

Analysing Interactions in Childhood: Insights from Conversation Analysis

Approaches to "Context" within Conversation Analysis

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This paper examines the use of "context" as both a participant's and an analyst's resource with conversation analytic (CA) research. The discussion focuses on the production and definition of context within two branches of CA, "traditional CA" and "institutional CA". The discussion argues against a single, monolithic understanding of "context" as the term is often used within the CA literature, instead highlighting the various ways that the term is used and understood by analysts working across the different branches of CA. The paper ultimately calls for further reflexive discussions of analytic practice among analysts, similar to those seen in other areas of sociocultural linguistic research.

1. Introduction

The concept of *context* has been a critical one within sociocultural linguistics. The varied approaches to the study of language and social interaction – linguistic, anthropological, sociological, and otherwise – each entail the particulars for how the analyst defines the context in which language is produced. Goodwin and Duranti (1992) note the import of the term within the field of pragmatics (citing Morris 1938; Carnap 1942; Bar-Hillel 1954; Gazdar 1979; Ochs 1979; Levinson 1983; and Leech 1983), anthropological and ethnographic studies of language use (citing Malinowski 1923, 1934; Jakobson 1960; Gumperz and Hymes 1972; Hymes 1972, 1974; and Bauman and Sherzer 1974), and quantitative and variationist sociolinguistics (citing Labov 1966, 1972a, and 1972b).¹ To this list we can add a number of frameworks for doing socially-oriented discourse analysis, including conversation analysis (CA), critical discourse analysis (CDA), and discursive psychology (DP).

These last three frameworks served as the focus for a critical dialogue on the nature of context in socially-oriented discourse analysis (Billig 1999a, 1999b; Schegloff 1997, 1998, 1999a, 1999b; Wetherell 1998). As the papers by Billig, Schegloff, and Wetherell exemplify, the conversation analytic understanding of context is often framed as contentious (and a "methodological limitation") outside of scholarship in the CA tradition. Such criticisms have emerged within pragmatics (e.g. Searle 1986), linguistic anthropology (e.g. Blommaert 2001, 2006; Briggs 1997; Bucholtz 2003), sociology (e.g. Cicourel 1981; Lynch 1985),

¹ Ervin-Tripp (1996) further unpacks the varied approaches to "context" seen in sociolinguistics.

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