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Context and its complications

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Introduction: Online-offline action

In his classic *Cognitive Sociology*, Aaron Cicourel made the following general observation:

> The problem of meaning for the anthropologist-sociologist can be stated as how members of a society or culture acquire a sense of social structure to enable them to negotiate everyday activities. (Cicourel 1974: PAGE)

This statement can serve as an extraordinarily accurate description of what was later called and methodologically developed as "contextualization" (Gumperz 1982, 1992; also Auer & DiLuzio 1992; Duranti & Goodwin 1992). Yet two components of the statement demand closer attention: "social structure" and "everyday activities", for since the beginning of the 21st century the realities of social structure and the range and modes of everyday activities have been profoundly affected by the generalized introduction of a layer of online social life, complicating the offline social world on which these earlier formulations of contextualization were based. In this chapter, we intend to sketch the complications emerging from discourse produced interactionally in such an online-offline environment now serving as the backdrop for what Ron Scollon (2001) called "the nexus of practice".

We must pay closer attention to the aspects of contextualization that have changed, we said, but that does not mean that we must do so from within a methodological *tabula rasa*. We believe the effort can be profitably made by means of some central insights and principles from within the interactional tradition of discourse studies.In fact, all the scholars already mentioned here belonged to that stream of ethnographically grounded studies of actual situated discursive practice, which has been the richest source of fundamental reflections on the notion of context and its role in social interaction. It is from that source that we can draw the general principles directing our discussion:

1. Context should not be seen as an abstract, stable or latent presence; it is a resource deployed in concrete socially situated meaning-making action: context is always contextualization.In that sense, it is highly unpredictable, evolving, dynamic and unstable. Also, while contexts operate at various scale-levels and structures a multitude of concrete interactions, the analytical point of departure is their situated effects on making sense. To quote Herbert Blumer in this respect: "People (...) do not act toward culture, social structure or the like, they act toward situations" (Blumer 1969: PAGE)

2. Contextualization is the key to making sense, because it consists of interactionally constructed *indexical* connections between actual discursive features and relevant chunks of sociocultural knowledge (Silverstein 1992; Hymes 1996; Gumperz 2003; Agha 2007).

3. Such indexically deployed and invoked knowledge is never neutral but always *evaluative* and in that sense *moral*, and by extension *identity*-related (e.g. Goodwin 2007). Making sense is a moral judgment grounded in socioculturally available normative-behavioral scripts situationally projected onto persons. Goffman (1974) called such moralized scripts "frames"; the ways we implement them have been variously called (with distinctions not overly relevant here) "indexical order" (Silverstein 2003) and "orders of indexicality"(Blommaert 2005). The concepts are joined by their emphasis on (Bakhtinian) evaluative uptake and on the dimension of social order as part of meaning-making practices – recall Cicourel's statement quoted above.

4. The contextual resources that people draw upon in interaction have to be *recognizable*, but not necessarily *shared* (Garfinkel 2002; also Blommaert & Rampton 2016: 28-31). Sharedness is evolving as the interaction proceeds but can also evolve as a shared sense of misunderstanding, i.e. a shared sense that very little of substance is shared in the interaction. What needs to be recognizable is the broad outline of a *format* of interaction, a general script for social action.

We can see that these principles favor action over content and participants, and situated and evolving effects over a priori categories (such as speech acts, conversational maxims, "meaning" and "understanding"). The reason for these preferences is that, due to the changes described above, very little can be taken for granted with respect to what is "ordinary" and "normal" in communication. To name just a few of the widely used assumptions that need to

