CONTEXTUALIZATION AND UNDERSTANDING†

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INTRODUCTION

I use the term "contextualization" to refer to speakers' and listeners' use of verbal and nonverbal signs to relate what is said at any one time and in any one place to knowledge acquired through past experience, in order to retrieve the presuppositions they must rely on to maintain conversational involvement and assess what is intended. The notion of contextualization must be understood with reference to a theory of interpretation which rests on the following basic assumptions. (1) Situated interpretation of any utterance is always a matter of inferences made within the context of an interactive exchange, the nature of which is constrained both by what is said and by how it is interpreted. (2) Inferencing, as Sperber and Wilson (1986), Levinson (1983) and others have noted, is presupposition-based and therefore suggestive, not assertive. It involves hypothesis-like tentative assessments of communicative intent, that is, the listener's interpretation of what the speaker seeks to convey, in roughly illocutionary terms. These assessments can be validated only in relation to other background assumptions, and not in terms of absolute truth value. (3) Although such background assumptions build on extralinguistic "knowledge of the world," in any one conversation this knowledge is reinterpreted as part of the process of conversing so that it is interactively, thus ultimately socially, constructed. Interpretations, in other words, are ecologically constrained by considerations of sequencing, conversational management and negotiation of meaning, and, since sequencing is by its very nature an interactive process, they are cooperatively made and validated.

These matters are, of course, relatively well-known from the recent literature on interaction, discourse (Goffman 1974; Brown and Yule 1983; Levinson 1983) and conversational analysis (Atkinson and Heritage 1984). But, to the extent that discourse and conversational processes have been systematically investigated, analyses tend to rely on separate and often conflicting theoretical premises and methodological procedures. What I want to suggest in this paper is that by treating verbal exchanges as involving contextualization based, on-line, discourse level inferencing rather than just concentrating on regularities of sequential organization across speech exchanges, we can integrate what is best in such divergent approaches into a more general theory of conversational inference. Such a theory

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should enable us to show how grammatical knowledge and knowledge of language usage and rhetorical conventions enter into the conduct of verbal encounters and to develop an approach to conversational analysis that accounts for the interactive processes that underlie the perception of communicative signs and thus significantly affect understanding and persuasion in everyday conversation.

I will try to document this argument on the basis of an indepth examination of extracts from a single counseling session. Before turning to the data, let me present a few more details about how the speech signals relevant to contextualization work and how they enter into the communication process.

CONTEXTUALIZATION CUES

Contextualization relies on cues which operate primarily at the following levels of speech production. (a) *Prosody*, which I take to include intonation, stress or accenting and pitch register shifts. (b) *Paralinguistic signs* of tempo, pausing and hesitation, conversational synchrony, including latching or overlapping of speaking turns and other "tone of voice" expressive cues. Although prosodic and paralinguistic signs have received extensive treatment in the recent literature, analysis has for the most part concentrated on clause level phenomena and has dealt with meaning primarily at the level of expression, that is, the communication of emotion and generalized attitudes. What I want to argue here is that these signs also play an important role in affecting participants' perception of discourse level coherence, thus influencing interpretation as such. (c) *Code choice* from among the options within a linguistic repertoire (Gumperz 1972), as for example in code or style switching or selection among phonetic, phonological or morphosyntactic options, and (d) *choice of lexical forms* or *formulaic expressions*, as for example, opening or closing routines or metaphoric expressions, such as are now being studied in the area of lexical semantics, again primarily at the clause level and at the level of referential semantics. In the sociolinguistic literature, these optional phenomena tend to be studied by means of quantitative methods primarily as social variables at the supra-individual or group level. Yet, when viewed from the perspective of contextualization, they can be seen to provide a significant input to inferential processes.

How do contextualization cues work communicatively? They serve to highlight, foreground or make salient certain phonological or lexical strings vis-à-vis other similar units, that is, they function relationally and cannot be assigned context-independent, stable, core lexical meanings. Foregrounding processes, moreover, do not rest on any one single cue. Rather, assessments depend on co-occurrence judgments (Ervin-Tripp 1972; Gumperz 1971) that simultaneously evaluate a variety of different cues. When interpreted with reference to lexical and grammatical knowledge, structural position within a clause and sequential location within a stretch of discourse, foregrounding becomes an input to implicatures, yielding situated interpretations. Situated interpretations are intrinsically context-bound and cannot be analyzed apart from the verbal sequences in which they are embedded.

Moreover, inferences are subconsciously made so that, as Silverstein (1977) points out, they are not readily accessible to recall. It is therefore difficult to elicit information about the grounds upon which particular inferences are made through direct questioning. The relevant interpretive processes are best studied through indepth, turn by turn analysis of form and content.

Contextualization cues enter into the inferential process at several degrees of generality. Minimally, it is necessary to recognize three distinct levels. First, there is the perceptual plane at which communicative signals, both auditory and visual, are received and categorized. This involves more than the mere mapping of sounds into strings of phonemes and morphemes. What is perceived must be chunked into information units or phrases, before can be interpreted. The nature of the transitions between phrases and the type of relationship of one phrase to another must be determined. Other phenomena such as what students of prosody call "accenting," as well as shifts in pitch register and tempo and the like also belong here. Inferences at this perceptual level are first of all relevant to what conversation analysts call "conversational management." As such they serve to provide information on such matters as possible turn construction units (whether or not a speaker is about to complete a turn or needs more time to talk), foregrounding or backgrounding of items of information, separating shared or known items from new information, distinguishing between main points and qualifying information or side sequences. It is necessary to speak of inferencing in discussing these matters because previous analyses have shown that perception of the relevant signs and of their signaling value varies even among speakers of the same language (Gumperz 1982a, p. 32ff).

The second level is that of local assessments of what conversational analysts call "sequencing" and what from a pragmaticist's perspective one might refer to as "speech act level implicatures." Inferences at this level yield situated interpretations (Cook-Gumperz 1977) of what I have called "communicative intent" (Gumperz 1982a; Gumperz, Kaltman and O'Connor 1984). Both direct inferences and indirect or metaphoric inferences that go beyond what is overtly expressed through lexical content are included here.

