THE NOTION OF "CONTEXT" IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION (1991)

1 Language and language education

My concern here is with 'context' as a notion that is useful for thinking with when one is investigating language. But I want to consider it not in relation to linguistics as a whole but in relation to one particular domain of linguistic activity, namely language education. This does not mean that theoretical issues will be absent; but they will be approached from a specific angle.

Education, I take it, means enabling people to learn; not just to learn in the natural, commonsense ways in which we learn in our daily lives, but to learn in an organized, progressive, and systematic manner according to some generally accepted principles about what people ought to know. So when we qualify this as "*language* education", what have we added to the definition?

In one sense, nothing at all; all education takes place through the medium of language. I don't mean all **learning**: human beings learn a great deal without the medium of language. But all **educational** learning is mediated through language; so why "language education"? We have come to use this term, over the past 10–15 years, partly to make explicit that very point: to bring to the foreground a motif that emerged in the 1960s, of "language across the curriculum", when it was first widely recognized that there was an essential language component in learning science or learning history or learning anything else that had a place in school. But at the same time, in talking of language education we are asserting that there is a relationship between language as a **medium** of learning, in this sense of "language across the curriculum", and language as the **substance** of what is being learnt, in the teaching of foreign or

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second languages, of the mother tongue, of reading and writing, of grammar, composition, and so on.

What is common to all these activities is expressed, in part at least, by the word "language". Language is implicated in some way or other in all educational activity; so we need to be aware of it, to recognize when learning problems are in some sense problems of language, and to conduct theory-based research into the linguistic aspects of educational processes. We know that this view is coming to be shared by the community when we see developments such as the Centre for Studies of Language in Education at the Northern Territory University in Australia, or the Institute of Language Education in Hong Kong. This tells us that there is a field of activity, or research and development, identified as the study of language in education, where we investigate how language functions in various educational contexts, and by doing so, seek to improve our educational practice.

I used the expression of language "functioning in educational contexts", and I think we have to bring this notion of language functioning in context explicitly into the discussion. What is distinctive about "educational linguistics", if I may be allowed to use that term as a shorthand for investigating language for educational purposes, is that we are concerned always with **language in context** (Martin 1993; Rothery in Hasan and Williams 1996). We are identifying certain kinds of activity in which language has a central place, and finding out just **how** language comes to play its part. What do people actually read, and listen to, and say, and write, when they are being 'educated'? What do they expect to achieve through using language; and how do we tell, and how do they tell, whether they have achieved it or not?

We generally take this notion of 'context' for granted. The context is some sort of environment; it's what's going on around, where language is somehow involved. And if we're talking English we then manipulate this in the typical English way, expanding the word by various derivations: we have the adjective *contextual*, as in *contextual features* or *parameters*; then the verb *contextualize*; and since language can be *contextualized*, it can also be *decontextualized*, and then of course *recontextualized* over again. And each of these, in turn, can become an abstract object, like *recontextualization*. So I think we should put this word "context" in inverted commas for a while and ask what it actually means: problematize it, if you like.

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1.1 Context of situation

Originally, the context meant the accompanying text, the wording that came before and after whatever was under attention. In the nineteenth century it was extended to things other than language, both concrete and abstract: *the context of the building, the moral context of the day*; but if you were talking about language, then it still referred to the surrounding words, and it was only in modern linguistics that it came to refer to the non-verbal environment in which language was used. When that had happened, it was Catford, I think, who suggested that we now needed another term to refer explicitly to the verbal environment; and he proposed the term "co-text". But how did *context* come to be extended in this way?

Here is Malinowski writing in 1923, about what at that time was referred to as a "primitive" (that is, unwritten) language. He writes "In a primitive language the meaning of any single word is to a very high degree dependent on its context. . . . [An expression such as] *we paddle in place* demands the context of the whole utterance, . . . [and] this latter again, becomes only intelligible when it is placed within its *context of situation*, if I may be allowed to coin an expression which indicates on the one hand that the conception of context has to be broadened and on the other hand that the situation in which words are uttered can never be passed over as irrelevant to the linguistic expression" (Malinowski 1923: 306). (In passing, we might note that on the very next page he also wrote "The conception of meaning as *contained* in an utterance is false and futile".) Ten years or so later, Malinowski had changed his view that this was a special feature of "primitive" languages; writing in 1935 he said all languages were alike in that "the real under-standing of words is always ultimately derived from active experience of those aspects of reality to which the words belong" (Malinowski 1935: 58; cf. Hasan 1985). By this time Malinowski is extending the notion of context still further: over and beyond the context of situation lies "what we might call [the] context of culture", so that "the definition of a word consists partly of placing it within its cultural context" (ibid.: 18). What this means is that language considered as a **system** – its lexical items and grammatical categories – is to be related to its context of **culture**; while **instances** of language in use – specific texts and their component parts – are to be related to their context of **situation**. Both these contexts are of course outside of language itself.

