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Richard Buttny, Syracuse University

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Putting Prior Talk Into Context: Reported Speech and the Reporting Context

Richard Buttyn
Department of Speech Communication
Syracuse University

Within the disciplines interested in language and social interaction, there are multiple approaches to the notion of context (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992). Although there is no unanimity on how to treat context, there is wide agreement that we need to attend to it. It is by now axiomatic: If context is ignored, then we cannot adequately interpret the text. In this article, I offer some general ruminations on context before turning to the specific problem of reported speech and context.

THE IDEA OF CONTEXT

Perhaps the very vocabulary we use to raise these issues, "text" and "context," misleads us. The literary emphasis of the notion of "text," as opposed to "talk," or "conversation," or "talk-in-interaction" has been pointed out (Schegloff, 1997). A related criticism could be made of the term context. Taken literally, context surrounds the text; it is that in which the text takes place. Thought of as surrounding the text, context conjures up spatial imagery—context as a container, context as the sociophysical

Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Richard Buttyn, Department of Speech Communication, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244. E-mail: rbuttny@syr.edu
setting, the specialized institution, the foreign culture. If text encompasses the words spoken during an exchange, then context involves the remaining aspects of the social interaction. If text is the microlevel of social interaction, context includes macrolevel dimensions in which to situate the text, such as historical background, the participants' power or economic position. Operationally, the text is that which can be written up in a transcript whereas the context is the background information supplied parenthetically at the beginning—the cast of characters, the social or physical setting, the participants' relationship, and so on.

Few, if any, theorists subscribe to the view of context as container, though in research practice it is not uncommonly treated in this way. A more reflective view takes context as existing both independently of the text and as (re)created in and through the text. On this dual-aspect conception, context is both external and internal to the talk, both exogenous and endogenous to communicative interaction (Heritage, 1984); context is simultaneously brought along and brought about through the talk (Auer, 1992).

A sensible way to begin is to get to know as much as you can about the context. This seemingly innocuous claim raises the problem of how do we know that this background knowledge about the context is relevant for the participants here and now (Schegloff, 1991). Given the indefinitely vast amount of contextual information, as analysts we need some way to show that our background knowledge of the context is relevant for the participants. To tell that contextual features are relevant we need to see that participants orient to them in some way. If participants are orienting to the context, then context may be available in the text.

An approach to showing how participants orient to context comes from conversation analysis, particularly studies focusing on institutional or specialized settings, for example, the courtroom, medical settings, broadcast news interviews, and the like (Drew & Heritage, 1992a; Drew & Sorjonen, 1997). The analytical goal is to show how participants' social interaction reflects and constitutes their situated context. In such contexts participants enact and display institutional identities as seen in their talk. Judge–counsel, physician–patient, interviewer–interviewee exhibit characteristic ways of speaking that display these identities. These characteristic ways of speaking may include specialized forms of turn-taking, word choice, drawing inferences, and the like. The analyst searches the texts for the identifying details that mark that talk as a particular context. So, contexts get talked into being through participants' particular ways of speaking and orienting to each other.
We need to take context as that which can be empirically investigated rather than as some factor that a priori is assumed to be at work. The proposition that gender or race is always relevant as a context to a conversation is the kind of claim being cautioned against. Although these features may indeed be relevant, we need to show in what ways they are relevant through persons' orientations, that is, their talk, noticeable silence, or other nonverbal displays. In a recent study on "talking race" (Buttny, 1997) I found, not surprisingly, that race was relevant in discursive constructions about race but did not make a difference in describing the conversational practice of reporting speech.

