CONTEXTUALIZING 'CONTEXTUALIZATION CUES'

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I would like to focus my remarks on John Gumperz's notion of a *contextualization cue*, which I think is central to his current programme. However, before I begin, I would like to make some more general remarks on that programme and its place both in Gumperz's overall oeuvre and in discourse studies generally.

As Di Luzio sketches in his contribution to this volume, Gumperz had a previous incarnation before becoming the founding father of interactional sociolinguistics; the previous avatar was of course one of the foundational spirits in the broader field of sociolinguistics itself. As the title of his collected papers of that vintage suggests (Gumperz 1971), that previous self was (amongst other things) interested in how social groups express and maintain their otherness in complex societies. Gumperz started as a dialectologist interested in tracking down the forces of standardization and particularly those of differentiation, and it was the search for where these forces are located that has led him inexorably from the macro-sociological to the micro-conversational perspective; it was a long journey from the study of regional standards, to ethnic groups, to social networks, to the activation of social boundaries in verbal interaction, to discourse strategies. Readers will not understand his work if they view it just as the study of conversation. He has not abandoned his interests in the macro - it is the large-scale sociological effects of multitudes of small-scale interactions that still partially fuel his preoccupations with conversation (see his contributions to Gumperz and Levinson 1996), most evident perhaps in his concern with the plight of the individual caught up in these large-scale forces. Those seeking to understand his attempt to link macro and micro aspects of language use may still usefully turn to his studies of code-switching, where many of his current ideas were adumbrated (see especially Blom and Gumperz 1972). It was clear to him, for example, that social situations partially determine the choice of code, and yet that code-choice can partially determine situation - and this play between the presupposing and creative aspects of linguistic choice (to employ Silverstein's terminology) still dominates his work.

This background will also help to explain what may otherwise be taken as a demerit: Gumperz's analyses of conversations have nothing of the theoretical cleanliness to be found e.g. in conversational analysis. His tools are eclectic, and the toolbox cluttered, on the one hand with pragmatic notions like implicature, speech acts, frames, activities, cues, indices, and the like, and on the other with sociological notions like network, ethnicity, gate-keepers, habitus and so on. He is trying to depict processes that still defy understanding with the best tools that come to hand from whatever school of analysis. And he is trying to connect levels of analysis, from macro to micro, rather than to develop an isolated level of conversational analysis. This is the real difference, it seems to me, between his

approach and e.g. conversation analysis, rather perhaps than the one he offers in the interview (in terms of his own preoccupations with "situated on-line interpretation"; elsewhere he offers a characterization of his own work in terms of the "social import of the fine details of verbal communication," which seems more accurate).

With that as background, let me turn to the subject of Gumperz's notion of contextualization cues, which seems to me the central innovation in his analysis of discourse. First, some remarks on the motivation. At the time he was developing these ideas, I was lucky enough to be a graduate student in the Language Behaviour Research Lab at Berkeley where he worked. In Berkeley at that time there was a rare and wonderful confluence of ideas from different disciplines concerning the study of meaning - in philosophy, Grice and Searle were expounding the ideas about implicature and speech acts now associated with them, Fillmore was preoccupied with indexicality in language, Kay with its sociological import, Robin Lakoff with contextual meaning, and George Lakoff was attempting to wrap it all up in a unified theory of generative semantics. It was an era of optimistic open-mindedness in which, for example, Harvey Sacks could give an extended series of lectures to the Linguistics Institute of the Linguistic Society of America. In Gumperz's lab, we were taping whatever we could get access to, and taping also in field locations around the world, and we were trying to apply these theoretical ideas to the analysis of actual snippets of conversation. It wasn't easy. There was a yawning gulf between what, on a simple-minded analysis, 'the words meant' and what we took the participants to be self-evidently doing with their words. The gulf was not to be bridged completely with the apparatus at hand - implicatures, indirect speech acts, frames, and the like. This was the problem that preoccupied Gumperz and his students at the time.[1]

In many ways, Gumperz's approach to discourse analysis still has this interpretative gulf as its primary theoretical target. He has since tried to narrow the gap in a number of innovative ways, which are the hallmark of his current approach. One line of attack was the careful analysis of prosody, the neglected acoustic cues that might help to explain how we can possibly mean so much by uttering so little. Another line was the apparently paradoxical idea that utterances could somehow carry with them instructions about how to build the contexts in which they should be interpreted. The two were combined in the idea of a contextualization cue, often (but not necessarily) a prosodic trigger that in conjunction with lexical material will invoke frames and scenarios within which the current utterance is to be interpreted as an interactional move.

