On the necessity of collusion in conversation*

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to grasp the social structure guiding naturally occurring talk among some children and their teacher. Although many (most strikingly Saussure) have called for language to be understood as a social institution, in the formulation of units and procedures of analysis, the institutional accomplishments of talk have been investigated largely as an afterthought. By focusing on collusion, this paper directs an analysis towards the identification of the efforts participants must make to preserve their conversation as an appropriate moment within the life of an institution. The consequences, from the point of view of Linguistics, of using this starting point is briefly outlined; and the particular brand of formal analysis emerging from artificial intelligence is criticized as being methodologically insensitive to the social structuring of language.

1. Introduction

Language . . . lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s.

M.M. Bakhtin, 1934-35

In 1928, V.N. Volokhov complained that "all linguistic categories, per se, are applicable only on the inside territory of an utterance" and are of no value "for defining a whole linguistic entity" (1973: 110). This paper attempts to

* This paper was prepared in anticipation of the late Erving Goffman liking it.

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begin with a whole linguistic entity as a unit of analysis by going beyond the utterance to the social scene in which it is embedded. Unlike some recent linguistic analyses which acknowledge that speech acts do not in themselves result in discourse coherence, but nonetheless are restricted to speech acts for a primary focus of investigation, we attempt to start with the properties of social activities as the essential guide to analysis.

We start with some assumptions that are, by now, well informed: participation in any social scene, especially a conversation, requires some minimal consensus on what is getting done in the scene; from the least significant (strangers passing) to the culturally most well formulated scenes (a wedding or a lecture), such a consensus represents an achievement, a cumulative product of the instructions people in the scene make available to each other; and, because no consensus ever unfolds simply by predetermined means, because social scenes are always precarious, always dependent on ongoing instructions, the achievement of a consensus requires collusion.

Collusion literally means a playing together (from the Latin colluder). Less literally, collusion refers to how members of any social order must constantly help each other to point a particular state of affairs, even when such a state would be in no way at hand without someone proceeding. Participation in social scenes requires that members play into each other's hands, pushing and pulling each other toward a strong sense of what is probable or possible, a sense of what can be hoped for and/or obscured. In such a world, the meaning of talk is very contained on the inside territory of an utterance); proposition and reference pass before the task of alignment, before the task of sequencing the conversation's participants into a widely span social structure. The necessity of collusion in conversation has wide-ranging implications not only for how people use their talk in conversation, but for how linguistics might profitably locate units for an analysis of conversation.

In this paper, we build a case for the importance of collusion in the organization of talk (Section 2) and offer a brief example of how collusion operates in a conversation (Section 3). From a transcript taken from a videotaped seven person reading lesson in grade school, we try to give a sense to the complex context in which people do to arrange for utterance interpretations consistent with, and not disruptive of, the situation the people are holding together for each other. By means of the example, we attempt to highlight the dimensions of a collusional stand on conversation by contrasting it to the now dominant propositional approach and the recently popular illocutionary approach to language behavior (Section 4). Each approach is discussed in terms of its definition of such fundamental notions as units of analysis, their function, the role of context in their organization, and the theoretical prize won by their description.

In a final section (5), as appropriate to a workshop on formal approaches to language behavior, we offer some evaluation of the cost of machine-modeled formal approaches for a complete appreciation of the subtleties and organizing power of talk. Essentially, our case is that if conversation is as much a product of collusion as we think, then formal approaches are likely to miss the excitement of it all, likely to lead us to analyses in which people simply make propositional sense with the tools of language, instead of pushing each other to the dizzying heights of identity enhancement and degradation or institutional advancement and suppression. We are particularly concerned that formal approaches can separate language behavior from its place in the social world. Just as formality is used in every day life to keep people at a distance from the various hierarchies that organize their experience, so might formality in language analysis keep us from attending to the hopes and lies we use to keep each other going.

2. The case for collusion

Discourses on humility give occasion for pride to the boastful, and for humility to the humble. Those on skepticism give occasion for believers to affirm, Few speak humbly of humility, not that he who is thus few of skepticism dishonorably. We are not falsehood, duplicity and contradiction, using even to ourselves concealment and guilt.

