4 Wherefore context? The ontogenesis of meaning exchange\textsuperscript{1} [2001]

‘The tongue finds the aching tooth,’ said Lenin, meaning that the constant return to a teasing question indicates that ‘there is something behind it’, it bears witness to the non-resolution of the question. (Pêcheux 1983: 55)

4.1 Introduction

There is no discourse analysis in this paper. Nor is it concerned with that enormously popular topic, namely discourse and social change. The paper thus offers neither any technicalities that can be readily borrowed and quickly applied to the analysis of another text of one’s choosing, nor does it make an appeal to our moral sense of responsibility, which is such a vogue in the social sciences today. Instead its interest lies simply in considering certain fundamental questions in the so-called ‘context theory’. Here too the problems I raise are not entirely novel, though I believe despite their importance, they are much misconstrued. The fundamental problem addressed by this paper has to do with the very basis for the recognition of the category of context; why is it necessary for a linguistic theory to recognize this category? And what are the attributes of this category? What justification is there for suggesting a particular set of attributes as essential to it? One might object that these questions have already been asked (e.g. see Halliday 1970a, 1975a, 1979b, etc.) and that we know all the answers. True, we do in a way; but I believe our approach to context has been a half-way approach. In this paper I will suggest a way of conceptualizing context which will hopefully enhance our understanding of the place of context in the system and process of language.
To this end, I will begin my discourse by first presenting in Section 4.2 a very brief and focused view of how the recognition of context has been validated in two major linguistic approaches. This will allow me to draw attention to a fundamental lack in the popularly held views. Following on this conclusion I will suggest that to understand the full significance and value of the category of context, we need to look into the early acts of communication by neonates. I discuss this activity in Section 4.3. Recent research in the domain of human brain/mind suggests that human beings are not so much *homo grammaticus* as they are *homo semioticus*. There appears to be a (bio)-logical necessity for semiosis, i.e., exchange of meaning: the human neonate is genetically predisposed to social acts (Brothers 1997). What this means is that the *homo semioticus* is, just as importantly, also the *homo sociabilis*. This close relation between sociality and semiosis offers a valuable insight into the category of context.

Current literature on context overwhelmingly supports the view that language in use presupposes an environment, a context for interacting. I will argue that neonate semiosis is no exception to this general principle: it too presupposes a social environment, a context, as has been demonstrated by the research conducted by several scholars e.g., Bateson, Bullowa, Brazelton and Trevarthen, to name a few. Their research is on pre-linguistic interaction – or more accurately, on proxemic semiosis – which provides valuable insight into a socio-historical stage necessary to the development of (proto-)linguistic semiosis such as recorded by Halliday (1973a, 1975a), Painter (1984, 1989, 1996), Torr (1997), which in turn is the foundation for the development of communicative competence examined by several other scholars writing within the framework of pragmatics (see, for example, Ochs and Schieffelin 1979). In my view, these researches argue for the centrality of context to the evolution and development of all semiotic modalities, not just language. The perspective thus offers a direction for answering the questions raised above. Having discussed these themes in Section 4.3, I will go on to present some implications of treating context as a phenomenon that is as much responsible for the development of language as it is for the formation of the human mind. These implications cover a wide range of linguistic theory, including of course the origin of the functional nature of languages as well as linguistic variation.

Section 4.4 will briefly address the question of linguistic functionality. If functionality in semiotic systems originates in the role of context in shaping the semiosis, then logically the principle of functionality should extend to all primary semiotic modalities, not just language. The important question for linguistic functionality is how it is articulated within the system,
and what we take to be the justification for its recognition. Is it something as local and piecemeal as words for snow and camel and colour, or is it something that characterizes the form of language in a deeper sense? Most readers will be familiar with Halliday’s hypothesis (Halliday 1970a, 1973a, 1975a, 1977b, 1979b, etc.), according to which there exists a realizational relation between the contextual frame and the metafunctions of language. The view of context offered here presents a compatible perspective.

Due to its origin in context, linguistic metafunctionality is a universal feature of human languages. Moreover its articulation within any one language is likely to be invariable: no matter what variety of English you use, its metafunctional make up will be the same as that of any other variety. On the other hand, the principle of variation in language by definition argues that systems within the same language will differ from each other significantly. In Section 4.5, building mainly on the work of Bernstein (1990, 1996), I will attempt to show how variation is an invariable condition of the linguistic process, affecting aspects of text formation.

4.2 Wherefore context? The traditional response

In the 1960s, context was a notion remarkable by its absence from the discourse of dominant linguistics: to express concern with context was to banish oneself to the outer periphery of the legitimate boundaries of that discipline. Today, except perhaps for a die-hard minority, the notion of context has captured the centre-stage position so that concern with context – or more accurately, the perspective adopted on context – defines one’s location within the now much more enriched discipline of linguistics. To those interested in the study of language as a social process, today’s popularity of context is certainly preferable to yesterday’s resounding silence. But interestingly at least in one respect, the two situations appear curiously alike: today when so much is being written on and around the notion of context, the question of the basis of its relation to language still remains almost precisely where it was in the era of its neglect. In fact it would not be an exaggeration to say that despite many very significant developments in the so called context theory, there has been almost no change so far as ideas about the place of context in the system and process of language are concerned: context still remains overwhelmingly a category whose recognition in linguistics is made necessary by the exigencies of language use – by the fact that people talk to each other. From this point of view, the concept has stayed pretty much where Firthian linguistics, building on the
work of Malinowski, placed it some seventy-odd years ago. To appreciate the thrust of the above remarks, consider two accounts of the role of context in the study of language. The first is an extract from Firth published first in 1950:

In the most general terms we study language as part of the social process, and what we may call the systematics of phonetics and phonology, of grammatical categories or of semantics, are ordered schematic constructs, frames of reference, a sort of scaffolding for the handling of events. … Such constructs have no ontological status and we do not project them as having being or existence. They are neither immanent nor transcendent, but just language turned back on itself. … ‘context of situation’ is best used as suitable schematic construct to apply to language events, and that it is a group of related categories at a different level from grammatical categories but rather of the same abstract nature. (Firth 1957: 181–182)

The context of situation is a convenient abstraction at the social level of analysis and forms the basis of the hierarchy of techniques for the statement of meaning. The statement of meaning cannot be achieved by one analysis at one level, in one fell swoop. … Descriptive linguistics is a sort of hierarchy of technique by means of which the meaning of linguistic events may be, as it were, dispersed in a spectrum of specialized statements. (Firth 1957: 183)

The second is a contemporary statement from Goodwin and Duranti (1992: 3) following Firth (1957) some forty years later:

When the issue of context is raised it is typically argued that the focal event cannot be properly understood, interpreted appropriately, or described in a relevant fashion, unless one looks beyond the event itself to other phenomena (for example cultural setting, speech situation, shared background assumptions) within which the event is embedded, or alternatively the features of the talk itself invoke particular background assumptions relevant to the organization of subsequent interaction (…). The context is thus a frame (Goffman 1974) that surrounds the event being examined and provides resources for its appropriate interpretation: … The notion of context thus involves a fundamental juxtaposition of two entities: (1) a focal event; and (2) a field of action within which the event is embedded.
To be sure, there are some important differences in the way that the category of context is conceptualized in these two approaches, but what I wish to draw attention to is the factor common to both: whether context is viewed as an abstraction as in Firth, or as an objectively real phenomenon as in Malinowski or in Goodwin and Duranti, the justification for the recognition of the category is that it is needed in order to make viable statements of meaning about (speech) events: attention to social environment is necessary simply because this is where the social process of language manifests itself; it forms the natural background for the event. It should be added that ascribing this remark to either Firth or Malinowski without further elaboration would be somewhat unfair since they were concerned with the wider reach of the notion of context, not simply with context as a back-drop (see Section 4.3).

