

## **Chapter 2**

# **Context and Language**

## **A Critique of the Systemic-Functional approach to Context**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I shall focus on the linguistic approach to context. The study of language in an early stage introduced a more or less technical notion of context in the humanities and the social sciences. Indeed, the very notion of ‘context’ suggests that we here deal with some phenomenon related to text, discourse and language use. And, as we also saw in the previous chapter for the everyday and scientific uses of the notion, “context” often means either the ‘linguistic context’ or ‘verbal context’ of some word, sentence or utterance, or the social or cultural context of these verbal expressions.

Let us therefore examine in some more detail how the notion of context has been used in linguistics. I shall do so by focusing primarily on the linguistic theory that has most consistently prided itself on its theory of context: *Systemic Functional Linguistics*, founded by M. A. K. Halliday. I shall show that the SF approach to context is erroneous, and needs to be

abandoned. Although I also make some more general critical remarks on SFL, the critique in this chapter does not imply at all that SFL has no merit as a linguistic theory. On the contrary, most work on discourse in linguistics has probably been carried out in that paradigm, including many very original studies that go beyond the core theory, such as more recent work in semiotics, appraisal, and so on.

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

In the previous chapter, I argued that most work in the structuralist and generativist paradigms has an ‘autonomous’ orientation, that is, tends to disregard a systematic study of the relations between grammar and (social) context, for instance in the broader frameworks of pragmatics or discourse studies.

As is the case for SF linguistics, most context-sensitive studies in linguistics have been carried out in functional paradigms, such as those propagated by \*Dik (1981), and especially by Givón, who most explicitly deals with context, also within a discourse analytical and cognitive perspective (\*Givón, 1989, 1995, 2005), and to whose work we shall return in the next chapter. For a systematic review of the studies of the relations

between grammar and context, and a detailed discussion of the notion of appropriateness, see \*Fetzer (2004). Given this earlier work, this chapter will not review the same literature, also because most of these studies are focused on the analysis of linguistic structures, and hardly systematically study the properties of contexts themselves. As to the context dependence of pragmatic and discourse structures, see also Chapter 4.

## **Systemic Functional Linguistics**

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

- Too much linguistic (“lexico-syntactic”) sentence grammar.

- Too few autonomous discourse-theoretical notions.
- Anti-mentalism; lacking interest in cognition.
- Limited social theory of language.
- Too much esoteric vocabulary.
- Too little theoretical dynamism, development and self-criticism.

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

It should be emphasized from the start, however, that the shortcomings mentioned above are general tendencies. This means that they do not apply to *all* SF linguists, all the time, but to the more continuous mainstream during the last decades. Even in the SFL community there are of course dissidents, despite the general admiration for the work of its founder and leader. It should also be repeated that my critique does *not* mean that SFL has not made significant contributions to the study of language and discourse. It has. No theory and no approach in linguistics are however perfect. In that respect also SFL is only human.

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

The history of the SFL approach to 'context' has often been told and retold, and hence need not retain us here. SFL and many of its notions are

rooted in the tradition of Firth in linguistics and Malinowski in anthropology, both situated in London. If one examines somewhat more closely what exactly these forebears of SFL have said about context, one is soon disappointed by the rather limited nature of their contributions. That they nevertheless have been heralded, especially but not only in SF linguistics, as prominent scholarly advances can perhaps be explained by the fact that other linguists at the time were not interested in context at all.

Compared to more formal approaches in linguistics, Firthian linguistics and SFL explicitly emphasize the social nature of language and language use. Language is seen as an inherent part of the lived experience of the members of a society and culture, and linguistic structures should therefore also be accounted for, and possibly explained in terms of their ‘natural’ environment and of the social activities constituted by them. It is within this very general aim that the notion of context was introduced in Firthian linguistics, namely as the *context of situation*. For those who may find this notion somewhat strange, while seemingly saying the same thing twice, it should be explained that it should be read as ‘situational context’, as different from the ‘textual’ or ‘linguistic’ context, for instance of words and sentences. In this respect, then, it is close to the notion of ‘social context’ as being used in related approaches to language, for instance in Bernstein’s sociolinguistics (also situated in London), with which it has family resemblances. To avoid further misunderstanding, I’ll simply use the general notion of ‘context’ here, also when describing the Firthian notion of ‘context of situation’.

