is interrupted by a material activity (looking for a passionfruit). The activity has changed, which means the Field has changed, which means the CC has changed, which means a different register has been instantiated. Hasan develops the concepts of *integrated* and *independent* contexts to deal with this instability. Some text types, on the other hand, have contextual stability as a feature. As Cook (1990) notes, this is the great advantage for the analyst of concentrating on "ritualistic socially institutionalized events in which certain types of context … are eliminated or made easier to handle" (p. 14).

We can see then, that the SFL approach to context theory is elaborated across two dimensions. The first is metafunctional. That is, the theory provides an account of those elements in the context that impinge on, or rather engender, the functions of a text. As we have seen, these may be factors related to the sphere of action of the text, the relationship of the interactants involved in the text, or the organization of the text. The second dimension is stratal: the theory shows how context realizes culture and is simultaneously realized by language.

However, do these two dimensions satisfactorily account for the role of context in discourse production? Are there other dimensions that could be considered relevant or even essential? Is the SFL model internally coherent? These are all large questions, and the best answers to them will be played out over the coming decades as social discourse analysis becomes an ever larger

academic pursuit. However, in the final section of this paper it seems fitting to consider, by way of comparison, an alternative model of context: that of the leading critical discourse analyst Teun van Dijk. To put it simply, is his model any better? I will conclude the paper with a critical analysis of van Dijk's objections to the SFL model.

Van Dijk's Alternative Model

Two papers by Teun van Dijk (2000, forthcoming) have attempted to construct a model of context that can be employed in CDA, but which is independent of the SFL model, which he views as flawed. Exemplifying his theory in relation to parliamentary debates, van Dijk argues that the relevant context is whatever mental model the participants form of the speech situation. In the following table I have summarised the two papers in which he outlines those elements that he takes to be essential in any description of context:

Table 1: Van Dijk's (2000, forthcoming) contextual parameters for the analysis of parliamentary discourse

Element	Definition for Parliamentary Discourse
Domain	This is the layman's notion of field—the general area of endeavour that participants perceive themselves to be working in, such as education, health or finance. In parliamentary debates, politicians show awareness of working in the domain of politics.
Institution	The "social groups, organisations and institutions, such as hospitals, schools or business" (2000, p. 49) that operate within a given domain. In politics, this means parliament, the parties, councils, ministries and so on.
Setting	This refers to both time and place. The parliament is conceived of by politicians as both a "global institutional deixis (here in the institution of Parliament)" and as a "local spatial deixis (in this building of parliament)" (forthcoming, p. 22). Specific parts of the building can also be significant—such as the floor of the House and the seating arrangements. Temporal setting impinges on discourse due to regulations of time (e.g. length of a speech), and because politicians regularly refer to specific times and dates on which events occurred or texts were produced.
Local Actions	These are micro-level actions by which global tasks are accomplished. In parliament, they are constituted by such acts as asking a question, heckling an opponent, making a statement and so on.
Participants	Van Dijk distinguishes three kinds of actor roles: communicative, interactional, and socio-political. The first refers to the participant's role in the speech event, as producer or recipient. Interactional roles are assumed when "supporting the government, or engaging in opposition, interrupting or criticising each other, and so on" (2000, p. 51). Socio-political roles include binaries such as "Left or Right," "man or woman," "old or young" and so on.
Cognition	Participants' mental models of the social situation: their intentions, their knowledge of other participants, and their own beliefs and ideologies.

In proposing this model, van Dijk has stated, "We do not claim that these various context categories provide an exhaustive list of relevant dimensions for the understanding and study of parliamentary debates" (2000, p. 52). However, he does argue that this model is preferable to that offered by SFL which, he concedes, "is undoubtedly the approach in linguistics that most often invokes the notion of context" (forthcoming, p. 2) and despite the fact that "there is very little inspiration from the many other approaches to context in linguistics" (forthcoming, p. 5).

Conclusion: Does a Systemic Functional Context Model Stand Up to Scrutiny?

In the concluding section of this paper, I shall briefly examine van Dijk's criticisms of the SFL model and make the claim that, to a large extent, the reservations he has expressed about the theory are actually based on a misunderstanding of it.

Firstly, van Dijk argues that the community of SFL scholars has failed in its articulation of contextual parameters. One reason for this charge is that "the notions have not changed much in the last 30 years … and it is striking that for a functional theory of language that aims to provide a "social semiotic," context structures were not explored more systematically and more explicitly in all these years" (forthcoming, p. 41). Discussing an argument such as this obviously requires a great deal more space than is possible here, however, an alternative account would report that the SFL model has been far from stagnant or unsystematic—it has in fact grown significantly in the delicacy of its systems, and constantly refined itself as more and more registers are put to its test. One example of this process is Hasan's 1985 paper "The Structure of a Text," in which she elucidates a model of Tenor that includes a renewed conception of Channel, introducing *phonic* and *graphic* possibilities in place of the outmoded *aural* and *visual* binary, and delineates the separate concept of *Medium* (further refined to *spoken* and *written*). This contrasts with Halliday's 1977 model, in which Channel and Medium were not distinguished. Van Dijk's objection extends to the claim that "several SF linguists are not happy with them [Hallidayan parameters of context] although they maintain them" (forthcoming, p. 3). This is true in the sense that there is debate within SFL about what should and should not be included under Field, Tenor and Mode (as my discussion showed), however it is surely unlikely, and indeed undesirable that scholars agree on the finer points of such a large stratal schema. Similar debates can be observed within models of lexicogrammar and semantics too—it is more a sign of healthy development within a theory than of fundamental instability.