Blaise Pascal, 1670

We build on two common observations on language behavior to develop the claim that collusion is necessary for any conversation. The first observation is that it everyday language is irreducibly indefinite, that every utterance is possible in a wide range of knowledge about the world that would require a potentially endless expansion for precise application. The second observation, seemingly contrary to the first, is that talk so amazingly exact that participants can often talk their way to long term concerted activities and well shared ideas about what they are doing together (often far beyond any agreements immediately obvious in a transcript of their talk).

During the past decade, both observations have been secured with much
data. Under the banner of pragmatics, we have been shown how much a person must know about the world in order to understand even brief utterances, and, urged on by sociologists interested in conversational analysis, we have been shown an amazing variety of interactional mechanisms that conversation-listers have available for directing and specifying utterance interpretations.

The collision claim takes both observations seriously. It starts with an appreciation of how much unspecified, and likely unspecified, knowledge people must have in order to understand each other. At the same time, the collision claim recognizes the powers of conversation-listers to use local circumstances to shape their knowledge into mutually perceptible and reflexively consequent chunks. This marriage of indefiniteness and precision in utterance interpretation both requires and is made possible by conversation-listers entering a state of collision as to the nature of the world they are talking about, acting on, and helping to create. With a little help from each other, by defining what can (or must) be left vague or made precise, they can shape their talk to fit the contours of the world in which they are embedded, a world they can prolong in order to make possible further interpretations of their talk.

At its cleanest, conversational collision is well tuned to people’s finest hopes about what the world can be, this often despite the facts, despite a world that sometimes offers them little reason for harboring such hopes. Examples include ‘We really love each other’ or ‘We can all be smart’. Although making believe that such statements are true does not insure our being loved or looking smart, it is an essential first step.

At its dirtiest, people’s collision amounts to a well orchestrated lie that offers a world conversation-listers do not have to produce but can pretend to live by, a world everyone knows to be, at the same time, unrealizable, but momentarily useful as stated. Examples of collision as treachery can be cut from the same utterance cloth we used to illustrate collision aimed at hope. ‘We really love each other’ can still be said when both participants know the statement to be a cover for a relationship that only offers protection from the imagined world beyond the relationship; we have it from marriage counselors that under such conditions, demonstrations of love can further lock the participants off from the world and further limit the possibility of their loving each other. Similarly, ‘We can all be smart’ has as its most frequent occasion of utterance the classroom, the very place, as we shall see, in which people organize significant moments during which smartness, and its opposite, must be alternately displayed, recognized, hidden and held back, in which displays of smartness and stupidity must be choreographed into the relations people have with each other. Without resources for organizing conditions for making possible an experience of love or intelligence, their invocation points much too often to oppression than to hope.

By lies, we refer to a phenomenon far more prevalent than those in which speakers must first remind themselves what not to say on a future occasion, in which ‘one has to remember the truth as well as the lie in order to bring consistency to a recriminatory future’ that could disprove the lie (Lang, 1980: 535). We think this kind of conscious lying is rare, relative to the amount of treachery in the world at large. One way of understanding social structure, in fact, is that it offers differential protection from confrontations in which pure lies must be told.² Institutional authorities are afforded various shelters from unpredicted accountability. It is possible to live lies without having to tell them. Our institutions secure such lives for us at every turn. Starting with the generalized gender configurations which are available in a culture to specify institutions built around informational entanglements (Hannoun or Mehinaku courtship, Kpells secret societies, Mediterranean honor codes, or a therapeutic halfway house for drug offenders in America, etc.), we can find people choreographing each other’s behavior according to scores that remain at hoc and tacit and, which if made explicit, would render the behavior that seems to service them useless. We should never allow ourselves to forget the warning of Nietzsche: ‘to be truthful means using the customary metaphors – in moral terms: the obligation to lie according to a fixed convention, to lie herd-like in a style obligatory for all . . .’ (1873: 47).

The collision stand on conversation not only unites apparently disparate facts about language behavior (indefiniteness and precision), but holds out the promise of a linguistics that could be useful in understanding the social situations in which people do their talking. Although it is a century since Georg Simmel told us that secrecy is at the heart of any social order and since William James told us that hope is a human possibility only by splitting in the face of the odds, our social sciences have proceeded pretty much as if the conditions organizing our lives were well ordered, shared, available for common understanding, and easy to talk about.⁴ The social sciences have proceeded oblivious to the basic conditions of our lives together. In the language sciences, this has translated into a focus on the sentence as if truth value or illocutionary force could be found in the utterance.