That there is truth in this claim is self-evident; and the work developed over the last few decades, particularly in SFL, has amply demonstrated the truth. I would argue we are dealing only with half the truth: to view the relations of context and language in this limited way has, in general, obscured a crucial part of the story. By focusing on context from solely the point of view of language as process, much modern linguistics has unwittingly been led into ignoring the equally important question of the relations of context to the system of language. Context has remained a category whose place in linguistic theories is just to illuminate the nature of parole, not of langue. The implication is not far behind that language as system has a being outside the context of the social conditions of human existence. This perspective on context would obviously be welcome to those linguistic theories which actually do locate the genesis of the language system entirely outside communal existence. For such theories, the category of context is a good device for ‘mopping up’ some of the problems that inhere in an essentially extra-social view of language: to bring back the banished realities of language use, all one needs to do is to, say, postulate a communicative competence side by side with the biologically bestowed linguistic competence, and suddenly the problems seems to be resolved. This is the kind of approach where context becomes a mundane ‘reality’, language a mysterious mental organ, and grammar becomes knowledge encrypted in the human brain at birth.

Clearly in theories of this kind, context, in the true Derridean fashion, can only act as a supplement for a lack in the theory itself. But it is the nature of supplements that they only do local repairs: context viewed simply as the frame for some focal communicative event is no exception to this rule. The most crucial problem it leaves unresolved is, ironically, the
problem of the theoretical status of context itself: if context has no part in
the genesis of language as resource for exchange of meaning, how come
it possesses such wide efficacy in revealing the nature of that same lan-
guage when it occurs in actual uses of decidedly varied kind? What is the
mechanism that enables an a-social linguistic/grammatical competence to
become socially responsive to the varied uses of language? How does com-
municative competence arise?

Of course there is no logical necessity for mutual exclusion of parole
and langue: they are not like conceptual allophones incapable of existing
in the same theoretical environment. Viewing context as necessary to the
explication of language use in no way excludes the possibility of its inter-
vention in the genesis of language. Quite the contrary: it does appear rea-
sonable to assume that there must exist some principled relation between
use and resource – the actual and the potential, the instance and the system,
the parole and the langue, call it what you will. And if that is the case,
then it appears more than likely that a theoretical category such as context
possessing the potential of identifying what meanings might be relevant
and appropriate to a given occasion of talk, might at the least have some
interesting contribution to make in illuminating the nature of language as a
resource for meaning. I suggest that both Malinowski (1923, 1935) and Firth
(1957) must have reasoned along these lines. I say this because, although
I myself have not come across any such explicitly expressed arguments
in either scholar, it is an assumption of such reasoning that would explain
their efforts to link context to the ontogenesis of language.6 Through his
notions of variant speech fellowships, and of social variation in language
use, Firth (1957: 177–189) seems in particular to draw attention to the
problem of the relation between the language one uses in language events
and the language that grows with one as one grows into a member of a his/
her speech fellowship. Goodwin and Duranti arrive at a compatible conclu-
sion though their point of departure is somewhat different:

If indeed language development starts as part of a social matrix and
the child’s egocentric speech is in fact internalized social speech, we
should be questioning the adequacy of child language acquisition
models based on a notion of linguistic structure as an independent
level, not affected, in its most basic nature, by the conditions of lin-
guistic performance. Indeed, it would seem that any kind of language
acquisition device would have to be able to both read, i.e. interpret,
and reformulate (or filter) some aspects of the context that give mean-
ing and form to speech signals. (Goodwin and Duranti 1992: 21)
Following Malinowski and Firth, Halliday had reached the above conclusion some 25 years ago in his study of an infant learning how to mean (1973a, 1975a). This account of language development is in harmony with the claim about linguistic functionality (Halliday 1970a): *the nature of language has to be functional since language grows out of languaging and languaging itself is a form of social life*. Valuable as this work is, I suggest that to appreciate the part that context plays in shaping the language of individuals in a community, we need to go beyond (proto-) linguistic semiosis to the earlier stage of proxemic semiosis.

### 4.3 Context in early semiosis

Despite the popular appeal of Pinker’s (1994, 1995) ‘quaint’ expression, recent research in neuro-science (Edelman 1987, 1992; Dennett 1991) suggests that it is not the grammar of human language as such that could possibly be viewed as a ‘human instinct’: rather, it is, in fact, the predisposition to semiosis which deserves that nomenclature. The research reported by Brothers (1997) on the genetic basis of human sociality makes a strong case for an inborn urge for semiosis, since the sociality of a specifically human variety is impossible without semiosis of a specifically human kin.⁷ Systematic observation of neonates has established convincingly (Bateson 1975; Brazelton 1961; Brazelton, Koslowski and Main 1974; Bullowa 1979b; Lewis and Rosenblum 1974; Shotter 1978; Trevarthen 1974; Halliday 1975a; Reddy, Hay, Murray and Trevarthen 1997) that babies are born communicators, engaging in what has been variously described as ‘pre-speech’ (Trevarthen 1974), or ‘exchange of attention’ (Halliday 1975a) or ‘proto-conversation’ (Bateson 1975).⁸

#### 4.3.1 Two conditions for the development of language

However, it is also quite obvious that for their early semiotic acts babies do not use the semiotic system of language in the ordinary sense of that term. What they use, instead, is the proxemic modality, enlisting their bodies as their expressive resource. This is not surprising given the state of the neuronal and organismic maturity of the neonate (see, especially, Edelman 1987, 1992 on the pre-requisites for linguistic semiosis). What this suggests is that it is not grammatical structures such as NP, VP, or transformational algorithms which are likely to be the biological ‘given’:
recent research in the formation of ‘mind’ makes it difficult to believe that a neonate’s brain could act as a material container housing pre-packaged categories of grammar as implied generally by the dominant model of linguistics. It seems considerably more likely that what the infant brings at birth is something much more basic and general – some neuronal affordance that enables the brain to function as a resource for supporting the inherent design features common to all human semiotic systems including language. The postulate of a biologically endowed faculty of this abstract nature suggests, in turn, that at the highest level of abstraction, semiotic systems must be alike, which is of course not to claim syntactic identity. Given the scope of this paper, I shall not develop this claim any further, but note recent descriptions of certain distinct semiotic systems (O’Toole 1994; Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; van Leeuwen 1991a) which appear to support this position.

What does it mean to claim that babies have a natural predisposition for semiosis, so that from a few weeks old, they appear to engage another in pre-speech conversations or in interactive exchange of attention? In answering this question, we need look no further than ordinary everyday experiences: most of us have noticed a baby perhaps just a few weeks old focusing on some person or even an inanimate object, with her tiny body straining in an effort to address – or at least, this is how we adults, who happen to be around the baby, interpret that physical posture. And it is here, in this tendency to interpret the baby’s focusing of attention as a meaningful episode, that context first impinges on the ontogenesis of semiosis. The physical posture of the baby is but a material phenomenon – what Harré (1993: 19) might call *action* of a kind. It is only when this material phenomenon can be treated *jointly* – by the baby and the immediate others in the baby’s life – as a device for making some meaning that its status changes from the material to the semiotic: Harré (*ibid.*) would call this an *act*, something that is significant in the literal sense of the word as Vygotsky (1962) argued; it signifies something but its becoming significant requires the joint participation of an acculturated other and the baby learning how to mean like other members of the speech fellowship. Let me emphasize two points here. First, there is the adult’s pleasure in participating in this dialogue, which is important, for it may be that so far as the neonate is concerned presence or absence of satisfaction is perhaps the most general meaning in all interactive activities. Second, it goes without saying that the neuronal make-up of the neonate brain is such as to support these early acts of semiosis (Edelman 1987, 1992): as some scholar remarked somewhere no amount of cooing to a cat/dog is going to enable
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the animal to develop human language, even though it may display a certain degree of comprehension. Brothers (1997) claims a genetic basis for attention to human (-like) faces, to hand and eye movements in all higher primates. In other words, the scene is set for the early proxemic engagement which is a necessary basis for the ontogenesis of all human semiotic systems (Halliday 1995a).