### *Malinowski*

The history of the Firthian/SF approach to context is usually associated with the work on “primitive” languages by Malinowski. His pervasive racist terminology -- he also routinely speaks about “savages”-- is usually conveniently forgotten in many of the references to his work, at least in linguistics — until recently hardly a discipline particularly concerned about social inequality and racism. The reason for Malinowski’s insistence that “primitive” languages be studied in their context of use was that they were only spoken, and that in order to understand and study them, unlike the “dead” languages usually studied by linguists, we also need to study the situations in which they are used (\*Malinowski, 1923/1957).

Although today such an argument may be found rather trivial, because the importance of the study of language use in their social situations is rather generally recognized, also for “civilized” languages, it should be recalled that in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century such an aim was rather new in linguistics.

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

Interestingly, as we shall also see later, context is here largely reduced to what we might call the ‘referential (or semantic) context’ consisting of *things or persons present* in the current situation. That is, the perception or awareness of present objects allows utterances to be incomplete and meanings of deictic expressions to be derived from the knowledge of this ‘context’. How exactly the presence of things or persons explains (leads to, causes?) incomplete sentences, for instance in terms of shared knowledge and inferences, is not explained in this simple idea of a

‘semantic’ context. Indeed, the more behaviorist leanings of Malinowski’s paradigm do not allow for much cognitive activity in the first place.

Also, the ‘pragmatic’ nature of the social context, and the other properties of communicative events (such as roles of participants, among many others) are not dealt with in these first ideas about context either. That is, despite Malinowski’s insistence that language is a “mode of action” (p. 312), and that the “primitive functions” of language are essentially “pragmatic” (p. 316), his idea of context is as yet hardly a contribution to the study of the *functional* nature of language, and limited to some examples that suggest linguistic functions beyond those of meaning or referring to something, that is, rather the “referential”, “descriptive” or “denotative” function of language. Important though is his view that language use is not merely thought or “contemplation” but also action and experience (p. 327), and that the uses of language “have left their trace in linguistic structure” (p. 327).

### *Firth*

Although theoretically Malinowski has little to say about the structures and functions of contexts, the overall cultural approach to language, which emphasizes the study of language use as action and social experience, provides the background to Firth’s contribution to the study of context. As will be the case in ethnography later, Firth sees the study of “speech events” as the main object of study for linguistics, and he stresses, like Malinowski, that language use must be studied in everyday life and as social intercourse (\*Firth, 1968: 13). Linguistics, just like the other social sciences, must start, he says, “with man’s active participation in the world” (p. 169). For Firth, part of this context (which he calls “context of

situation”) are the participants of the speech events, described as members of a speech community, as well as in terms of their “personality” (p. 13). He insists on the fact that a “science” of language necessarily needs to deal with abstractions, and hence not with the rather unique characteristics of specific situations, but rather with general, abstract properties. As is the case for the structuralist paradigm in general “occasional, individual and idiosyncratic features” are declared outside the boundaries of linguistic interest (p. 176).

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

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

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



The reference to the “effect” of verbal action as a component of contexts is not further detailed by Firth, but within his framework such effects are probably social, rather than mental. In fact, as is typical for British empiricism and the behaviorist tendencies of the time, he explicitly rejects mentalism in a passage that deserves to be quoted in full, because its antimentalist ideology will have fundamental and long-lasting influence on SF linguistics — and other contemporary approaches to language and discourse — until today:

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

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

Thus, although accepting the unity of thinking and acting in principle, in practice he reduces meaning to “objective” and “observable”

properties of situations, thus relating functional linguistics with the positivist aims of the contemporary scientific enterprise.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Although these features include many, if not most, of the characteristics of social and communicative situations, there are no further arguments or examples why these aspects are part of the contexts, and why not others. These and many other reasons suggest that Firth's remarks on context hardly constitute a theory, even by the standards of the time of his writing -- for instance in terms of the sophistication of linguistic theory and description (for critique, see also \*Hasan, 1985: 194).

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

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

We may conclude that Firth does have interesting theoretical ideas about context, and about the need for linguistic theories to be contextual, but that his remarks have barely been worked out nor related to systematic empirical research on the contextual nature of language use.