If we are to replace the traditional SFL model with van Dijk's, we need to be convinced that it offers much that is missing. He specifically identifies "social domain" and "setting" as two such areas (forthcoming, p. 5), in addition to an absence of "mental aspects" in the SFL concept of situation. It seems strange that van Dijk would suggest an absence of setting in the SFL model, given that Hasan (1985b) has written extensively on this issue in her delineation of the *material situational setting* and its significance for context (see above). The SFL model demands that we identify the *extent* to which setting impinges on discourse and, if it does, to identify precisely *how* it does. As Eggins (1994) puts it:

> The question centres around the observation that although some aspects of situations seem to have an effect on language use, others do not. For example, although the different social statuses held by the interactants do seem to effect language use, it does not seem to matter much what the weather is like, what clothes the interactants are wearing, or what colour hair they have. (p. 50)

Social domain is more problematic, as van Dijk does not explicitly define it—rather he states that "social situations are routinely understood and experienced as forming part of a larger social domain" (forthcoming, p. 19). The stability of "domain" as a contextual category therefore rests on speakers being able to identify one. In parliamentary discourse (i.e. the domain "politics") this may be possible, but in casual conversation it seems less likely. In any case, the notion of Field would seem to cover "social domain." As Miller, (forthcoming) has stated, "it is my belief that the SFL categories of Field, Tenor and Mode remain nonetheless extremely useful analytical categories, ones which are already at least potentially inclusive of those features considered as relevant to parliamentary discourse in van Dijk" (p. 4).

Finally, there is the charge that the SF model of context is so geared towards knowledge as a purely social notion, that it is "anti-mentalist" or "non-mentalist." According to this argument, there is a

> lack of attention for the many types of "mental" aspects of the social situation that are relevant for text or talk, such as purposes or aims, and especially knowledge, a notion that is very seldom used in SF analyses of context, at least not as a cognitive notion or as knowledge of individual speakers (for SFL, undoubtedly, knowledge is a social notion, in the sense that knowledge is—somehow—"in" or "of" society, and not in the minds of people). (van Dijk, forthcoming, p. 5)

This argument does not pay heed to the fact that any profile of a context of situation must ultimately be sketched from the point of view of a participant in that situation. For example, if we characterise "status" (Tenor) for a given situation as "non-hierarchic" then we are effectively making assumptions about the mental model of a participant. From the *point of view* of that interactant, there is no gap in status between him/herself and the interlocutor. Of course, that participant's interlocutor may perceive a significant hierarchic discrepancy—which is why we have to redraw the contextual configuration from the point of view of each interactant. So even contextual profiles of the SFL-type are ultimately mental models postulated for the participants, and include explicitly mentalist notions such as *goal orientation*. This is precisely the point that Halliday has made many times: people develop a bank of knowledge about contexts of situations, and it is for this reason that they are able to predict, to a large extent, what will be said in those contexts. For Halliday, this knowledge is a foundation stone of communication:

> We always have a good idea of what is coming next, so that we are seldom totally surprised. We may be partly surprised; but the surprise will always be within the framework of something that we knew was going to happen. And this is the most important phenomenon in human communication…. What the linguist is concerned with is: how do we make these predictions? The first step towards an answer is: we make them from the context of situation. (1985a, pp. 9–10)

A contextual configuration is an attempt to replicate an individual's understanding of the social situation—there need be no irreconcilable gulf between the mental and the social. The knowledge that an individual brings to the speech event is not marginalised or ignored in SFL theory, rather it is taken to be *the most important phenomenon in human communication*.

To sum up, then, I do not believe that van Dijk's context model provides a viable or even necessary alternative to that of SFL. On the one hand, van Dijk claims that the articulation of contextual parameters has stagnated within SFL, but on the other hand he claims that there is debate between SFL scholars about what the parameters are. This contradiction (positing both stagnation and debate) points to a different scenario: that there is healthy debate on the issue, which in turn leads to further development of the theory. This latter scenario is a welcome one. Secondly, I hope to have shown that much of van Dijk's alternative model (such as "social domain" and "setting") are not alternatives at all—in fact they are already present in the SFL model. And finally, it should be clear that claims about SFL being anti-mentalist—and therefore fundamentally flawed—are claims based on a misunderstanding of the theory. Halliday's central concept of the context of situation is an intrinsically mentalist one. Unfortunately, the emphasis that has been placed on Halliday's linguistics as a *social* practice (perhaps in reaction to the more overtly *mentalist* orientation of Chomsky's project) has convinced many that the inner life of the individual has been lost. Nothing could be further from the truth: rather, it is the individual's relationship to the social world that has been articulated. Theorizing context is one way of conceptualizing this relationship.

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