Notwithstanding Pinker (1994), the meanings babies mean cannot already be there inside their brain ready and packaged in innate syntax. In any event, the brain at birth cannot contain all the essential structures and evaluations arbitrarily associated with those meanings just straining to get out on exposure to the sound of someone speaking. Rather babies are, in fact, born meaning-makers in the following specific sense: as pointed out by the many scholars already mentioned, a neonate is as likely to initiate the exchange of attention as to respond to it. In other words, babies independently and non-randomly take the first step towards actions to which some meaning can be assigned. But even so, meaning making is essentially a joint activity: validation by an other is essential for seeing the action as an act, so turning the material into the semiotic. You need not, in fact you cannot, deliberately teach the baby to adopt the physical postures that she adopts as she begins to engage in this primary form of semiosis; nor can you teach the baby how to arrive at what I have called the principle of the conjunction of dissimilars which binds the signal and its meaning into a unity (see note 9): this is part of the biogenetic capital that the baby has inherited as a member of the human species; it forms an element, amongst some others, of the biological basis of her language development, and is far removed from the Chomskyan notion of innate grammar. But to build on such biogenetic foundation (Vygotsky 1978), to get it to function as a resource for her, the baby needs other social beings (Hasan 2005, 2009a, 2011b). Unless her physical moves are validated as moves having some semiotic value there is no reason to suppose that the baby would experience what I am inclined to call ‘interactive satisfaction’ – a sense of ‘semiotic success’. Indeed, in this sense, the very significance of what it is to engage in semiosis is jointly created by the baby and her caregivers, and I would suggest that, if for some reason, none of the baby’s initiatory attempts at engagements of this kind received any response, it is very likely that she would herself not develop a sense of those physical postures, those vocal patterns as some kind of semiotic move. To see some sensori-motor phenomenon as having a specific semiotic character, the baby needs an acculturated other as caregiver. In other words, the sociogenesis of meaning begins at a very early stage indeed and it typically takes the form of the
caregivers playing what are essentially *their* semiotic games, while passing them off as really the baby’s games, which turn into meaning because they are ratified by the baby’s state of satisfaction.

The importance of validation and reciprocity does not disappear as the child moves into language. In any event as many scholars (see, for example, discussion in Halliday 1973a, 1975a, 1995a; Trevarthen 1974; Lock 1978; Bullowa 1979b; Painter 1984, etc.) have pointed out, the move into language does not represent a sudden and sharp discontinuity: the baby is not propelled suddenly from silence or senseless babbling to linguistic semiosis, as was implied in the 1960s accounts of language acquisition. Under normal conditions, an 18-month-old infant has had an 18 month experience of being systematically engaged in semiosis (which is not the same as babbling), and to the extent that language is one semiotic system among many, the child’s familiarity with the most abstract design features of semiotic systems extends back to her first weeks of life. Some of the ways in which reciprocity by an other becomes integral to the development of language is well recorded by many scholars (Halliday 1973a, 1975a, 1979a; Trevarthen 1974; Trevarthen and Hubley 1978; Bruner 1978; Painter 1984; Torr 1997), to name a few. That this pattern of validation and reciprocity continues much longer than the very early stages of natural language development is borne out by Painter’s case study of a child beyond the age of four – the magic age at which according to the innatist model, the child is supposed to have already ‘mastered his mother tongue’ (Painter 1989, 1996). And so he has if ‘mother tongue’ is equated with basic structures of simple clauses: this simply reveals the impoverished sense of what it is to learn a mother tongue.

In the nativist model of language acquisition, validation and reciprocity are assigned no importance. The other is reduced to a vocalizing mouth producing the language data against which the child can test her innate grammars to select the right grammar to which she is exposed. The mind-making features that underlie the language ‘data’ – its reciprocity, its role in ‘scaffolding’ the child’s knowledge of language, in validating her developing sense of its practical power, i.e., what you can do with it, its inter-subjective nature – are all trivialized and made irrelevant in that frequently repeated phrase ‘exposure to language’. As I pointed out elsewhere (Hasan 1973c) if the reductive hypothesis supported by invoking this phrase were at all viable, then it would follow logically that if you played an audio recording of, say, Urdu day in and day out to an 18-month old living in a Chinese speaking family in some remote part of China, the baby would learn the language spouting forth from the audio recording.
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just as well as she would learn the Chinese of her speech fellowship. The absurdity of such a supposition can be ignored only by very committed theoreticians of language! Unless it can be established as an empirical fact that mere ‘exposure to language’ in isolation from its social context is sufficient for the ontogenesis of language, one is justified in maintaining that even in normal humans, language will not develop without contact with some culturally specific other(s), for the simple reason that it is only such a being who can validate, it is only such a being who will have the ability to reciprocate. As Brothers (1997: 68) points out ‘the human brain stripped of its intrinsic sociality, is in fact mindless’. Whatever the biogenetic capital that the neonate brings from birth, the complicity of the social is required to enable the child to develop a sense of the identity of an act as a semiotic act. The baby’s completely unconscious working out of the abstract design features of the semiotic systems (including the system of language) is predicated on sociogenetic intervention, and this implies the centrality of context in the process.

4.3.2 What does proxemic semiosis tell us about context?

The above account presents the barest outline of the essential nature of language development. However in this skeletal account of the ontogenesis of language two themes have been reiterated which are immediately relevant to our concerns with theorizing context. The first of these is the double condition for semiosis. On the one hand there is an affirmation of a biological basis for sociality: the human infant is genetically other-oriented. On the other hand, there is a biological basis for semiosis: the human infant is biologically programmed to cope with the basic content-expression principle, which is fundamental to all semiotic systems. The conjunction of content and expression at this early stage is likely to be entirely physiologically mediated – a pairing of the baby’s emotion and bodily action and ministrations is what signing is likely to implicate at this stage; and the locus for both is the neonate’s body. The second theme derives from this double foundation: the biological resources are a necessary condition, but not sufficient in themselves, for the ontogenetic development of a human semiotic system such as that of language. This biogenetic capital cannot be put to use without an interactive other.

It is in this second theme that I would locate the justification for the claim that context must form an integral part of any viable theory of language. Assuming that the foundation of linguistic semiosis is built on proxemic
semiosis, which itself cannot develop without interaction, we may claim that the category of context is needed because human languages as we know them cannot come about without context. Context can so effectively resolve the many problems in the study of language use because context is, from the very start, implicated in the genesis of language system. This goes some way towards answering the question included in the title of this paper: ‘wherefore context?’ At the same time, an examination of the neonate’s interaction allows us to identify those elements of the social environment which are essential for the coming about of these acts of semiosis.

Taking the fact of sociogenetic intervention as the starting point, we note that the engine for this intervention is the biogenetic urge for creating intersubjectivity, which implies, first and foremost, the recruiting of an other to act as an accomplice. This other stands in some social relation to the baby – parent, sibling, hired care-giver, and so on. From the very beginning then human semiosis occurs within a social frame, and this has far reaching consequences. The interacting adult is already socially positioned, and in time the effects of such positioning rub off on the growing infant (discussion Section 4.5), whose relation to the adult is continually (re-)defined, maintained and reinforced in and through these joint acts of semiosis. The implication is that the primary condition of human interaction is some variety of relation with an other: we must therefore take social Relation to be one main element of the neonate’s communicative environment. This aspect does not cease to have importance for the individual in any of the proverbial seven stages of human existence: communication always implies some variety of social relation between interactants.