Third, there is the more global level of framing which, to use Goffman's terms, signals what is expected in the interaction at any one stage. I use the term "activity" here to account for the fact that contextualization may raise expectations about what is to come at some point beyond the immediate sequence to yield predictions about possible outcomes of an exchange, about suitable topics and about the quality of interpersonal relations. The assumption is that such global predictions or expectations provide the grounds against which possible ambiguities at the perceptual or sequential levels can be resolved. It goes without saying that this separation into three levels is primarily an analytical strategy which serves to call attention to some of the complexity of the inferential processes; in everyday interaction, these levels merge. Participants themselves are concerned with their situated interpretations of what they hear.

I will illustrate these issues on the basis of my analysis of the data itself. But first some ethnographic background. The conversation takes the form of a heated and at times highly argumentative discussion recorded in fall 1976 while I was associated with an adult education center in Britain as a sociolinguistic consultant. The participants are "Lee," an ESL (English as a Second Language) instructor in her early 30's who also serves as curriculum planner and student advisor, and "Don," a student in his mid-40's. Don was applying for admission to a newly organized course on interethnic communication which was to be offered at the nearby E Community College. Lee is one of a group of ESL specialists who had jointly planned the course and she is scheduled to give guest lectures when it is offered at E College. In addition, she has also taken on the job of distributing information about the course at her home institution, the adult education center. Although Don holds a degree in political science from a university in India, he has, since his arrival in Britain in the early 1960's, worked as a manual laborer. He had applied for several white collar positions but so far without success. In order to gain the background he feels he needs, he is now enrolled as a student both at the adult education center and at E College. At the time of the discussion, he is taking an advanced adult center course on communication skills for non-native speakers of English employed in industry. This is referred to in the conversation as the "Twilight course." After his Twilight instructor announced the new E College course in class, Don had telephoned Lee to ask for application forms. She agreed to send him the forms when they became available but went on to tell him that she did not think that Don was a suitable applicant for the new course. Sometime later, while visiting the E College campus, Don discovered that the forms were already available there. He obtained a form and submitted his application. He then called Lee again and asked her why she had not sent him the forms as she had said she would. An appointment was made to clarify the matter in a face-to-face meeting in Lee's office. It is the tape recording of this meeting made by one of the two participants which is examined here.

In my analysis of the transcript, I will adopt the strategy of examining the same data successively from several distinct perspectives. I will begin with a brief discussion of the transcription symbols used to create analyzable written texts from the raw tapes. Following Ochs (1979), I assume that all transcription is selective and motivated by analytical goals. My goal here is to set down on paper all those signs which, on the basis of my analysis of the interaction as a whole, I can assume participants rely on in their on-line processing of information. Signs, that is, that demonstrably enter into participants' perceptions of interpretive frames (a subset of the total list given in Appendix A). I use the term "contextualization cue" to refer to these signs (Gumperz 1982). The assumption is that conversationalists' responses are ultimately based on empirically detectable signs, but that such raw perceptions enter into inference via co-occurrence judgments based on simultaneous cognitive processing of information at multiple signaling levels. In identifying such cues, I initially build on experience gained through previous systematic analyses of what speakers respond to in making contextualization judgments. The initial hypotheses of what the relevant cues are are then validated or disconfirmed on the basis of how well they explain our analysis of the interaction’s interpretive outcomes.

The basic assumption that guides my transcription is that participants process speech not in terms of individual words or syntactically defined phrases, clauses or sentences as such but in terms of what phoneticians interested in speech perception have called breath or intonation groups and discourse analysts refer to as idea units (Chafe 1980) or information units. For the purposes of this discussion, I will use the term "informational phrase." Prototypically the best way to characterize such an informational phrase is on the basis of prosody as a rhythmically bounded chunk consisting of a lexical string that falls under a single intonation contour which is set off from other such units by a slight pause and constitutes a semantically interpretable syntactic unit. I want to argue that speakers chunk the stream of speech into processing units on the basis of co-occurrence judgments that build on prosody and rhythm, as well as on syntactic and semantic knowledge. As is true of prototype phenomena in general, not all these features need to be present at the same time. In marginal cases, determination of the phrase boundaries depends on what phrase divisions make sense in terms of the organization of the surrounding discourse.

Here is a list of the most important contextualization cues that enter into the present analysis.

Phrase final cues. Information units are bounded intonationally by phrase-final tune. In this transcript, I distinguish between (1) slight fall ("/") that, although it indicates a separate unit, suggests that there is more to come, (2) final fall ("//") which marks relative completion, (3) slight rise (",") as occurs in listing a number of separate items that form part of a larger whole, (4) final rise ("?") as in questioning, and (5) truncated unit ("-"), strings that are interrupted before completion and are prosodically marked through various cues suggesting incompleteness. In some cases though not in the case of the present materials, it becomes necessary to distinguish one additional type of phrase final tune, a holding intonation in which the tone neither falls nor rises.

Interphrasal transitions. In most conversations, transitions between phrases or turns are characterized by small breaks that are fairly constant in duration. When this is the case, no special symbol is used. It should be noted however that pausing is not essential for separating out informational phrases. In many instances, particularly in a single turn of speaking, the rhythmic and accentual features of phrasing alone enable us to recognize an informational phrase. (See, for example, the discussion about line (1L) of the transcript below.) Pauses of one second or more are transcribed by indicating the approximate number of seconds elapsed in angle brackets, as for example "<2>". Pauses of up to .5 second are indicated by two dots and pauses of between .5 and one second are indicated by three dots. Latched turns, that is, those that follow immediately upon the previous turn with less than the expected break, are indicated by "==" at the beginning of the latching turn. Overlap, that is, the simultaneous production of speech by more than one participant, is marked by preceding and following the overlapping stretches of talk with single "=".