Although Malinowski was the first to use the expression **context of situation**, the concept of 'situation', in the sense of the events and actions

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that are going on around when people speak, had been invoked before in linguistics, in a very different domain of inquiry, namely dialectology. Linguistic field studies were not only of culturally exotic, unwritten languages such as those studied by anthropologists; they were also carried out with rural dialects, and the Swiss dialectologist Wegener had developed a "situation theory" to account for the "special" features of informal, spoken language – that is, features that **appeared** special at a time when the only form of text that was recognized in linguistics was a written text, preferably written in a language long since dead (i.e., no longer spoken at all) (Firth 1957b). What led linguists to take account of the situation was when they turned their attention to speech. Here, they had to recognize factors like reference to persons, objects and events within the speaker's attention (technically, *exophoric deixis*), as well as other, more oblique forms of dependence on and interaction with environment. What Malinowski was saying was that because of these things, in spoken language the "situation" functioned by analogy as a kind of context. The situation was like the text by which a piece of spoken discourse was surrounded.

Malinowski was an anthropologist, who became a linguist in the service of his ethnographic pursuits. His younger colleague J.R. Firth, who was a linguist, saw the possibility of integrating this notion, of the "situation" as a kind of context, into a general theory of language. Firth was also interested in spoken language; but not as something quaint or exotic like rural dialects and aboriginal languages. On the contrary, Firth was concerned with the **typical** – what he referred to as "typical texts in their contexts of situation" (Firth 1957a: 224), by which people enacted their day-to-day interpersonal relationships and constructed a social identity for themselves and the people around them. A text was an object of theoretical study in its own right; and what Firth did was to map the notion of "context of situation" into a general theory of levels of language. All linguistic analysis, Firth said, was a study of meaning, and meaning could be defined operationally as "function in context"; so to study meaning you took each of the traditional divisions of linguistic theory – phonetic, phonological, lexical, morphological, syntactic – and treated it as a kind of context. You could then include the *situation* as just another linguistic level. But the context of situation did have a special place in the overall framework, since it was here that the text as a **whole** could be "contextualized". (And if it was a written text it could be tracked through time, as it came to be "recontextualized" with changes in the contexts in which it was read and the cultural background and assumptions of those who read it.)

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1.2 Context of culture

What about the "context of culture"? Firth made very little use of this idea. Although, to use Robins' words (Robins 1963:17), Firth considered that a language was "embedded in the life and culture of its speakers", he was actually very sceptical about general notions such as 'the language' and 'the culture', because he didn't see either a language or a culture as any kind of homogeneous and harmonious whole. The notion of culture as a context for a language – for language considered as a system – was more fully articulated in the work of their contemporaries Sapir and Whorf. Sapir did not use the **expression** *context of culture*; but he did interpret a language as expressing the mental life of its speakers, and from this starting point he and Whorf developed their powerful view of the interplay between language and culture, the so-called "Sapir–Whorf hypothesis". In this view, since language evolved as part – moreover the most unconscious part – of every human culture, it functioned as the primary means whereby the deepest perception of the members, their joint construction of shared experience into social reality, were constantly reaffirmed and transmitted. Thus in this sense the culture provided the context within which words and, more generally, grammatical systems were interpreted. (Many of Whorf's example involved what he called "cryptotypes": systems of meaning that were hidden rather deep beneath the surface construction of the grammar and could only be revealed by a penetrating and thorough grammatical analysis) (Whorf 1956).

These two founding traditions of the study of language in context, the British, with Malinowski and Firth, on the one hand, and the American, with Sapir and Whorf, on the other, are in an important way complementary to each other. The former stress the ***situation*** as the context for language as ***text***; and they see language as a form of action, as the enactment of social relationships and social processes. The latter stress the ***culture*** as the context for language as ***system***; and they see language as a form of reflection, as the construal of experience into a theory or model of reality. From these two sources, taken together, we have been able to derive the foundations of a functional semantics: a theory of meaning that is relevant to applied linguistic concerns.

2 Language and context, system and instance

So we come back to language education; but there is just one more general theoretical point to be made first. A functional semantics needs

to be grounded in a functional grammar: a grammar that is likewise related to the contexts of language and language use. Here a major contribution came from a third source, this time on the European continent, namely the Prague school, whose founder Mathesius, another contemporary of Sapir and Malinowski, showed for the first time how the grammar of spoken language was organized so that it related systematically to the surrounding context, including both the context in its traditional sense – the "co-text", in Catford's term – and the context of situation. And now we can take the interpretation somewhat further and show that the entire construction of the grammar – the way all human languages are organized for creating meaning – is critically bound up with the situational and cultural contexts in which language has been evolving. As I wrote myself many years ago, language is as it is because of what it does: which means, because of what we do with it, in every aspect of our lives. So a theory of language in context is not just a theory about how people use language, important though that is. It is a theory about the **nature** and **evolution** of language, explaining why the system works the way it does; but with the explanation making reference to its use. (I should make it clear that this is not a teleological explanation; it says nothing about purpose or design. It is a functional explanation, based on a social–semiotic interpretation of the relations and processes of meaning.) And I think this last point is fundamental in relation to language education work.

