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Comments on Context and Conversation

1. Introduction: The debate about context

One of the prominent debates in contemporary discourse and conversation analysis (CA) is about whether and how to take into account elements of the social `context' in the analysis of talk (Schegloff 1998, 1999, 2003; Wetherell 1998; Billig 1999a, 1999b).

Although in the last decade the number of studies relating conversation with, for instance, the institutional context has increased significantly (see, e.g., Boden 1994, Drew/Heritage 1992), mainstream CA has always been very reluctant to go beyond the structures and strategies of talk itself. If at all, aspects of context in CA are analytically dealt with only if they are *procedurally relevant,* that is, if they are demonstrably *oriented to* by the participants themselves (Schegloff 1991, 1992, 2003).

There are many good reasons for the reluctance in CA to deal with context. First of all, it has always been a main tenet of CA to focus on the autonomous principies of interaction itself. Secondly, bringing in contextual explanations for some properties of conversation might open a Pandora box of unanalyzed social categories, such as those of gender, class or power among many others. In a CA perspective, if these categories are relevant at all, such relevance should not be assumed a priori, but actually demonstrated by the way they become locally enacted and demonstrably produced in talk. This is one of the ways CA and ethnomethodology have explicitly distinguished themselves from classical macrosociology. Despite obvious differences in backgrounds, history and philosophy, discursive psychology in this respect follows the principies of conversation analysis (Edwards/Potter 1992).

In many respects, CA's attitude about context is similar to that of formal linguistics, which also focuses on the autonomy of grammar or syntax, disregarding the social context of language use (Can 1990, Akmajian/Demers/Farmer/Harnish 1995). Even systemic functional linguistics (SFL), although explicitly interested in the relations between language and society, defines context in terms of the *relevant* aspects of the social situation — a tradition that goes back to the definition of `context of situation' by Firth and Malinowski (Ghadessy 1999, Leckie-Tarry, 1995; for a critical analysis of the SFL concept of context, see Van Dijk 2004). Also outside of linguistics, for instance in literary studies, there used to be various tendencies that emphasized the autonomy of the literary work, and hence explicitly banned social or psychological `explanations' of literature, such as Russian Formalism and Close Reading (Erlich 1965, Wellek/Warren 1957).

On the other hand classical sociolinguistics systematically studies those properties of language use that co-vary with aspects of the social context, such as class (Labov 1972a, 1972b). Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS) much more explicitly focused on how contexts are signaled by contextualization cues', that is subtle — especially paraverbal — details of the interaction such as intonation and code switching (Eerdmans/Prevignano/Thibault 2003; Gumperz 1982a, 1982b). Given the anthropological and ethnographic background of IS, it may be expected that aspects of culture, such as cultural differences between participants, are brought to bear in the IS analysis of discourse.

In a much more general perspective, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), specifically interested in the reproduction of power and power abuse in discourse, more generally examines the relations between discourse and society (Fairclough 1995, Van Dijk 1993, Wodak/ Meyer, 2001, Weiss/Wodak 2003).

We see that the concept of `context' plays a controversial role in the study of discourse, conversation and interaction in general. The notion divides those who have a more autonomous concept of discourse or interaction, and those who prefer to analyze text and talle in light of a 'broader' social situation than that constituted by previous turns, actions or sentences of the same discourse. The latter group of scholars may be called `contextualists', but it should be emphasized that contextualism comes in various flavors.

Thus, we have seen that in formal CA and linguistics contextualism at most admits *relevant* contextual factors, that is, those that are actually expressed, signaled, enacted or in general 'indexed' in talk. On the other hand, in more social, political and critical directions of discourse analysis, the focus is not on the autonomy of talk or text structures, but on the ways these structures are related with society. That is, relevance in this latter case is defined in a different way. For instance, in CDA we might want to know how racism or sexism is discursively reproduced in society. Such a study may focus on for instance specific discourse structures that may contribute to the formation of ethnic prejudices. So the main focus here is on a social issue, and the study of discourse is largely a means to understand that social issue.

Moreover, and here we touch upon the crucial but very vague criterion on what is `observably' relevant for discourse, for CDA researchers (and many others) properties of context — such as gender or power — may be quite relevant for talk even if such an influence is not explicitly expressed, but inferrable by other means. For instance, a contribution at talk by a woman may often be interpreted differently by recipients whether or not the speaker explicitly signals gender, and whether or not the recipient actually signals such specific interpretation in later talk.