I would like now to attempt to further clarify the notion of a contextualization cue, which is perhaps better exemplified rather than analytically explicated in Gumperz's work.[2] There are two issues in particular worth exploring. One is what the notion presupposes about the nature of context. Another is the role of an

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[1] My own response, with Penelope Brown, was to develop a theory of politeness that we hoped would help to bridge the gap between the said and the unsaid. Other students of his, like Susan Gal and Deborah Tannen, have developed their own responses.

[2] One of the clearest expositions may be found in Gumperz (1992).

implicit distinction between foreground and background information in messages. Out of these considerations should emerge a clearer delimitation of the notion of a contextualization cue. For current purposes I will assume a definition of context as a set of propositions taken for granted by the participants[3] (See especially Duranti and Goodwin 1992).

Let me turn then first to the apparent paradox that utterances can create their own contexts. The paradox would be: if it takes a context to map an interpretation onto an utterance, how can we extract a context from an utterance before interpreting it? The idea that utterances might carry with them their own contexts like a snail carries its home along with it is indeed a peculiar idea if one subscribes to a definition of context that excludes message content, as for example in information theory. Context is then construed as the antecedent set of assumptions against which a message is construed. But it has long been noted in the study of pragmatics that this dichotomy between message and context cannot be the right picture. We may want to say that use of an expression of the form 'The so-and-so' presupposes the mutual knowledge that there is one relevant so-and-so, but then find that in fact a standard way of informing an interlocutor that there is such a so-and-so is to say e.g., "The King of Tonga will begin his state visit on Monday." Some have argued that this is as it were an abuse of the conventions governing the use of definite descriptions which forces the interlocutor to 'accommodate' the utterance by interpreting it as if it were mutual knowledge that there is a king of Tonga. But in fact there are many other (non-presuppositional) devices that work in this way - conventional implicatures associated with expressions like 'but' or 'even' force the creative construction of a context for the interpretation of the utterances they occur in. "Even Harry will come" projects a context in which it is assumed that there is a ranking of people in terms of their likelihood of coming, and Harry is very low on that scale. Or suppose I say, "What are you doing tonight?" - this projects some kind of invitation or request sequence in the offing.

So the idea that utterances can carry their contexts with them, that is, the set of assumptions necessary to unpack their interpretation, is not as outlandish as it may seem at first sight. The paradoxical quality of the idea of a contextualization cue is as much due to our wanting to hang on to the simple information theoretic view of what a context is. But still, there is a puzzle: how does it work? Here both the phenomenon and the theorists part company. Perhaps we can distinguish different species of context-invoking aspects of utterances:

i. Context-importation by conventional coding devices

Examples would be presupposition triggers like definite articles, expressions which carry conventional implicatures like 'even' or honorifics in those languages that have them. Contrastive stress also fits here: "It wasn't **me** that did it"

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[3] There are all sorts of things wrong with this, but that is another issue.

projects a context in which someone is supposing I was indeed responsible. Many languages have particles or other morphemes that serve the same sorts of function: indicating that something is already presumed, or that no-one assumes it, or that it is being introduced for discussion, or that its veracity is in doubt, etc.. Interacting closely with the central meaning (e.g. truth-conditional content) of the utterance, these conventional codings signal extra propositions that form the background to the interpretation of the utterance.

ii. Context-invocation by inference alone

Classical Gricean implicatures would be the prototype here:

A: Hey, how about supper together?
B: I have a jealous husband

where in order to infer a (negative) response to the invitation, it is necessary to invoke a large series of contextual assumptions of the sort: "One does not choose to make one's husband jealous," "Eating supper is an intimate act" and the like.

iii. Context-invocation by 'cue' or 'flag'

This is, I take it, the Gumperzian notion, in which the term 'cue' denotes an encoded or conventional reminder, like a knot in a handkerchief, where the content of the memo is inferentially determined. Thus the 'cue' cannot be said to encode or directly invoke the interpretative background, it's simply a nudge to the inferential process. Moreover, the interpretative process is guided more by a series of nudges now in one direction and now in another - thus 'cues' come as complex assemblages where the result of the whole assemblage cannot be equated with the inferential results that each part alone might have. The interpretive process may be guided by general pragmatic principles of a Gricean sort, and thus be in many ways universal in character; but the 'cues' are anything but universal, indeed tending toward sub-cultural differentiation. Hence the Gumperzian perspective on communication: at once potentially possible across cultural divides and inevitably thwarted by cultural nuances.