Intraphrasal cues. Studies of English intonation have shown that within each phrase at least one syllable is set off from others by instrumentally difficult to segment but interactionally relevant combinations of loudness, pitch obtrusion or change in amplitude. Following established practice, I will refer to this phenomenon as "accent." The present transcripts mark only those accents which are not readily predictable from English syntax by placing a "*" before the relevant syllable. For extra prominence, upper case type is used. Other frequently used significant cues include shifts in pitch register, tempo and loudness which can occur either inter- or intraphrasally. They are marked in the transcript by special symbols, such as "hi," "lo," "ac" (accelerated) and "dc" (decelerated) and "f" (loudness) in square brackets, with curly brackets bounding the lexical string over which these features occur. No attempt is made to render phonetic detail in this transcript, although where such phenomena as vowel or consonant lengthening, marked intonational contouring, falsetto and staccato speech are found to have signaling import, these should be represented. Parentheses are used to mark unintelligible speech.

TEXT ANALYSIS

The transcript is presented as a series of numbered two-part exchanges, with Lee's turn marked with "L" and Don's with "D". A line in the transcript includes one or more phrases which always terminate in one of the above phrase final markers.

Examining Contextualization Cues. Let me now turn to the initial portion of the transcript to illustrate the way in which the cues enter into the inferential process. The full text is reproduced in Appendix B.

1D: this is not a-
1L: ==of *course/ {[ac] it is not a secret//}
2D: =that it *is a secret*//=
2L: (1) =I haven't *said= it's a secret//
(2) {[ac] I didn't say it was a secret//}
(3) what I *said was/
(4) .. that it was *not a suitable course/ .. for you to *apply for//
(5) because it is ( )//
(6) .. {[lo] now if you *want to apply for it/}
(7) .. {[hi] of *course/} you can do what you *want//
(8) but/ {[hi] if you are *doing the twilight course at the *moment/}
(9) .. {[lo] it was *not something which-}
(10) .. Mrs N and Mr G *thought/ *originally/
(11) that it was a course to carry *on/ *with the *twilight course/
(12) {[hi] but this is NOT the case//}

The recording starts a minute or so into the discussion. Evidently, Don has either directly or indirectly accused Lee of not wanting to send him the information about the E College course and seems to be claiming that she is trying to keep him from registering because she does not think he is qualified. The conversation gives the impression of a heated argument marked by overlap and latching and voices raised with respect to both pitch and volume. The two participants are intent on following their own lines of argumentation, often without attending to the other's contributions. The details of the contextualization processes revealed in the transcript illustrate what it is about the interaction that conveys this impression.

I begin with Lee's response in turn (1L). The initial "of course" is accented and treated as a separate informational phrase. When analyzed solely in terms of syntax, it might appear that "of course" syntactically and semantically qualifies what follows and that only one informational phrase need be recognized. Yet the phrasing and the shift in tempo suggests a division into two units. On this interpretation, (1L) becomes similar to line (7) of turn (2L), "of course, you can do what you want" (with the sole exception that the in the latter case, a shift in pitch register is used to separate the two units rather than a shift in tempo). The interpretive consequence in this case is to link the "of course" with the preceding "now if you want to apply for it" rather than with what follows so that the utterance can be paraphrased as, "of course you can, you can do what you want." Applying the same argument to (1L), we can assume that Lee's initial "of course" is intended to refer to one of Don's previous utterances. This makes interpretive sense because the content indicates that Don is accusing Lee of treating the information as a secret as far as he, Don, is concerned, not of claiming that information about the course itself is a secret. So that Lee would not have been likely to respond to Don's "this is not a secret" with a literal "of course, it's not a secret." In (2L) in fact she says explicitly, "I didn't say it was a secret," stressing "say" with a strong accent. This illustrates the methodological point that phrase boundaries are not just "there" empirically, they are constructed and construed to serve rhetorical ends. By contextualizing (1L) as two phrases and accenting "of course," Lee seems to be suggesting that she is either responding to something that has just been said before the recording commences or to something that can readily be inferred from what had been said earlier.

Lee's next speaking turn in lines (2L1-12) reveals the basic features of her contextualization strategies. Note for example that in a number of phrases (e.g. lines 2, 4, 7) double bar rather than single bar final contours are used. This along with the strategic deployment of pauses lends the passage a certain air of definiteness. Turning now to (2L1), we note that the first part of Lee's utterance overlaps Don's (2D). She is apparently anticipating what he is about to say. Then having gained the floor, she repeats herself in accelerated tempo. Line (3) is followed by a brief, seemingly rhetorical pause which introduces Lee's exposition of her own perspective. Thus the accelerated repetition of "it is not a secret" can be taken as a floor holding first part of a two-part lead in to the explanation that follows. Although lines (1L) to (2L2) contain four repetitions of "it is not a secret," each one has a different interpretation, depending on sequential position and how it is contextualized.

Lee begins her explanation in lines (2L3-5) by referring to what she had originally intended to tell Don in the first phone call. Note the positioning of accents. The contrastive accent on "said" in (2L3) mirrors the accent in (2L1) to suggest the paraphrase "what I actually said was." Accent placement on "not" and "apply" in the following line suggests the inference that at the time she had indirectly advised Don against applying. Lee's continued placement of contrastive accents on verbs and predicate qualifiers serves to maintain the tone set in the opening lines throughout the remainder of her speaking turn.

Beginning with line (2L6) the perspective shifts from what Lee had said to the present and to what Don might want to do. This part of Lee's explanation is additionally marked by frequent pitch register shifts. Line (2L6) "now if you want to apply for it," which refers to what Don might do, carries low register. Line (2L7) shifts to high register. (2L8) begins with the connective "but" in neutral register, which is then followed by another change to high register. The speaker is alternately speaking in her own and in her interlocutor's voice and is using pitch register shifts to signal the contrast. There follows a brief pause and then an aside in (2L9-11) in low register. The explanation concludes in (2L12) with Lee's return to her own main argument, again in high register. The argumentativeness of her talk at this point in the interaction is further underscored here by the extra strong emphasis of "Not" and by the "DO" later on in (3L). Her speech almost verges on shouting, a clear sign of how annoyed and frustrated she is by her inability to get through to Don.

