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Language in Society **46**, 95–99.
doi:10.1017/S0047404516000841

Commentary: Mobility, contexts, and the chronotope

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Mobility raises specific issues with regard to what we understand by 'context', and in this commentary I suggest that Bakhtin's concept of chronotope could be a useful instrument enabling a precise and detailed, mobile, unit of 'context'. This unit connects specific time-space arrangements with ideological and moral orders, projecting possible and preferred identities. The articles in this issue offer rich material in this direction.

I thank Adrienne Lo and Joseph Park for inviting me to comment on this exceptionally insightful collection of essays. The essays, I believe, mark the increasing maturity of a sociolinguistics of globalization in which the various, highly complex challenges caused by mobility are being productively addressed.

Of these challenges, perhaps that to established notions of 'context' might be the most pressing. Rigorous and disciplined attention to context is what separates social and cultural approaches to language from formal linguistics; it is the thing that defines sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, pragmatics, and discourse analysis. And an increasing awareness of mobility as a crucial ontological feature of 'language'—or more broadly, meaning making—goes hand in hand with an awareness that our well-weathered mainstream conceptualizations of 'context' fail to do justice to the complexities we observe. The articles in this issue can be read as illustrations and expressions of that unease. I propose Bakhtin's concept of 'chronotope' as a fertile and more precise tool for addressing these challenges (Blommaert 2015a).

Two preliminary remarks may be useful for what follows.

(i) In a sociolinguistic approach to meaning making, context cannot ontologically be separated from language, for it is a fundamental part of the meanings constructed in language; context is what turns language into a 'social fact' (to quote Émile Durkheim).
(ii) Notions of context are built on, and invoke, imaginations of the social world and of the place of social actors and activities therein. So context is always more than just an operational-analytical category: it involves an IDEOLOGICAL and a MORAL a priori.

From that perspective, two things can be observed. One, context remains quite poorly integrated in several branches of the social and cultural study of language (Silverstein 1992; Blommaert 2005). And two, the social imagination underlying many forms of context appears to be 'sedentary': context is local, stable, static, and given. Obviously, a notion of context adjusted to mobility needs to transcend this and stress its continuously evolving, multiscalar, and dynamic aspects, as well as the intrinsic unity of context and action.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404516000841 Published online by Cambridge University Press

There are several available building blocks. Gumperz (1982) reminded us that context is always contextUALIZATION, and Cicourel (1967, 1992) insisted that context was multifiliar, overlapping, and scaled. In addition, the union between context and action, we now realize, is METAPRAGMATICS: language-ideologically ordered indexicals are at the core of the dialectics of contextualized meaning making (Silverstein 2003; Agha 2007; also Blommaert 2005). The introduction (this volume) notes that in an era of physical and technological mobility, people navigate MULTIPLE WORLDS. They cannot be viewed as members of a (single) closed, integrated, and stable Parsonian community and are subject to normative judgments in very different places among very different people—simultaneously.

This is where the chronotope might come in handy. Recall that Bakhtin (1981) defined the chronotope as a time-space configuration—an 'objective' bit of context, one could say—which was characterized, and joined, by IDEOLOGICAL, 'subjective' features. Specific times and places placed conditions on who could act, how such actions would be normatively structured, and how they would be normatively perceived by others. A knight in a medieval legend, for example, is expected to be chivalric, and his concrete actions should emanate such characteristics; if not, he would not bea 'real' knight. Bakhtin, thus, offered a heuristic unit in which time-space configurations are SIMULTANEOUSLY orders of indexicalities, and in which the multiplicity of such units is a given of the dialogical and heteroglossic reality of social life. Chronotope, thus, is a 'mobile' context enabling not just precise ethnographic description but explanatory potential as well.

We see, for instance, how physical and social mobility operate synergistically—moving across time-space configurations involves a reshuffling of the social and cultural capital required for identity construction and power, through what Hymes called FUNCTIONAL RELATIVITY (1996:44–45). Forms of speech indexically anchored in one time-space configuration can be re-entextualized into another, in ways that involve entirely different indexical valuations. We observe this in the essays by Vigouroux and Collins, where the indexical valuations of forms deemed emblematic of the colonial (racialized) past dance up and down once they move into different time-space configurations. A descriptive stance—observing an accent in students' speech (Collins), or a 'substandard' grammatical pattern (Vigouroux)—is turned into a racialized-historical stereotype whenever it is produced 'elsewhere' (Agha 2007). Mobility, we can see, involves indexical restratification.

Such restratifications have an outspokenly MORAL character. The ideological load attributed to specific forms of social action turns them into MORALIZED BEHAVIORAL SCRIPTS NORMATIVELY ATTACHED TO SPECIFIC TIME-SPACE CONFIGURATIONS. The essays in this issue are replete with examples in which judgments of speech are formulated in terms of locally articulated claims to LEGITIMACY, a projection of behavioral features onto 'the right to do X here and now'. Chun's analysis of perceived mispronunciations of Korean names by 'foreign' fans illustrates this: such fans are 'not from here', and their actions are therefore subject to normative judgments 'from here'.