be qualified: the assumption that communication is self-evidently a human-to-human activity has been challenged by human-machine interactions, and has thus become a variable rather than a stable feature. This, of course, has numerous knock-on effects on widely used criteria in theories of meaning: intentionality, agency, (human) rationality. Even more widespread is the assumption that the most "normal" or primitive form of communication – in the sense of: the kind of communication on which we base our fundamental theoretical imagination – is unmediated, spoken dyadic face-to-face interaction in shared physical timespace and between persons sharing massive amounts of knowledge, experience and sociocultural norms within a sedentary community (an offline conversation between similar people, in short). The online world has critically destabilized that assumptionby inserting scripted, multimodal, non-simultaneous, translocally mobile, multiparty and technologically heavily mediated forms of everyday communication into the communicative economies of very large numbers of people, not as peripheral modes of interaction but as important, inevitable ones. We now communicate intensely with interlocutors with whom we do not share much (not even acquaintance as a natural person and a human subject), across space and time, and through complex modes of non-acoustic semiotic work.

Our core vocabulary and assumptions derive from an implicit sociological imagination of which we assume that it reflects the true state of things. Changes in the state of things often take some time before they translate into an alternative sociological imagination (cf. Mills 1959; also Blommaert 2018a). In the meantime, however, they render some of our core vocabulary for talking about language, interaction and meaning-making less salient and applicable, and invite a focus on the phenomena we can identify as constants. The constant feature, we would argue, is social *action* – a synonym, asAnselm Strauss (1993) among others emphasized, for *interaction*. Even if we now communicate with machines, with unknown mass audiences (as in mass online gaming), by means of delayed, asynchronous messages scripted in new forms of graphic visualization and design – we are still performing interactions in attempts to make sense of our world. Taking social action, defined in this sense, as our ontological point of departure enables us to start describing and understanding old and new patterns of interaction, how they intersect and how they structure our social lives.

With these principles established, we shall now engage with four different sets of issues, all of them inspired by the changes we noted earlier: the transition from an offline world of communication to an online-offline one. Some of these issues are not new – they have been constant features of debates on context and contextualization – but demand a renewed

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

Beyond the macro and micro: recognizability and formatting

A persistent feature of discussions of context and its uses in scholarship is the use of the "micro-macro" dichotomy (occasionally turned into a triad by inserting "meso" in between). "Micro"-contexts would then be the factors affecting and informing local, situated events: the timespace frame, the participants, the immediately and *directly* relevant social roles, the topic, and so forth. "Macro", in turn, would stand for the nonlocal, broader factors in which the event can be situated and by which it is *indirectly* affected: the wider historical, sociocultural and political parts of the picture making (at least part of) the event understandable (see the discussion in e.g. Goffman 1964; Silverstein 1992;Cicourel 1992; Duranti 1997; Blommaert 2015a).

While such distinctions might be discursively and heuristically helpful, they are methodologically unhelpful from the perspective we formulated above. They do point to a fundamental fact: the non-unified and complex nature of context – *any* context – but they do so in an inaccurate way. Certainly when we become aware of the ways in which they rest on a particular sociological imagination, and of the ways in which and structure an epistemological field. The sociological imagination on which the dichotomy between "micro" and "macro" rests is the one sketched earlier: a world in which we can separate and isolate specific aspects of social life as being the *direct* conditions for conduct – the local, sedentary, individual, variable and mundane aspects – while other aspects appear to only *indirectly* inflect such conditions for conduct, due to their remoteness and their stable, collective character. The first set of facts we could call "processual" factors, and they would always be unique, while they others would be "procedural", and they would be general. The first set would index "community" – a specific small-scale group involved in shared practices, but diverse and changeable – while the latter would index "society" – the organized, stable, enduring, systemic large-scale group characterized by common institutional characteristics. Obviously, this imagination of the social world is far removed from what Castells (1996), in a visionary text, called the online-offline "network society" (cf. also Blommaert 2018a).

The dichotomy between "micro" and "macro" also structures an epistemological field in which "micro" would stand for the anecdotal, the concrete, the singular, the possible

exception, the empirical and the "token", while "macro" would point to the systemic, the abstract, the generalizable, the norm, the theoretical and the "type". Thus, so-called "micro-sociologists" and ethnographers would be dismissed as scholars whose attention to the uniquely situated features of cases precludes any attempt towards valid generalization, because generalization can only be made at a "macro" level of analysis where analytical detail has to be surrendered to abstraction (see the discussions in e.g. Mills 1959, Blumer 1969, Giddens 1984).