Now it appears that to account for even the simplest conversations, we have to take seriously the moment to moment hopes and lies that connect
our utterances into coherent parts of the social order. Language analysis can lead us back to social structure. To the extent that collusian is essential to conversation, then its exploration cannot leave too far behind an account of the institutional constraints that have us colluding in the ways that we do. It will leave us in the long run wondering about the constraints we are working against, and that if we are making up so much of our lives together, why we achieve often such impoverished versions of what is possible.4

Our discussion of the necessity of collusian in conversation could proceed from first principles: All action, said John Dewey, 'is an invasion of the future, of the unknown. Conflict and uncertainty are ultimate truths' (1922: 12). This is no less true for speaking and listening actors than it is of acrobats and subway riders (whatever the differential in risky outcome). Without a tentative agreement about what the future is (no matter, for the moment, how fanciful or harmful it might be), how else could conversationalists achieve precise understandings from ambiguous materials without ever really saying what is going on? Clearly, conversationalists have to be working together, tripping over the same defeats, stumbling into the same understandings, and working to the same ends (if only to reach the silence at the conversation's end). How they do this work should represent an answer as to how their collusian is both made necessary and subsequently organized.

3. An example. From precarious to treacherous

All lies are collateral; all truths are collateral. The nature of the truth is always bound by the shape of the context . . . . Truth and falsity are matters of agreement . . . . The conditions of sending the signal which arranges for deception may rest in a variety of places within the deception system.

Ray L. Birdwhistell (in McDermott, 1980)

For an example of collusian in conversation, we can offer some talk between a teacher and her first grade students which was filmed and analyzed in some detail by McDermott (1976). It is a reading lesson, and much of the interaction is around the issue of taking turns to read. Unlike turns to talk in most conversational clusters, turns to read are not just managed in the pursuit of other conversational goals, but are often the focus of the group. it is in terms of turns to read that the group's talk is made directional, that it takes on meaning and carries social facts. The details of the taking-turns-to-read system are constantly put forward for noticing, analyzing, and interpreting, and their organization helps to curb the indefiniteness of talk, to make clear, for example, that 'Me' is a call for a turn to read or that 'Not me' is a request not to read while constituting simultaneously a display of an agreement to listen to another child reading. Collusion is visible in the ways in which the members instruct each other in the use of turn in organizing their interaction, and is essential to their production of group order.

The case for the necessity of collusian in conversation is perhaps most arresting in the talk of one child, Rosa, who is often treated as if she had said something different than a literal interpretation of her words would indicate. That is to say, her words, imprecise on their own, are made precise by those about her in ways not well predicted by their propositional content. Literalness aside, how her words are used by the group seems much better described by the conversationalists' situation together as a particular kind of reading group within a particular kind of classroom, school, and wider educational community.

Rosa constantly calls for a turn to read by shouting 'I could' or 'I could read it'. In addition, she complains when she is bypassed, 'G . . . Go around' or (a long time later and still without a turn) 'I wanna go around. But Rosa almost never gets a turn to read; she is understood to be not very good at reading, and her status as a turn-taking reader seems to be problematic enough to be commented on at various times during the children's half-hour at the reading table with the teacher. Careful observation indicates that Rosa seems to be doing much work to arrange not getting a turn. Everyone is on page 5, except Rosa who is on page 7 (as everyone can tell with a first grade illustrated reader). As the teacher begins to call on another child, Rosa asks for a turn, just a fraction of a second later; as the other children move up from their books to face their teacher and to call for a new turn, Rosa lowers her head into the book with her face turning away from the teacher. The plays are numerous in kind and fast in occurrence.

The kind of duplicious talk just described has not come very much to the attention of linguists. It has been unfortunately easy to put aside. Propositional analysis can chalk up this kind of talk to the abstractions of actual use in social scenes. However greater the evidence to the contrary, no matter how much conversationalists seem to rely on meaning one thing by saying another, traditional linguistic analysis remains intact by claiming that the literal meaning of an utterance must remain the point of departure for describing how speakers understand each other.4 The argument is that the
meaning of Rosa's calls for a turn to read are quite clear: how else could they have been transformed into something systematically different from a literal reading. In addition, such a transformation in use would have been most likely insinuated linguistically by some marked appeal to irony or subterfuge. However, transformed by the situation, for most linguists, propositions remain meaningful in their own terms.