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Being '(not) from here' becomes an ABSOLUTE non-negotiable benchmark that offers no bail. Ideologies of correctness and standardization, we can see, are chronotopically organized (cf. Silverstein 1996). They require a distinction between 'from here' and 'not from here' that can be activated as A CHRONOTOPE OF NORMALCY. Park's excellent essay shows how people who are by definition 'not from here'—expatriate executives—negotiate and renegotiate the issues caused by mobility itself, shaping a separate chronotope of normalcy among themselves.

Obviously, such distinctions are IDENTITY distinctions—indexical order is always a template for identity, and identities are chronotopically grounded (Blommaert & De Fina 2016). Park's managers construct themselves in elaborate metapragmatic discourses of mobility; Chun's K-pop fans ascribe identities to mispronouncing transnationals; Collins' teachers construct their pupils, and the discursive pathways analyzed by Vigouroux lead to a projected 'African' identity drawn from the colonial imagination. In each of these cases, MORAL judgments constitute the moment of identity-shaping. The 'corrections' offered by Chun's K-pop fans come with judgments of legitimacy that extend from minute features of language into categorical identity diacritics. Moralized behavioral scripts are the on-the-ground realities of indexicality, and thus of identity-making. Typically, those who are 'not from here' can achieve 'approximations' of the normative 'standard' order (Vigouroux); they can therefore also only approximate 'standard' identities. 'Standard' and 'correctness' are inevitably EVALUATIVE judgments, and they fit into a package of profoundly moral-evaluative notions such as 'true', 'authentic', 'real', and so forth. In public debates on such topics one continually trips over collocations between terms such as *correct* and *true*, and *(not) from here*. Collins' delicate analysis of racialized enregisterment in South African schools serves as a textbook example of this.

Lo & Choi's study of an internet debate on the 'truth' in the story of the Korean rapper Tablo brings together several of the points mentioned here. The critics who doubt Tablo's educational credentials (using, unsurprisingly, details of his English 'accent' as evidence) draw on a chronotope of normalcy: NORMALLY, one can't finish a degree at the rhythm claimed by Tablo; NORMALLY, his English should be immaculate if he has a US degree, NORMALLY he shouldn't sound like 'us' after his US-based education, and so forth. They base themselves on a 'normal' behavioral script, adherence to and deviance from which are profoundly moralized. The data are bursting with moral-evaluative statements that are simultaneously statements of identity ascription, and driven by the 'from here–not from here' diacritic that defines globalized mobility.

But there is more. The general chronotope of normalcy can be broken down into micro-chronotopes specifying the indexical order of specific bits of behavior (Tablo's performance in a talkshow, his translation of a short story, and so forth). So we see a FRACTAL connection across differently scaled chronotopes, in which the order of indexicality from the highest scale (the chronotope of normalcy) is carried over into infinitely detailed lower-scale ones. We see chronotopes nested

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within chronotopes, with specific points and general ones interacting nonstop, chronotopically organized 'frames within frames' (Goffman 1974).

The essays in this issue thematize such cross-scalar connections as 'discursive pathways' (Vigouroux), 're-entextualizations' (Lo & Choi), or 'interdiscursivity' (Park). Such descriptors of cross-chronotope processes of uneven (scaled) quality are far more precise than 'cross-contextual' analyses. Such connections—the 'polycentricity' of communicative environments, in short (Blommaert, Collins & Slembrouck 2005)—are inevitable in the sociolinguistics of mobility. This leads me to a final, brief, remark.

In the essays by Chun and by Lo & Choi, the internet, or (to use an epic misnomer) the 'virtual world', is the context of the data offered. The analyses are outstanding; but we should not overlook the fact that the online context is not well understood. We know that it has exceptional scalar qualities (think of virality), and that it stands in complex polycentric relationships to 'offline' chronotopes (Blommaert 2015b; Varis & Blommaert 2015). But the exact characteristics of these phenomena await focused study. Note that ALL of the subjects in this issue live in the internet age; we can assume that ALL have been influenced by the circulation of cultural material enabled by such technologies. Precisely how this influence plays out in their actual day-to-day discourses, how it grants them yet another dimension of metapragmatic mobility, raising new issues of polycentric normativity, looks like a worthwhile topic for a follow-up volume. It is to the credit of the present issue that such fundamental questions emerge, and I repeat my sincere thanks to the editors for affording me the chance to engage with them.

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(Received 4 September 2016; accepted 7 September 2016)

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404516000841 Published online by Cambridge University Press