CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND OUTLINE

1.0 Decontextualisation

One of the fundamental properties of human language is its ability to be used in displacement. Indeed, this property may well be considered one of the design features of human language. The use of language in displacement refers to the use of language to talk about things and events that are remote in time and place, to recount past events, to plan future activities or simply to create things and events that have never - and possibly could never - exist. Hoijer (1969:60) points out that the use of displaced speech gives to physical experience a sense of continuity and enables humans to work out problems "in the absence of the physical situations in which these problems arise."

The use of language in displacement is the issue that is addressed in this study. In recent years, such language use has often been referred to as "decontextualisation" or the use of decontextualised language. At least it is assumed that these two terms are synonymous: rarely is the term 'displaced language' used, the term 'decontextualised' language apparently being perceived as being more appropriate. From a functional linguistic perspective, however, the expression 'decontextualised' language is problematic, for it suggests that there can exist language without context. According to functional linguistic theories such as the systemic-functional (henceforth SF) model

language is operational within some context; in the words of Halliday (1985/89:45) "All use of language has a context." Perhaps the only exception to this general principle is the language of dictionary citations and citations found in textbooks about language, though even here the context in which citations are used and interpreted may be identified by their locations. Nevertheless, the use of the term 'decontextualised' language persists even in the writings of proponents of functional linguistic models, and clearly it has some referential basis.

1.1 Aims of the Research

The question of interest, then, is: what, precisely, is decontextualised language? To seek an answer to this question, I will first review what is meant by the term in the writings of those who use it. The term is to be found mainly in discussions of cognitive development, the development of literacy and in comparisons of spoken and written language. It is thus a concept which has its currency in educational linguistics. The term is also used in the work of the British sociologist of education, Basil Bernstein. Bernstein (1990) uses the term to characterise pedagogic discourse, and, indeed, distinguishes between decontextualisation and recontextualisation. These processes of de- and re-contextualisation may in fact be viewed as the same process considered from two different angles - two sides of the same coin. The emphasis in this study, however, will be on decontextualised language rather than on recontextualised language.

The first step therefore will be to clarify what is meant by the term and to re-articulate the phenomenon expressed by it in a way which is theoretically motivated. In addition to clarifying the meaning of the expression 'decontextualised language' this study also seeks to locate whatever it is that is referred to by the term within the framework of a linguistic theory. In order to have theoretical vigour the concept must be incorporated within a framework in which the notion of context has more than an ad hoc status in relation to language. Indeed, the concept of context is itself problematic in most linguistic theories which recognise its significance. The only theory which would seem to offer scope for the incorporation of the concept of decontextualisation is one in which the relation between context and language has been theorised, e.g. the systemic functional model of language.

This study, however, is not simply about re-defining terms for the sake of theoretical clarity. The review of the use of the term 'decontextualisation' in the literature will not only establish its signification and value; it will also highlight the significance of the concept in the concerns of those who use it. It appears that variation exists in the use of 'contextualised' versus 'decontextualised' language. In view of the importance attached to decontextualised language, it would seem appropriate to enquire into the social correlate(s) of variation in its use. Investigation of such variation and its social correlates in the talk of mothers to their preschool

children, is therefore, a primary aim of this study.

The research reported here will thus address two issues: i) the value and signification of the term 'decontextualisation'; and ii) the social significance of variation in the use of 'decontextualised' language. The first issue is concerned with the identification of the phenomenon itself: what does the term 'decontextualisation' refer to? If all text is related to its context in some specific way, how can any text be considered 'decontextualised? If this phenomenon can be calibrated with some parameter of context as the term suggests, what are the linguistic devices associated with its realisation? What is the nature of these linguistic phenomena in terms of a multi-stratal model of language such as the SF model? The second issue treats 'decontextualised' language as a variety. The question here concerns the use of the variety: is there variation in the use of language referred to as 'decontextualised'? If there is, with what attributes of speakers is such variation associated, for example, social class or sex of the interactants?

1.2 Structure of the Study

In order to establish the meaning of the term decontextualised language the use of the term by various scholars will be reviewed in Chapter Two and it will become apparent that the term opposes 'contextualised' language use. It will be seen that the dimension of language use of which the terms 'contextualised' and 'decontextualised' are the poles

refers to the degree to which language is dependent for its interpretation on the context of its production.