Further insights into how contextualization cues work, and their place in an overall pragmatic scheme, may be found by turning to the second issue, the relation between 'foreground' and 'background' in message structure. By these terms I mean something entirely pretheoretical, the opposition between central message content, coded propositional information, and peripheral, more loosely associated and less clearly formulatable information, a sort of informational penumbra. The opposition has aspects at different levels: form, content, and cognitive saliency:

	foreground	**background**
form	lexico-syntactic	particles, modifiers, prosody, kinesics
content	propositional communicative	general/vague or non-propositional meta-communicative
cognition	salient conscious	inconspicuous unconscious

This set of alignments is the intuition in the Batesonian analysis of communication, with the differentiation of channels between conscious 'verbal' coding and less conscious, less fully-coded prosodic and paralinguistic channels, carrying with them some differentiation of function. Silverstein (1981) has offered some further elaboration of the relation between formal factors and cognitive saliency: he suggests that certain factors tend to render aspects of messages 'out of awareness'. Thus non-segmentable, discontinuous, non-iconic forms are likely to be inaccessible to native intuition; they will also tend to be associated with non-referential, contextual content.

The message vs. context opposition is, as we have noted, a false opposition: the message can carry with it or project the context. But we tend to hang on to the opposition because we focus on the foreground or message content, and it is the background that tends to project the context. 'Contextualization cue' is one of a number of terms of art that attempt to explicate this relation between message-background and context-projection. The hypothesis may now, I think, be clarified by suggesting that contextualization cues form a natural class with the following cluster of properties:

Contextualization cues

Formal properties
(i) a tendency towards non-segmentable, prosodic, paralinguistic, or kinesic features;
(ii) if cued in lexico-syntax, then by lexical alternate (register) or minor grammatical class (e.g. particles);
(iii) any one clear function associated with a whole cluster of disparate features (cf. Silverstein's discontinuous feature), such features often being cross-channel (a constellation of e.g. kinesic, prosodic and lexical features).

Content properties
(i) 'out of awareness' background features; they are context-invocative, and cannot therefore be easily directly responded to;
(ii) non-propositional content, e.g. affectual, rhetorical, social or metalinguistic;
(iii) tendency to invoke holistic bodies of assumptions (contextual 'frames'), which then play a role in the interpretation of the utterance - e.g. help

        select
reference, clarify rhetorical structure, indicate illocutionary force, etc.;

(iv) content not really coded, but 'cued' - i.e. reliant on large dose of inferential reconstruction; thus the inferred content of the same cues can be different in different utterances.

The reasons why Gumperz has made this notion central to his analysis of discourse should now I think be clear. It is because he is interested in the relation between the micro- and the macro-sociolinguistic that contextualization cues have a special interest. First, their 'out of awareness' features, coupled with their essentially arbitrary but loose association with formal cues, mean they can only be learnt by rich exposure to a communicative tradition, a deep immersion in social networks. This takes us back to the earlier Gumperz with his interest in social groups and their networks. Second, in the workings of contextualization cues can be found the springs of dialect and group differentiation: we pseudo-speciate by slow degrees that start here in subtle miscommunications. In Labov's view, in contrast, sociolinguistic differences are little carriers of prestige or stigma. In Gumperz's view, the smallest formal differences may carry with them a chasm of incomprehension, because contextualization cues invoke the essential interpretive background for the foregrounded message. This is where the barriers first come up, later to grow into the saplings of dialects or the oaks of languages. This is also the last place for the barriers to come down, as demonstrated in his analyses of the mini-tragedies - the failed job application, the lost welfare benefit - which have been a favourite theme of his recent work, and which can be seen to be an almost inevitable outcome of differentiated socialization. Gumperz is Americanized enough to put forward here an optimistic message about the educability of the gate-keepers in multi-ethnic societies; others will find here a deeply pessimistic story about how elites guard access to social advancement.

      A final remark. In the interview in this volume, one of the interviewers persists with a line of questioning that Gumperz seems to side-step. If understanding is so complex, is it not ineffable? In particular, what gives the analyst the right to say, "A intends this, but B thinks he means that"? Gumperz suggests that it is all a matter of good ethnography: one asks A about what he meant, and one notes that elsewhere C said something similar with similar intent, and so on. But the interviewer, in good postmodernist style, is not so easily assuaged: after all, if contextualization cues are often ambiguous, even properly socialized 'natives' may understand different things by the same utterance. Gumperz assents, but does not draw the postmodernist conclusion: he thinks that in certain cases, things are reasonably clear; he thinks he can demonstrate a recurrent tendency by those who share the right kind of network to associate a class of interpretations with a highly specific set of linguistic cues invisible to those who belong to other networks. Radical doubt does not assail him. In this, Gumperz is again a cheery optimist, and perhaps that stems from his own first-hand experience as a network hopper, who landed on American shores a refugee in his late teens.

In the twenty years since we sat together in the basement that served as the Language Behaviour Research Lab and pondered the gulf between the said and the unsaid, Gumperz has surely but steadily tried to build out the piers of an analytical bridge across it. He will be the first to admit that the gap is still very much there: we have today at best only the feeblest of understandings of inferential processes in conversation. In a way, his own contributions only deepen the puzzle about how human communication is possible, by drawing attention to yet further layers of hidden, self-invoking machinery of the kind sketched in his contextualization cues.

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