The empirical question could then be asked: How do we know? Well, one of the many replies to such a request for empirical proof could be: because the woman didn't get the job, or was otherwise treated in a discriminatory way, or because it became obvious in the recipient's non-verbal behavior, and so on.

In other words, contextual influence may become obvious in many ways other than in explicit expressions in following turns of conversation. There has been a lot of experimental evidence that the 'same' discourse produced by a man or a woman — signaled only by their (male or female) first names — was read, understood and evaluated differently by recipients (among many other studies, see Steinpreis/Anders/Ritzke 1999). So, context obviously *does* matter. The question thus is not whether context should be part of a sound theory of discourse and conversation, but rather *how* such contextual influence should be accounted for, and *how* context should be analyzed.

Despite the prominence of this debate in current discourse and conversation analyses, it is striking that the notion of context itself, as well as the crucial condition of relevance, are so ill-defined. In the social sciences there are thousands of books that bear the notion of `context' in their titles, but there is not a single monograph that theoretically deals with the notion of context, although there are some collections of articles (Duranti/Goodwin 1992). This means that the notion is mostly used in a rather intuitive, pre-theoretical sense, namely as some kind of social, cultural or political *environment* for an event or action — and more often as a condition than as a consequence of such an event.

Also in discourse and conversation analysis there are many studies and discussions of context, but these generally also presuppose a rather vague notion of context in tercos of the social situation of ongoing text, talk or language use. Interesting — but barely influential — early approaches to the theory of context may be found in the social psychology of social markers in speech (Scherer/Giles 1979), and in the theory of social situations or episodes (Argyle/Furnham/Graham 1981, Forgas 1979).

A fully fledged, multidisciplinary theory of context, as well as a detailed discussion of the uses of the notion in all directions of discourse and conversation analysis, is beyond the boundaries of this chapter. I shall therefore limit my discussion here to some brief comments on the use of the notion of context in CA and IS, and summarize my alternative, sociocognitive concept of context (and for details, I may refer to my book on context, in preparation).

1.1. Example: A parliamentary debate

I shall develop and illustrate these comments with a few analytical observations on fragments of a parliamentary debate from the British House of Commons, namely the debate of February 4, 2004 about the Hutton report. This report features the findings of Lord Hutton's inquiry into the suicide of Dr. Kelly, an arms specialist of the UK Ministry of Defense who had talked to a journalist of the BBC about the alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in Saddam Hussein's Iraq. According to this journalist — as well as many others —

Tony Blair, his government or his assistants had exaggerated the threat posed by these WMDs as it was described in intelligence reports. Lord Hutton's inquiry, however, exonerated Tony Blair and his administration, and blamed the BBC for its unfounded accusations.

This brief description of the 'background' of the parliamentary debate may be described as one version of the `context' of the debate. Indeed, without such previous knowledge of the political `circumstances' of the debate, we would understand very little of what is going on, and about what Tony Blair and the MPs are saying, implying or politically *doing.* That is, we may in rather general terms understand the words, and much of the interaction of questions and answers, and possibly much of the criticism of the MPs, but we would miss much of the (political) *point* of the debate. And if we do not account for this contextually influenced `point', we are obviously under-describing the data, and hence applying an empirically too restricted form of CA.

Thus, the question is what exactly the `context' is for this debate, and how exactly it is relevant for its production, for its understanding and for its analysis — that is, *both* for the participants and hence, *also* for the analyst. Since the relevance of context might be taken in the broad sense described above (e.g., as influencing the understanding and talk or text), we especially also want to examine the stricter claim that such a context is also relevant for the very interactional structure itself, and not only for its understanding.

1.2. Current (but commonsense) concepts of context

I have argued that the notion of context as it is used in the social sciences is not a strictly theoretical concept, but rather a more or less fuzzy notion denoting a situational, historical, geographical, social or cultural environment of a phenomenon being studied.

In traditional linguistics (until today), context is often limited to the 'verbal' context surrounding some word or sentence. With the introduction of discourse grammars, this influence of 'verbal context' (on words or sentence structure) was made part of the very linguistic analysis itself, namely as part of the very structure of text or talk. In the study of literature, discourse, communication and conversation,

contexts were traditionally described as different from `text´ or
itself, for instance as the *social situation* in which spoken or written
verbal utterances are being used. It is this second, broader, social
concept of context we are dealing with here (and as it is usually
understood, also in the debate on the role of context in CA) although I
shall give it a very different theoretical reformulation below.