In all language education, the learner has to build up a resource. It is a resource of a particular kind: a resource for creating meaning. I call it a "meaning potential". Whether someone is learning the mother tongue, learning to read and write, learning a second or foreign language, learning the language of science or mathematics, or learning the styles of written composition – all these are forms of meaning potential. What the learner has to do is to construe (that is, construct in the mind) a linguistic *system*. That is what is meant by "language as system": it is language as stored up energy. It is a language, or some specific aspect of a language, like the language of science, in the form of a *potential*, a resource that you draw on in reading and writing and speaking and listening – and a resource that you use for learning with. How do you construe this potential, and how do you use it when you've got it? You build it up, and you act it out, in the form of *text*. "Text" refers to all the *instances* of language that you listen to and read. And that you produce yourself in speaking and in writing.

I have suggested that the context for the meaning potential – for language as a system – is the context of culture. We will, of course, have

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to problematize this term "culture" as well; I will come back to that later on. The context for the particular instances – for language as processes of text – is the context of situation. And just as a piece of text is an instance of language, so a situation is an instance of culture. So there is a proportion here. The context for an instance of language (text) is an instance of culture (situation). And the context for the system that lies behind each text (language) is the system which lies behind each situation – namely, the culture. (See Figure 13.1.)
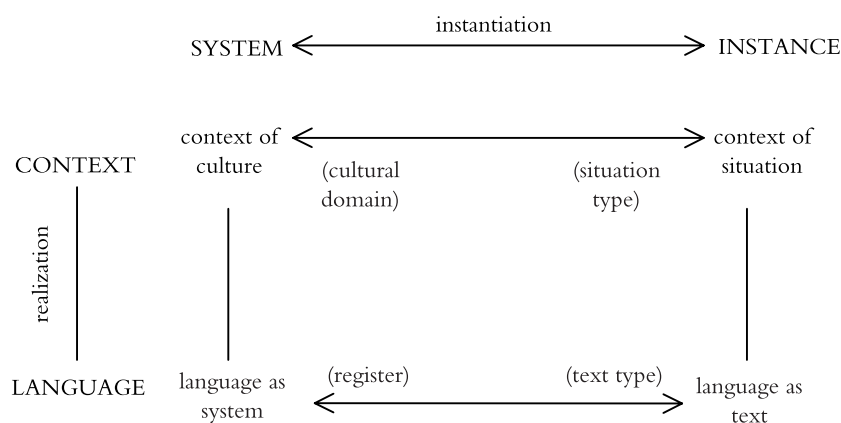

Figure 13.1 Language and context, system and instance

Note: Culture instantiated in situation, as system instantiated in text. Culture realized in/construed by language; same relation as that holding between linguistic strata (semantics: lexicogrammar: phonology: phonetics).

Cultural domain and register are "sub-systems": likeness viewed from "system" end.

Situation type and text type are "instance types": likeness viewed from "instance" end.

2.1 The relation between system and instance: instantiation

However, there is a hidden trap to watch out for at this point. We have these pairs of terms, like culture and situation, or language as system and language as text; we need them in order to talk about what we do. But the implication is that these are two different things: that the "system" is one thing, and the "text" is something else, something different. Let me return to this concept of a "potential". The system is not some independent object; it is simply the potential that lies behind all the various instances. Although the actual texts that you process and produce will always be limited, the potential (for processing and producing texts) has to reach the stage where it is unlimited, so that you can take in new

texts, that you haven't heard or read before, and also **interact** with them – interrogate them, so to speak, argue with them, and learn from them. (That, of course, is a high standard to attain.) And we can apply the same thinking to the situation and the culture. These also are not two different things; they are the same thing seen from different points of view. A situation, as we are envisaging it, is simply an instance of culture; or, to put it the other way round, a culture is the potential behind all the different types of situation that occur. We can perhaps use an analogy from the physical world; the difference between "culture" and "situation" is rather like that between the "climate" and the "weather". Climate and weather are not two different things; they are the same thing, which we call *weather* when we are looking at it close up, and *climate* when we are looking at it from a distance. The weather goes on around us all the time; it is the actual instances of temperature and precipitation and air movement that you can see and hear and feel. The climate is the **potential** that lies behind all these things; it is the weather seen from a distance, by an observer standing some way off in time. So, of course, there is a continuum from one to the other; there is no way of deciding when a "long-term weather pattern" becomes a "temporary condition of the climate", or when "climatic variation" becomes merely "changes in the weather". And likewise with "culture" and "situation": a school, for example, is clearly a cultural institution, a matrix of social practices governed by cultural norms and values. But we can also look at it as an assembly of situations: it consists of regular events called "lessons" in which people in certain role relationships (teachers and pupils) take part in certain forms of interaction in which certain kinds of meanings are exchanged. We can look at it as system (this is what we mean by education: the school considered systemically), or as text, repetitive instances of the processes of teaching and learning. We may choose to look at this phenomenon from either end; but it is still a single phenomenon, not two.

2.2 The situational context in language education

So much for the horizontal dimension. What about the vertical dimension: the relation between culture and language, and between situation and text? This is what we are calling the relationship of "context": culture and situation as the context, respectively, for language as system and for instances of language as text. But I have been talking for long enough in abstract terms; so let me now approach this question through some examples of language education practice. And since we are talking about language in context, let me start with one where we may feel that

the language is somehow functioning out of context – a typical adult foreign-language class. (Many among us might feel that this is one of the most intractable problems on the language education scene!)