### *Context of culture*

The notion ‘context of situation’ is often related by Malinowski, Firth and later SF linguists with that of ‘context of culture’, of which it is a specific instantiation and which is usually described as the general context for language as system (\*Halliday, 1999). Although the notion ‘context of culture’ may be integrated into a more general theory of ‘context’, we shall further ignore it here, also because it is not extensively used and elaborated in SFL. Rather, as also Halliday points out, cultural contexts are more typical in the work of U.S. anthropologists of the time, e.g. in the work of Sapir and Whorf (\*Halliday, 1999: 5-6). That is, we may assume that unlike “contexts of situations” their influence on language use is more diffuse, indirect and takes place at a more abstract level.

Thus, one may in principle agree with Halliday’s view that context of culture is instantiated in or (‘through’) more specific contexts of situation. After all, social situations may be described as inherent part of a broader culture. However, he does not explain how *for language users* such instantiation is possible, how in actual language use the macro or global relates to the micro or local level. If for him and Firth language use is embedded in our daily experiences, and if these experiences are typically situational, how does the broader culture impinge on these local experiences, otherwise than through the interpretations or constructions, and hence the cognitive representations of the language users about their culture? The same is true for the relations between the *system* of language (in Halliday’s terms a system of “potentialities”), on the one hand, and actual language *use* (texts), on the other hand. This relationship also presupposes that language users *know* and can apply these potentialities, that is, that their grammar and rules of discourse and interaction also have a

cognitive dimension. These problems probably also explain why for Halliday ‘context of culture’ should be related with the language *system*, at a global level, and only in linguistic theory or other analyses of observers of language use. In other words, as we also saw with Malinowski and Firth, the notions of ‘context of situation’ and ‘context of culture’ are linguistic, analytical notions, not members’ categories. In that respect, SF linguists seem to diverge from later ethnomethodological approaches to the study of conversation and interaction. We shall come back to these and other cultural aspects of contexts in a later chapter.

### *Halliday*

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

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

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

Thus, he rejects Dell Hymes' notion of 'communicative competence,' as follows:

There is really no need to introduce here the artificial concept of 'competence', or 'what the speaker knows', which merely adds an extra level of psychological interpretation to what can be explained more simply in direct sociolinguistic or functional terms (Halliday, 1978: 32).

His argument seems to have two dimensions, namely simplicity (Ockham's razor), and naturalness. Both dimensions however seem inconsistent with the proliferation of a large number of grammatical and contextual concepts and terms used in SFL, also for the description of context. Most of these terms are rather more "artificial" than such everyday and experiential notions such as thought, belief, knowledge or purpose as descriptions of what social participants (know they) do when using language.

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

knowledge in text and talk. Here is one of the passages in which he does so:

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

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

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

Whatever way one formulates these fundamental notions, one always comes back, whether through the front door or through the back door, at what language users are able to do, and what they share with other language users, namely some form of knowledge, both in the sense of ‘knowing that’ as well as in the ‘performative’ sense of ‘knowing how’. And no serious study of such knowledge is complete without a socio-cognitive account of some kind. This obviously does *not* mean either that



such abilities or knowledge should *only* be studied in a cognitive or social psychological framework: ‘competence’ as *shared* knowledge obviously also has social and cultural dimensions.

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

### *Context of situation in SFL*

In his account of the ‘context of situation’, Halliday follows the example of Malinowski and Firth, which he cites explicitly (\*Halliday, 1978: 28 ff, 109 ff). In this account, Halliday acknowledges the following properties of context also emphasized by his masters:

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

Note that despite the prevalent antimentalism of the theory, there are many mental or cognitive notions implied by these and other definitions in the work of Halliday and other SF linguists. Thus, one may well agree with a definition of contexts as abstractions of situations, and hence as *types*. We see that also for Halliday language users need to *learn* these types, which

of course implies that they *know* them when using language. In other words, even this first definition already has cognitive implications.

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

Unfortunately, from the start these three --terminologically rather obscure – terms are hardly well-defined. Rather, only some examples are given of what belongs to them, e.g., as follows (in a definition attributed to John Pearce), in Halliday (\*1977; 1978: 33, but also p. 110, 122 ff, 142ff).