Following a well-known — but not uncontroversial (Alexander
1987, Knorr-Cetina/Cicourel 1981) — distinction of levels of descrip-
tion, such a social 'situation' may be either local or global, micro or
macro. The first is the immediate situation of actual discourse
production and understanding, as is the case in face to face interaction
involving the co-presence of individual persons as participants. The
latter would be the broader historical, societal or cultural situation
described not (only) in terms of the current participants, but (also) in
terms of groups, communities or institutions, and not limited to the
time or place of the actual utterance but involving a larger period and
a larger location. A similar distinction has been made — but not syste-
matically investigated — by Halliday (following Firth), when referring
to the `context of situation' and the `context of culture' (for
discussion, see, e.g. Leckie-Tarry 1995).

In our example of the debate in British parliament, thus, the
local context would be the actual session of the House of Commons,
its Setting (time, place), as well as its participants, such as Tony Blair
and the MPs, and their properties and relations, including the power of
Blair as Prime Minister (PM), and most likely the goals of the
participants, among other contextual properties to be examined. Part
of the social-cultural situation might be, say, the color of Blair's tie,
but since this feature of the situation would hardly be relevant here
(although clothing, such as uniforms, etc. may be on other occasions),
it would *not* be part of the context as defined.

The *global* context would in this case involve for instance the
House of Commons and the Prime Minister as institutions, the
Government, and British international policy and their properties in
more general, abstract terms, on the one hand, or more concretely the
current social and political situation, such as the war in Iraq, the death
of Dr. Kelly, or the Hutton inquiry, on the other hand.

This informal description of these contexts suggests that the
distinction between local and global, micro and macro, if relevant at

all, is gradual or scalar: Both the current political situation in the UK, as well as much more generally (historically) British foreign policy would be part of the 'global' context. Intuitively, there is also the feeling that the 'broader' the context the more diffuse the influence on the actual interaction or discourse of the debate.

Also, local and global events and interactions and hence situations take place `at the same time': Tony Blair is not only speaking as a person, and now enacting the role of Prime Minister, locally, but by doing so realizing the institution of the Prime Minister, as well as `doing government' and `doing foreign policy'. The distinction should thus not be seen as two kinds of `reality' or context, *but rather as different descriptions or constructions of the same events or situation.* Thus, the Hutton inquiry constitutes a more specific `global' context — as to its actions and participants — than the role of Judges of the House of Lords or the relations between parliament and government in the UK. Indeed, one kind of context could be called current 'background', and the other `institutional'. In other words, even a cursory glance at an example suggests that a theory of context may need to develop a typology of kinds, levels, or scopes of context and how such contexts are constructed and described by both the participants and by analysts.

Another observation on (more or less) local or global contexts is that they seem to have similar structures, components or categories. Thus, both feature such categories as time (or time period), place (space, location), actions, events or processes, as well as participants (persons, groups, organizations or institutions). Thus, the debate not only takes place, at the same time, on a specific hour, but also on a specific day, in a specific year, and not only in parliament, but also in London and the UK. And local or global participants are engaged in some kind of 'broader' event or interaction: their interventions are part of a debate, and such a debate is part of the kind of things (legislating, controlling the government, etc.) MPs do. Tony Blair is participating not only in order to answer questions but also as doing the kind of things Prime Ministers do, such as legitimating their actions and policies. In sum, what goes on in the debate is part of — or a way of — doing many other political things that may be seen as part of the context of the debate. This also seems to suggest that when characterizing contexts, we seem to be describing the 'same' thing, namely

some kind of social (political, etc.) environment of an event, but only at different *levels* of understanding, construction or analysis.

Arguably, all this might intuitively be `relevant' to understand the ongoing debate and hence míght fall under the current (common-sense) definition of `context'. There can be little doubt that parti-cipants or analysts who have no idea of all these aspects of the different kinds of `context' would be able to understand or describe only quite limited aspects of the debate. One crucial question of the debate is thus: How much? And is so much enough for adequate interactional analysis? Indeed, how much context do the *participants themselves* (an important but hardly rigorously respected criterion of CA) have to 'know' in order to be able to partícípate as competent MPs? If some of the context as thus intuitively described would be necessary to account for obviously interesting aspects of the interaction itself, how do we conceptualize and analyze this 'context and its relation to the properties of the ínteraction? Indeed, how do participants themselves actually `manage' such contexts in talk? We see that a more or less intuitive characterization of the context raises more questions than ít answers. What we need ís a *theory* of context and its relations to talk and text.