From a viewpoint privileging social action, all of this is highly unproductive, and the acuteness of the problem was repeatedly emphasized by Pierre Bourdieu and others. Bourdieu – often seen as a "macro"-sociologist whose work speaks to society at large – would emphasize that concepts such as "habitus" (a *general* concept) could only emerge through ethnographic attention to actual situated practice, not by statistical surveys. It was by observing the struggles of Algerian farmers to come to terms with a new market economy that Bourdieu saw the actual working of capitalism as propelled into socioculturally inhabited modes of practice (Bourdieu 2000; cf Blommaert 2015b). The big things reside in the small things, and the most inconspicuous and uniquely situated social action is, in that sense, "systemic" and "typical", as well as the source for theoretical generalization. Evidently, the same insight animated Goffman's work on interactional ritual and frames (1967, 1974): even if all instances of human interaction are unique, they display general characteristics and patterns sufficient to lift them from "micro" to "macro" relevance (cf. also Rampton 2016).

This is the point where we can start formulating a proposal in line with the principles outlined above. And we can draw for inspiration on the authors just mentioned, as well as on Garfinkel's (2002) uncompromising formulations of the issue. Garfinkel saw *recognizability* as the key to understanding the social nature of interaction, and as already mentioned above, recognizability should not be equated with sharedness of norms, assumptions and worldviews. It is a recognition of the joint potential for specific modes of action that gives such action the character of "congregational work", he argued – work performed collectively *because* we are jointly involved in it. We enter jointly into an action of which we know very little outside its possible general features, and we jointly construct such actions as forms of *social order*. This order can be entirely ad hoc, temporary and ephemeral. But while it lasts, it is a firm order that generates roles and identities along with a range of moral codes controlling (mis)behavior.

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

Recognizability, however, is not an empty and random container. We recognize particular social situations and their features *as* something specific – a quarrel, a lecture or a Facebook update – on the basis of perceived properties of the situation (what Garfinkel called "autochthonous order properties", 2002: 245) associated with what Goffman called "frames": the ways in which we organize our experience. Recognizing a situation means *framing* it along what we could call a general *indexical vector*, i.e. entering that situation as one that imposes and enables specific forms of interaction, one or different orders of indexicality. When we recognize something as a Facebook update, we recognize that it enables (among other actions) different forms of *response*, and that it imposes keyboard writing and a specific set of symbols (e.g. emoticons) as techniques for responding to it. When we recognize the particular update as an instance of trolling, we recognize it as enabling an unfriendly response, and so forth. This we can call, following Garfinkel, *formatting:* shaping the particular situated interaction in "typical" (i.e. generic, non-unique) ways and bringing the "sense of social structure" mentioned by Cicourel into the particular action we are engaged in with others.

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

Chronotopes, scales and synchronization

In every moment of interaction, contextualization draws upon *specific* and *non-unified* resources (cf. Cicourel 1967, 1974; Silverstein 1992). Both dimensions are crucial if we wish to avoid undue simplifications such as "*the context* for this utterance is X". The contextual resources drawn upon in contextualizing concrete interactions are inevitably multiple and layered (cf. Blommaert 2005). But they are not infinite, and not without structure and pattern. If we draw upon Goffman's frames, we see that social experience is organized into such structures and patterns, in which particular forms of interaction – with attributes to be discussed in a moment – are attached to specific social situations in forms comparable to what Bakhtin called "chronotopes".