**Field:** institutional setting, activities, subject matter.

**Tenor:** relations between participants.

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

Now, this is a rather strange list, with obviously overlapping categories, as well as a large number of lacking features of social situations. No distinction is made between institutional and spatiotemporal ‘settings’, no distinction between (semantic?) subject matter on the one hand, and activities and settings on the other; participant relations are mentioned, but not participants, nor other properties of participants; and such disparate concepts as (written or oral) medium are combined with a very vague notion such as ‘the role of language in the situation’, which is quite strange when one considers that the point of the *whole* context is to

define the functions of language. Given these examples, the three categories appear totally obscure and arbitrary.

Although due to experts on style (see, e.g. \*Gregory, 1985; \*Gregory & Carroll, 1978; \*Spencer & Gregory, 1964), it is strange that Halliday, and then after him countless of his followers, would accept such a simple, heterogeneous and hardly theoretically consistent definition of ‘situational contexts’. It is even stranger that for many years this definition and its rather idiosyncratic terminology has not substantially changed, and that many analyses of language use apparently could be connected to it (see also the comments, and comparisons with other proposals, in \*Leckie-Tarry (1995). Indeed, until Halliday’s article (\*Halliday, 1999; but written in 1991) contributed to the book *Text and Context in Functional Linguistics* (\*Ghadessy, 1999), we find the same triadic analysis, more or less the same divisions and the same overall view on what context is. That is, if judged by the conceptions of its paradigmatic leader, and despite its vague and heterogeneous definition, SF’s very simple and heterogeneous notion of context does not seem to have changed very much in more than 30 years. This is why I concluded that at least on this point, SF as a direction of research is not very self-critical and dynamic in the development of its theoretical notions.

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

Note first the surprisingly mental terminology (“planning”) used in his argument, rather inconsistent with his earlier rejection of such

“arbitrary” notions -- unless planning is defined as an observable act. It is quite likely that plans or intentions should be included in a theory of context, but obviously at a different level of analysis from activities of participants or institutional settings, and of course (also) in an appropriate cognitive framework, which Halliday however rejects. Note that the vague term “subject matter” for Halliday is obvious something language users think about in their planning of discourse, and not for instance the abstract semantic object of a topic or theme of discourse. In other words, if events and actions are part of “field”, and if subject matter is what people plan or think about before speaking, than field also gets a cognitive dimension.

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

So far, the initial context notions of SFL barely add up to an explicit and systematic theory. We shall see that the framework built on such a shaky foundation, namely the very theory of language functions, will hardly be more satisfactory.

## *Register*

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

Using Ockham’s razor, one might wonder why the notion of ‘register’ is necessary. If we have context and “language”, as well as functions defined in terms of the relations between text and context, register as a separate notion becomes superfluous, unless one defines it in a much more specific way, for instance in terms of the set of discourse properties (or discourse types) controlled by one or more contextual features. For instance, didactic discourse may be defined as ‘register’ when defined as the collection of those properties of discourse, or the set of discourse types, that are based on institutional properties (schools, lessons), in terms of participants (teachers) or in terms of the goals of institutional actions (knowledge acquisition). However, this means that the number of registers is (theoretically) infinite, and it may be asked in which way such a theory is different from a theory of discourse types or genres (see also Leckie-Tarry, 1995).

Another concept of register may thus be the set of *grammatical* properties that typically vary in a specific situation, for instance the use of specific lexical items and syntactic constructions in ‘formal’ situations such as parliamentary debates or newspaper articles. Whatever the usefulness of the notion of register, there is no doubt that we need more explicit

theoretical language that defines the relations between discourse structures and context structures (see Chapter 4, for discussion).

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

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

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

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

A further complicating factor is that, at least initially, SF was generally formulated as a linguistic theory and not as a theory of discourse, so that the vague use of “varieties of language” did not help to solve the theoretical problem of definition. That is, many of the manifest properties of register were traditionally described in terms of grammar (e.g., as lexicalization and lexical variation) and not in terms of (other) discourse structures, such as global topics, schematic organization (such as the

conventional structure of a scholarly article) or rhetorical moves and strategies. Another implication of Halliday's list of properties of register is that social activity is mentioned as being distinct from context, and that social process and occupation also appear separately from context. And finally, does "saying different things" mean using for instance different words to say more or less the same thing, or that different registers are associated with different topics as well? Again, we find that as far as crucial theoretical notions are concerned, definitions are limited to rather vague and unsystematic lists of examples. Thus, we still do not know exactly what 'register' is, nor how it relates to language or language use. But let us continue with the core of the SF doctrine: the functions of language.