Illocutionary analysts would take Rosa a little more seriously. They would try to extrapolate the actual conditions of the social actors so that their intentions could preclude without anyone having very literally put them into words. Again, the propositions would be understood on their own, albeit in a series. In either case, Rosa would be understood cognitively, as a strategist, who was manipulating the social scene and the people in it with her words. What would have organized her words or their systematic interpretation would have been left undiscovered. Neither Rosa, nor linguistics would have been well served.

The collateral approach to Rosa's talk forces us to take her situation much more seriously. We are not interested simply in speakers, or even speaker-hearer pairs and the ways they react to each other. Rather we are interested in ongoing social scenes into which people walk and talk their lives together. As Arthur Bentley said well, long ago:

Terminology has been poor in the social sciences, drawn as it has been from the language of everyday life -- from the vocabularies of the manipulation of one man by another. But not the point of view of one toward another is what we seek, rather the very processing itself of the ones-with-others (1956: 457).

We are not interested in Rosa the strategist, but Rosa the participant. Rosa's words, Bakhtin reminds us, are only half her's. They must be brought to completion by the group, and all their words together, if well enough studied, belong to the conversation which is, in turn, a moment in a far more extensive conversation that we might call American education (Varenece, 1983).

A collateral approach takes it that Rosa does not act on her own; that the very machinery used to transform, reframe or to put into a new key Rosa's talk are group produced; that every member of the group helps to instruct Rosa to say what she says in favor of what she did not say, which, in fact, if she did say would break the conditions for the group being together in an order that they can recognize, use, and perpetuate.

In addition, the collateral stand adopts the understanding that the efforts members make to reach a consensus (that we are all learning how to read) while allowing, ignoring and hiding important exceptions (namely, that some of us are here only for the purpose of not getting caught out not knowing how to read) is a direct product of the institutional conditions under which the teacher and children are asked to come to school. Their production and interpretation of talk must be understood as a product of their collusion in response to a complex institutional setting that requires that they talk as if they could all learn, while, in fact, they arrange much of their day trying to catch each other out not learning (Hood, McDermott and Cole, 1980). In taking up utterances that seem to mean the opposite of what, in isolation, they would appear to say, we have moved from collusion as a necessary solution to the precariousness of everyday life situations, to collusion as a defensive tactic against the treachery of everyday life. There are reasons even to ourselves concealment of guilt'. When further pressed, there are reasons for lying even to others, although we must remember, before hunting down liars, that the 'conditions of sending the signal which arranges for deception may rest in a variety of places within the deception system'.

It is not easy to describe an instance of collateral conversation. One effort, particularly directed towards linguists, is available in a recent paper by Dore and McDermott (1982). The dedicated reader can examine that data analysis in the light of the more radical arguments of the present account. The argument of Dore and McDermott's paper is that a particular 'I could read it' by Rosa, by virtue of how it is said and its timing, is seemingly accepted as such by everyone in the group while they simultaneously act as if she had said that she could not read it and that a particular someone else had been given the turn to read. Rosa's claim for a turn appears at a time when the group is somewhat at bay for a clear definition as to what they are doing together. By interpreting Rosa's utterance as something different from what it seemingly proposed, an interpretation to which Rosa contributed, the members of the group used Rosa's call for a turn to establish both a turn and a reader (other than Rosa) for the turn. The point is that everyone used the primary practice of the scene, namely, the constant evaluation of every reader's skill and the avoidance of such evaluation by different members at various times, to understand Rosa's call for a turn as a suggestion that she be bypassed. The very conditions that allowed for the methods Rosa used to instigate her subterfuge were not only well recognized by the group, but were maintained and supported by every member's involvement with evaluation. The present paper offers a different fragment of talk from Rosa's reading.
group (Table 1). The scene opens with the teacher calling on Child 4 (numbered in order around the table). Child 1 and Child 2 have read page 4 to the group. Rose is Child 3. As the teacher and the children raise their heads as Child 2 finishes page 4, the teacher turns her head towards Rose, who has moved her head further down into the book and right, away from the teacher’s advancing gaze. The teacher continues turning her head left, past Rose, until she reaches Child 4. She calls on him, ‘Alright. Let’s see you do it’. He moans a complaint, ‘Unnn’. Rose begins to suggest that they take turns in order: ‘O... Go around’. She is supported almost immediately by Child 4, screaming, ‘What about Rose... Sh... She doesn’t get a turn’. Child 5 begins to chide Rose, ‘You don’t get a...’ while Child 2 also calls for a more rigorous linear order, ‘Yeh. Let’s go around’. The teacher then, after a non-vocalized false start and a nervous glance away, addresses Child 4 very softly, ‘Jimmy. You seem very unhappy. Perhaps you should go back to your seat’. Simultaneously with the teacher’s attribution of Jimmy’s feelings, Rose begins to lay out the order of the going around that she has called for; in none of the two or three versions she suggests is there any discernible, going-around order. After Rose has her say, the teacher calls on Child 6, ‘Alright, Fred. Can you read page 4?’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Alright. Let’s see you do it.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child 4</td>
<td>Unnn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>G... go around</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 4</td>
<td>What about Rose (screaming) Sh... she doesn’t get a turn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 5</td>
<td>(to Rose) You don’t get a...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 2</td>
<td>Yeh. Let’s go around</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Jimmy (very softly). You seem very unhappy. Perhaps you should go back to your seat. Back to Fred, then back to me. No. Back to Fred, back to Anna, and back to Fred and Maria and back to me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Alright, Fred. Can you read page 4?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Transcript of procedural positioning. "Getting a Turn".*