In traditional textbooks, single sentences and even single words were often presented in isolation: out of context, in the original sense of the term. Actually they had their own linguistic context: in a structure drill, for example, the context of a given sentence was the set of all the other sentences displaying a similar structure:

(1) Although they were poor, (yet) they were happy.
(2) Although the light was on, (yet) I fell asleep.
(3) Although she got the highest mark, (yet) she was not given a prize.

More recently, these tended to give way in favour of sentences having a similar function, as in the English lessons on Singapore Chinese radio:

(4) How long does it take to get to Silvertown?
(5) How long will it take me to get to Silvertown?
(6) How long does the journey to Silvertown take?

There is a co-text here; but since people don't go around talking in paradigms, the only context of situation is the one that is created by the language activity itself.

In the 1960s, when the theory of context became familiar in applied linguistics, teachers set out to improve learning materials by "contextual-izing" them, and one early result of this was what came to be known as the "situational" approach. Instead of sentences related by grammatical structure this offered coherent passages having a recognizable situational setting, like "at the post office", "in a restaurant" or "in hospital". The parts of the text were now held together by the unities of the situation.

These materials were much criticized, on the grounds that the sentences were still readymade; people sensed that this conflicted with the basic notion of functioning in a context of situation. I don't myself share that objection; there are many situations in which the text is ready-made, and I think readymade text has an important place in learning a foreign language. But there was a more serious objection to them, which was that the context of situation had been interpreted simply as a setting. But "context of situation" is not just equivalent to setting. The context of situation is a theoretical construct for explaining how a text relates to the social processes within which it is located. It has three significant components: the underlying social activity, the persons or "voices" involved in that activity, and the particular functions accorded to the text within it. In informal terms, the situation consists in what's going on,

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who is taking part, and where the language comes in. (These are referred to technically as the *field*, the *tenor* and the *mode*.) The setting, on the other hand, is the immediate material environment. This **may** be a direct manifestation of the context of situation, and so be integrated into it: if the situation is one of, say, medical care, involving a doctor and one or more patients, then the **setting** of hospital or clinic is a relevant part of the picture. But even there the setting does not **constitute** the context of situation; whereas the materials presented in the "situational" approach tended to relate exclusively to the setting and not to the culturally defined social processes that lay behind it.

The point is, that the actual setting in which these texts had to function was not, in fact, a post office or a hospital; it was a classroom, and this illustrates the contradiction that is inherent in 'teaching a language'. Consider an adult language class such as is typical of Australia and other countries where immigrants arrive knowing nothing of the majority language. What is the context of situation for the discourse of their language classes? The **immediate** situation is the activity of learning a foreign language, involving teacher, learner and fellow students, with the text functioning as instructional material (interspersed with other discourse, such as the teacher's classroom management); and in this context, the natural setting **is** a classroom. But beyond this immediate situation lies another layer of situation of which the learners are always aware, namely that of participating effectively in the life of their new community; and here the natural settings would be those of the workplace and the shopping centre.

2.3 *The learning situation as context*

So how have language educators tried to resolve this contextual contradiction? One early approach was to engage with the setting of the classroom: to teach the students to survive in a world made of books and pens and blackboards. This obviously has its limitations! But note that it is possible to move on from there while still remaining within the **immediate** situation: that is, exploiting the language learning context, but going beyond the setting to the situation proper – using language that relates to learning language, to the roles of teacher and student, and even to the discourse itself. I have in mind the sort of work where students critique their own and each others' presentations, and reflect on and monitor their own learning experiences (cf. Jones et al. in Hasan and Martin 1989) Or – a third option – one may exploit the **outer** situation, that of participating in the community: following up the "situational

approach" but again moving beyond the setting to engage with the social processes of which this situation is actually constituted. The value of "communicative" approaches is that they are based on a context of situation, not just on a setting; hence they do embody a real conception of text – language that is effective in relation to the social activity and the interpersonal relationships (cf. Breen and Candlin 1980). Applying this principle to the outer situation, one can simulate the workplace or shopping centre not just as physical surroundings but as the location where particular processes of production and exchange take place and particular kinds of interpersonal relationship are enacted.

To say "simulating" the workplace implies, of course, that the teaching is still actually taking place in a classroom. There is another way of dealing with the contextual contradiction, which is that the teachers move the operation out of the classroom altogether and teach the language in place, in the factory or the department store or the office. If this is done the activity becomes less like language teaching and more like language apprenticeship – though it is still a form of language **education**: it is guided and structured by a professional language educator, so that the learner is not simply left to the casual goodwill of the workmates. You have to do without the facilities that the classroom offers (whether computer and tape recorder and reference books, or just the security of your own bit of personal space); but you avoid this huge disjunction between the immediate setting and what is perceived as the 'real' – that is, the outer – context of situation.