### *Functions of language*

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

cohesion), thus excluding many other levels of discourse structures and their functions.

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

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

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



- emotional functions (for the enactment or expressions of emotions)
- intrapersonal functions (establishment and maintenance of self-identity, etc).

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

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

We see that the *theory* of context and its associated theory of register and functions of language in SFL is not very sophisticated. But what about its *applications*? Let us briefly examine an example. On the basis of a dialogue between mother and child (his own son Nigel), Halliday (1978: 117) attributes such totally heterogeneous contextual properties to “field” as: manipulation of objects, assistance of adults, movable objects and fixtures, recall of similar events and evaluation. Note that the original definition of “field” was ‘institutional setting’ and ‘activities’. Tenor, originally defined in terms of relations between participants, in this example features such categories as interaction with parent, but also:

determination of course of action, enunciation of intention, control of action, sharing of experience, seeking corroboration of experience. That is, on the one hand “activities” belong to “field” but various kinds of interaction to “tenor”, a rather arbitrary division of realms of context it seems. Again, we also see several cognitive notions enter the backdoor when actual contexts are being described. We earlier saw that “planning of what to say” (“subject matter”) was categorized as field, and now see that similar cognitive notions, such as “determination of course of action”, are categorized as tenor. And ‘mode’ -- originally defined as the role language plays in the situation -- here includes a totally heterogeneous list of notions such as spoken mode, dialogue, reference to situation, textual cohesion (objects, processes), furthering child’s actions, as well as orientation to task.

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

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

### *Other SF approaches*

Of course, there are SF linguists who are aware of the rather sorry state of the SF theory of context, and who stress that a lot needs still to be done (\*Ventola, 1995; \*Butler, 1985; \*Martin, 1985, 1992, 1999). However, even contemporary monographs and collections of SF studies maintain the original distinctions between field, tenor and mode, and its register applications, and not only in studies dedicated to the work of Michael Halliday (such as \*Fries & Gregory, 1995). Since the contextual categories are so vague and general, many other categories fit, and thus there is always a contextual ‘base’ to account for linguistic functions and structures, so that the (much more sophisticated) linguistic analyses in SF can develop rather freely, thus contributing to its significant work on the study of language and discourse. This may also include combinations with cognitive theorizing, especially, and predictably, about knowledge (see, e.g., \*Asp, 1995).

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

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

Note that a an approach that includes cognitive aspects of context (whether or not defined as mental models as we shall do in more detail in

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

However, true to the antimentalist and positivist doctrine, also \*Hasan (1999: 220) in her contribution to the same volume, rejects any account of the role of knowledge: “the impetus for speaking does not originate in the knowledge of language”. Psycholinguists would probably ask her to explain how people can possibly speak without knowledge of the language, without knowledge of how to use the language in social situations, without general knowledge of the world and indeed without knowledge of the social situation or context, among many types of knowledge. That is, in an antimentalist SF account of language use, language use seems to spontaneously (magically, mysteriously) emerge in speakers and social situations.

In the same collection \*Martin (1999) gives his own view of (the history of the notion) context, also in his own work (which had provoked a fierce polemic by \*Hasan (1995), which continues in this volume; \*Hasan,

1999). Martin begins by claiming that there are some alternative SF models of context, but in my view these are minor variation on the same Tenor-Field-Mode theme (for all relevant references to other work, see \*Martin, 1999). Also Martin rejects a cognitive dimension of language: “we were as far as possible trying to model context as a semiotic system rather than something material or mental” (Martin, 1999: 29). This semiotic system is borrowed from Hjelmslev’s notion of ‘connotative semiotic’, which is also familiar in studies of literature, e.g., in the Tartu School tradition. Thus, Language (Content Form + Expression Form) becomes the Expression Form for a higher level (connotative) Content Form, for instance Register (or Literature). Martin’s concept of ‘genre’ is again another, higher level of ‘connotation’ based on Register, thus producing a ‘stratified’ concept of the relation between language, register and genre, and hence also of context, a conception criticized by other SF linguists (see, e.g., \*Hasan, 1995). The basic idea, as far as I understand the complex meta-theoretical notions of SFL, is that genre is realized by register, which in turn is realized by ‘language’ (in turn including, e.g. discourse semantics, lexico-grammar and phonology/graphology). Genre is part of the ‘context plane’ (as usual organized by tenor, field and mode).