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*Some are more interesting than others in supplying insight to life in classrooms, and some are used more than others at various subsequent moments by group members. We should not expect Rose to have a uniform stand service by her words. In the complex role that teaching-learning scenes play in the lives of young children, could we expect Rose to be free of all the tensions of her community around the issues of relative skill, smartness, competitiveness and the like?

As we flee from utterance complexity to a consideration of social context for some key to what Rose might be talking about, we are offered some relief by the fact that Rose’s utterance does not stand alone. The question of meaning must be rephrased: What instructions are available in the scene for the participants to organize an interpretation of Rose’s utterance? Part of the instructions available to the participants in the scene is, of course, Rose’s utterance; her talk reflexively organizes its own context and directs participants by virtue of its timing and other performance details, to use the conditions of the scene for possible interpretations of her talk. Our question concerns what Rose’s utterance has to work with in arranging a hearing for itself.

First of all, the group is organized posturally into a procedural focus or positioning; well suited for activities such as getting a turn to read (for criteria establishing postural-kinetic events and their importance to the structure of interaction, see McDermott, Gospodinoff and Aron (1978) and Schellen (1973)). That they are at a getting-turn-to-read relevant moment is everywhere evident in their body alignments and attentional structure. Second, that such moments are delicate can be seen in the efforts members make to preserve them; e.g. they all attend carefully to the beginning and endings and hold each other accountable for any disruptions of the apparent order. Third, within any positioning, alternative formulations of what might be going on between the participants are often attempted and usually abandoned; e.g. while most are still calling for a turn-to-read, someone might start reading. Fourth, at the same time as working hard keeping a focus organized and rejecting rival formulations, members of the group constantly make available for use the dimensions along which they can understand each other; e.g. a child who does not follow the pattern of a procedural positioning may be considered a management problem, whereas a child who does not follow a pattern in a pedagogical positioning may be understood as a learning problem. Fifth, there appears to be a strong preference for how and when different dimensions can be applied; e.g. the smart-dumb continuum is constantly applied in classrooms, and much instructional delicacy must be organized to
apply the continuum only in cases when someone can be called smart. The application of the continuum to instances of "dumb" behavior does occur, but participants usually work hard to have it not noticed. Sixth, a getting-a-turn positioning does not usually attract the application of a smart-dumb contrast set, and it is accordingly used as a moment safe from intelligence evaluations. By virtue of its comparative safety, it is used often as a place in which the participants prepare for some next intelligence display, including preparation for who might be subject to an upcoming evaluation. It is therefore a perfect umbrella under which to perform covert, unspoken evaluations that make possible more public contests in the next moment.

With all this going on (and the reader for the purposes of this paper has only to ignore that such events could be at work; it would take a volume to complete a description of the behavioral background), Rosa's utterance enters the world pregnant. As Bakhtin noted well:

Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated - overpopulated - with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accounts, is a difficult and complicated process (1934-35: 294).

