Theorizing the relationship between text and context: some reflections two decades into the 21st century

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The overarching theme of XIV ALSFAL is one that has been central to the systemic functional research programme since the start — the exploration of text and context, or text in context. The launch of two new journals in 2019 reminds us of the long-term significance of the theme, viz. *Language, Context and Text: The Social Semiotics Forum* within the SFL community and *Register Studies*, intended for all approaches concerned with functional variation in language. In fact, the importance of this perspective on text goes back to pre-SFL days, to Malinowski's anthropological investigation of texts in their contexts of situation in the Trobriand Islands. In a sense, this concern is one of the key characteristics of the ecological approach to language and other semiotic systems developed over the decades in SFL.

While the focus on text in context fell outside the domain of the emerging "mainstream" linguistics of the 1960s, certainly as it was championed within generative linguistics, it has now become a much more widely embraced research concern in linguistics and other scientific approaches to semiotic systems, even in strands of cognitive linguistics that recognize the value of "usage-based" approaches. Still, there are interesting tensions relevant to the theme at hand, e.g. the tension between massive corpora of texts and corpora of "situated discourse", between low-level automated analysis and high-level analysis.

In SFL, there have been considerable advances in the exploration of texts in contexts, in terms of both theory and description (e.g. Halliday, 1978; Steiner, 1991; Martin, 1992; Ghadessy, 1999; Hasan, 2009; Bednarek & Martin, 2010; Bartlett, 2012; Miller & Bayley, 2015), and these have been extended to cover semiotic systems in general (e.g. Bateman, Wildfeuer & Hiippala, 2017). Theoretical issues that have emerged in the course of these advances include the question of scale (macro — meso — micro), e.g. in relating contexts to institutions to cultures — the problem of scale being a common issue one in 20th century linguistics and social sciences, the complementarity of stratification and instantiation in the modelling of text in context (e.g. do we stratify context and/or extend it along the cline of instantiation), the issue of the functional diversification of context in relation to text (e.g. the complementarity of field and tenor goals), the challenge of specifying the nature of realization as the link between context and text, and the relation between text, context and meaners belonging to meaning groups.

Here I will reflect on some of these issues, picking up the thread from e.g. Matthiessen (2012, 2015a; 2014, 2015b). The best way of reasoning about them and of weighing different approaches against one another is to operate with a multidimensional model involving (i) the hierarchy of stratification, (ii) the cline of instantiation (with inherent variation in instantiation, including centrally registerial variation), (iii) the spectrum of functional diversification (within context: field, tenor, and mode; and within language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual); (iv) the hierarchy of axis, and (v) the hierarchy of rank.

This model will enable us to relate context of culture to context of situation with intermediate contextual patterns characterizable in terms of institutions, it will enable us to ask if we need both "genre" and "field" in our account of text in context, it will enable us to explore if we need to account for scale in terms of instantiation and/ or rank, it will enable us to explore the notion of division of labour in a society in terms of the distribution of fields of activity across institutional roles in tenor role networks, it will enable us to explore the notion of semiotic division of labour in terms of mode, and so on. In investigating issues of the kind noted above, it is helpful to use some institution as a territory for exploration, and in addition to institutions of education another good candidate illuminated in systemic functional work is institutions of healthcare (cf. Matthiessen, 2013).

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