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

Despite Martin’s endeavors, we remain with the important question *how* genre (however defined) is exactly related to other properties of

context -- especially since the tenor-field-mode triple is so confused and vague, as we have seen above. Recall that context, thus defined, features not only social properties (participants and their properties), but also linguistic-cognitive properties (subject matter), and linguistic-communicative properties (channel, written/spoken modalities, overall 'rhetorical' functions of language), and even textual-semantic properties (themes, coherence, etc.).

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

Unlike much earlier work in SFL, \*Martin (1985) also emphasizes the *dynamic* nature of contexts, namely a situation that is constantly changing, especially in oral communication (see also the critical commentary by \*Hasan, 1999). This emphasis on the dynamic nature of context is important, but for Martin and other SF linguists contexts are abstractions and one may thus wonder how such dynamics can be theoretically accounted for: what abstract things have a dynamic character?

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

In his monumental book on English Text, \*Martin (1992) emphasizes that SFL also needs a proper theory of context, defined as a connotative semiotic, as we have seen above. After several historical remarks about where the notions of field, tenor and mode come from, he finally summarizes his own definitions in accordance with Halliday's:

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

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



Halliday uses “context”, Martin prefers “register” (\*Martin, 1992: 502), thus blurring the difference between social context and the ways such context influences language use. It is not surprising that after a somewhat detailed examination of the SF literature on context, an outsider feels theoretically rather confused and lost.

*Helen Leckie-Tarry*

Perhaps the most articulated SF study of register and context has been provided by Helen Leckie-Tarry in her PhD thesis, completed just before her untimely death (\*Leckie-Tarry, 1995). This study is interesting because on the one hand it is firmly rooted in the SF tradition, but on the other hand, the author takes a much more independent position, integrating ideas from many authors and directions of research, even in psychology (for instance she also refers to the strategic theory of text processing proposed in \*Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). After a historical and systematic overview of the notions of context, register, and genre by various SF linguists and others, she proposes her own theory of context, followed by a systematic study of several structures of text. I shall focus here only on her definition of context and register. Following several other authors, she first of all distinguishes between three different “levels” of context: Context of Culture, Context of Situation and Co-Text, which together define the complete “meaning potential” of a culture.

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



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

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

Leckie-Tarry further emphasizes that context and its categories are not static but dynamic, with different forces that produce "an ongoing environment of which the text is part", with the strongest forces running from field to tenor to mode. She does not further explain what exactly these "forces" are, but examples suggest that field variables such as setting, participants and topic have a strong influence on tenor variables such as formality, role and focus, which again may influence mode variables such as written or spoken language etc. Different contextual configurations of

values for these variables thus favor specific types of discourse with specific meanings and forms. Again, the informal examples are persuasive and there is a strong suggestion that an explicit theory of context thus can be related to discourse structures, but we remain confused about the theoretical nature of the categories, and hence about the criteria why some contextual variables belong to one or the other category, why for instance participants are categorized as ‘field’, but their roles and relationships as ‘tenor’, and why such different things as setting and topic or subject matter, and even participants’ knowledge also belong to field. Thus, field is categorized as the “fixed” properties of the social situation, and tenor as the non-inherent features of social situations, but no other criteria are given – and she again cites Halliday who characterizes field as “the total event in which the text is functioning”. But Halliday categorizes participants and their permanent and temporal properties as part of tenor. These differences of “interpretation” suggest that the main contextual categories are hardly well-defined. Relationships between participants, such as power, are categorized as tenor, and the distance of the participants as mode, although one fails to see why these cannot be part of the fixed characteristics of the field. And finally the category of mode features a similarly heterogeneous collection of variables such as degree of planning or feedback (or distance) between participants, medium (spoken or written) and ‘contextualization’, i.e., the degree in which the text is embedded in the surrounding activities. Thus, mode is seen as closest to the text itself, and somehow as an intermediate between field and tenor variables and text structures. We have already seen that it is strange that there should be a *context* category that is said to define the *functions* of the text, when precisely the whole point of contextual analysis is that such a function is defined in terms of *all* the relations between text and context. Indeed, one can only understand this