2.4 Exploring and creating the learning context

So is this kind of disjunction, this problem of language 'out of context', a feature of all the activities of language education? I don't think so. I think what I have just cited is an extreme case; most instances are much less contradictory, and in some there may be hardly any such conflict at all. Let me refer to some earlier experience of my own. In London in the 1960s I directed a curriculum development project, the Programme in Linguistics and English Teaching, in which we had primary, secondary and tertiary teachers all working together to apply some of the principles derived from linguistics to the teaching of English at various levels in school. This was English as a first language (there was a separate project for English as a Second Language), and we were aiming particularly at those sections of the population where the children were most likely to fail, which meant inner-city working-class and new-generation immigrants (Pearce et al. in Hasan and Martin 1989)

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2.4.1 Programme in Linguistic and English Teaching: primary

The primary-school teachers, headed by David Mackay, were able to define their task more or less from the beginning: to develop a new programme for teaching initial literacy. They very quickly took up the relevant ideas, combined them with their own thinking and got down to work. For them, the context of situation was that of the school as an institution defined by the culture; there was no "outer" level of context conflicting with this one. (The "field" was the social practice of education: developing systematic knowledge in an institutional framework, as distinct from commonsense knowledge in home and family. The "tenor" was a teacher–pupil–peer group relationship, as distinct from one of child with parents, siblings and neighbours. The "mode" was that of explicit instruction, as distinct from learning through unstructured conversational interaction with other people.) The classroom setting, far from being in conflict, represents very precisely the situational and cultural context in which the activity of learning to read and write is situated, and also evaluated: namely, the children are learning to function in the world of educational knowledge.

In developing their materials, which were called *Breakthrough to Literacy* (Mackay et al. 1970), the primary teachers had to take various critical decisions; and they used their interpretation of the context in order to do so. Let me just refer to four of these. First, they recognized that the children were not just learning to read – they were learning to learn through reading; so they separated out the semantic aspects of reading and writing from the techniques, so that the children could get ahead with making sentences and constructing their own reading materials without having first to manipulate the written symbols and writing implements themselves. Second, they recognized that where the instruction is explicit the children need to be partners in the accompanying discourse; so they built into the programme a technical language so the children could always talk about what they were learning. (There had always been this strange discrepancy in infant schools: in arithmetic, everyone accepted that the children had to learn to talk about their number skills, like adding and taking away; but they were expected to master highly complex language skills without any systematic resources with which to talk about them.) Third, they recognized that, in order to relate their educational learning to their commonsense learning, the children had to be the authors of their own texts; so there were no primers – the first reading books were books the children made themselves. And fourth, they recognized that all language learning is highly

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interactive; so they designed the materials for the children to work with in groups, sharing their experiences instead of having to work through it all by themselves.

Initial literacy, then, is one kind of language education where the social process is defined by the notion of education; the cultural context **is** that of education, which is directly reflected, or "instantiated", in the situation of the classroom. Contrast this with the circumstances faced by the secondary teachers in the project. They were no less qualified and experienced; but when they came to their task, of producing materials for studying language in the upper secondary school, they took a very long time before they were able to get started. We can look at this also from the point of view of the context.

2.4.2 Programme in Linguistics and English Teaching: secondary

The problem faced by the secondary teachers was that, for them, there **was** no context. There was no culturally recognized activity of learning about language. "English", at that level in school, meant just the study of literature; and while they might have taken that as their context and developed materials on stylistics, that seemed both too specialized and too technical. This meant that, while creating their text, they had to be **creating the context** for it at the same time.

So how do you set about "creating" a context for language? You cannot do it by means of legislation, like decreeing that poems are to be written in praise of a national leader. The only way is for the text itself to create its own context of situation. Let me return for a moment to the earlier discussion.

I tried to suggest how this notion of context had evolved in modern linguistics. The "situation", and the "culture", were both taken as something "given" – as already in place, so to speak, to serve as the environment for language. Is this, in fact, a valid perspective? That depends on what you are trying to find out. If, like Malinowski, you are asking 'how do I explain the meaning of this text?' then you are bound to treat the situation in which the text was functioning as a "given" phenomenon: the reasoning is, 'now that we know what was going on, we can understand what was being said'. But in language education work we have to have a wider angle of vision. In any situation involving language and learning, you have to be able to move in both directions: to use the situation to construe the text, as Malinowski did, but also to use the text as a means to construe the situation. The situation, in other words, may not be something that is "given"; it may have to be constructed out of the text.

2.5 The relation between language and context: realization

Let us look again at this "vertical" dimension. The term that we usually use for this relationship, coming from European functional linguistics, is ***realization***: the situation is "realized" in the text. Similarly the culture is "realized" in the linguistic system. This does not mean that the one somehow **causes** the other. The relationship is not one of cause. It is a semiotic relationship; one that arises between pairs of information systems, interlocking systems of meaning.

If the situation **caused** the text, the situation would have to exist first; and it would be impossible for the text to cause the situation – if *a* causes *x*, then *x* cannot also cause *a*. But text and situation come into being together; so whatever kind of order we set up between them, it must be such that we can start from either end. This is how Firth was able to integrate the situation into his model of linguistic levels, because the relationship between the levels **within** a language is already of this same kind. A language is articulated at the level of grammar, and also at the level of phonology; but neither of these two systems "causes" the other – the relation between them is this one of realization. We are able to project this relationship from language on to culture, and show that, in an analogous way, the text "realizes" the situation. And this is a relationship that can be traversed, or activated, in either direction.