To sum up, Lee relies on contextualization strategies of contouring and pausing, accenting, and pitch register and tempo shifts among others both to convey information and to give her argument rhetorical force. The relevant contextualization cues affect the signaling process by virtue of the fact that they (a) single out or group together certain sets of items, (b) set them off from the surrounding discourse, and (c) indicate how they are to be interpreted in relationship either to preceding or following units or to background knowledge in such a way as to construct a coherent argument. It is this perceptually based information that, when processed with reference to grammatical and lexical knowledge and sequential positioning, yields situated interpretations.

Now turn to Don's contribution.

3D: (1) no// what you- you take *one thing at a time*//
(2) this case// that whatever {[f] *they know*//}
(3) I get that even .. hmm// for a D .. *me*//
(4) {[lo] and I am *student in E *College*//}
(5) and Mr W *knows me*// he// .. I am student in the *same school*//
(6) {[f] he knows *my qualifications*/} and what- whether I'm suitable *or not*//
(7) =but=
3L: =this= has nothing to DO with qualifications//

Comparison of Don's speech with Lee's preceding turn, immediately reveals some systematic differences both in nature of the contextualization cues employed and in the discourse level relationships they signal. Note, for example, that Don's phrases for the most part end in double slash boundaries ("//"). He almost never employs (/) and (,) boundaries throughout the entire interaction. That is, his use of phrase final signaling is less differentiated than Lee's and most probably differs in signaling import. Don's accent, moreover, does not ordinarily fall on a single syllable and, what is more, its phonetic realization is different: either a part of a phrase or an entire phrase is set off from what precedes or follows by a combination of slow tempo, staccato enunciation and, sometimes, increased loudness. I have used italics to mark this the relevant contrasts. Other differences in the use of pitch register shifts will be discussed later. Clearly Don's contextualization system differs significantly from Lee's. Don's practices, moreover, are not idiosyncratic. In the examples below I have reproduced just a few of the many instances of similar phenomenon that we have found in other tapes of Indian-English conversations to suggest that what is at issue here are culturally based differences in contextualization conventions.

Manager of a small firm interviewing a recently hired engineer:

A: how do you like your job//

B: I may tell you that *since joining the firm*/ I have been *so happy*//

From an adult education class in which an Indian-English speaking instructor is talking with a group of Indian-English speaking students:

A: houses are as we say of three types//
.. detached// .. a house *which is all by itself*/ only *one door*//
and then you have two// semi//
and ah .. all in a row as you say// ... *terrace* .. *or town houses*//
now which one *would you think*// .. which would be *the cheapest to buy*//
any idea? *terrace house*/ semi/ or detached//
B: I think miss// this *terrace house*//
in *England*/ the more windows *you have in the house* the more *rates you pay*//
because you get more *sunshine in the house*// (Gumperz 1982a)

A close analysis of Don's contextualization conventions is beyond the scope of this paper, since it would require detailed comparisons with the grammar and rhetorical system of his native language (see Gumperz 1982; Gumperz, Kaltman and Aulakh, 1982a for some preliminary discussions). For our purposes here, it will be sufficient to concentrate on some of the interpretive consequences of the contrast between Don and Lee's contextualization practices.

Interpreting Communicative Intent. Consider the content of Don's response in (3 and 4D).

3D: (1) no// what you- you take *one thing at a time*//
(2) this case// that whatever {[f] *they know*//}
(3) I get that even .. hmm// for a D .. *me*//
(4) {[lo] and I am *student in E *College*//}
(5) and Mr W *knows me*// he// .. I am student in the *same school*//
(6) {[f] he knows *my qualifications*/} and what-
(7) whether I'm suitable *or not*// =but=
3L: =this= has nothing to =DO with qualifications//=
4D: (1) ={[f] but you can't know/}=
(2) and can't {[f] *tell a person*/} .. just who is to come into *this course*//
(3) if .. suppose I came to *this course* from uh//
(4) .. *(had) you taken this impression*// .. {[lo] that I am *not suitable*//
(5) because I took this {[f] *course*//}

Since contextualization conventions are automatically applied without conscious awareness, British-English speakers, relying on their own native language based interpretive conventions are likely to encounter problems in determining how Don's argument coheres. In lines 1-3 of (3D) Don corrects himself several times and his remarks are therefore not easy to understand. On close examination, I arrived at the following interpretation which Don confirmed later when I played him the tape. He begins by saying that he knows as much as "they," thus implying that his background is as good as that of others who will be admitted to the new course. Given this interpretation, a native speaker of English would expect the

"I" in line (3) to be given more prominence than the "they know" in line (2), but in Don's speech the reverse seems to be the case. In line (4), Don goes on to introduce new information to the effect that he is already enrolled as a student at E College and that Mr. W. (a lecturer at E College who is also involved in the course) already knows him. Yet, "student in E College" is foregrounded while "I" is spoken in low pitch. On this interpretation, we would have expected the whole phrase to be given prominence. Similarly, in line (5) the name of the person who knows Don is backgrounded.

In turn (3L) Lee interrupts without giving Don a chance to finish. He responds by raising his voice and overlapping Lee's turn. When he has regained the floor, he goes on with his previous argument as if nothing had happened. What he is trying to say in this turn is that perhaps she mistakenly believes that because he is currently enrolled in the Twilight course he is not qualified for the new course. Don's way of referring to the two courses illustrates another interesting difference between the two contextualization systems. In lines (2) and (3) of turn (4D), "this course" is foregrounded to refer to the Twilight course. In line (5) at the end of the turn, only "course" is foregrounded but the reference here is to the new course. In other words, the distinction between the two courses is conveyed only through pitch register and loudness shifts. As native speakers of English, we would expect differentiated syllable accents and additional qualifiers such as "other course" or "new course" to avoid problems of co-referentiality. It seems reasonable to assume that, although Don's sentences are on the whole grammatical, the differences in prosodic conventions may create processing difficulties for listeners relying on the native English contextualization conventions.

The text contains a number of instances that suggest that processing difficulties such as the above lead to serious misinterpretations of Don's intent on Lee's part. For example, when Lee interrupts Don in turn (3L), she focuses on his use of the word "qualifications," which is the last of several items that he foregrounds but clearly not his main point. Don then in turn interrupts and continues his argument where he had left off, whereupon Lee responds by giving more details about who the course was designed for as if course description were what is at issue rather than Don's argument that he as an individual could profit from the course.