Second, interaction presupposes Contact. In the first place there is the material aspect of contact – how the interactants are materially located vis-à-vis each other. In the case of interaction with a neonate, clearly this aspect is, as it were, predetermined: typically the interaction occurs face-to-face, implying the material co-presence of the interactants. But apart from this aspect, there is the semiotic aspect of contact – what sign systems are employed for reaching the other semiotically. In the early days of the neonate’s life, contact with the body of the other, including vocal contact, is the main means of semiosis. But it is the semiotic aspect of contact that becomes the means of bringing about sociogenetic intervention: adults all over the world use the modalities of communication that they are themselves most comfortable using. Which means, of course, that from a few days old, the neonate encounters not only paralinguistic noises of one kind or another but also the language of her speech fellowship, sometimes cut to suit the consumer’s size as for example by using ‘motherese’. But the
ordinary adult, who most probably knows nothing of Vygotsky’s principle of the ‘proximal zone of development’ is not daunted by the fact that the baby is as yet without language. The caregiver puts into practice the principle underlying this theory of development: together the care-giver and the baby take a linguistic tour of the baby’s immediate social world. It is thus that in time the baby gains familiarity both with the language of her speech fellowship and the worlds that this language construes. The socially positioned adult attending to the neonate is the most powerful device for the transmission of ideology though his behaviour towards the baby is hardly ever recognized as ‘teaching’ ideology.

Third, and last, interaction occurs with reference to some action: there has to be some perturbation in the even tenor of existence to bring about the convergence of interactants’ attention. In most adult interactions, this initial stage typically takes the form of verbal action, such as greeting and/or forms of address or other attention-enlisting moves. The neonate is unable to use the system of sign that we normally think of as language, but this does not mean that avenues of initiating action are closed to the infant. The simplest act on the baby’s part is to express her inner state, e.g. to cry, to gurgle. I am not suggesting that such actions either have a purpose in the sense we understand that term or that they are necessarily directed towards another with the intention of producing a reaction, though the work of Brazelton, Bullowa, Trevarthen and others does suggest that even a-few-weeks-old babies display remarkable evidence of interactive intentionalties. Whatever the case, it is some initial action on the part of the baby and/or the adult which brings about the convergence of their attention and acts as the occasion for creating contact, and where there is contact, there will be relation. And, of course, action and relation are two sides of the same construct: action without relation is strictly speaking impossible, while the quality of joint action produces what we see as some relation.

Action, Relation and Contact (ARC, for short) are thus the three essential components of context: they are quite literally a condition for the occurrence of any joint social activity irrespective of the semiotic system employed for creating and maintaining contact. These contextual parameters relate systematically to what systemic functional linguists have known since the early 1960s as Field, Tenor and Mode. Action, relation and contact are more general in nature: I think of ARC as relevant to any form of joint social practice, whether this involves language or not. By contrast, field of discourse, tenor of discourse and mode of discourse are, as the name suggests, specifically discourse related, and so would appear to imply language as the main, if not the only, sign system for creating and
maintaining contact, though in recent years these concepts have also been used to describe ‘texts’ produced in systems other than that of language (O’Toole 1994; Kress and van Leeuwen 1996). Whether the terms should be seen as interchangeable or not is, in any event, a minor matter; what is much more relevant is the set of arguments through which the structure of interactive context has been established here as relevant from day one of an infant’s life. The scenario I have sketched, seeking support from Edelman, Dennett, Brothers, Brazelton, Trevarthen, Halliday, etc., has suggested a fundamental role for context in the genesis of language: there can be no language without context.

4.3.3 Context and the system of language

This way of validating context as a fundamental theoretical category in linguistics appears to redress the balance. By emphasizing the centrality of context in the processes of the evolution and development of language, I am arguing the importance of context both in the shaping of language as system and in the working of language as a process. There is no exaggeration in the claim that the modelling of language as a social semiotic is impossible without invoking context as a primary base for semiotic activity (Hasan 2009a, 2013, 2014b). Context becomes the force which unites the biogenetic and the sociogenetic elements in the working of language whether seen as an ontogenetic process as in the above account or as a phylogenetic one (Halliday 1995a; Williams and Lukin 2004; Hasan 2004b). This in turn has important implications, some of which may be listed as follows.

First: context seen from this perspective has sufficient power for acting as the mechanism for the co-genesis (Marková 1990; Hasan 1992a, 1995, 1999b) of parole and langue. The role of context in the dialectic of instance and system (Halliday 1999; Hasan 2009a) suggests that, contrary to the popular view on linguistics, the metaphors of ‘execution’ and ‘score’ for parole and langue are a serious misreading of this relation (Halliday 1992a, 1996; Hasan 1996a).11 Although arguably there appear to be early hints in Firth, it is in fact Halliday (1992a, 1996) to whom we owe a fuller explication of the dialectics of system and instance. This is how Halliday puts it:

Saussure problematized the nature of the linguistic fact; but he confused the issue of instantiation by setting up langue and parole as if they had been two distinct classes of phenomena. But they are not. There is only one set of phenomena here, not two; language (the
linguistic system) differs from parole (the linguistic instance) only in the position taken up by the observer. *Langue is parole* seen from a distance, and hence on the way to being theorized about. (Halliday 1996: 30)

Second: given the basic attributes of context derived from an observation of neonate semiosis, and given the dialectic of instance and system, it seems reasonable to deduce certain features whose presence in language is logically predicated by the fact that for interaction to continue, the interactive means, here language, must be contextually sensitive. This allows an alternative approach to the validation of the claim of linguistic functionality, which is based on the exotropic nature of the linguistic theory (Hasan 1999c), and it adds a further dimension to the criteria suggested by Halliday (1970a, 1979b). There follow some theoretically interesting consequences, particularly for ideas on the relations of context, semantics and lexicogrammar which are briefly discussed in Section 4.4.

Third: since semiotic acts realize some cultural practice performed jointly by individuals in contexts that are specific to their own living of life – their own social positioning – it follows that every semiotic act is simultaneously both socio-historically unique because it is an individual’s act operative at a specific spatio-temporal location and also socio-historically recognizable because socially regulated and culturally positioned. *Both variance and invariance can thus be found in the language of a community*, and, in the last resort, both these attributes of language are due to the contextual shaping of language. This on the one hand suggests that social context is the indispensible basis for studies in linguistic variation, and on the other hand points to the possibility of exclusive focus on the homogeneity or heterogeneity of language: this focus is an artefact of the analyst’s point of view, not inscribed in the nature of language system as such, nor is it necessarily descriptive of a scholar’s approach.

Finally: register or speech variety emerges as but one principle of variation in language – what Gregory (1967) referred to as *diatypic variation*. In the nature of things, this variation is not unrelated to other principles of variation – those of accent, dialect and semantic orientation (as defined in Hasan 1989, 1992b, 1992c). These different principles of variation are not segregated one from the other: they are simply the expression of the various facets of an individual’s social conditions of existence, which implies that they inform the individual’s system of language. Not surprisingly, each principle of variation is typically manifested within one and the same instance of language use (discussion, Section 4.5).
The following section shows the relevance of this way of context validation to the postulate of linguistic functionality.