In some of my prior work I have concentrated on the context of couple therapy (Buttny, 1990; Buttny & Cohen, 1991; Buttny & Jensen, 1995; Buttny, 1996). Part of this project has been to specify characteristic ways that participants orient to and display the interaction as therapy. In orienting to the interaction as therapy, participants are partaking in varied speech acts, positionings, and footings that constitute the therapeutic context. However, these conversational practices, although characteristic of therapy, are not unique to therapy—they can be found in other contexts as well. As Heritage (1984) pointed out, the third turn of a question-answer-evaluation sequence is seen in a variety of institutional settings as a slot for the institutional representative to evaluate the client's prior answer. Also, everyday talk can take on a therapy-like character. Ordinary conversation can exhibit ways of speaking also found in therapy, such as cautiousness, qualifying statements, expressing uncertainty, citing publicly available facts, or discussing possibilities (Perakyla & Silverman, 1991; Bergmann, 1992; Drew & Heritage, 1992b; Gaik, 1992). Granted, therapeutic discourse is not so unique or distinctive that it cannot be found in other contexts. Nonetheless the general claim still holds—these ways of speaking are characteristic of the practice of therapy. If we were to view a videotape or read the transcript without knowing what it was, I submit that we would be able to readily identify the context by the participants' discourse. It is through certain ways of speaking and conversational practices that persons display and orient to their situated identities and local knowledge of context.

An endogenous sense of context seems to make a stronger case than an exogenous context (cf. Mandelbaum, 1990/91). My own approach follows a kind of methodological dictum: If the analyst can show how participants orient to context as situated communicative practices identified through characteristic speech patterns, interactional sequences, or inference making, then do so.
THE CONVERSATIONAL PRACTICE OF PUTTING PRIOR TALK INTO CONTEXT

Ongoing personal relationships may be seen as lived through a series of conversations (Tannen, 1990). A prior bit of a conversation can serve as a context for what is happening now. To reference one’s own or another’s prior words, the current speaker needs to place such discourse in a context. In the remainder of this article, I examine how previous talk is used and put into context in a present conversation—the practice of reported speech.

Reported speech may be simply characterized as quoting another person’s, or one’s own, prior words. This may take the form of direct quotation (purportedly quoting the actual words of the original speaker) or indirect quotation (a summary of what was said in the words of the teller) (Holt, 1996). Reported speech can be characterized as a “double-voiced discourse” reflecting both the original speaker and the present speaker (Bakhtin, 1981)—“double voiced” in that the present speaker appropriates the quoted discourse for his or her own purposes in the present context. This “double-voiced” character of reported speech presents some intriguing problems for the study of context:

Between the reported speech and the reporting context [italics added], dynamic relations of high complexity and tension are in force. A failure to take these into account makes it impossible to understand any form of reported speech. (Volosinov, 1971, p. 153)

Volosinov’s point here is that the “original” speech gets altered by being uttered by the reporting speaker in the reporting context. So reported speech, no matter how accurate its reproduction of the original text, cannot convey the same meaning as its use in its original context (Tannen, 1989).

To develop Volosinov’s point, three senses of context may be distinguished: (a) the original words uttered in context, what might be called “the original context”; (b) the context offered by the reporting speaker to situate the reported speech, “the context of the storyworld”; and (c) the present interactional context of the reporting speaker conversing with interlocutor(s), “the reporting context.”

Reported speech commonly, though not exclusively, occurs in narratives. Many of our actions about which we tell stories are things done with words, so what I, or another, has said often becomes a resource we
draw on in narratives. Reported speech seems reserved for capturing the most crucial or interesting parts of the narrative. This may be because reported speech, especially direct quotes, comes closest to presenting what was said, and thereby, done. The reported speech conveys the "what was said," but some context for the reported speech is necessary to indicate "what actions were done" along with their social significance.

In some approaches to narrative, context is taken in a commonsensical way as providing the background information for the story, an orientation to the time and place and characters involved (Labov & Waletzky, 1968). This background information, as it were, provides a context to understand the subsequent actions and events.

But context needs to be seen as involving more than mere background information in telling a narrative. Context is continually oriented to by participants. As Sacks noted in discussing reported talk in narratives:

There are some reasons why these kinds of context information designed for the listener are used, and that is, to keep them attentive to how to read what they’re being told. And there is reason for those things to be put directly before or after [italics added]. (Sacks, 1992, p. 274)

So context works for recipient design and contextual framing purposes, for telling recipients “how to read what they’re being told.”