2. Towards a sociocognitive theory of context

In order to be able to be able to evaluate other proposals on the role of context in conversation and discourse, I summarize some of the main tenets of my own theory of context (for detail, see Van Dijk 1999, 2003a, 2003b, 2004). The fundamental assumption underlying this theory is that what intuitively has been described as context aboye — that is, various local and global aspects or levels of the social, political, cultural or historical situation — cannot possibly have a direct influence on talk or text at all and therefore should not be called 'con-text' in the first place. *There is no direct causal or conditional relationship between social characteristics (gender, class, age, roles, group membership, etc) of participants and the way they talk or write.*

Rather, it is the way participants as speakers (writers) and recipiente subjectively understand, interpret, construct or represent these social characteristics of social situations that influences their production or understanding of their talk or text.

So, strictly speaking, it is this *interpretation* or *construction* that is the context of text and talk. Since in the same communicative event, participants may interpret the various aspects of the social situation in different ways, contexts defined as interpretations or constructions of social situations also explain the personal, ad hoc, locally occasioned construction of the context, and hence its variable influence on talk. And this is what we observe. That is, if we would assume that it is the (local or global) social situation that directly influences talk or text, we would have to conclude that all discourse in the 'same' social situation would be 'the same'. To escape such absurd social determinism, we not only need to introduce the necessary conditions of social variation, but also those of personal, individual variation through the interface of what participants also *do* when talking or listening: understand, interpret, construct, etc. In other words, contexts are by definition subjective — even if they of course also have social and intersubjective properties, as is also the case for discourse understanding.

Iinportant is the other fundamental aspect of the theory, namely that this subjective, `relative' concept of context at the same time accounts for *relevance:* What is socially relevant for one participant at one moinent inay not be so for another participant or for the same participant at another moment.

2.1. Mental models

Although this principie of our theory may be explained quite well using commonsense terms such as `understanding' and `interpretation' — as would be more common in CA and ethnomethodology — when speaking on subjective versions of social situations, a sociocognitive theory not only wants to be socially explicit, but also cognitively. For this reasons, I use the theoretically more satisfactory and einpirically well-tested notion of a *mental model,* namely as the mental representa-

tion of an event or situation in episodic memory (Johnson-Laird 1983, Van Dijk/Kintsch 1983, Van Oostendorp/Goldman 1999).

The psychological details of this (very powerful) mental model theory are less relevant here. It should only be einphasized that when language users participate in a conversation they dynamically construct a mental model of the ongoing conversation and its relevant social situation. It is in this way, and only in this way, that they are able to participate in such an event, understand what is going on, engage in action, and execute their actions as part of a sequence and in interaction with other participants. Indeed, and perhaps trivially, without a mental model of the current situation, speakers would not be aware of themselves or other participants in the first place. All relevant `cognitive' notions of contemporary conversation and interaction analysis thus not only have a social dimension, formulated in interactional terms, but also a cognitive dimension, formulated in the terms of mental models and their structures — as well as in other cognitive terms, such as those of knowledge and opinions.

In fact, participants construct *two different kinds of model* of ongoing conversations. Thus, understanding what people say in conversation involves the construction of a *semantic* mental model of what the conversation is *about*. Reference, co-reference and coherence in text and talk are defined with respect to these subjective models participants construct of the events talked about. And the participation in a conversation requires the construction of relevant aspects of the communicative event in a *pragmatic* model of the ongoing communicative event itself. *This is the context model, or simply the context.*

Note that this context is not a static mental representation, but a dynamically changing model, controlling on line the ongoing conversation at each moment. In this respect, this theory of context is at the same time a theory of relevance, because it defines what is situationally relevant for each participant (for related cognitive notions of relevance, see Sperber/Wilson 1995). This sociocognitive, model-theoretic account of context details integrates both sociocultural and sociocognitive aspects of context and explains many aspects of more traditional concepts of context and discourse:

• *The relativity of context:* What is a relevant context feature for one participant need not be relevant for other participants; or what is relevant for me now, need not be relevant for me earlier or later.