Bakhtin developed the notion of chronotope (literally "timespace") as a way to describe the sociohistorical layering in novels, more precisely the ways in which invocations of particular sociohistorical frames structured "voices" in specific situations, infusing them with identity scripts, moral orientations, participation frameworks (Goodwin & Goodwin 1992), expected and unexpected normative modes of conduct and roles within the situation – in short, the full sociocultural value of otherwise random forms of action (see the discussion in Blommaert 2015a and Blommaert & De Fina 2016). Thus in a fairy tale, the Big Bad Wolf is exactly that: male, big and bad, a threat to the others, and someone to be defeated by the others. Chronotopes, seen from this rather orthodox Bakhtinian perspective, provide moralized behavioral scripts in specific social situations (we called them *formats* above), and the recognition of social situations as *specific* (e.g. as a formal meeting) will prompt such scripts: as soon as the chair announces the beginning of the meeting, we will all reorganize our conduct, assume a different set of body poses, discursive patterns and relations with the other participants (e.g. respecting the chair's formal leadership and the differential allocation of speaking rights), and align with the congregational work performed by the others. As soon as the meeting is over, we can shift back into another register of conduct, and the opponent during the meeting can turn into an ally in the pub during the post-meeting drink. Chronotopes impose formats on those inhabiting them, and this means that from the potentially infinite aspects of context animating events, a specific subset will be invoked and deployed as the normative script for conduct within that chronotopic situation, as the *specific* bit of social order to be followed by all those involved. Violating or disrupting that order – Goffman called them frame breaking – comes with moral judgments: everyday notions such

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

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

  (a) composed of several different actions and types of actions, as when someone checks his/her email or takes orders for sandwiches during a formal meeting – where each of these will have to proceed along the specific formats for such actions. Goffman (1974: 561) clearly pointed to that (using the term "realm statuses" for what we call formats here), and see e.g. Goodwin (2013) for excellent discussions.
  (b) Connected to other chronotopes, as when the relations between participants in a formal meeting are affected by already existing interpersonal relationships specific to other areas of social life or when the history of a particular issue is invoked as a frame for discussing its present status, or even when quoted or indirect speech is introduced into interaction embedding one chronotope and its actual voices into another one (e.g. Voloshinov 1973; Goodwin 2003).

Both outcomes are particularly interesting, for they take us to the issue of the non-unified nature of context and bring issues of scale into view (cf. Blommaert 2015a). Scale can best be understood as reflections and expressions of how social beings experience dimensions of sociocultural reality as indexical vectors, as informing the general normative patterns that shape formats of action (cf. Das 2016; Carr & Lempert 2016). Scales, thus, are interpretive and normative-evaluative, suggesting distinctions between what is general and what is specific, what is important and what is not, what is widely known and what isn't, what is valid and what is not, what can be widely communicated and what cannot, what can be widely recognized and understood and what cannot. There is nothing stable, absolute or a priori about scales – we can obliquely recall our discussion of the "micro-macro" distinction here – for what we see in actual discursive work are scalar *effects*. To give a simple example: when the history of a particular issue is invoked as a decisive argument in discussing its present status, then that history is presented as a way of upscaling the current issue to normative levels

immune to contemporary petty or personal concerns ("We already discussed and decided this point in January, there is no point in returning to it now!") Conversely, when someone raises a point which is not seen by others as belonging to the most general normative layer of what goes on, it can be downscaled ("This is a detail" or "This is just your personal opinion"). In their actual deployment, scalar effects are indexically ordered degrees of moralization in social actions.

The presence of such non-unified (plural and scaled) contexts in concrete situations brings us to a third notion: synchronization (cf. Blommaert 2005: 131-137, 2018b). The scalar effects we just mentioned occur in real-time and on-the-spot moments of interaction, in a sort of evolving "synchrony" which hides layers of non-synchronous resources and folds them together into momentary and situated instances of making sense. We call this process synchronization because the highly diverse resources that are deployed as context are focused, so to speak, onto one single point in social action. In other branches of scholarship this process would be called "decision making", with strong undertones of individual rational calibration. From an action-centered perspective, synchronization is a collaborative social act in which the format, not the rational calculation of its actors, is predominant (cf. Goodwin 2013).