The concept of context is thus central to the present undertaking. In Chapter Two the concept of context in the study of language will be reviewed and it will be shown that the terms context-dependent and context-independent are themselves as theoretically misleading as contextualised and decontextualised. Consequently, a set of terms will be introduced which are theoretically motivated by the postulated nature of the relationship between language and context within the SF linguistic model.

The review of context in Chapter Two will highlight the relation between language, text and context as propounded by Halliday and Hasan. Halliday's multi-functional multi-stratal model of language will be reviewed in Chapter Two and the relation between context and language will be discussed. The relation of context to language postulated in this model will show that the concepts of 'contextualised' and 'decontextualised' language use may be calibrated with a concept already current within the SF model of context, i.e. that which refers to the role of language in the social process. This concept is an aspect of a parameter of context that, within SF theory, is considered relevant to language, i.e. Mode of discourse. In Chapter Three this linguistically relevant aspect of context will be shown to be realisationally related to the rhetorical mode of

discourse.

The postulated relation between text and context on the one hand, and between text and lexicogrammar on the other locates the problem of decontextualisation firmly within the purview of discourse analysis: the relation between text and context is a problem in text linguistics or discourse analysis.

Text is a semantic unit realised in patterns at the lexicogrammatical stratum of language. But a text is itself the realisation of a stratum outside language - that of context: in Halliday's (1978) terms text is semantic choice in social context. According to the SF model, context (outside language) activates choices in meaning which in turn activates choices in wording. Study of the relation between text and context then is study of the interface between language form, language meaning and society. The interfacing object, i.e. facing both to society and to language, is the text considered as a semantic entity.

Of the three phenomena - context, text and lexicogrammar and phonology considered as objects of linguistic study, it is the latter - lexicogrammar and phonology - whose units, structures, classes and systems have been most clearly enunciated. Halliday postulates a multi-functional view of meaning in which each of three kinds of meaning are simultaneously expressed in any one unit of the lexicogrammar by different structures. Thus, taking the lexicogrammatical unit clause, the postulate is that there exist three different perspectives each of which correspond to one of the three kinds of meaning or metafunctions the clause expresses. The structures of transitivity - types of processes and the participants involved in the processes - together with dependency relations between units of the same rank tend to express ideational meaning; the structures of mood - Subject and Finite - express interpersonal meaning; and the structures of i) Theme and ii) Given and New express textual meaning, the former being involved in the contextualisation of the discourse, the latter in the organisation of information.

How is the use of 'decontextualised' language to be investigated? Is it possible to say that this or that instance of language use - a text - is decontextualised i.e. context-independent, as opposed to contextualised, i.e. context-dependent? In fact, the issue is not so simple for two reasons:

i) the terms - decontextualised versus contextualised language - are too gross; each is too undifferentiated, for it would seem that the use of one kind as opposed to the other is a matter of degree;

ii) it is difficult to relate these terms to the function of such language use in the lives of speakers, beyond saying, following Bernstein (1990), that decontextualised language is a feature of instructional discourse.

What then are the formal linguistic features of

'decontextualised' and 'contextualised language'? Or should the question be: what kinds of meanings are expressed by 'decontextualised' as opposed to 'contextualised' language? To answer these questions, consider informally instances of the kind of language that is associated with a) the most contextualised language use; and b) the most decontextualised language use:

a) the most 'contextualised' language use would seem to be the use of language to get someone to do something, what Halliday has termed language as action: demanding (or, for that matter, giving) goods and services; in such language use the doer and the doing are typically located in the spatio-temporal here-and-now;

b) the most 'decontextualised' language use would seem to be a particular use of language as reflection: demanding or giving information in which i) the entities involved are generic and the events refer to all occasions; or ii) the entities are absent and the events refer to past or future occasions.

The informal features of 'contextualised' and 'decontextualised' language use postulated above are semantic features: rather than referring to formal linguistic criteria, they refer to such meanings as:

i) exchanging information versus goods or services;

ii) spatio-temporally present versus absent entities;

iii) events unfolding in the here-and-now versus habitually or in the past or future.