- *The subjectivity of context:* Contexts are not objectively' out there, but the result of personal, subjective understandings of the communicative situation. That is, contexts are personal constructs.
- *The partiality of context:* The subjective, constructed nature of mental models allows that contexts are partial, and 'ignore' large parts of the social situation. Thus, by constructing context models, participants ongoingly and flexibly select what is now relevant for them.
- *The missing link between social situation and discourse:* Since context models are cognitive they allow to be related explicitly with the cognitive processes of discourse production and understanding. An exclusive 'social' or interactional' account of context would not be able to establish such an interface, or would be limited to a more superficial, intuitive or merely correlational account of the relation between social structure and discourse. Or it would be plainly deterministic, by assuming direct (causal?) influence of social situations or social structures on discourse. In other words, there is no empirically or theoretically warranted alternative than to relate social situations to individually variable discourse and discourse understanding than through some kind of cognitive interface. Contexts as mental models provide such an interface.
- *Contexts control processing.* Context models are not only the subjective constructs that represent now relevant aspects of the situation, but also *control* all aspects of discourse production and comprehension. Since they are dynamic, that is, continuously changing, they are the kind of things that ongoingly allow and monitor interaction. They represent Self as well as other participants and the subjectively relevant social representations, and hence also the relevant intentions, plans and knowledge of the participants.

2.2. *Models, social cognition and social representations*

Like all mental models, also context models are related to more general, shared social representations of many kinds, such as socio-cultural and group knowledge, altitudes, norms, values, ideologies and other forms of social cognitions members share with other members of the same social group or community. These social representations are

formed by and in turn play a role in the very construction of new context models. It is in this way that we can learn from our everyday experiences, also as language users and conversationalists (on different — and sometimes conflicting — perspectives on social cognition, social representations and other forms of socially shared beliefs, see, e.g., Augoustinos/Walker 1995, Brewer/Hewstone 2004, Farr/Moscovici 1984, Fiske/Taylor 1991, Moscovici 2001).

Thus, MPs in the British House of Commons in our example learn from their communicative experiences by generalizing from context models to more general knowledge about the interaction norms and rules of the House. Of course, they may also learn rules and norms by explicit, general forms of instruction and by meta-talk with their colleagues, and in that sense much learning, also linguistic or conversational learning may be both top down or explicit, or bottom up, experiential or implicit. Once they have acquired such shared, general knowledge about this kind of communicative event, these social representations will again be used (top down) to construct the ongoing context model. This allows context models to be constructed also when the participants have no or little information on the current social situation, for instance on the properties of the participants. They may simply project more general knowledge about the same kind of communicative event into the mental inodel of the current coinmunicative situation. This is indeed one of the *strategic* aspects of discourse and context processing. We see that in this way general, sociocultural and political knowledge of the participants about communicative situations may be inserted into the context model, and in this indirect way influence ongoing talk and text. This is how and why MPs are able to speak adequately in a parliamentary debate.

Finally, contexts defined as subjective mental models of communicative situations can also easily be linked with the (semantic) mental models that represent the subjective `meaning' interpretation of text and talk, and `referentially' what the text or talk is *about*. Thus, in our example, MPs not only know about parliament, legislation and how to participate in a debate, but also about the actual Hutton report and the current foreign policy of the UK and more generally about Iraq, reports, suicides, wars, and so on. Thus, whereas (`pragmatic') context models control interaction, speech acts, style, rhetoric, and all

other aspects of discourse that make discourse *appropriate* in the current situation, these `semantic' models and social representations control the *meaningfulness* (both in production and understanding) of the debate.

Note that although intuitively this kind of `world knowledge' is often taken as part of the context, we need to distinguish quite clearly between `pragmatic' and `semantic' models — that is, between the representation of the current communicative situation — such as the current debate in the House — on the one hand, and the representation of the events we now are talking *about* — such as the Hutton report or Iraq — on the other hand.

However, since they are mental objects of the same kind, namely models (representations in episodic memory), they can easily be combined. Thus, we may represent a communicative situation also in terms of the kind of topics or meanings that are allowed in that situation: MPs know what kind of things they should or should not talk about in parliament.

2.3. Context model structures

Mental models of contexts are subjective, but not arbitrary. After experiencing and participating in many thousands of unique communicative situations, language users tend to generalize and normalize such situations, so that also their mental models of such situations are generalized to shared, social representations of such situations. Such social representations will abstract from ad hoc, personal and other specific aspects of communicative situations, and hence reduce the subjectivity of each context model. It is in this fundamental way that (this aspect of) the social order is reproduced, how the rules of conversations and other interactions are being acquired, and how context models inay be coordinated by different participants. Without abstraction and generalization, social meinbers would not be able to learn from their earlier conversational experiences.