Within such formats, synchronization ensures the degree of coherence we expect to find in interactions as an essential component in making sense of situations.

Formatting and nonlinear outcomes

Coherence, however, must not be imagined as a straight line from premises to conclusion. Neither can formats be imagined as closed boxes with extraordinarily transparent orders of indexicality, generally known to all participant. As said earlier, order is evolving and contingent upon the congregational work performed by participants. Recognizing a situation, we explained, proceeds through perceived order properties of such situations that can be framed into formats, then guiding the actions of participants. But outcomes cannot be linearly predicted from the starting conditions, because multiple forms of action can emerge within the same format, *and be coherent* to the participants. In other words, different kinds of actions can be ratified as properly within the format; formats allow *nonlinear* actions, and when it comes to normativity in connection to formats, we see a relatively open and relaxed form of normativity there.

This violates several older assumptions about communication. In speech act theory, J.L. Austin famously distinguished clear "felicity" conditions for smooth and "correct" interaction, while deviations of them (even a violation of one of them) would make the interaction "unhappy", or "infelicitous". Equally famous are Grice's (1975) "maxims" for conversation – conditions for maintaining a well-ordered mode of interaction with any other interlocutor. Both (and many others) grounded their theories into widely shared folk views of the strong normative order required for interaction. Another set of assumptions that is violated by the nonlinearity-within-the-format we mentioned is that underlying the kind of naïve survey methodology devastatingly criticized by Cicourel (1964) and others. In such survey enterprises, the stability of the format is used as an argument for the stability of its outcomes. Concretely, it is assumed that as long as we ask the same questions in the same format to large numbers of respondents, the answers will be commensurable because each respondent was addressed *identically*. Converted into the terms we are using here, stable formats will generate linear actions, since every action will be an identical response to an identical prompt. Cicourel's penetrating critique targeted the impressive amount of ignorance about actual forms of communication buried inside this methodological assumption, leading to the incredible suggestion that hundreds of different people would all have identical understandings of a question (and its meanings for the analyst) and that the actual (and highly diverse) conditions of the question-and-answer events would not have any effects on the respondents.

The fallacies of such assumptions can be shown through the following example, involving the present authors. In late 2017 Jan Blommaert set up a small practical exercise in research interviewing for MA students including Laura Smits and Noura Yacoubi. The instructions were clear: pairs needed to be formed and the roles of interviewer versus interviewee needed to be assigned; the interview was to proceed in English and (unbeknownst to the interviewees), the interview had to contain some potentially frame-disturbing elements. One of these elements was the opening question: "who are you *really*?" The format, we can see, was entirely scripted and uniform for all the teams.

Laura and Noura were both interviewees and were interviewed by classmates with whom both had a history of friendly personal encounters and lengthy conversations – in Dutch. All of them – interviewers and interviewees – were also students in the same year of the same program track at Tilburg University. Thus we can suppose other elements of potential stability to be there: shared membership of a clearly defined community, a shared history of interaction

making all participants familiar with each other's speech habits and idiosyncrasies, and also enabling all to know quite well who the other "really" was. Laura and Noura, however, responded to this question in radically different ways. Let us look at the sequences following the question; in the transcript "I" stands for "interviewer" and "R" for "respondent".

Laura's answer

I: SO Laura*, who are you REALLY?

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

I: TELL me something about yourself

R: Okay. I'm Laura .. Laura Smits .. I a::m twenty-three years old .. eu::hm.. I study Global Communication here at Tilburg university I play volleyba::ll I have a little sister, I have a boyfriend, and I live in Tilburg eu::hm furthermore<1> I think<1> I am very happy at the mome::nt in the situation I live in .. eu::hm ja* enjoying life/ …

I: Okay.

Noura's answer

I: Uhm .. who are you really?

R: Who I am?