The utterance is shaped to fit its occasion. The conditions that organize its production and interpretation are distributed throughout the system.

To the extent that "Go around" represents a hope, the possibility (no matter how improbably at the moment) that Rosa learning to read well enough to perform, must be organized by all the participants. To the extent that it represents an institutionalized lie, a delicate way to avoid a confrontation with a smart-dumb contrast set, that too has to be organized across persons. Indeed, the lie has to be told against the background that everyone is still hoping, or at least making believe they are hoping, that Rosa can learn to read.

Instead of asking whether Rosa is intending to get a turn, an unwarranted question anyway, if we asked about the social constraints to which Rosa's remark might be an appropriate and constitutive reaction, then we have to ask how the participants are playing into each other's hands (that is, more literally, colluding) to organize the world Rosa gets systematically instructed to avoid. If we could ask more questions about what issues every institution has us avoiding, we would have not only a better account of social structure, but a better account of the language tools people use to build social structure.

4. Three ways of appreciating language

The salient aspect of the social fact is meaning; the central manifestation of meaning is pragmatic and meta-pragmatic speech; and the most obvious feature of pragmatic speech is reference. We are now beginning to see the error in trying to investigate the salient by projection from the obvious.

Michael Silverstein, 1981

There are a number of dimensions along which to rank different approaches to language behavior. Silverstein (1979) goes to particular pains to point out what cannot be accomplished with traditional analyses that focus on reference, and what might be accomplished if we were to concentrate more immediately on the social facts produced with talk. This paper proceeds in that spirit. By starting with the collision required of conventionalism, the social facts, of which the people are a part, move to the center of analysis, and their language can be understood for what it does within the social order. This approach gives us a different way of appreciating language behavior. It also requires a shift in some of the tools we have used to do language analysis.

In the following chart (Table 2), we offer a simple scheme for contrasting a collisional approach to appreciating what people do with their talk with the more traditional propositional and illocutionary approaches that dominate contemporary linguistics. At its best, the chart should offer a map of what each of the approaches is trying to accomplish and its underlying conceptual assumptions.

The propositional approach focuses on the sentence for a unit of analysis, understands sentences in terms of their referential potential, and asks questions about their clarity and possible truth value. Propositional analyses produce statements of the type, Sentence X can mean a, b, or c. The variation in meanings available in the sentence is understood as contained within the sentence. Context is irrelevant and invoked only in the face of the abominations of actual use; it has no systematic bearing on utterance interpretation. Meaning is formed by the capital and the period without any reference to how, as Frake (1980) reminds us, plying frames can be dangerous or in any other way consequential for speakers.

An important, if partial, advance is made in the linguistic sciences when analysts start to look at the consequences of talk, at the effects speakers have one upon another. For a unit of analysis, speech act theorists stick closely to the sentence although they focus on what the sentence is doing in conjunc-
tion with other sentences. The utterance exchange is the purported unit of analysis, although the descriptions are deemed complete with the attribution of intentions. Talk is understood as being about the expression of intentions, and variations in utterance interpretation are chalked up to the complexities of organizing an identity in social situations; thus, hedging and mitigating can rule the discourse. The analytic product gives an appearance of being more complete than propositional analyses.

Dimensions of context are considered crucial to the description of the illocutionary force of speech acts. However, the use of context in the analysis is nonetheless an afterthought. There is still a reliance on a soup-in-the-bowl approach to context. According to this model, the soup has a life of its own; it is the substance which is placed in a bowl and accordingly shaped. In speech act analysis, propositional meaning is the soup (an alphabet soup, most likely, good for monologue, reference, and description) and the social statuses and roles of the speaker-hearer are the contexts that organize the rewrite rules allowing the referential power of talk to be obscured enough to meet the demands of the social situation. Reference remains primary in the analysis, and the conditions of context are piled against what anyone could recognize as the canonical interpretation.