Hence, we not only need mental models of current communicative events, but also more general social representations of such events. Thus, through experience members may know that gender or

age will often matter in the way they conduct talk, whereas size of shoes, color of shirt, or hairstyle hardly do so. They thus learn how to design more or less routine schemas that form the structures of routine genres of everyday and institutional talk, with the categories that are most often relevant. Of course, actual ongoing talk may have surprises and conflicts and might require the construction of an ad hoc model of the current situation. That is, sine each specific situation is unique in its combination of categories and their `values' (time, place, participants, etc.), also their construction as mental models is unique — and hence people are able to solve such problems if they have also acquired the necessary interactional `methods' to do so. CA has extensively shown how these `methods' work. But these `methods' obviously are not properties of interactions, but of social members, and more specifically, like grammars and other discourse tules, part of their knowledge, that is, part of their socially shared minds.

2.4. Context and knowledge

One of the major contributions of contemporary psychology to the theory of discourse and conversation is that text and talk require vast amounts of knowledge (among many other studies, see, e.g., Schank/ Abelson 1977, Van Dijk/Kintsch 1983, Van Oostendorp/Goldman 1999). Although the theory of knowledge and its role in discourse processing needs to be further developed (in fact we still largely ignore what the mental structure of knowledge is), we know that what people say or write is only the tip of the iceberg of what they know and what they mean. Indeed, participants in interaction in principle only say what is now relevant, leaving a host of meanings or inferences *implicit,* either because they are currently irrelevant, because they are inappropriate, or because they can be inferred by the recipients. Following empirically rather well established cognitive psychology, it has been shown aboye that these kinds of knowledge are represented in subjective mental models of events, on the one hand, and in socially shared, general representations, on the other hand. We thus have an elegant definition of implied meanings, namely as those meanings that can be inferred from text and talk that are part

of the mental model of the partícipants but that are not explicitly expressed (Graesser/Bower 1990; Van Oostendorp/Goldman 1999).

Much of what is traditionally called the `context' is the knowledge people bring to bear in conversation. It should be noted though that this kind of specific or general knowledge, as represented in mental models and social representations, respectively, serves to understand what the discourse is *about: it* is the basis of the semantics of discourse. Here, however, we are dealing with another kind of 'knowledge', namely knowledge about the current communicative situation, as explained aboye: the participants and their relevant properties, relations and action in the current setting. We might simply call this contextual or pragmatic knowledge.

However, more general (`semantic') knowledge of events and the world is related to context models: *participants know about the knowledge of recipients, and ongoingly and strategically adapt what they say to such mutual meta-knowledge.* This means that if context models control ínteraction, they also need to manage the knowledge of partícipants: which knowledge to activate, and especíally which knowledge to presuppose. I therefore assume that context models have a special knowledge device or K-device, whose task ít ís to manage the way knowledge is expressed or suppressed in text and talk (Van Dijk 2003b). Since it would be an impossible task to somehow incorporate all the vast amounts of assumed knowledge of recipients in a limited and flexible context model, it should be assumed that the K-device functions on the basis of simple strategies, such as:

• presuppose all knowledge shared with members of the same epistemic community (dyad, group, nation, culture) and

• express new relevant knowledge that co-members may not yet have acquired (such as personal experiences, news, new discoveries, etc.).

That is, perhaps trivially but quite fundamentally, language users are able to manage the vast amounts of shared sociocultural knowledge, because of the simple fact that they usually are members of the same or related epistemic communities as their recipients. Hence, they can simply assume (and hence presuppose) most knowledge they have themselves to be shared by the recipients. So no (impossible) double knowledge bookkeeping is needed, one's own and the recipient's

knowledge of the world: For most (practical) situations, these are simply more or less the same.

Given the central role of knowledge in all text and talk, thus, the K-device plays a fundamental role in the management of context models: At each point in talk a speaker needs to `calculate' what the recipients already know, and take this meta-knowledge into account in the production of the next discourse fragment. *In other words, talk is not only socially interactive, but also mentally so.* Moreover, much of the kinds of knowledge involved here are not at all personal or subjective, but socially shared in a group, institution, nation or culture, and hence should be part of the social theory of interaction as well: they are inherent part of the social order and its reproduction through discourse.