4L: (1) but it is a question of the *job you're doing/
(2) the course is for people/ who are/ {[ac] I'll *tell you/
(3) it *says on the information//
(4) {[hi] it's for youth *employment officers,
(5) it's for members of the *police, it's for uh *teachers,
(6) it's for people with *management positions,
(7) {[ac] *those are the people {[hi] who are going to be on the *course//}}
5D:(1) {[hi] it-} {[lo] that's- that's *your plan*//}
(2) uh and ( ) who would would benefit and *who would not*/ ah =you know/=
5L:(1) =but {[ac] Mr D/=

(2){[hi] it’s a TRAINING course for people who are going to do those *jobs//}}

6D:(1)==and/ it lasts *until you say*// {[lo] *also for the people}*

(2)*who are interested* in this sort of uh::-

6L: yes//

7D: ==educa=tion//=

7L: =with re=ference to their WORK// it would be/

8D: ==yes/

8L: ==with reference to their *work//

9D:(1){[lo] (professional) *people/*} ( ) them/

(2){[hi] or *the people* who are *personally interested*//

9L: why are you so/ {[lo] (unin-)/} you’ve APPLIED//

10D: yes//

In turn (5D), Don responds to Lee’s list of types of suitable candidates by suggesting that the course is also for people who are "interested in this sort of education." That is, he is interpreting Lee’s "people who are going to do those jobs" as referring to those who are interested in preparing to go into the relevant professions. Lee then takes advantage of Don’s hesitation in turn (6D) to interject "yes" but when he then goes on with a latched "education," Lee once more overlaps, qualifying Don’s word "interested" by "with reference to their work," placing extra strong emphasis on "work." The two are evidently arguing about what is meant by "interested" but if Lee’s turn (7L) is a rejection of Don’s point, it is at best an indirect one and it is doubtful whether Don understands her. Don then responds with a latched "yes" in turn (8D), whereupon Lee repeats her qualification with less emphasis. She seems to assume that he is confirming her interpretation and that they are now agreed on this point. Don continues in turn (9D) by repeating "professional people" in low pitch register but then he raises his pitch to reiterate his earlier point, "the people who are personally interested" whereupon Lee now becomes very annoyed as if Don had gone back on his agreement, and in turn (10L) she accuses him of acting as if she had insulted him.

10L: (1) it doesn’t MATTER anymore//

(2) .. I don’t understand/ why you are so INSULTED {[lo] with me//}

Don then denies that he had intended to "insult her," using the phrase "feeling sorry for myself."

12D: hmm I’m not *insulting you*// I just hm =feeling *sorry for myself*//=

12L: (1) =no I didn’t say you were//=

(2) but exactly/ why are you feeling so sorry for YOURSELF//

Note that what Don accents here are the last three words of the second phrase. But in her own subsequent question, Lee asks "why are you feeling so sorry for yourself" as if Don had accented "myself." In other words, she is reading his utterance as if the accent had been on a single syllable, which it wasn’t. This reinforces her impression that Don is personally offended. The discussion continues in this vein marked alternately by mutual irritation, attempts at repair and serious frustration, ending in Lee's shouted exclamation in (19L).

Although on the surface it would seem that both speakers are talking about the same general issues, they clearly approach these issues from different perspectives. Lee acts as if her own actions were the main issue and insists on explaining her role in the admissions process, while Don, according to his comments in the later follow-up interview, seeks in vain to turn the discussion around to his own professional situation. In spite of several attempts, they are unable to undo what both seem to sense are, in part, misunderstandings and to negotiate a shared perspective. In other words, we are not simply dealing with misunderstandings here but with the failure of the very repair strategies that participants must rely upon to resolve misunderstandings. I hope to have shown that the differences in contextualization conventions play a significant role in this mutual failure.

But there are important aspects of the conversation that need further explanation. If we look at the content of Don's responses, they seem—on the surface at least and from a native English speaking perspective—strangely inconsistent. In (5D) and (6D) he seems to claim that, in spite of Lee's denials, he nevertheless believes that she is actively involved in the admission process, thus overtly contradicting what she has said about her own role. In the latter part of the interaction, he goes on to suggest that he thinks that she has decided that he and other students in the Twilight course are not qualified and to argue that she is not likely to favor his admission. The more Lee attempts to set the record straight, the more he holds to this position. Yet on the other hand, Don denies that he is offended (11D, 16D) and, on the contrary, it seems from the way he talks, for example in (19D), as if he were trying to enlist her help and that he is upset that she has the impression that he is not suitable. For someone who is asking for assistance, his behavior certainly seems strangely inconsistent.

The apparent contradictions in Don's reasoning literally jump out at us when we look at the second section of the transcript.

20L: I was *one of the members of the com*mittee/
20D: ==yes//
21L: (1) who de*signed the course at E College//
(2) but I have nothing to do with the appli*cations or anything/
(3) because I'm *here// it's a *college course/
(4) not a *center course/ =and ok center=
21D: =no *it's center*-=
22L: Mr D I know MORE about this course/ than *you do// I DESIGNED =it//=
22D: =yes=
23L: (1) at E *College// but I am TELLING you/
(2) I'm not involved in the appli*cations// I'm =telling you//=
23D: =*but you have*=
24L: Mr D I KNOW whether or not/
24D: you have an *equal say even*

25L: I DON’T have an equal say actually/ it’s
25D: .. yes//
26L: I’m telling you/ .. I KNOW//
26D: if if .. if if you *feel somebody*/ who is not suitable// *you can say no* (   )//
27L: I’m NOT GOING to say/ ANYTHING to ANYBODY//
27D: if you *feel somebody*::/
28L: (1) {[ac] it’s got nothing to do with me//} if::/
(2) {[ac] you have applied to E *College/}
(3) *that- as far as I am concerned/ that’s *that//
(4) {[ac] it’s up to .. *them//} it’s got nothing to do with me/ at *all//
28D: yes// still you have *a say*// you *have opinion*//
29L: (1) {[hi] Mr D} stop *telling me/ {[hi] what I’m DOING/}
(2) what I’m NOT doing// {[hi] I .. KNOW what I am doing//}
29D: (1) no/ I’m not *telling you*/ what *you do*/
(2) or what you .. *not to do*/ but *I know* .. the fact/
(3) what you’re/ .. and *what you did*/ what your *opinion will be*//