### 4.4 Context and metafunctionality: instance and system

I have argued above that the three essential attributes of context – Action, Relation and Contact – form the very basis on which, for the neonate, some bodily behaviour receives its definition as a semiotic event. This is bound to have repercussions for the semiotic systems since they evolve epigenetically with each occurring instance of interaction. An indication of this is provided, for example, by Brazelton and colleagues who describe infant strategies for regulating semiotic interaction, whereby the infant controls both the course of the (inter)action and her accessibility for contact with the other. In other words, within the semiotic systems there develop features which act as a resource for the management of action, relation and contact. Of interest is Brazelton’s view that disregard for the infant’s interactive rhythm tends to be dysfunctional for the development of her psyche, damaging the prospects of future interaction. Similarly studies conducted by Trevarthen and his colleagues reveal the infant’s sensitivity to the other and to her material environment of objects, processes and circumstances. As Reddy et al. point out:

… from the first weeks of life infants are highly sensitive to the quality of adult communication. Further, they respond not only to simple alterations in form (for example, from an active and responsive partner to a still, blank face), but appear to process manifold parameters of adult displays in unison, treating each complex whole as specifying distinct interpersonal positions. The strong affective quality of infant response to the adult’s unavailability or incomprehensible behaviour attests, too, to the fact that infant emotionality is intimately bound up with the state of mutual engagement, and there is a focused investment in achieving particular forms of contact. (Reddy et al. 1997: 257)

It seems to me that these and other such features of infant communication are an early manifestation of the functionality of the semiotic systems being used by the infant. Features of this kind which act as the resources for ensuring mutual engagement in interaction must keep pace with the increasingly complex changes in the developing patterns of interaction.
And there is every reason to suppose that as the maturing infant moves from the pre-speech proxemic semiosis to proto-linguistic semiosis, her developing semiotic system maintains the same regard for the important elements of the social environment. The seminal work of Halliday cited here and its replication and development by Painter (1984) and Torr (1997) demonstrates the trajectory of this development as it continues from proto-language into adult language.

The development of regard for the three basic elements of context is an essential condition for interactive satisfaction, and this is ultimately the basis for functionality in language: a semiotic modality which lacks efficacy for the conduct of semiotic acts is an anomaly, especially in view of the neonate’s genetic bias toward social semiosis. In systemic functional linguistics, the term ‘metafunction’ is used to refer to that inner organization of language whereby its form acts as a resource for construing meanings relevant to the parameters of Action, Relation and Contact (i.e. Field, Tenor and Mode). Much has been written on the realizational relations of contextual parameters and texts. The questions that have been raised are: what attributes of language justify the postulate of field, tenor and mode (Halliday 1975a: 130)? Or coming at the issue from the other direction: why is the structure of language as it is (Halliday 1973a)? While appreciating the importance of both these perspectives (Hasan 1993, 1995), in what follows I want to raise a slightly different question: what does language have to be like if it must satisfy the necessity of responding to the interactive context – what the speakers are doing, with whom, and how they and their communicative modalities work to organize the social relation and the practice? The asking of this question takes for granted the fact that the responsiveness to the elements of context displays itself in some manner in the instances of use, but the question shifts the focus of enquiry from instance – from individual texts – to system. The question may, thus, be rephrased as: given the dialectic of system and instance, what sorts of features may be expected to appear in the language systems over time as a logical corollary of the fact that language must, of necessity, continue to be responsive to action, relation and contact, as it keeps pace with the communicative needs of the interactants? So the perspective is from above, and what is under focus is the system – how the elements of context activate the elements of the semantic level, and meta-redundantly those of the lexicogrammatical level.

We may turn for this discussion to the contextual parameter of social Relation, i.e., tenor with specific reference to discourse. Like the other two elements of context, the parameter of relation is itself a complex of factors,
each of which is equally relevant to how the interactants see themselves vis-à-vis each other. Specifically, these factors have to do with the location of the interactants: (a) with respect to the action – what I have referred to as the *agentive role relation*; (b) with respect to power – i.e., *hierarchic role relations* based on, say, age, kinship, expertise, control of resources, and so on; and (c) with respect to the degree and quality of familiarity – what I have called *social distance*. However, the most general and pervasive factor locating the interactants vis-à-vis each other is with respect to their social positioning, using the term largely as in Bernstein (1990, 1996). The importance of this factor resides in its relation to the social subjects’ ideological stances (Section 4.5 for a more detailed discussion), through which all aspects of the interactive context are refracted. The implication is that what from some point of view might be thought of as the same social relation, e.g., that of authority as in mother-child relation, would invoke distinct orders of meaning depending upon the ideological stance of the adult. This implies in turn that if one wishes to specify the semantic features of the language system of the various speech fellowships in a community, these have to be stated at a certain degree of delicacy to permit the possibility of such non-random variation.

In being responsive to the interactants’ need to manage their social relation with the interactive other in the ways discussed above, language must develop meanings and wordings which construe the interactants’ discursive and evaluative attitudes in keeping with their perception of their location vis-à-vis the other. Some categories of meaning relevant to the realization of these attitudes would be such as the following:

- categories of ‘rhetorical stance’ whereby an exchange of messages is brought about;
- categories of a logic based on rhetorical stance which underlies exchange structures such as the nexus of command and its compliance/rejection; question and its answer/disclaimer, etc.;
- estimates of certainty, possibility, probability, obligation, discretion, etc.;
- perspective on phenomena, their evaluation as normal, positive or negative.

The lexicogrammatical resources for the realization of the above categories of meaning are found in the systems of mood, modulation, attitudinal modifications, and in evaluative prosody in the lexical items of the kind that Martin (1996) has discussed under the label of appraisal. It is not difficult to see how patterns such as those listed above might play an important part
Wherefore context?

in creating, maintaining and changing the interactants’ social relations. This can be appreciated by examining just a very short extract from a naturally occurring dialogue between a mother and her child. In this examination I will focus on one aspect of meaning-wording relations identified above:

**Example 1:**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mother</td>
<td>(1) put it on the stove (2) and leave it there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>child</td>
<td>(3) why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mother</td>
<td>(4) ’cause</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In her first two messages the mother’s rhetorical stance is exhortative (Hasan 1992b; Cloran 1994; Williams 1995), which is realized as imperative mood. The mother offers the child no discretion for rejecting, demurring, or considering other options. This does not mean that the child is prevented from doing any of these things – simply that from the point of view of the mother the situation is clear-cut; it admits of no such challenge as is obvious form her response to the child’s *why?* in message (3). Compare the following possibilities any one of which might have been used instead of the original message (1):

**Example 2:**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1a)</td>
<td>let’s put it on the stove</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1b)</td>
<td>let’s put it on the stove, shall we?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1c)</td>
<td>how about putting it on the stove?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1d)</td>
<td>why don’t we put it on the stove?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1e)</td>
<td>shall we put it on the stove?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1f)</td>
<td>could you put it on the stove?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1g)</td>
<td>I’d like you to put it on the stove</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1h)</td>
<td>it would be better to put it on the stove</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are of course other possibilities open to a speaker in roughly the same action environment. But examples (1a–1h) are enough to allow one to appreciate the contribution made by each in implying a subtly different social relation between interactants. Of course natural discourse is not like examples in a linguistic presentation: it normally consists of a large number of messages each of which carries information relevant to the social relation between the interactants; and typically each message sets up certain expectations about what is likely to be meant and worded thereafter. The liaison between social relation and patterns of meaning-wording discussed above is known as the ‘interpersonal metafunction’.