2.5. Context management

The sociocognitive theory of context ís not limited to a mental format for the representations of communicative events. First of all, as emphasized aboye, context models are dynamic: they ongoingly change and are updated throughout the communicative event, as we have seen for the management of knowledge. Secondly, the theory is also a *social* theory, because it features a theory of interaction: context models are formed and managed as part of the sequentially organized interaction of participants. These form models of each other, and about each others' contributions to conversation. Thus, at each point of the conversation, participants orient to how they have interpreted what has been said, done and implied by the previous speaker, and use this interpretation for the production of their own conduct.

Contrary to standard CA theory as I understand it, thus, *conduct does not directly depend on previous actions, but on the ways these are being interpreted by participants,* that is, on the mental models participants ongoingly construct and update. At the same time, such mental models not only incorporate representations of previous actions or the 'verbal context', but also the representations of (other) changes in the social situation, such as non-verbal actions of participants, changes of time, place, and circumstances.

Context models are being managed *strategically*. This means that they are produced as fast as possible with a minimum of information, tentatively, to account for the relevant aspects f the current situation. In the same way, we already strategically (and hence hypothetically) infer the global meaning f a discourse from its announcement, title or headline; we may derive overall definitions or properties f the context model (e.g., `this is a customer who needs some information') from time, place or person observation. Hence, context inodels may be misguided, incomplete and fragmentary. Misunderstanding and conflict are the possible consequences of such fast but imperfect context modeling. If actions were occasioned by previous actions in the sequence, as would be the case in a more superficial account of interaction, it would be hard to account for such consequences.

Although CA does not explicitly engage in the analysis of the cognitive basis of interaction, the theory f interaction and context proposed here is in my opinion quite compatible with it: it is fundamentally associated with the interactional dimension f the social order, it accounts (much better) for dynamic interpretations of ongoing talk, it is also social because of the social knowledge shared by members, and it is an explicit part f the underlying `methods' ethnomethodology and CA are seeking to make explicit in the account f everyday interaction.

In other words, an adequate theory of interaction should always have at least two levels, one of 'conduct and one of `thought'. The fundamental conditions f interaction, such as the mutual orientations, interpretations etc. f speech participants, cannot be accounted for without mental representations f some kind. The same is true for the fundamental role f knowledge and other beliefs that are expressed and presupposed in talk. In actual theoretical and analytical practice of f CA, these notions are routinely used, but not made explicit — and left to psychologists.

3. Context and conversation

Against the background of this briefly summarized theory of context, we are now able to return to the account f the role f context in conversation. First f all, the theory accounts for *relevance* — indeed, it *is* a theory of relevance in the sense that it explains how aspects f the social, communicative situation are subjectively represented, selected and dynamically *made* relevant or irrelevant by participants at each point of the conversation.

Secondly, we have seen that as a mental representation f the ongoing communicative event, context models are the underlying cognitive dimension f interaction. They account for the many cognitive aspects of interaction, such as intentions, plans, purposes, goals, interpretations, understandings, orientations, awareness, and many other commonsense notions f action and interaction. Since a theory of interaction obviously presupposes a theory of action, and actions cannot be properly defined without some kind of cognitive dimension without lapsing into behaviorism, also a complete CA needs a cognitive basis, whether or not it deals with such a cognitive basis itself, or leaves it to the psychologists. More specifically, the philosophy f action has traditionally emphasized that actions imply (mental) intentions and/or purposes f some kind (Brand 1984, Danto 1973, Juarrero 1999, Montefiore/Noble 1989, Von Cranach/Harré 1982, White 1968). I shall here not go into the precise mental nature f intentions, but assume, with most cognitive psychologists, that both intentions f actions as well as the goals that represent what we want our actions to obtain are (necessary) mental models of social human conduct, and with conduct define action and hence interaction. All relevant properties of interaction, such as mutual awareness f participants, mutual knowledge, coordination, and so on, are unthinkable without such a cognitive dimension.

Scheglff (2003: 39) explicitly rejects the notion of `intention' because he sees it to be associated with single actions of isolated individuals and as 'causes' for actions. He stresses that such 'causes' must rather be sought in the immediately preceding course f action. Of course, there is no contradiction here at all. Actions by definition

have intentions, and these intentions are f course ften formed on the basis f what the same or other actors have done before. Indeed, unless we want to resurrect crude forms of behaviorism, conduct is not *directly* `caused' or `occasioned' by previous conduct, but by the participants memory, understandings or interpretation f this previous conduct. And as we shall see below, such understandings are f the same nature as the intentions of actions, so that we have a way to actually establish the missing links between the actions in an action sequences. In other words, the notion of intention is equally relevant and necessary in a theory of action sequences or interaction, and closely associated with the very accomplishment and understanding f conduct *as* social action.