If the culture, and the situation, are said to be "realized in" language, this means that they are also constructed by language – we could again use the term *construed* if we want to make it explicit that this is not a material process but a semiotic one. Thus the culture is construed by systems of language choice; the situation is construed by patterns of language use. I can give a simple illustration of this by just referring to the setting. If there was a storm starting up outside the window, I could say

(7) There was a flash of lightning.

That text makes sense in relation to a setting that is "given". But the day may be perfectly bright and clear; I can still say

(8) There was a flash of lightning –

and it still makes sense; I have started to tell you a story. I have **created** the setting by the device of using that text. We can say that the text has "construed" the setting; or, if you want to express this in terms of the mental processes of the interactants, you can say **you** have construed the setting out of the text. All fictional narrative depends on this construing power of language.

Coming back to our secondary teachers, then: they had no cultural context for teaching about language in the secondary school. Grammar had largely been disappeared from the curriculum, because the teachers in the schools found the traditional grammar boring and useless; but nothing had come in to take its place, and neither literature nor composition was taught with any real consideration of language or any proper value being accorded to it. We felt that students at this level, the upper secondary school, should learn about the nature and functions of language. But for this to happen, our teachers had not only to construct a new text; they had to make the text such that it would construct a new situation. In order to do this they produced a programme of materials entitled *Language in Use* (Doughty et al. 1971), through which teacher and pupils could explore language together (the teachers' book was called *Exploring Language*); and the concept around which they organized these materials was that of **variation** in language, especially functional variation of the kind we refer to as "register". They hoped in this way to be creating a new context within language education, in which the activity of investing language would become an integral part of developing educational knowledge.

Of course, no single project can transform the educational scene. But in the recent discussions of the national curriculum in Britain it was explicitly acknowledged that the work of these teachers back in the 1960s had been significant in reshaping the cultural context of language education. If they were able to play some part in this, it was because they understood that they had actively to construct the context for their work instead of merely taking it for granted. Language does not just passively reflect a pre-existing social reality. It is an active agent in constructing that reality; and in language education we often have to exploit that vast potential. (And of course that is what is being done whenever language education is used as an instrument of language policy and planning.)

3 The cultural context in language education

But you notice that I have now slipped from talking about the context of situation to talking about the context of culture. This is easy to do, given that, as I suggested earlier, "culture" and "situation" are not two different things, but rather the same thing seen from two different depths of observation. The culture is the paradigm of situation types − the total potential that lies behind each instance, and each class of instances. Thus just as the text realizes, and hence can construe, a context of situation, so the system, the potential that is inherent in that text − in this example, the

potential built up by teachers and pupils as a discourse for exploring language – realizes, and hence can also construe, a context of culture.

But looking at **culture** in this way, as a context for our educational practices, we may come to view it rather differently from the way in which people usually understand it when they use expressions such as "teaching language, teaching culture". There it usually means the traditional lifestyles, beliefs and value systems of a language community. Many years ago, when I was still a language teacher, teaching Chinese at Cambridge University in England, I used to teach a class of scientific Chinese to a group of Cambridge scientists. They wanted to read scientific texts written by Chinese scholars: one was a plant geneticist, interested in Chinese work on hybridization, one was a mathematician, one was a psychologist, and so on. Now, they had no interest in Chinese culture in the traditional sense of the term; it wasn't necessary for me to teach them anything about Chinese history or family life, or about filial piety or other Confucian values. Did this mean, however, that there was no "context of culture" for my teaching? Of course not. There certainly was a context of culture; and you couldn't hope to learn scientific Chinese without knowing quite a lot about it. But "culture" here does not mean the traditional culture of China. It means the culture of modern science, whether practiced by Chinese or English or Australian or Vietnamese or any other nationality of scientists. When we talk of the cultural context for language education, we have to go beyond the popular notion of culture as something defined solely by one's ethnic origins. All of us participate in many simultaneous cultures; and language education is the principal means by which we learn to do so.

When people ask, as they often do, whether it is possible to learn a language without at the same time learning about the culture it belongs to, they usually mean the culture in the traditional sense, the ideas and the customs and the values inherited from the past. In that sense of culture, the answer is obviously: yes, it is perfectly possible. There are millions of people around the world learning English without learning anything about British or North American or Australian culture in the process. There is no need to involve the culture in that sense at all. In saying this, I'm not arguing **against** taking the cultural heritage into consideration in those cases where it's appropriate: there are situations in language education where traditional culture is very much part of the context, for example language maintenance in migrant communities, where the language is being taught precisely as an instrument for maintaining and transmitting the ethnic culture. (Even here, I think, such an activity is

likely to be successful to the extent that it is forward-looking as well as backward-looking, having regard to the functional significance of the language in the new cultural context. This is in fact widely recognized, because in maintenance classes they usually teach the standard variety of the language, even though, as among Italians in Australia, and Chinese in many parts of the world, many parents feel that that is not the natural way to maintain the culture and it doesn't help the children to talk to their grannies.) But usually this sense of culture as tradition is not relevant as a cultural context for language education. When we talk of the "context of culture" for language activities we mean those features of culture that are relevant to the register in question. If we are looking at a secondary physics syllabus, then the cultural context is that of contemporary physics, combined with that of the institution of "education" in the particular community concerned (cf. Gunnarsson 1990).