when in SF it is not defined in broad interactional terms, but only as linguistic (grammatical) realization, because obviously matters of planning, feedback, functions (like persuasive or didactic functions) or medium are themselves properties of various dimensions of the discourse itself. This is also why (also according to Leckie-Tarry) mode features depend on field and tenor features. As all properties of discourse do. No wonder that the mode category is related to the “textual” metafunctions of language. Indeed, mode categories *are* properties of discursive interaction or text. We now understand why in SF theory rhetorical features are placed in mode. In other words, everything that does not fit the traditional domains or levels of grammar is thus placed in the *contextual* category of mode, thereby collapsing text theory into part of a context theory.

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

missing link between discourse and society, and hence between discourse and “context of situation”.

*‘Context’ in an introduction to SFL*

Whereas most of the studies mentioned above might be considered core texts of the founders and leading scholars of SFL, it is also important to briefly examine an introduction to SFL, that is, what is now considered the “standard theory” on notions such as ‘context’, for instance \*Eggins (1994). Also here we do find the definitions encountered above, but with the following further explanations. First of all, there is a very close relationship between context and register. Indeed, the field-tenor-mode notions are defined by Eggins in terms of *register* variables (and not as context variables or categories). This is strange because register is vaguely defined, as usual in SF, as the *impact* (of the context) on the way language is used (p. 9). That is, if these are register variables, they should say something on this linguistic “impact”. The three notions themselves are defined closely to the classical definitions in SFL: ‘field’ as the “topic or focus of the activity”, ‘tenor’ as the “role relations of power and solidarity”, and ‘mode’ as the “feedback and amount of language,” definitions that barely provide more insight into the detailed structure of social contexts of communicative events.

After a historical review of the use of the notion of context, mentioning Malinowski, Firth and Halliday, Eggins adds a more detailed explanation of the three “register variables”. Especially her account of “mode” is interesting, because instead of the usually vague description of mode as “the way language is being used”, she here introduces the criterion of the “distance between participants”, spatially, interpersonally or

experientially, which would be related to more or less interactive, face to face, spontaneous or casual language use.

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

Also, another recurrent problem of SF is not resolved here, namely that properties of language use (such as spoken/written, spontaneous/casual, etc.) appear as properties of the context that precisely are being postulated to describe or explain such properties of language, thus arriving at a vicious circle. That is, register theory – at least in SF terms – should relate properties of context with properties of language structure or language use or ‘texts’, and not confound these different levels or dimensions of description. That is, contexts in SF theory should be defined only in sociological terms.

### *Gregory*

In order to ‘contextualize’ the SF approach to context, let us also briefly consider what one of those who inspired some of its initial concepts has to say, Michael Gregory, whose early work was on socially based linguistic variation, for instance as a basis for a theory of style (\*Gregory, 1967; see also \*Spencer & Gregory, 1964). Note by the way that in \*Spencer & Gregory (1964), the authors define field, tenor and mode not as properties of the context or situation, but as properties of discourse; they speak of the “field of discourse”, etc. That is, they would rather be part of

what SF defines as “register”, a notion that the authors reject as not very helpful (\*Spencer & Gregory, 1964: 86). Instead of “style”, as used by \*Halliday, McIntosh & Strevens (1964), they introduce the term “tenor”, defined as reflecting the degree of formality of the relations between the speaker/writer and hearer/reader.

Gregory’s later approach is called “communication linguistics” (\*Gregory, 1985), in which he not only refers to the work reviewed above by Malinowski, Firth and Halliday, but also to tagmemic linguists such as Pike, Longacre, Gleason and Lamb in the USA. Gregory uses the notion of “planes” of experience, and relates these to “strata” of the grammar. Citing the work of \*Fleming (1978a, 1978b), he thus defines the communicative situation as the “extra-textual features of experiences that are relevant for the discourse” (p. 123). We shall later see that the notion of “experience” may well be used as a foundation for a (psychological) theory of context, but it should be emphasized here that it would be inconsistent with an SF approach, which only accepts social variables of context, and not how language users *experience* these relevant features of social situations. Gregory then proceeds to a further account of these features of communicative situations, such as

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

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

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

One can only explain this in a theory of language where grammar is the core and everything else is “context”. It hardly needs further argument that discourse structures just like sentence structures need to be related to contextual structures in their own right, and that the way they are “context” for other parts of the discourse (like following sentences) implies a different concept of context (verbal context or “co-text”) than that of the social context. Scholarly terminology may sometimes be somewhat idiosyncratic, but this very heterogeneous characterization of the

communicative situation does not offer a systematic theory of the structures of contexts or communicative situations either.