This contextual framing activity (or telling recipients “how to read what they’re being told”) is especially apparent in reporting speech. I first noticed this in a study of racial discourse; participants would quote their own or others’ voices and simultaneously evaluate them—overwhelmingly to criticize out-group members (Buttny, 1997). The evaluative component serves as a contextual frame for how to take the reported speech. To put this another way, context involves utterances designed to tell recipients how to hear the reported speech.

To further investigate how speakers contextually frame reported speech, we need to examine some particular cases. The following transcript is taken from an initial couple therapy session. I want to draw attention to Larry’s narrative (beginning at line 055) and reported speech (lines 066–068, 078–079) and the various layers of context.

((The three participants are the therapist, T, Larry, L, and Jenny, J))

001 T: Ah you mentioning (0.6) [That he is, (0.6) afr^acid =
002 J:  Uh huh
T: = of (1.5) ah: is that a: (. ) feeling that fits:
(1.3) your own: (0.5) perception? that when you don't
share your feelings it’s because you are afraid? >you
feel < (1.0) f: :rightened?
L: No.:
T: No (. ) so that's a eh: (0.7) I- if I would be you:
I would ah: jump: on:. that and I would object to
the statement (1.1) that you are afraid >not that you
don’t express feelings (1.1) because I believe that
you two agree with that< (. ) but the question of ah
expressing (. ) of- of being afraid (1.1) is something
that I- makes me feel a bit uncomfortable. =
L: = Yeah I- I don't agree with that< (4.5) =
T: [You don't?]
L: = I- it’s not fear (0.6) of expressing my feelings,
> I mean I get < (0.8) I (0.9) at other situations I get
angry and show my anger easily . ah (0.8) uhm I get
and I- I think show: w my happiness easily (0.8)
I'm not afraid to show emotion I- -I
J: [But >you< you
are ^with me:. I think^ (0.4) you don’t do it as much
with ^me: as you do it with other people? . hh
(4.3)
L: Right. so it’s not fear:. it might ^be lack of trust
(1.1) "but it’s not fear." "
T: Um hum (.) hhh hah lack of trust means ah:: (0.9) the
the ways in: which: (0.5) you ah:: (2.4) ah:: worry
(0.8) she may be handling those feelings:
L: Yes: (. ) very good
J: [Uh huh >uh huh<=
((skip 10 lines of joking))
T: Uhmm (3.3) >where were we?<
J: Uhmm feelings sharing (shared feelings) FEAR
L: [We were talking about that-
T: Oh about that ( )
L: Ah that I- (0.4) maybe: the thing that I mistrust is
is how she's going to handle my (feelings)
T: Oh ( ) yeah
L: Would: you: mind describing that a bit?
052 L: Uh

053 T: What is your experience of her handling your feelings?

055 L: pt Well: in the ah:: (0.4) in the first number of years of our (. ) relationship (0.9) I would ah (0.9) we were in a stage: I think that was fairly different >we were younger< and ah (0.8) uhm I think she was a different person and I was a different person in the sense that ah (0.8) uhm our values: were different and (. ) our internal (1.4) whatever drives us I think was slightly different (0.5) things have happened to us since then (0.7) that have changed ah just like in life >things happen to everyone< .hhh but in those years: ah (0.6) I would express a lot of emotion "you know" ^why are you going out with those other men why don't you: stay with me an' (0.6) ah why don't you move up to Portland at the time she was in the state of Maryland (0.6) for a (0.9) in college and (. ) sh- she wouldn't move up (0.5) at that time (0.5) uhm she kept the boyfriend (an-) a number of boyfriends and a (0.8) and so there was this triangle most of those early years: and I MEAN THERE WERE A LOT OF EMOTION THAT I - I ( ) I would wait by the phone (0.6) for her to call (0.4) and she would always be late or not call at all, (1.3) uhm >things like that< (0.4) and I and I would tell her >you know< how distressed: I was "ya know" why didn't ya call? you know I was waiting by the- in the ah (. ) I'd show all my emotions .hhh and AT THAT TIME (0.9) ah I don't- you know they weren't handled (0.7) in a way that ah: made me the happiest >"let's put it that way"< .h-hhhhh but uhm (1.7) pt but I think that she had =

084 T: Uh hum

085 L: her own problems at that time=I had my problems dealing with ah:: that kind of situation (0.5) "ya know" I think I would handle that kind of sit- that particular situation differently n"ow: and I wouldn't be so unhappy (0.4) as I was then:: (0.7) uhm (1.7) SO I guess what I'm saying is that you can't just look
at what happened last week why:: (1.5) why do I fear
or mis-why don’t
T: >Hh well< ah (1.6) you: can’t but let me try
just the same . . .