In this discussion, instead of looking at the metafunctional organization of language from below, I have examined it from above. As widely
recognized in the systemic functional theory, these two ways of examining a linguistic fact are not in mutual exclusion; rather they form part of the ‘trinocular perspective’ for validating categories of description (Halliday 1979b, 1984a, 1996). Remarkably, the conclusions I have reached are in agreement with those suggested for example in Halliday (1973b, 1979b), Hasan (1993), Martin (1992), Matthiessen (1995), etc.: tenor of discourse activates the interpersonal metafunction. The reason for the agreement is simple: the same phenomenon, i.e. metafunctionality, is the focus of attention, though from a different perspective. That being the case, rather than repeat the details of the liaison for the other two contextual parameters here, I would like to take my description of the origins of interpersonal metafunction (see also Hasan 1993, 1999b) as indicative of how one might go about describing a similar liaison between the contextual factor of Action with the patterns of wording-meaning which have evolved specifically in response to dealing linguistically with action. The resonance of action with a certain patterning of meaning and wording is what is known as the ‘ideational metafunction’, while a similar liaison between the contextual factor of CONTACT with certain patterns of meaning and wording is known as the ‘textual metafunction’. Figure 4.1 represents this metafunctional resonance.

Figure 4.1: A co-genetic perspective on context and content

It is, however, important to ask what, if anything, has been gained by introducing the perspective from above? One might add that there has already been a perspective from above for some time on the relations of context and metafunctionality in the systemic functional model: this is implicit in the dialectic of realization whereby context is said to activate the semantic and lexicogrammatical choices in a text (Halliday 1977a, 1992a) while the latter are said to construe the context relevant to the text (Halliday 1973a). What is perhaps somewhat different here is the status of context itself: I have argued that the centrality of context is predicated on the genetic basis of social semiotic activity by the neonate: the relevance
of context begins at a pre-linguistic stage. This is significant for it suggest
that the justification for the recognition of the category of context in the
last resort does not lie in the shape of the system of language; on the con-
trary, it is the shape of the system that depends on context – this as I have
said before is the meaning of the claim of functionality in language. So
the approach here is not simply from above – from context to linguistic
meaning and form – but also it is thoroughly exotropic (Hasan 1999c); on
the one hand, some inner properties of language are being examined from
the point of view of a phenomenon – social context – which, though it is
intimately bound up with the evolution of language, lies nonetheless out-
side language itself and has its roots in human nature; on the other hand,
the validity of the postulate of context itself does not have to depend on
the internal structuring of language. As I see it, context is a pan-semiotic
notion. In the end, the justification for postulating this category takes us
back to the biological make-up of the human organism: in this sense con-
text is the bridge between the biogenetic and the sociogenetic foundations
of language. What is justified by the functional organization of language is
the relevance of context, not its epistemological status. The internal struc-
turing of language goes a long way in supporting the claim of the epigeneto-
ic evolution of the language system.

If these views are accepted, then it seems that the discussion bears rel-
relevance to the old debate about the problem of validating the role of con-
text in the genesis of linguistic metafunctionality (Hasan 1995, for some
discussion). In the first place, such a relation is already indicated IF the
internal structure of language shows fairly clear demarcations of system
networks and structural patterns as suggested in Figure 4.1. Further, con-
sidering the way context operates in interaction, there is every reason to
suggest that in a specific instance of language use the three parameters of
Action (= field), Relation (= tenor) and Contact (= mode) will be perceived
by the speaking subjects as integrated, presenting themselves as a seamless
structure, an interactive occasion in which what, who, and how are not sep-
arate things; rather together they create a discursive unity. And this to my
mind argues, first, that in the process of language, the correlation between
these elements of context and individual metafunctions can only be proba-
bilistic, not mechanically determinate: this is in complete agreement with
Halliday’s claim of several years ago (Halliday 1977a, 1979b). It is point-
less to strain for an absolute one-to-one relation between, say, the field of
each specific text and the meaning and grammar that defines the ideational
metafunction. The more important question is: are there any semantic (and
lexicogrammatical) choices in texts which cannot be shown to be relatable
to these three parameters of context? Only if the answer to this is in the affirmative can we doubt the validity of the metafunctional hypothesis, and/or our description of the context based on the pattern of early semiotic practices. It seems to me that the separation of the parameters of context is inherently probabilistic. As such they are likely to be permeable – a point that I have emphasized since almost the very beginning of the discussion of context (Hasan 1973c, 1995, etc.). We cannot expect that one of these can have an instantial reality without the support of the other two: just as the instantiation of the category clause is impossible without the simultaneous mapping of each metafunction, so it seems that texts are realized by the whole metafunctionally informed ideational, interpersonal and textual semantics and grammar as a whole.

4.5 The heterogeneity of system: context, interaction and linguistic variation

Any mention of the system of language has to come to grips with the empirical fact that a living language has no other mode of existence except as an embodied semiotic resource, a point that Firth often emphasized. This fact would be quite irrelevant if the languages of individuals in the community were entirely homogeneous as postulated by Chomsky in the early 1960s: in that case, to describe one person’s language would be tantamount to describing the community’s language. But linguists have long recognized that language varies, both across individuals and within the one individual: ‘unity’ said Firth (1957: 29) ‘is the last concept that should be applied to language. Unity of language is the most fugitive of all unities.’ Naturally then language as in the language of a community, is a theoretical abstraction, not an actual fact, even if ‘our language’ has a reality that impinges strongly on us, its speakers. The pertinent question is how this reality is experienced by the members of a speech community. Observation of our language use suggests that typically individuals do not believe that everyone in their community has exactly the same language: we tend to act as if we believe that the most natural way of speaking is naturally ours; so far as others are concerned, they speak ‘posh, proper, slovenly, crude, with an accent’ and so on. These evaluative characterizations refer simultaneously to two ‘facts’: in the first place, they refer to something experienced in the flow of speech, and second, they refer to something in the living of life, something in the context of members’ social existence. In this section I will briefly discuss how the intervention of context in the ontogenesis of
language brings heterogeneity into the developing system of the growing individual’s language.

4.5.1 The larger canvas of human time and space

In talking earlier about the parameter of relation, I commented that social relation is really about the location of interactants vis-à-vis each other. Infants are born in a community that is always already there; and the care-giving adult is always located vis-à-vis others in a number of ways. Most variation in language is directly related to the contextual parameter of relation (tenor), but relation when it refers to human relation is a relative term. So far as variation is concerned, the perspective on relation may extend from the widest to the narrowest. From the wider point of view – call it the context of human history – there is the location of a community in time and space. So for example, in both these respects the Australian English speech community is located differently vis-à-vis other speech communities. The Australian English of today is considerably different from that spoken a century ago in Australia; and Australian English, at any time, thrives in Australia as it does nowhere else, notwithstanding the fact that speakers of this geolect will be found in nearly every corner of the globe. The Australian English of today represents a specific ‘geolect’ and ‘chronolect’, and no matter what other differences we might note within Australian English, in this respect all varieties of Australian English today are alike: each is a kind of modern Australian English. In this sense, a geolectal and chronolectal variety covers the speech community as a whole.

But hardly any aspect of language has sharply determinate boundaries. A fuzziness enters into the above situation due to language contact. Throughout human history, members of one speech community have come in contact with those of another. The twentieth century is perhaps extraordinary in the extent and intensity of exodus to the English speaking West, and Australian is no exception. Such contact typically produces types of English normally known as ‘migrant English’. It is however worth noting that the migrant English of a Vietnamese in Australia is likely to be notably different from the migrant English of a Vietnamese in the United States. To have the status of an Australian citizen is not the same thing as being a member of the Australian English speech community, and at what point a migrant Asian becomes a member of, say, the Australian speech community is a moot point. The complexity of this situation is an indication of the complexity of the concept of speech community, which does not simply
have to do with speech but also with affect to that speech and its speakers. Witness the language riots in various parts of the world.

4.5.2 Variation and speech fellowship

In most official literature on sociolinguistics, linguistic variation is viewed from a more local perspective: the geolect in the sense described above is taken as the starting point, whether this is ever explicitly stated or not. The fact that today’s Australian English represents the same geolectal and chronolectal variety does not mean that it is one monolithic, homogeneous system: the work of Mitchell (1946) and that of other sociolinguists has demonstrated this quite clearly. So, to begin with, there are varieties of accent (Abercrombie 1951) – a term that refers to approximately the same aspect of linguistic variation that Labov was later to call ‘social dialect’.