The problem with the soup-in-the-bowl approach is that it allows the assumption that the soup exists independent of the bowl, that the meaning of an utterance remains, if only for a moment, independent of conditions that organize its production and interpretation, that meaning exists 'on the inside territory of an utterance'. If, however, soup and bowl, behavior and its contexts, utterance and the hierarchy of scenes it serves, are all mutually constituted, then the utterance cannot stand alone; it cannot make meaning on its own any more than a fiber can make a rope, or a thread a fabric. An utterance can only help to piece meanings together, and in so doing becomes itself as the essential unit of analysis. Along with many other behavior sequences, an utterance becomes consequential in social facts, and it is to these facts we must turn for instructions on how to appreciate language as a social tool.

The collision approach develops from a more reticular sense of context. It rejects the traditional notion of intention-to-mean as directly homing in on its object, but instead recognizes that the pathway of meaning by talk is by no means simple and assured. The behavioral stuff to which an utterance can make connections, and the connections the utterance may make possible, are primary in the analysis. The irreducible absence of strict borders between persons and others, between acts and other acts, produces interactional

Table 2. The way of organizing language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal of analysis</th>
<th>Analytical accomplishment</th>
<th>Role of context</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Propositional</td>
<td>speaker's propositional</td>
<td>participant's</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>analysis</td>
<td>inferences</td>
<td>experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic</td>
<td>implicatured</td>
<td>experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>analysis</td>
<td>information</td>
<td>experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative</td>
<td>scene and social</td>
<td>social situation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
puzzles that require constant alignment and collusion from participants. As we saw in some moments in Rosa's life, talk is primarily about alignments with others — alignments that run a moral order gamut from institutional manipulation to social transformation for the good of all, talk that runs the moral order gamut from hiding and lying to a will to believe and consciousness-raising. An appreciation of talk as collisional raises the most basic human issues for our consideration. It is demeaning to the richness of talk and its talkers to limit its description to anything less than a consideration of the most fundamental issues facing people in social life.8

5. A gut reaction to formal analysis of discourse

The algorithm, the project of a universal language, is a revolt against language in its existing state and a refusal to depend upon the confusions of everyday language. The algorithm is an attempt to construct language according to the standards of truth, to redefine it to match the divine mind, and to return to the very origin of the history of speech or, rather, to tear speech out of history.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 1969

All kinds of formality make us nervous. Neither of the authors of this paper takes easily to religious rituals, neither of us likes high school graduation proms, and both of us are attending this symposium to say that formal approaches to discourse analysis leave out the most important reasons for studying language behavior. By formal approaches, we refer to the common practice of limiting our understanding of each other's behavior to what can be articulated with specifiable and codifiable units of analysis ideally held together by an exact calculus for relating the units to each other.9 We must worry about both the identity of the units and the logic of the calculus. For machine-based approaches to language behavior, the units are propositions and the logical glue that holds them together is constructed from grammatical relations and supposed speaker-hearer intentions.

Although we are attracted by the strong rhetoric of social order and responsibility encouraged by formality in the social world and the even stronger rhetoric of replicability and generalizability adopted by devotees of formal behavioral analysis, our enthusiasm is constantly damped by our experiences with both social situations and social sciences. Social situations and schools of behavior analysis have this in common: when their participants develop formal ways of proceeding, they usually identify working entities (social roles and grammars) in ways not consistent with the complexity of the phenomenon before them (Franke, 1984). It is not just that these ways of proceeding can lead to inadequate analysis. There is the far worse sin of not allowing methods, data, and conclusions enough mutual tuning to allow for corrective devices to emerge; they cannot offer insights beyond the coding capacities of their predetermined categories of analysis, and there is reason to believe that prior to detailed contextual analyses our categories can render us systematically inarticulate about the dimensions that organize the meaning of our own utterances (Silverstein, 1981). In social science, to cite Wittgenstein (1958), 'problems and method pass one another by'. In everyday social situations, to cite folk wisdom, 'you get what you are looking for, even if you don't know what it is'.

With formal approaches, persons and events (in social situations) and utterances and utterances (in linguistic analysis) are dissected into types, and their functions are frozen in predetermined grids before their full potentials are explored. Worse, once units are identified, participants (prom-goers and linguists) have a strong inclination to hold onto them. Formally defined units offer the appearance of clarity, and they can seem elegantly well ordered. But once they are attended to as a status quo, and accorded the power of a guide to the interpretation of events, there is rarely a way for new (or hidden) information about the conditions of the system to emerge from the flow of behavior. Instead, the world is asked to bend to meet the simplifying demands of formalism. Long after the prom is reduced to spit balls and drums, the queen is still crowned and long remembered as if this event adequately glosses the evening for all its participants. Long after the hierarchy that insists that their words carry specific meanings well carved to the shape of institutional ends, utterances are still coded and guesses at speaker intentions are still assumed to offer adequate descriptions of the organization of talk. Too much can be distorted.