I: Yes

R: Well.. what do you mean? What do you want to know?//

I: Yeahh who are you?//

R: That is a.. difficult question [Laughing]/

I: Why is it difficult?//

R: Because you are asking *a lot* at the same time. Do you want to know my characteristics, my name, my birth, my hobbies, do you want to know my study?

I: Tell me what *you think* who you really are//

R: *Dude* [Laughing] well I am a... Dutch, well Moroccan-Dutch girl, born here, I'm uuhh 22 years old. Uuhm who I am? <2> Well I am a student that is part of my identity, I *feel* as a student, I am.. living the life of a student. Uhmm.. I am studying global communication/

I: Ohh

R: What a coincidence [Laughing]

I: Me too [Laughing]

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

I: Is this really who you really are?

R: Well it's uhm.. it is quite a lot who I am I mean.. also history comes into pla::y, also family comes into pla::y uuh who I am yeah I am a human being//

I: Okay but/

R: Punt

We see that Laura and Noura are both initially looking for the right frame, as both ask for clarification of their interviewers' actions ("what do you want to know"?). Both, consequently, receive a reiteration of the question (part of the instructions given by Jan to the interviewers). But what follows are two entirely different courses of action. Laura instantly aligns with the perceived frame and gives what we could call a "profile answer" – the kind of clearly organized factual and affective information offered on social media profiles and in short introductory "pitches" to unknown people. She "neutralizes", so to speak, the interviewer whom she considered to be a close friend, and addresses her in her role as an interviewer performing an unusual kind of interaction, which in the same move is "normalized": this is an interview, it's strange, but we'll do it the way it should be done. The synchronization towards the format is complete in Laura's case. Noura, by contrast, does not exit the interpersonal and intertextual frame, but engages in several turns of metapragmatic negotiation with the interviewer (also someone with whom she maintained a very friendly personal relationship), expressing discomfort and resistance to align with the format in utterances such as "dude" and "punt" (meaning "period", "that's it"). And while she does offer a kind of "profile answer" at some point, the answer is followed by a repeated request for clarification of what goes on. The chronotope of interpersonal friendship sits uncomfortably with that of the training interview, and synchronization is a process that demands quite a bit of construction work here. Note, however, that later in the interview Noura offers long and detailed autobiographical-narrative answers; the synchronization demands more work but happens eventually.

If Austin's felicity conditions would be rigorously applied here, Noura's initial response would perhaps be called "unhappy", a "misfire". Laura's response would, from a similar perspective, be "correct" and "happy", as it articulates the linear uptake of the interviewer's action. From the viewpoint of making sense of the particular situation, however, Noura's actions and those of Laura are equivalent and fit the format in spite of their substantial

differences. What we can take from this is that uniformity in format does not guarantee uniformity in actions – a confirmation of Cicourel's critique of assumptions to the contrary – and that diverse lines of action can occur within the same format, even if some actions are not linear responses to what preceded. Formats are not one-size-fits-all and linear–normative units.

Context collapse versus expansion

At this point, our action-centered proposal is complete: we see contextualization as the recognition of a situation through perceived order properties of such situations, that can be framed into formats, then guiding the actions of participants. We submit that it is applicable to interaction online and offline, since it avoids many of the core assumptions (and vocabulary) that are challenged by features of online interaction.

In studies of online interaction, "there are great analytical gains to be made by looking very closely at how particular activities are organized" (Goodwin & Goodwin 1992: 96). The advantages of that tactic can be illustrated by looking at an issue widely debated in the world of social media research: "context collapse", i.e.