However, as Lamb (1969:47) puts it, what connects

meanings with the sounds that express them is linguistic structure. In other words, meanings are only accessible via words and structures so that the wordings which express these meanings must also be specified. Thus, for example, tense selections in the verbal group typically express the direction of the event spoken about relative to the moment of speaking but this is not invariably so; there are other ways, for example, by temporal adjuncts or dependent clauses. Thus while linguistic forms express meanings there is not a one to one relation between form and meaning.

These informal criteria for the identification of 'contextualised' and 'decontextualised' language use will be applied to conversations between mothers and their preschool children in Chapter 3 in order to clarify the concepts.

It is suggested above, that the unit of analysis of decontextualised language is the text. If this is the case, what are a text's constituent units? Hasan (e.g. 1991) proposes that the basic constituent unit of text is the message. As suggested by the informal list of meanings at risk in the use of 'decontextualised' as opposed to 'contextualised' language given above, certain meanings or semantic features of messages form the basis of the analysis of 'decontextualised' language use. The systematisation of the analysis in the form of semantic networks of messages will be discussed in Chapter 4 where the processes involved in the 'translation' of semantic categories into their

lexicogrammatical realisations will also be examined.

From the informal list of semantic features given above, it might be thought that it is the components of messages - entities and events - that are at risk in the use of 'decontextualised' and 'contextualised' language. However, an informal analysis presented in Chapter Three will be used to prepare the ground for arguing that not all entities in a message are equally relevant to this identification. Rather, it will be argued that the entity in question has certain specific properties that set it apart from other entities. It will be argued that this category of entity together with the temporal orientation of the event may remain constant for more than a single message and that this phenomenon suggests the recognition of an intermediate unit of text. In other words, a message may be regarded as the constituent of an intermediate unit of text, this unit being recognised by the configuration of a particular entity and event orientation. This unit is termed here a rhetorical unit.

The different types of entity and the different temporal categories of event define the kinds of rhetorical units. It is suggested in Chapter Three that these classes of rhetorical unit construe the contextual parameter known as the role of language in the social process, for, seen from the perspective developed here they are categories of a text's rhetorical mode.

The systems of message and message component meaning that are relevant to the construal of the kinds of rhetorical units identified in the mother-child conversations in Chapter Three will be discussed in Chapter Four and presented as system networks in Chapter Five together with the realisation statements that translate these meanings into wordings.

Does any single instance of language use - any text - involve language of one kind or the other, i.e. decontextualised or contextualised language, or is there a mix of the two types in any specific instance? It would seem that even in what is considered to be the most decontextualised use of language, i.e. the written language of academic articles, there is a mixture. Conversely, even within the most 'contextualised' uses of language, i.e. exchanging goods and services, the use of decontextualised language may be called for. The question then becomes: what is the relation between decontextualised and contextualised language use in any specific text and how is the relation expressed?

If all language use is considered to be contextualised, i.e. related to its context of use, then it follows that 'decontextualised' language is contextualised. A further aim in the systematisation of the concept of decontextualisation is to show in a concrete way how decontextualised language is contextualised. These questions will be illustrated in the analysis in Chapter Three where it will be seen that a text may consist of more than a single rhetorical unit. If more

than one rhetorical unit is involved in the constitution of a text, what is the relationship between these constitutive rhetorical units and does it vary? These questions are addressed in Chapter Six.

Chapters Four to Six are thus concerned with the conceptualisation and development of a framework for the analysis of decontextualised language use. This framework is applied in the analysis of mother-child talk in Chapter Seven. Here the possibility of variation in the use of decontextualised language will be investigated in the talk of eight mothers with their preschool children. If differences are found between mother-child dyads in their use of 'contextualised' versus 'decontextualised' language, the question is raised: are such differences associated with attributes of the dyads and if so, what attributes? Such variation is predicted by previous studies (e.g. Bernstein, 1973, Adlam and Turner, 1977) in which lexicogrammatical features of children's talk were investigated. The question will be addressed: what, if anything, does the present analysis of mother-child discourse add to previous studies.

Enunciation of the units, structures, classes and systems at the semantic level has been pioneered and is progressing while those at the level of context are still largely pre-theoretical. Despite the fact that pioneering work has been undertaken at the level of semantics (e.g. Halliday, 1975; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Hasan, e.g. 1987, 1988; Martin, 1992) there is

little consensus about even the basic constituent units of analysis in spoken discourse. The rank-scalar model of Sinclair and Coulthard will be briefly reviewed in Chapter Eight as will the dependency-based model of Thompson and Mann (1987). These models will be discussed in relation to the constituency model proposed here. It will be shown that one of the advantages of the model presented in this study is its applicability to both spoken and written discourse.