### *Wegener*

Malinowski, Firth and SF linguists repeatedly refer to the situation theory of Philipp Wegener (1848-1916), the 19<sup>th</sup> century German linguist, as formulated in his book *Untersuchungen über die Grundfragen des Sprachlebens (Investigations into the Fundamental Questions of the Life of Language)* (Wegener, 1885/1991). Let us briefly examine what Wegener has to say, and how his remarks fit (or do not fit) the SF approach to context.

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

The same is true for his (brief) study of the role of the situation in the understanding of language use. His general assessment of the role of situation factors is that language users need to say less when they are more familiar with the situation, a general strategy that would also today figure in any theory about the role of knowledge (and context) in the understanding of discourse. He also relates this general role of knowledge with the Subject - Predicate articulation, which today would be associated with Topic - Comment articulation: Subject is what is already known (in some situation), and hence less interesting in an utterance, and the predicate is what is new and interesting, and forms the actual 'Aussage' (proposition, statement). But because grammatical subject need not be the same as the



‘logical’ subject (for instance in passive sentences), he proposes to speak of ‘Exposition’ to refer to what is already known when an utterance is made. The notion of *situation* is then related to this concept of Exposition (which we would probably call ‘Topic’), as follows:

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

Note incidentally that the original text probably has an error when it uses the word *Gegenwort* instead of *Gegenwart* (presence), since this is also the word used earlier in the passage. However the uncommon word *Gegenwort*, which might be loosely translated as “talking back” would of course perfectly fit Wegener’s definition of the situation. We have translated *Anschaung* with *perception* in order to maintain the visual aspect of the German original, but it might more generally also be rendered with ‘view’ or ‘experience’. After this passage he gives examples that show that the presence of objects in a situation make explicitly naming such objects superfluous.

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

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

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

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

This brief summary of the three kinds of situation distinguished by Wegener shows an interesting discrepancy with the reception of his ideas in

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

We have seen that the empiricist leanings of Malinowski, Firth and Halliday did not allow them to take a more cognitive stand on situations, and thus reduced them to their allegedly more ‘observable’ characteristics, such as participants, etc. We shall see later that my own approach to context is closer to that of Wegener than that of the British empiricists as well as their SF followers.

### **Summary of critique of SF approach to ‘context’**

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

- a. Its conceptualization is theoretically closed, without much theoretical development, systematic research, or influence from other approaches and disciplines.
- b. Halliday, and then later other SF linguists, borrow a notion of context from Gregory and other UK linguists that is vague, heterogeneous, terminologically obscure and theoretically confused, namely the triple of field, tenor and mode. With small changes, this conception has barely changed in nearly 40 years, although it produces numerous problems for the theory of the relations between text and context.

- c. Much of the approach to “language” advocated in SFL should better be called an approach to “grammar”; this would also avoid many inconsistencies and contradictions of its terminology (such as the “textual functions of language”).
- d. Because of the rather arbitrary nature of these three ‘variables’ defining contexts, also the mapping of such contexts on (three) functions of language (ideational, interpersonal and textual), and on the language structures controlled by them, remain arbitrary, incomplete and confused. This not only shows in the theory, but also in the analyses of language use in SFL.
- e. Despite the social (or social semiotic) approach to language, there is no social research into the nature of contexts, and the ways properties of context systematically influence language or discourse. References to the social sciences are scarce.
- f. The fundamentally construed or interpreted nature of context, for instance in terms of mental representations, as well as the important role of knowledge and other beliefs as relevant cognitive and social properties of language users, is not recognized. This also means that there is no explanation of how exactly such contexts are able to influence discourse production and comprehension by real language users -- and indeed how context can conversely be affected by discourse. Especially also the dynamic nature of context cannot be explained in an approach that ignores a mental component in which actual language users (and not abstractions) ongoingly (re)construct a context through a dynamic interpretation and representation of the communicative event and situation.

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

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

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

and discourse structure, and on the relations between text and context, remains relevant today.