Notice that when the therapist asks Larry to describe his feelings or experience (lines 051–054), he tells a story. Sarbin (1989) has noted that people commonly use narratives to account for their emotions. The story—the characters, circumstances, and what occurred—puts the narrator’s feelings into context by making those feelings and emotions understandable, as a response to certain contingencies. Affect, feelings, and emotions are discursive objects, not merely raw sensations. As such, they need to be situated in a nexus of social relations and actions to be presented as intelligible and justifiable. So Larry’s narrative of his girlfriend having lived out of state to go to college, of having another boyfriend(s), and not telephoning are the sorts of circumstances that can make a person emotional and even mistrustful. These circumstances can make one respond emotionally as seen through Larry’s affect display and reported speech. When we look at affect as a discursive construction, then narrative provides a context for understanding affect.

Turning to look at this narrative more closely, Larry begins by offering a background or orientation to their prior relational state and “stage” they were in at that time. Larry then avows his general disposition to be expressive of his emotions (lines 064–066), which contextually frames his reported speech (lines 066–068) as instances of this expressiveness. Returning to Volosinov’s point, we can see how the reported speech gets structured by the reporting context, by how the reporting speaker wants recipients to take the reported speech. Without the immediately prior contextualizing statement, “I would express a: lot of emotion,” it seems doubtful that listeners would hear the reported speech of lines 066–068 in just that way.

Larry’s reported speech here is formed grammatically as a series of three why-questions: “Why are you going out with those other men why don’t you: stay with me an’ (0.6) ah why don’t you move up to Portland” (lines 066–068). In the context of the storyworld these questions, addressed to Jenny, can be heard in various ways as a blaming, a request, or a plea. These reported why-questions implicate some prior troublesome actions done by Jenny, for instance, that for which she is blamed. Also, these reported why-questions sequentially implicate responses from Jenny
that Larry supplies in continuing with the narrative: “she wouldn’t move up” (line 070) and “she kept the boyfriend (an-) a number of boyfriends” (line 071).

For the reporting context—that is, the present conversation—not only is the frame of expressing emotion relevant but also the implicit blame in Larry’s questions and Jenny’s reported responses. To understand the reporting context it is crucial to bear in mind the participation framework. Larry’s narrative is addressed to the therapist with Jenny as a coparticipant. His narrative is not a disinterested report of events. In his story, Larry seems to discursively position himself as responding emotionally to Jenny’s misdeeds.

This contextual framing of reported speech, and reported action, is also apparent as the narrative continues. Larry’s emphatic reference to emotion he expressed (lines 073–074) provides a context for his reported action of waiting by the phone (lines 074–076) and his reported speech of telling her of his feelings (lines 078–079).

072  L:  and a (0.8) and so there was this triangle most of those
073 early years: and I MEAN THERE WERE A LOT
074 OF EMOTION THAT I- I ( ) I would wait by the
075 phone (0.6) for her to call (0.4) and she would always
076 be late or not call at all, (1.3) uhm >things like that<
077 (0.4) and I and I would tell her >you know< how
078 distressed; I was ‘ya know’ why didn’t ya call? you
079 know I was waiting by the- in the ah () I’d show all
080 my emotions ((narrative continues))

Larry does not merely claim that he expressed emotion, he displays affect in recounting these events. This strong emotion gets shown by the increased volume of his avowal (lines 073–074), the emphatic intonation in his reported imploring of Jenny, “why didn’t ya call:?” (line 078), and in his cut-off, exasperated reported complaint, “you know I was waiting by the-” (lines 078–079). Direct reported speech, of course, allows the speaker to use prosodic and paralinguistic features in recounting how something was said. These serve as contextualization cues (Gumperz, 1982), which are consistent with and amplify the contextual framing of the reported speech.