Several turns later:

30L: but nobody is going to/ *ask me for my opinion//
30D: ( ) *I think so* for the admission//
31L: (1) {[hi] Mr D} *stop telling me/ that I am .. a *liar// {[hi] I’m telling you the *truth//}
(2) oh *yes you are/ =you’re-=
31D: =I’m not= telling you//

Beginning in turn (20L) Lee once more explains in detail her role in the admission process. In (21D) Don reacts to her last phrase with an overlapped "no it’s center" which Lee takes as a denial of what she has just said, even though she did not give him an opportunity to elaborate his point. Lee’s utterance evokes a "yes" on Don’s part (22D). This could count as a mere backchannel signal acknowledgement that he has understood her, yet she again responds as if he were contradicting her. Once more, in (23D), Don’s attempt to respond with an overlapped "but you have" is similarly interpreted. This pattern of Lee’s interpreting Don’s attempts to reply as contradiction goes on through much of the remaining portion of the exchange, particularly in turns (25L), (26L), (27L), (29L), (31L), until finally Lee comes out in (37L) with an exasperated

37L: (1) .. I don’t know WHAT to say to you// you you- / you don’t BELIEVE me/
(2) what I tell you/ you don’t .. ACCEPT what I say to you as true/
(3) and I don’t know *what to say to you anymore//

Yet on a several occasions Don clearly denies that he is intentionally trying to contradict her or to tell her what to do.

29D: (1) no/ I’m not *telling you*/ what *you do*/ or what you .. *not to do*/
(2) but *I know* .. the fact/ what you’re/ .. and *what you did*/ what your *opinion will be*//

37D: (1) uh I .. I accepted most of *your word*/
(2) and uh what what *I think*/ that's my *personal opinion/*
(3) *and that's why* I am saying that/
(4) you are *saying this for*/ and uh *that's your*- part of your job//
(5) and I'm not uh ( )/

39D: (1) uh if *if I don't* get admission/ I am *not blaming* .. you for that//
(2) if uh:: *forget about that*/ I'm not saying/ *to you anything*/ and-

In other words, he repeatedly claims that he is not annoyed at her and, towards the end of the conversation, he asserts that he will not blame her even if he does not get admitted.

How can we explain this apparent breakdown of what Agar (1983) would call "coherence" in our ability to account for Don's actions? A likely solution for this emerged only after I had the opportunity to look in detail at these seeming contradictions together with two Indian-English speaking research assistants. Although all of us had spent quite a bit of time with the tape, we had at first not noticed this point. It was only when we began to try to guess at what Don could have been intending to say on the many occasions where he was interrupted that the two native speakers remarked that an Indian-English speaker might interpret Don's action not as contradicting Lee but as an instance of a kind of pleading. This type of discursive practice is typical of situations where a member of the lay public makes a request of a representative of a public institution. In India such situations are often treated as hierarchical situations marked by a sharp status distinction between the public official who is addressed as a superior and the client who acts as the dependent. Two kinds of discursive strategies are commonly involved in this type of pleading. On the one hand, lay persons, in arguing their case, represent themselves as innocent victims of circumstances.

We have a number of instances of similar phenomena in our tape recorded materials. For example, in a roleplay enactment a customer complaining about a faulty sweater that he purchased said, "I bought this sweater some time ago and when I came home it was torn and I spoiled my money." In a second example, an unemployed clerk who has come to see a social worker at a neighborhood center to ask for help with tracing his unemployment check introduces his story with, "I'm in terrible trouble." In both situations the client frames his talk as if it were some personal mishap rather than talking about the issue in neutral institutional terms. Don's attempt to explain himself to Lee in (12D), "I didn't need it for myself. Because I came to this course. And that's why it happened. I'm not insulting you. I am just feeling sorry for myself," can perhaps be explained as a similar troubles talk strategy. What Don is arguing is not that he is sorry for himself but that he is sorry that he enrolled in the Twilight course because it is this that might have led Lee to misjudge him. While downgrading their own status, lay persons, on the other hand, as part of this same complex of strategies, depict the official as being all-powerful and in control, thus able to assist in finding a solution to the problem. Thus, superiors are often addressed with words to the effect that "you are important," "you are powerful," "you can help." When this leads to denial on superior's part, clients tend to repeat their praise strategy and so on. If we interpret Don's behavior towards Lee in this way, his actions do seem to make sense. In other words, he is not claiming that she can change or actually bypass the rules of the course. He is simply trying to enlist what Erickson (1982), in his analysis of similar counseling situations, has called "co-membership." He is asking her to take his, Don's, perspective and support him in making a good case for admission to the course.

Some of Don's replies can indeed be interpreted in this way. Consider (6D), "And it lasts until you say, also for the people who are interested in this sort of uh-." Perhaps what he intends to convey here is, "Maybe you can suggest that the admission criteria be interpreted so as to include people like me who would like to go into such professions." Similarly, in reply to Lee's (12L), "Why are you feeling so sorry for yourself?", Don replies, "Because I didn't have to come to this course," and then one turn later, "But you think that nobody in this class who is taking the course (is qualified)." Don did not have an opportunity to complete his utterance, but in view of his statements in (23D), "but you have an equal say," and (26D), "if you feel somebody is not suitable, you can say no," he evidently believes that the fact that he enrolled in the Twilight course has prejudiced her against him. If he assumes that as a result she is less likely to help him, he has reason to be disappointed.

Finally, let us look at Don's response in the sequence from (31L) to (35D) which begins with Lee's, "Stop telling me that I'm a liar." Don replies, "I'm not telling you you're a liar, that's your profession," and then when she persists in her argument, he repeats, "Your profession, I'm not telling, I never say liar." When Lee then accuses him by paraphrasing his words as follows, "You said, 'yes, you can do this, you can do that,'" Don replies, "No, that's not lying" and in the next turn goes on with, "People don't admit the fact sometimes, and that's part of their job you know." He is evidently interpreting Lee's denials as typical of and expected of officials who have power and are reluctant to use it on the client's behalf.