Formal approaches have their price. With proms, they leave out those not invited, those who could not get a date, and, in the long run, those who attended but were not crowned; they leave out the many voices that make up the background for the formally noticeable persons and events, a background which is probably more essential to all the participants (including, hopefully, the queen) than the formal events. With discourse, formal approaches leave out what can be said only between the lines and what cannot be said at all; they leave out the clues as to how to ask the questions that can get truthful
answers, the questions that would reveal the issues and constraints around which the conversationists are organizing their collusion; they leave out the circumstances that organize people not to say in so many words what everyone must recognize as well said in unquotable, uncodifiable ways; they distort social structure, and they offer us no tools for organizing social change.

Notes


2. Carkhuff (1963) has advanced the same point with his work on "trust" as a condition of stable concerted activity. Various other terms glossing the same phenomenon of personal and social identity and source of context, frame, key, even with varying degrees of political but not with the same recognition. Carkhfuff would appreciate, a sense of institutionalization and even a theory that we believe essential (institutionalization as the arrangement of persons and commodities that have we necessarily treating reciprocally in the ways to socialize as a measure of how far we will draw ourselves and others to believe in a world not well connected to our experiences).

3. As Harvey Sacks (1972) has noted, there are numerous statements accruing varying social behavior such as conversation. One cannot collude alone; it takes at least three persons (two to collude and one to be aware of the collusion).

4. At Harvey Sacks (1972) has noted, there are numerous statements accruing varying social behavior such as conversation. One cannot collude alone; it takes at least three persons (two to collude and one to be aware of the collusion).

5. From the standpoint of the social sciences usually inclusively account of how to be lied above. Kimpano has offered a lovely account of a Men-Fried contrast on the meaning of the world that organizes collusion: It is intriguing to imagine Froud's reaction if one of his patients-a neurotic, but a political lucid one - in reply to the question which according to Froud was the best means of analyzing the patient: "What would you consider the most unlikely thing in the world is that situation? What do you think was the ferociously thing in the world from your mind at the time?" - had answered: "I considered the most unlikely thing in the world would be to see a capitalist renounce his own power even use of any force on the part of the workers he exploits." At this point, there would surely have been an exchange of roles: Froud would himself have accommodated to the behavior typical of a "patient", he would have lost his temper or changed the subject - in short, have revealed "resistance" so strong that he would not even have been aware of their existence" (1976: 59).

6. Oursen Birnold (1967) has pointed out that the best of our talk, metaphor and poetry, thawers on saying one thing to mean another; the more one missing lives as a modification of another, the richer the metaphor. Linguists have managed to avoid a careful look at how such talk is used in social life by giving great away to the grammatical and referential workings of language. Nietzsche has bemoaned how deep this trend: "I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar" (1889: 34).

7. Biasness is essential text: "It is important to see the particular stature or action as part of the ecological subsystem called context not as a product or effect of what remains of the context after the piece which we have to comment has been cut out from it" (1972: 338). Birnold adds in which people together ignore the fact that the context of what a context is: "I like to think of it as a rope. The fibers that make up the rope are discontinuous; when you twist them together, you make the thread continuous . . . The thread has no fibers in it, but, if you break up the thread, you can find the fibers again. So that, even though it may look in a thread as though each of those particles are discontinuous, that isn't the case. That's essentially the descriptive model" (Maddison, 1980: 4, 14).

8. Our interest in collusion as essential to the most ordinary level of talk is greatly enhanced by the fact that it is extremely possibled in many of the commonly occurring phenomena in the symptoms that are so tightly intertwined with audience response that the chain of deception seems to have no beginning or end. As Henry Ey has stated: "Honesty is one without at one's instants with an eye of an accomplice, too shrewed to be taken in, that one begins to wonder . . . if the hysteric before declaring we has declined himself as well" (1982: 121). The same question can be put to the doctor and his interest.

9. In sociology, there are many other meanings of the word formal to which the gap reaction does not apply.