3.1 Some examples of educational contexts

So I suggest that in our language education practice we interpret "culture" from a linguistic point of view: as a context for language, a system of meanings that is realized in language and hence can be construed in language. And just as in language education the term "language" does not usually encompass the whole of that unwieldy concept we call "English" or "Russian" or "Chinese" – it means the language in one particular variety or aspect, such as scientific Chinese, or Russian for interpreters, or initial literacy in English, and so on – so also the term "culture" will not designate some amorphous object such as 'Chinese culture' or 'Western culture'; it refers to something much more specific, that we can interpret in terms of some overall model such as the present one. I think one of the most penetrating studies in the field of language education is the work of Jay Lemke, Professor of Science Education at the City University of New York. In the early 1980s Lemke carried out some research into the teaching of science in American schools, on behalf of the National Science Foundation; his report *Classroom Communication of Science* (1983) was based on detailed observations of science classes in New York high schools, and he subsequently published a book, *Talking Science* (1990), which presents his ideas as they have developed since that investigation was carried out. As the title suggests, Lemke sees the activity of learning and teaching science as one of "talking": exchanging meanings through language. But this meaning-making activity is complex and has to be interpreted at different levels.

The text in Lemke's model is the discourse of the science class: he has recorded *instances* of teachers expounding scientific topics, with responses and interventions by the pupils. These belong in the southeast quadrant of our model. These texts are the *realization*, in language, of what Lemke calls "activity structures", the *situational contexts* in which the discourse sequences unfold. "An activity structure is defined as a socially recognizable sequence of actions" (198); or rather, he goes on, it is realized as sequences of actions, so that "the same activity structure can be realized in many ways" (ibid.). Among the activity structures that Lemke identifies in science classes are Triadic Dialogue, Teacher–Student Debate, Teacher Monologue, Groupwork. These are the modes of discourse of the specific situation types that make up the overall context of situation for talking science.

Moving now to the left-hand side of our diagram: the teacher is the one who knows the field – he has the *system* already in place. He has already constructed the meaning potential of the language of science; for him, the texts are instantiations of that system. For the pupils, however, the texts have to function so as to **construe** the meaning potential: they are learning the discourse of science. This system consists of what Lemke calls "thematic patterns", "shared patterns of semantic relationships" which can be "said" (instantiated) in various ways; but these, in turn, realize the underlying "thematic formations", the "webs of semantic relationships" that make up the context of culture for science education (87). "Thematic formations are what all the different texts that talk about the same topic in the same ways . . . have in common" (203); they are scientific constructs, typically realized in language but with other modes of expression also playing a part.

Thus the "context of culture" for any educational activity includes the structure of the relevant branch of educational knowledge, and Lemke explicitly interprets this in semiotic terms. "A scientific theory", he says, "is constituted of systems of related meanings"; it is "a way of talking about a subject using particular thematic patterns", that is "reconstructed again and again in nearly the same ways by the members of a community" (125: 99). So the wheel has now turned full-circle. If the culture is itself a construction of meanings, it has now become, not just context but "context", a con-text in the original sense of the term. The cultural context for the discourse of science, which these students are having to construe, is the world of scientific theory; but it is a world that is itself, as it were, made of meanings. And this is not a metaphorical way of talking about science just from the "applied" viewpoint of language education; it is a perspective that derives from the ideas of the scientists themselves.

The world of quantum physics, for example, in the widely accepted "Copenhagen interpretation", is a semiotic construction of reality. The universe is the way that we make it by turning it into meaning (Polkinghorne 1990).

My final example comes from Canada, from a language education project where the same general model can be found underpinning some activities of a very different kind. This is Bernard Mohan's "Vancouver project", in which primary-school children in a typically multilingual assortment, of the kind very familiar to us in Sydney and Melbourne, are learning how to learn: to construe educational knowledge and represent it in written English. While Lemke's project was one of research, Mohan's is curriculum development. His "texts" are information sources of every conceivable kind: writing, pictures, maps, diagrams, tables, news reports, any object or event that has a semiotic potential, that the children can use to construct their resource of knowledge. The context of situation is a classroom; but it is a classroom conceived of, and organized, as a repository of information (Mohan 1986).