To repeat, contrary to what Lee thinks, Don is not necessarily deeply insulted nor sorry for himself nor is he intentionally contradicting her, although perhaps he does show annoyance at the end. He is simply employing the discursive practices and acting out the interpersonal relationships that he associates with situations of official pleading. Furthermore, both Lee's perception of what he is doing as well as our own initial impressions are in large part interactively generated by the fact that more often than not Don is interrupted before he has had a chance to make his point and he is rarely ever allowed to complete what he wants to say. Our evidence seems to show that the differences in contextualization strategies which as we argued led to Lee's initial perception that Don felt sorry for himself and was acting insulted also stood in the way of both participants' efforts to repair the situation. We conclude that Don's seeming denials and his references to himself must be understood as formulaic contextualization cues which suggests how he defines the verbal activity at hand.

Although the two conversationalists would clearly agree on what the overall speech event is in which they are involved, they differ significantly in their notions of what types of activities constitute this event, how these activities are reflected in contextualization conventions, and what can and cannot be said. Such differences are not rare and not confined to interethnic situations. But what makes this kind of situation special is that the differences in the contextualization conventions, the inferences made at the first and sequential levels, and the resulting misunderstandings keep each conversationalist from recognizing the other's perspective at the third level of activity. As a result, attempts at repair misfire and miscommunication is compounded rather than resolved by further talk. The long term social consequences of miscommunications that occur under these circumstances have been discussed elsewhere (Gumperz 1982a). The present paper can best be understood as a further step in the development of what Jenny Cook-Gumperz and I (1977) have referred to as "the process of arriving at a socially active notion of context." A notion of context, in other words, that deals with the cognitive processes through which cultural and other types of background knowledge are brought into the interpretive processes.

Appendix A

Symbol	Significance
//	Final fall
/	Slight fall indicating "more is to come"
?	Final rise
,	Slight rise as in listing intonation
-	Truncation (e.g. what ti- what time is it/)

..	Pauses of less than .5 second
...	Pauses greater than .5 second (unless precisely timed)
<2>	Precise units of time (= 2 second pause)
=	To indicate overlap and latching of speakers’ utterances
	e.g. R: so you understand =the requirements=
	B: =yeah, i under=stand them/
	~~
	R: so you understand the requirements?
	B: ==yeah, i understand them/
	R: ==and the schedule?
	B: yeah/
	with spacing and single "=" before and after the appropriate portions of the text indicating overlap and turn initial double "=" indicating latching of the utterance to the preceding one.

::	Lengthened segments (e.g. wha::t)
˜	Fluctuating intonation over one word
*	Accent; normal prominence
CAPS	Extra prominence
{[ ]}	Nonlexical phenomena, both vocal and nonvocal, which overlays the lexical stretch e.g. {[lo] text//}
[ ]	Nonlexical phenomena, both vocal and nonvocal, which interrupts the lexical stretch e.g. text [laugh] text//

( )	Unintelligible speech
di(d)	A good guess at an unclear segment
(did)	A good guess at an unclear word
(xxx)	Unclear word for which a good guess can be made as to how many syllables were uttered with "x" = one syllable
(" ")	Regularization (e.g. i’m gonna ("going to") come soon/)
# #	Use hatchmarks when extratextual information needs to be included within the text (e.g. R: did you ask M #surname# to come?)

Appendix B

1D: this is not a-
1L: ==of *course/ {[ac] it is not a secret//}
2D: =that it _is a secret_//=
2L: (1) =I haven't *said= it's a secret//
(2) {[ac] I didn't say it was a secret//}
(3) what I *said was/
(4) .. that it was *not a suitable course/ .. for you to *apply for//
(5) because it is ( )//
(6) .. {[lo] now if you *want to apply for it/}
(7) .. {[hi] of *course/} you can do what you *want//
(8) but/ {[hi] if you are *doing the twilight course at the *moment/}
(9) .. {[lo] it was *not something which-}
(10) .. Mrs N and Mr G *thought/ *originally/
(11) that it was a course to carry *on/ *with the *twilight course/
(12) but this is NOT the case//
3D: (1) no// what you- you take _one thing at a time_//
(2) this case// that whatever {[f] _they know_//}
(3) I get that even .. hmm// for a D _..me_//
(4) {[lo] and I am _student in E *College_//}
(5) and Mr W _knows me_// he// ..I am student in the _same school_//
(6) {[f] he knows _my qualifications_/} and what- whether I'm suitable _or not_//
(7) =but=
3L: =this= has nothing to =DO with qualifications//=
4D: (1) ={[f] but you can't know/}=
(2) and can't {[f] _tell a person_/} .. just who is to come into _this course_//
(3) if .. suppose I came to _this course_ from uh//
(4) .. _(had) you taken this impression_// .. {[lo] that I am _not suitable_//
(5) because I took this {[f] _course_//}
4L: (1) but it is a question of the *job you're doing/
(2) the course is for people/ who are/ {[ac] I'll *tell you/
(3) it *says on the information//
(4) {[hi] it's for youth *employment officers,
(5) it's for members of the *police, it's for uh *teachers,
(6) it's for people with *management positions,
(7) {[ac] *those are the people {[hi] who are going to be on the *course//}}
5D: (1) {[hi] it-} {[lo] that's- that's _your plan_//}
(2) uh and ( ) who would would benefit and _who would not_/ ah =you know/=
5L: (1) =but {[ac] Mr D/=
(2) {[hi] it's a TRAINING course for people who are going to do those *jobs//}}
6D: (1) ==and/ it lasts _until you say_// {[lo] _also for the people}_
(2) _who are interested_ in this sort of uh::-
6L: yes//
7D: ==educa=tion//=
7L: =with re=ference to their WORK// it would be/
8D: ==yes/
8L: ==with reference to their *work//
9D: (1) {[lo] (professional) _people/_} ( ) them/
(2) {[hi] or _the people_ who are _personally interested_//
9L: why are you so/ {[lo] (unin-)/} you've APPLIED//
10D: yes//
10L: (1) it doesn't MATTER any more//
(2) .. I don't understand/ why you are so INSULTED {[lo] with me//}
11D: {[hi] hmm I am =_not insulting you_//=
11L: (1) =I mean two *things/= {[lo] I said/ [ac] I said to you/
(2) you can- you- I'll send you the things when they *come/ I've only just *received them//}
(3) and *then I said to you/ that I *didn't think you were suitable/
(4) ok/ *nothing =more//=
12D: (1) =I didn't= need it for myself//
(2) because I came to _this course_//