> "the flattening out of multiple distinct audiences in one's social network, such that people from different contexts become part of a singular group of message recipients". (Vitak 2012: 541)

The theoretical and empirical validity of the concept of context collapse has been criticized by several discourse analysts (Georgakopoulou 2017a, 2017b; Tagg, Seargeant & Brown 2017; Szabla & Blommaert 2018). Indeed, online technology "complicates our metaphors of space and place, including the belief that audiences are separate from each other" (Marwick & boyd 2010: 115) and has taken us from a world of relatively transparent audiences to that of far less transparent "networked publics" (boyd 2011). But such complications cannot be solved by drawing on the sociological imagination we sketched earlier: that of "normal" dyadic face-to-face communication with well-known similar people in a tight community – which is what happens in the literature on context collapse. Such an anachronistic imagination spawns an abstract conceptualization of context as something which is only transparent when we situate humans in transparent situations in transparent communities, where "audiences" are known and trusted and people have full control over what they do in social action. When we move into the online world of online audiences and inconspicuous overhearers, of lurkers, aliases

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

In a case study of a long and highly complex discussion on a large Facebook group for Polish people living in The Netherlands, we used the action-centered perspective described here (Szabla & Blommaert 2018). At first glance, the case would be eminently qualified for context collapse: we had an enormous community of effective and potential participants, large enough to speak of a "networked audience" consisting of people who did not know each other. The lengthy nature of the online discussion may have disturbed our "metaphors of space and place" and the particular rudimentary platform affordances of Facebook may have complicated our expectations of coherence and sequentiality in dialogue, as responses to a prompt may not appear in adjacency but be separated by several intervening responses from others – a practical problem of synchronization, in fact. Facebook formats interactions in a curious way, and people may lose their bearings in such formats.

Our first empirical observation obviously complicated things further: the general activity of a "discussion" was, in actual fact, a mosaic of different actions, some linear and connected to the initial action (a request from a Polish-origin journalist for assistance in the making of a documentary on the labor conditions of Polish workers in The Netherlands) and many nonlinear, embedded and parallel to the initial action. People would indeed respond to the journalist's request (and be redirected to the private messaging section of Facebook) but would also attack the orthographic errors in het Polish writing, discuss linguistic correctness in relation to Polish identity; they would accuse and scold each other on specific statements they had made, venture conspiracy theories about journalists and Polish émigrés, offer general observations about the work ethos of Polish and Dutch workers, and so forth. Each of these different lines of actions was normatively recognizable as a different chronotopic unit of participants, topics, orders of indexicality and moral codes, and was formatted accordingly.

The second observation, however, was that people found their way around this terrifically complex web of actions. The non-sequentiality of scripted Facebook interaction, the meandering of topics and participants and the generally confusing character of what went on did not appear as an obstacle for participants to participate *in the specific parts of the event in which they got involved*. We saw participation frameworks shift along with topic shifts, in such a way that just handfuls of people would be involved in an action, and know quite well

who their actual addressees were and how they should proceed, and how they could migrate to another participation framework or exit the discussion when lines actions were closed. In other words: we saw plenty of congregational work shaping formats and subformats and connecting or disconnecting parts of the discussion from other parts. Participants made sense of the *specific actions* in which they were involved – they performed adequate contextualization work throughout, even if that included self- and other-correction and rectification, necessitated by the awkward Facebook discussion affordances. They recognized the specific situations, framed and formatted them into indexically ordered discursive actions. No contexts appeared to collapse; instead we saw an amazing density and intensity of contextualization work – context *expansion*, if you wish.

Conclusion

The example of context collapse versus context expansion brings us back to our point of departure: the need to rethink our commonly used notions of context and contextualization so as to make them useful and accurate for addressing a world of communication in which ordinary dyadic face-to-face conversation is no longer the Archimedian point and foundation for theory. Contemporary discourse analysts must be aware that the sociological imagination balancing on this Archimedian point is anachronistic, and that we cannot accurately address the phenomenology of contemporary communication without sacrificing that imagination. Doing that does not mean that we are left empty-handed to the task of analysis. We can fall back on reasonably robust tools and approaches that do not carry that bias of anachronism or can be refashioned so as to be free of it. In this chapter, we have made some proposals in that direction. Let they be a prompt for others to think along.

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