The system that the children are construing from this text is one where language and subject matter are integrated; but it is not defined by subject matter − in terms of adult practices it is more like English for Academic Purposes than English for Specific Purposes. The meaning potential is that of language as the basis of learning: language construing and transmitting information − "content", in Mohan's terms − which may be about anything at all. So what is the context of culture for Mohan's work? As he sees it, the context of culture is a general theory of learning, and conception of educational knowledge, rather than the theories of particular disciplines. (Of course, both Mohan and Lemke include both a general theory of learning and particular, subject-based theories in their context of culture; the difference is one of orientation, between a secondary-level research project and a primary-level development project.) But this cultural context, as Mohan points out, often involves conflict with received ideas about education and about language that are dominant in the educational field. We should not forget that this general context of culture for language education − the dominant philosophy of education, if you like − is something that is already in place; and it is not something homogeneous and in perfect harmony, either with itself or with the transformed cultural context that our language education work is designed to bring about. In this connection Frances Christie finds it helpful to think of the school itself as a cultural context: instead of a system, or institution, of education in the abstract, with the school as simply the setting where this is instantiated,

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she prefers to see the school itself, in its guise as an institution, as the context of culture. This enables her to explain the emergence of special **language** systems as registers of education – what she refers to as "curriculum genres" (Christie in Hasan and Martin 1989).

3.2 *Learning language, learning through language, learning about language*

When I was working as a consultant to the Language Development Project in Australia, I used to sum up the scope of language education under the three headings of "Learning Language, Learning through Language, Learning about Language". "Learning language" means, of course, learning one's first language, plus any second or foreign languages that are part of the curriculum: including both spoken and written language – initial literacy, composition skills and so on. Here, language is itself the **substance** of what is being learnt. "Learning through language" means using language, again both spoken and written, as an **instrument**: as the primary resource for learning other things – language across the curriculum, in other words. "Learning about language" means study- ing language as an **object** in order to understand how it works: studying grammar, semantics, phonetics, and so on. Here language is a domain or branch of knowledge: typically in schools this is taken no further than a kind of linguistic nature study, with lists of parts of speech and rules of behaviour, but there is no reason why it should not become a properly constructed avenue of learning (Halliday 1981; Painter, Cloran, Rothery, Butt in Hasan and Martin 1989; Carter, van Leeuwen and Humphrey, Painter, Veel and Coffin, Macken-Horarik in Hasan and Williams 1996).

So language enters in as substance – we have to learn it to perform; as instrument – we have to learn with it, as a resource; and as object – we have to learn about it, as content. This is important because nothing else in our educational experience has all these three aspects to it. (Perhaps the nearest analogy would be a combination of mathematics and music – we can think of music as 'performing numbers'.) What is there that is common among these three, which enables us to model them in a coherent fashion? I think what is common is what is being expected of the learner. In all these activities, learners are having to transform text into system; that is, to construe the instances of language, what they hear and what they read, into a meaning potential. If we want to express the three aspects of that meaning potential as aspects of language, we can say that it is linguistic (that is, language skills), extralinguistic (knowledge of content), and metalinguistic (knowledge of language, as content).

For all this to be possible, we depend on the context of situation – hence the problem of "decontextualized" discourse, that I started with. Again, I don't just mean the setting. The setting, of course, is important: it is hard to learn science without laboratory equipment, and it is hard to learn anything, in the educational sense of learning, without writing materials and books. But I mean the context of situation as I have been talking of it; the coherent pattern of activities – activity structures, in Lemke's term – from which the discourse gains its relevance. These are so essential because the **system** that the learner has to construe for himself is also a system at that higher level – the context of culture, as I have been defining it. The advantage of interpreting this higher level as being itself a form of discourse, rather than in conceptual or cognitive terms, is that it enables us to model all the processes the learner has to go through using a unified theory of learning based on language. (It also helps us to diagnose the kind of partial learning that takes place when a student has construed the system at the linguistic level but not integrated this into a construction of the cultural context.)

In all educational learning, learners are being required to predict both ways: to predict the text from the context, and to predict the context from the text. This is something we do all the time in the casual, informal registers of speech; when small children are listening to stories, they are constructing the context in their imagination. But it can be very demanding, especially when too much of the total pattern is unfamiliar. The obvious example of this is if you are having to learn through text in a second language you haven't had much experience of; but it is not only a second-language problem – I have written elsewhere (Halliday and Martin 1993) about the problems that arise in learning science in the mother tongue when you have to construe, from technical and often highly metaphorical written texts, generalizations that you must recognize as relating to, but systematizing, your own previous everyday experience. Language educators have to be able to diagnose where specific effort may need to be expended in working on the language itself, instead of just taking it for granted that the learners are able to use the language for learning with. (For example, in learning how to construct technical taxonomies from the discourse of scientific textbooks; cf. Wignell et al. in Halliday and Martin 1993). If I have kept coming back to my little diagram, it has been partly in order to focus more closely on what we actually mean by "culture" in relation to language education; but mainly to suggest that, in educational learning, all four quadrants are involved. The learner has to (1) process and produce text; (2) relate it to, and construe from it, the context of situation; (3) build up

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the potential that lies behind this text and others like it; and (4) relate it to, and construe from it, the context of culture that lies behind that situation and others like it. These are not different components of the process, with separate activities attached to them; they are different perspectives on a single, unitary process. But to understand this process, and examine our own practices that are designed to bring it about, I think we need some in-depth, rich perception of language such as this. I think that, whenever we say that someone has "learnt" something, it means that all these resources for meaning are now in place.