uh heh heh/ and that eh- and that's *why it happened*//
hmm I'm not *insulting you*// I just hm =feeling *sorry for myself*//=
12L: =no I didn't say you were//= but exactly/
why are you feeling so =sorry for YOURSELF//=
13D: =because I didn't= didn't ( ) have to come to this *course*//
13L: (1) yes/ well that's very good/
(2) I don't understand why you're feeling so INSULTED//
14D: well but you think ( )// that uh *nobody in this class*// or who is *taking the course at-*
14L: (1) no/ it isn't a question of *that//
(2) Mrs/ well uh Mrs G *told me/
(3) she had given the things out to the people in the *class/
(4) because she thought it was something *suitable/
(5) they would want to go on and *do/ when they had *finished this course/
(6) that it was a *follow-up//
15D: yes//
15L: but it ISN'T a follow-up/ that's the point// it's something quite DIFFERENT//
16D: (1) but/ what this is uh/
(2) I'm not *crossing you* but I *already .. noticed about this course/*
16L: .. well that's ALRIGHT then/
17D: from there/ and I already *got this application form*/
17L: ˜that's =˜alright/=
18D: =and I= *already applied*//
18L: that's OK//
19D: (1) and- ya- what- but the way you hmm (uh)/ on the *last day*//
(2) when I found on *the last day*/ then *I worked this out*//
(3) {[ac] same thing uh thing//} now/ *this is confirmation of that*/
(4) {[lo] uh you took *this impression*/ that I am *not suitable*/}
(5) and that's why you didn't *send me the application forms*//
19L: I RECEIVED THEM ONLY ON FRIDAY// [shouted]

Several turns later:

20L: I was *one of the members of the com*mittee/
20D: ==yes//
21L: (1) who de*signed the course at E College//
(2) but I have nothing to do with the appli*cations or anything/ because I'm *here//
(3) it's a *college course/ not a *center course/ =and ok center=
21D: =no *it's center-*=
22L: Mr D I know MORE about this course/ than *you do// I DESIGNED =it//=
22D: =yes=
23L: (1) at E *College// but I am TELLING you/
(2) I'm not involved in the appli*cations// I'm =telling you//=
23D: *=but you have=*
24L: Mr D I KNOW whether or not/
24D: you have an *equal say even*
25L: I DON'T have an equal say actually/ it's
25D: .. yes//
26L: I'm telling you/ .. I KNOW//
26D: if if .. if if you *feel somebody*/ who is not suitable// *you can say no* ( )//
27L: I'm NOT GOING to say/ ANYTHING to ANYBODY//
27D: if you *feel somebody*::/
28L: (1) {[ac] it's got nothing to do with me//} if::/
(2) {[ac] you have applied to E *College/}
(3) *that- as far as I am concerned/ that's *that//
(4) {[ac] it's up to .. *them//} it's got nothing to do with me/ at *all//
28D: yes// still you have *a say*// you *have opinion*//
29L: {[hi] Mr D} stop *telling me/ {[hi] what I'm DOING/}
what I'm NOT doing// {[hi] I .. KNOW what I am doing//}
29D: (1) no/ I'm not *telling you*/ what *you do*/ or what you .. *not to do*/
(2) but *I know* .. the fact/ what you're/ .. and *what you did*/ what your *opinion will be*//

Several turns later:

30L: but nobody is going to/ *ask me for my opinion//
30D: ( ) *I think so* for the admission//
31L: (1) {[hi] Mr D} *stop telling me/ that I am .. a *liar// {[hi] I'm telling you the *truth//}
(2) oh *yes you are/ =you're-=
31D: =I'm not= telling you//
32L: ==*contradicting me/ I *know my situation *better than you/ I know-/
32D: ==you're a liar/ that's *your profession*-/
33L: ==I know my situation *better than you//
33D: ==your profession I/ .. I'm *not telling*/ I never *say liar*//
34L: (1) yes you .. DID/ you ( )- I SAID to you/ I have- it has *nothing to do with me.
(2) and *you .. said/ yes/ you.. can *do this/ you can do .. *that//
(3) I'm TELLING you/ I *can't/ and that's the *end of it// and I don't WANT to anyway//
34D: no that's *not lying*//
35L: I'm getting *tired of it//
35D: (1) people- people .. uh don't .. uh admit *the fact sometime*/
(2) and uh that's their- / part of *their job*/ you know//
36L: {[hi] that's very *rude of you//}
36D: if you feel that way you can *say it*/ .. that thing/
37L: (1) .. I don't know WHAT to say to you// you you- / you don't BELIEVE me/
(2) what I tell you/ you don't .. ACCEPT what I say to you as true/
(3) and I don't know *what to say to you anymore//
(4) I .. *told you/ what I've said I/ .. *told you//
37D: (1) uh I .. I accepted most of *your word*/
(2) and uh what what *I think*/ that's my *personal opinion*/
(3) *and that's why* I am saying that/
(4) you are *saying this for*/ and uh *that's your*- part of your job//
(5) and I'm not uh ( )/
38L: but I've TOLD you/ {[hi] it .. *isn't} part of my job/ part of my *job is to .. *teach//
38D: yes/
39L: I don't have *anything to do with *admission//
39D: (1) uh if *if I don't* get admission/ I am *not blaming* .. you for that//
(2) if uh:: *forget about that*/ I'm not saying/ *to you anything*/ and-
40L: *well// then what are you SAYING//
40D: I'm not saying *liar or anything*/ =and I=
41L: =well/= then what are you .. saying//
.. then// what do you WANT//

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