2.0 Data and Conventions

The set of texts which form the database for this study are drawn from Hasan's corpus of mother-child interaction. This data consists of transcripts of dialogues between mothers and their preschool aged children while the two interactants are engaged in eating a meal together. No third person is present for more than a minute or two and researchers not at all. Control of the audio recording equipment was entirely in the mothers' hands as, indeed, was the decision to record the particular interaction and to permit it to be used for research purposes. The recordings represent, as far as can be judged, natural interaction between mother and child. Further details regarding the subjects and the mode of data collection are to be found in Hasan (e.g. 1989).

The process of transcription involved, as the initial step in the analysis, the segmentation of the talk into messages to which numbers were assigned in sequential order. The basis of such segmentation is explained in

Chapter Four. The conventions used in the transcription of these dialogues are as follows:

Mother = M ; child = C

unintelligible item = [?]

uncertain transcription of item = [? item]

overlapping speech = [155 M [message
e.g. 156 C [message

pause in conversation = ..

more dots = lengthier pause

Transcription commentary = (IN CAPITALS)
e.g. 65 M *Are you going to eat that?* (LAUGHING)

Speaker does not allow time for hearer to answer a question = ?*
e.g. *157 M What's that one got?**
158 Has that one got a seed?

Interrupted speech = - e.g. *158 M I think you -*

Elaborating message interrupting primary message = <17>
e.g. *16 M It gives you a pain <17> doesn't it?*
17 when it's going down

It is hopefully obvious from the preceding discussion that this study will need to concern itself with the analysis of discourse. One of the consequences of doing discourse analysis is the need to present extended segments of text for illustrative purposes. This is done in the following chapters, where, in order to conserve space and to mark them off from the rest of the text, illustrative examples are presented in smaller type and italicised. Throughout the thesis, italics indicate examples from the mother-child dialogues.

Most of the interactions from which these illustrative examples are drawn are presented in their entirety in Volume 2, Appendix A. Occasionally, an illustrative example has been used that occurred in a similar interactional frame between members of a dyad which is not amongst the eight used in the indicative study and presented in Appendix A. Volume 2 also contains appendices B and C. In Appendix B the linguistic interaction of the HS dyad which is the first dialogue in Appendix A is analysed according to the framework developed in this study; in Appendix C, the same framework is applied to a fragment of written text.

3.0 Outcomes of the Research

There are three outcomes expected of this research. It is hoped that it will:

i) elucidate the concept of decontextualisation; in the process, the clarification of the phenomenon to which the concept refers will, in an apparent paradox, demonstrate how the linguistic resources are deployed to contextualise text;

ii) complement Hasan's research on semantic variation, providing an additional way of investigating Bernstein's theory of coding orientation;

iii) by integrating the indicative study with Hasan's research results, and following Bernstein, show how, in the process of primary socialisation of young children, the semantic choices that mother-child speakers make are activated by the different orders of relevance held by speakers due to the social relations into which they enter by virtue

of their positioning within the social division of labour.

This is, then, an applied linguistic study which has had the consequence of extending theory in the process of its application.

CHAPTER TWO

DECONTEXTUALISATION, CONTEXT AND LANGUAGE

1.0 Introduction

The term decontextualisation is problematic because, from a functional linguistic perspective, all language is operational within some context. Yet the term 'decontextualised' language persists even in the writings of proponents of functional models of language and clearly it has some referential basis. In this chapter, I will attempt to clarify what is meant by the term in order to be able to re-articulate it in a way which is theoretically motivated. To this end, I will review the use of the term by various scholars and it will become apparent that the term opposes 'contextualised' language use. It will be seen that the dimension of language use by reference to which these varieties are identified has to do with the degree to which language is perceived to be dependent for its interpretation on the context of its production.

However, this formulation suggests a narrow interpretation of the concept of context. The concept of context will therefore be reviewed in the second section of this chapter. It will be argued that the concept of context deployed by most writers tends to be a-theoretical. Indeed, Levinson (1983) bemoans the fact that there is no theory which links context and language in any systematic way.

Levinson's remark, though made some years ago, remains