Notice that Sacks’s observation (quoted previously) is borne out in that the contextual framing components come immediately before or after the reported speech in both excerpts we have examined. This sequential
contiguity (Sacks, 1987) between the contextual frames and reported speech has to do with recipient design considerations.

An exception to this sequential contiguity thesis is that Larry’s avowal of expressing emotion in these excerpts can be heard as a response to a dispute with Jenny some moments earlier over whether Larry shows emotions to her (transcript lines 022–028 and also 045–049). Indeed this whole episode begins with the therapist asking Larry about Jenny’s prior complaint that he is afraid to share his feelings (lines 001–007). This ongoing dispute over Larry’s emotional expressiveness can be heard as a context for Larry’s avowals of emotion in his narrative.

Larry’s insistence that he is expressive of emotion is uttered three times in his narrative. The reported speech and reported action work as evidence or examples of his assertion. So Larry’s framing statement of emotional expressiveness provides a context for how to take the reported speech and the reported speech provides instances in support of this framing statement.

In the literature on reported speech, Volosinov’s (1971) caution on attending to the reporting context has not always been followed. In an otherwise excellent study, Holt (1996) explored the ways direct reported speech works as evidence but seemed to neglect the contextual framing of reported speech. For instance, Holt claimed,

Using [direct reported speech] enables the speaker to give an air of objectivity to the account. The reported speaker is, in a way, allowed to “speak for himself or herself.” (p. 230)

What I take issue with is this assertion, albeit qualified, that direct reported speech allows the reported speaker to “speak for himself or herself.” Reported speech gets presented in some contextual frame. For instance, in the following transcript the man’s reported speech (lines 15–17) is contextualized by Lesley’s immediately prior utterances (lines 10–11 and also lines 1–6). Also, Lesley’s subsequent exasperated comment (line 26) works to contextually frame the reported speech.

(Holt, 1996, pp. 229–230; Note: transcript is simplified)

((Lesley is talking about visiting a sale at the vicarage with her husband.))

1 Lesley: And em: .p we (.) really didn’t have a lot’v
2 change that (.) day becuz we’d been to Bath ’n
Holt's point was that the reported speech is presented (lines 15–17) by
the reporting speaker, Lesley, to allow the recipient, Joyce, to evaluate
it for herself (line 28). My position is that Lesley's prior and posterior
statements contextually frame the reported speech to be heard in a certain
way. One could imagine a different prior contextual framing such that
the identical reported speech of lines 15–17 could be heard in a different
way, say as a humorous teasing remark.

To conclude with a bit of reported speech on context that I want to
contextually frame, Charles Antaki\(^3\) made the point that many social
scientists treat context as a rather narrow range of factors (e.g., demo-
graphic categories, personality traits, situational variables) considering
the indefinitely vast number of things that people can do with each other
during social interaction. This observation is well taken; we need to consider the innumerable things we do with words and how we put those words in context. The conversational practice of reported speech takes a prior utterance situated in a particular context and unearths it and gives it a life again in the new soil of the reporting context. To fit into its new context, the reported speech often needs to be contextually framed so recipients understand it in the desired way. So Larry’s contextual frame of expressing emotions and the reporting context of Jenny’s defending herself against the man’s reported complaint are the kinds of things that give context to talk.

NOTES

1 This familiar distinction between direct and indirect discourse is problematic, especially the notion of indirect speech, but it need not concern us here (see Sternberg, 1982, for a discussion and Payne, n.d., for a more adequate category scheme).

2 Tannen (1989) argued from this that the label reported speech is a misnomer; a better term is constructed dialogue. Although this point is well taken, nonetheless reported speech seems to be the entrenched term. More important, there seems to be a consensus in the literature that reported speech need not be a true reproduction of the original.

3 Comment made during the discussion at the Conference on Language and Social Psychology, Ottawa, 1997 (see pp. 13–28, this issue).

REFERENCES


Sarbin, T. R. (1989). *Presentation on narrative psychology*. Joint Meeting of the Rocky Mountain and Western Psychological Associations, Reno, NV.