With some oversimplification, one might say that accent/social dialect – henceforth, sociolect – is on the one hand typically phonologically expressed: this is what constitutes its linguistic character. On the other hand, it is a linguistic means of ‘bonding’ to one’s primary community, i.e. Firth’s speech fellowship: this is what constitutes its contextual character. ‘A speech fellowship sees itself and hears itself as different from those who do not belong’ (Firth 1957: 186). Sociolects are one device for establishing such identifications. In the case of sociolects, what makes it obvious to an observer that someone does not belong is the fact that the patterns of noises they produce by way of speaking are not the same as that of the observer’s speech fellowship. In this sense, sociolectal features are indexical: they become a means of signalling who you are, i.e., where you and your speech fellowships are located vis-à-vis the wider speech community. This location is simultaneously identified by reference to a variety of interactant attributes such as social class provenance, gender, ethnicity, age, and so on. It is not necessary to emphasize the obvious fact that, on the one hand, these attributes are significant in the social organization of a community and on the other, they are relevant to the parameter of social relation. In fact, Bernstein (1990, 1996) would claim that what we are concerned with here are not two distinct things, namely, social organization and social relation: they are simply two perspectives on the same social phenomenon.

The infant’s first bond with her speech fellowship is mediated by her immediate contact with her caregiver, typically her parents and more specifically the mother, who in the nature of things is herself a member of some speech fellowship. If it is true that the neonate’s semiotic systems
– and that means all primary semiotic modalities not just the system of language, which arrives later on the scene for the child – receive their definition and identity in interaction with an other, then from the very moment of birth when the infant’s body comes in contact with the maternal body the infant is learning her speech fellowship’s way of being, doing and saying, in the sense of meaning. This is where the first early lessons about bodily behaviour begin to be learned; this is where the unconscious, the deepest stratum of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1990) begins to take shape; this is where the legitimacy of desire is established; and later, this is where the child’s identity as a member of a speech fellowship is confirmed, at least partially, by her adherence to sociolectally specific forms of speech. The ultimate principle that sets these practices in motion is social and semiotic, but what carries it on is *affect* – the intimate relation between the child and her caregiver, which is reinforced by the child’s semiotic successes, her interactive satisfactions. It has been often observed that accent – the expression of one’s sociolect – is the most persistent element of one’s being. This is not surprising: one would hardly expect anything else given the role of context, especially the deeply personal relations, in the ontogenesis of vocal semiosis which begins as early as the first 6–8 months of a child’s life (Halliday 1973a, 1975a).

4.5.3 Social control, ideology and semantic variation

Sociolectal variation, as I just remarked, is indexical in nature: whatever significance is attached to it is due to the prestige of the speech fellowship that owns up to the sociolect in question. Because its expression typically implicates the level of phonology – particularly the segmental features of phonology – sociolectal variation in itself is not directly relatable to the construal of meaning. It is thus not competent in itself to bring about material changes in the social environment; nor can it participate in the construal of the mental landscapes of its speakers, which depend on ways of meaning: whatever effect a sociolect creates in the life of the speaker is created entirely through the association of the sociolect with its speech fellowship. If members of the speech fellowship are underprivileged then the sociolect is so, too; and *vice versa*.

Not all linguistic variation is of this kind. In this respect ‘semantic variation’ (Hasan 2009a for discussion) is maximally different from sociolectal variation. Using Whorfian metaphors (Whorf 1956), one might say that semantic variation is realized *cryptotypically* by patterns of *configurative*
rapport at the level of semantics. Whorf, as is well known, identified his patterns of configurative rapport at the level of lexicogrammar, and proceeded to provide their semantic interpretation, which he linked to the construal of an ideology. By contrast, semantic variation identifies patterns of configurative rapport at the level of semantics: it looks below for lexicogrammatical realizations and above to the construal of ideology as the higher level contextual phenomenon (see Hasan 2009a; Cloran 1994; Williams 1995, etc.). From the perspective of the contextual parameter of relation, what semantic variation construes is the interactants’ ideological stances. Unlike sociolects, semantic variation does not simply signal ideology; rather, this is how language participates in creating, maintaining and changing ideological stances. The condition of material social existence to which ideological variation relates may most succinctly be described in Bernstein’s words as ‘social positioning’.

Social positioning is socio-logically related to control over the production and distribution of communal resources, whether the resources are material or symbolic. It is the quality of this control that underlies the relations of class, race, gender, age, expertise, and so on. The implication is that one’s relation to the communal resources is one’s relation to power: this, at the deepest level, is what social positioning is about.

Member’s social positioning, in turn, underlies their ideological stances. Ideological stances do not so much determine the nature of what one views as content, as they determine how that content will be viewed. They are thus the regulators of relevance. It is a member’s ideological stance that furnishes the principles through which a social context is seen for what it is for that member, both from the point of view of the recognition of the occasion and from the point of view of participation in it – the modes of being, doing and saying that are ideologically legitimate. What enables language to participate in construing distinct ideological stances is the possibility of semantic choice, which is what underlies semantic variation. The claim is then that speaking with reference to context presupposes a recognition of that context; to recognize a context is to recognize what would be the appropriate ways of being doing and saying in that environment, and these perceptions are far from uniform in any speech community. In other words, there are variant performances, variant text types, relating to what from some point of view is the same context, the same register at the primary degree of delicacy. The gist of this discussion is presented in Figure 4.2, which is a distillation from and an adaptation of some figures in Bernstein (1990: see esp. 13–62; 165–218 and 1996: 17–34 and 91–144).
Figure 4.2: Social structure, variation and text in register

control over communal resources

relations of class, race, ethnicity, gender.

social positioning

ideological stances

principles for interaction

recognition of context (Ac, Rel, Contact)

participation in context (classification & framing of ARC)

 semantic variety

construal of legitimate perspective on interactive event

recognition

participation

action (field)

relation (tenor)

contact (mode)

metafunctional system

text
I want to make five interrelated observations with regard to the model represented in this figure. The first is the relevance of semantic varieties to the growing child’s ideological stances. In adult-infant interaction, the ideological manifestations of social positioning naturally flow in one direction, namely, from the adult to the infant. However, there is evidence that the situation changes very soon: toddlers at the age of approximately three and a half years already display significant evidence of having been enlisted into the ideological stances of the speech fellowship to which the significant adults in their life belong (Hasan 1989, 1992b, 1992c, 1993; Cloran 1994, 1999b, 2000; Williams 1995, 2001). This demonstrates the efficacy of interaction in inculcating the growing child’s own ideological stances – her cultural affiliation (Hasan 1986, 1996b). The results of these researches strongly support the view that the ontogenesis of ideology begins very early indeed. And there again what is responsible for the success of this ontogenesis is the relation between the child and the care-giver. Through participation in these everyday ordinary interactions the child shapes her own consciousness in the image of her interactant, and this is possible only because of the special relation that holds between the child and the care-giver. The evidence of our research suggests that a grid is already being laid for the child for perceiving the world. I should emphasize that a semantic variety and the ideological stances that it construes are no more immutable than, say, Bourdieu’s habitus; nonetheless the ideological stances developed in early infancy are the most potent because like the sociolects, they are buried below the surface of consciousness. What we take as natural is largely what has been nurtured in everyday ordinary interactions of no exceptional significance.

This leads me to the second point: the child’s experience of everyday linguistic interaction is highly relevant to the development of her discursive potential (Hasan 1996c). Often, as Painter has shown (1989, 1996), adults take deliberate steps to guide the child’s production of text, but most often it is the invisible local pedagogy of active participation in ordinary interactions that inculcates children into the principles and practices of discourse formation common to their speech fellowship. It stands to reason that the principles for the recognition of and for participation in contexts that the child grows up with are those of her speech fellowship, and therefore informed by its ideological stances. The child’s response to ARC of context – to the action, the relation and modes of contact in any one instance – is as it should be in light of her developing ideological stances. This point is brought out clearly by Cloran (1998) and Williams (1998) who demonstrate from the different perspectives of their distinct studies.
that in interacting the child is learning ways of being, doing and saying common to her immediate speech fellowship; that the development of discourse does not follow a universal invariant trajectory. The mundane line of discursive development socio-logically schools the child in discourse practices informed by one particular semantic variety – that of her speech fellowship.

In view of the discussion in the last paragraph, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that adopting a model of context along the lines developed here would be quite relevant to the arguments used for supporting the case for a genre-based pedagogic programme. As I understand, this programme emphasizes the need of those children whose mundane discursive development varies considerably from the discursive principles favoured in educational sites. The model presented here provides the socio-historical antecedents of the problem that the genre based pedagogic programme attempts to address. In addition, if the importance of control over symbolic resources is accepted (which is argued in the model), it seems highly desirable that the mundane line of discursive development should be further supplemented by a line that from the point of view of the learner is bound to be exotic. This would suggest that educational sites need to concern themselves not simply with schooling pupils in what is traditionally thought of as the favoured educational genres but the real task of literacy development consists in enabling insight into all forms of discourse prevalent in the community – whether they are currently educationally favoured or not.

The fourth observation is as follows: if we argue, as we do in systemic functional linguistics, that a context of situation is an instance of the context of culture, then it seems desirable to consult compatible existing theories which model those processes whereby the system of culture and the instance of a specific situation are brought into relation. I have argued elsewhere (Hasan 1992a, 2001b) that the most compatible theory of the social is that of Bernstein’s, and in broad outlines, Bourdieu’s, though the views of the latter on language do leave much to be desired (Hasan 1999a). It seems fair to suggest that if stratification of context is required to elaborate some aspect of this complex area, then abstractions of the type presented in Figure 4.2 might be better suited than those current in the connotative semiotic modelling of genre and context, which do pose problems in a functional model of the type that SFL is (Hasan 1995).

Finally, Figure 4.2 ultimately brings the highest level of cultural organization in relation to a text. The trajectory of this relation schematically covers a vast space. If it is accepted that cultures are created in and by persons being, doing and saying in the living of life, then it would seem to follow
that the instance must carry some traces of this process. In this sense, each
target situation and each text has a long history – and it is a history that one needs
to understand whether one’s perspective is ontogenetic, phylogenetic or
logogenetic. In my view this nicely captures the significance of context
in the system and process of language. It is important to emphasize that
the different kinds of variation, including the ones that I have not focused
on specifically, namely that of register or (to use Gregory’s term) diatypic
variation, interlock: each kind of variation finds its expression within the
process of language; this is because each typification vector applies to the
entire system of language, and each is relevant to the interactants’ location
vis-à-vis others in the community. The system of language, whether indi-
vidual or communal, is neither static nor invariant: what gives it its identity
as system is in fact its systematicity. To quote Firth (1957: 185) again:
‘experienced language is universally systemic’. Rather than invariance,
identity or homogeneity, perhaps it is this systematicity that is a necessary
though not sufficient condition for semiotic success.

4.6 Concluding remarks

As I remarked in the opening sentence, this paper contains no discourse
analysis. Perhaps I should qualify this remark. The paper does not contain
an example of actual analysis of some given piece of discourse such as I
and many of my systemic colleagues have attempted a number of times.
However, what I hope the paper does do is to chart out the sorts of consider-
ations that are relevant to the analysis of discourse. Academic discourse is
as subject to fashions as the hemline of women’s skirts. The point I would
like to emphasize is that all aspects captured within Figure 4.2 are relevant
to discourse analysis: each aspect opens up an area of complexity in this
enterprise, irrespective of whether it is in fashion today or not. This does
not mean of course that every analysis needs to address every one of these
aspects, simply that the analysis should be aware of their relevance. The
multiplicity of aspects relevant to discourse production and comprehension
should be no cause for dismay so far as the systemic functional model is
concerned. One of the notable contributions of this model has been a will-
ingness to include rather than exclude, to overview wide expanses rather
than draw hard and fast lines around tiny little parcels of the intellectual
landscape. When it comes to society, semiosis and the brain, we have a
trinity no one member of which can exist without the other two. And this
is the real context for the conceptualization of the category of context in
linguistics.
Notes

1. This chapter is an elaboration of the introductory section of the plenary talk presented at The International Conference on Discourse Analysis, held at the University of Macau, October 16–18, 1997. It first appeared under the title ‘Wherefore context? The place of context in the system and process of language’.

2. It is worth remembering here that for some scholars context is a category in pragmatics NOT linguistics, which simply supports my characterization of views on context (Leech 1983; Sperber and Wilson 1986).


4. For some accounts of these developments within the Malinowski-Firth-Halliday tradition, see Martin 1992; Matthiessen 1993; Hasan 1981, 1995. For a state-of-the-art account of the anthropologically inspired scene in America, see Goodwin and Duranti (1992).

5. As for example in theories inspired by Chomsky’s nativist approach where ‘exposure’ to language is provided in social context, but context is no more than ‘material surroundings’.

6. It is in this sense that one would have to grant that both Malinowski and Firth at least hinted at a wider theoretical reach for the concept of context.

7. It is important to stress the difference between human sociality and animal sociality as manifested even in the higher apes. The enormously elaborated ways of being, doing and saying that human beings have evolved all over the world are as far removed from the communal ‘interpersonal’ behaviours displayed by the higher apes as the specificity and flexibility of human language is from the pre-programmed patterns of their language.

8. (p. 5) Halliday (1995a) has referred to it also as ‘pre-meaning’: this description might be open to objection unless the word ‘meaning’ were to be universally understood as ‘linguistic meaning’.

9. In a plenary talk at the 23rd ISFC 1996 (Sydney) I suggested that a basic biological condition for semiosis is the ability to perceive a principled relation that brings together two phenomena which are otherwise quite unrelated. I referred to this as the principle of ‘the conjunction of dissimilars’, a requirement from which a surprising number of properties common to semiotic systems may be logically derived, such as recognition of ‘sign-unity’, sign functions, stratification, realization, and so on.

10. For the semiotic description of some sign systems, Hasan (2016).

11. I refer to Saussure’s analogy of *langue* as the score on a music sheet, which is executed in *parole*.

12. I take social positioning to be a universally relevant aspect of human relation: although the instantial impetus and the manifestation of this social positioning might vary from one stage of human social evolution to the next, the fact
remains that from the very start social agents are placed *vis-à-vis* each other whether the basis for this is a sense of distinction due to some biological attribute (e.g. skin colour) or due to an attribute that is socially manufactured (e.g. the power that comes from control over the resources for the production of knowledge in academia).

13 Needless to say that the choice from these categories of meaning is coloured by the interactants’ ideological stances.

14 It seems appropriate to refer to this way of relating one message to another as a kind of ‘interpersonal logic’ which is essential to the connectivity of discourse, especially in the dialogue mode.

15 The responsibility for the adaptation is entirely mine, without necessarily implying agreement on Bernstein’s part. Compare this with a more elaborate systemic representation of the context of culture in Hasan (1999c: figure1).

16 There is of course no implication that social positioning is relevant to every participant in a linguistic interaction; however, all semantic modalities, including the proxemic, are sensitive to adult speakers’ social position.