Thirdly, context models are the necessary interface between social structure and talk. Since social structural categories such as gender, class, age, group membership, institutions, and so on, cann ot *as such* influence — let alone cause — how people speak, we need to account for the indirect influence f social structure through the ways participants subjectively as well as normatively represent such structure. To wit, it is not being a man or a woman, young or old, that may influence talk, but rather our socially normalized but subjectively variable, experience-based, representation f such identity as they are íncorporated in the models f daily experiences in general, and the context models in particular.

Mental models are not directly observable. We have direct access to them only through our own thought, and indirectly through our interactionally and communicatively validated assumptions about the minds f others, on the one hand, and as inferences from what participants say or display, on the other hand. Both members as well as analysts understand interactions and what is observably displayed always in terms of inferred representations f some kind (we ignore Mere the broader philosophical — as well as psychological — aspects f the classical problem f how we can know `other minds' — see, e.g., Wisdom 1952, Bogdan 2000, Givón 2005, who offer a theory of context related to mine, based on the notion of `other minds').

To exclude mental models from our theories and analyses of conversation because they are not 'observable', and to exclusively admit only what is `demonstrably displayed' in talk, is in my opinion based on a behaviorist (or maybe better an interactionist) fallacy.

Actions are no more directly observable than meanings or other mental constructs: they are also interpretations f conduct, as we also know from the philosophy of action. The kinds f action described in CA are also inferences based on actual words or paraverbal expressions, which themselves are again conventionally meaningful and hence based on mental representations. In that sense, we do not have more direct access to actions and discourse than to mental models. That is, in the same way we cannot escape the socially displayed dimension f interaction we cannot escape its mental dimension. An integrated theory f talk and text needs to account for both of them. A mindless approach to conversation is an illusion or a reduction, no less than a theory of mind without an interactional or social dimension.

3.1. Context in a parliamentary debate

Let me illustrate some f the points made aboye in a partial analysis f some fragments of the parliamentary debate chosen as an example (see also Van Dijk 2003b, 2005, 2006 for further contextual analyses f parliamentary debates). Let us begin with the intervention f Prime Minister Tony Blair:

(1) *The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair):* This is a debate on the Hutton report, but I know that the House will want to range wider than the report itself. I intend to cover four issues: the report itself and its findings; the inquiry into the issue of intelligence announced yesterday; the threat of weapons of mass destruction more generally; and the current situation in Iraq. I shall try to take as many interventions as possible, to allow questions on those issues.

After the Speaker of the House has opened the parliamentary session, Tony Blair is the first speaker in the debate. Thus, what he says is not occasioned by a previous speaker in the debate, and hence not interactionally accountable `backward' but only `forward' as the one who initiates this debate. He deictically refers to the current type of dialogue as a debate, and thus also defines the communicative event as a whole, and can obviously do so only when he has a mental model of the event, that is a context model. He also deictically refers to himself as a participant, as well as to 'the House' as the assembled MPs, and

finally to some of his own mental states: knowledge, intention and attempts — and again, he is only able to do so, obviously, when he has some representation f such aspects of the communicative event, independent of the meaning f discourse itself as well as independent f the ongoing interaction.

In other words, in order to be able to accomplish this first turn of the debate, Blair displays fragments f his context model, such as knowledge about the participants (Blair, the House), himself as the current speaker, the type f interaction (debate) he is engaged in, his political knowledge and intentions, assumptions about the wishes of the recipients, and intentions for what he will speak about, and intentions for the kind of exchanges (allow interventions, questions). In other words, context models are not *just* mental constructs, but may also be partly expressed and thus socially displayed. This means that, interactively, recipients can incorporate relevant parts in their own next context models, such as the knowledge that Blair invites questions, and so on.

However, much of the context model will usually remain implicit, by contextually based rule, simply because speakers know that recipients partly have a similar model, or already know or can infer parts f the context model of the speaker. Thus, Blair's intervention does not explicitly express that he is speaking not only as the one who opens the debate, but also and primarily as Prime Minister, information that is never made explicit in the debate but that is permanently relevant, beginning with Blair's speaking first. Thus, there can be little doubt that both in his own current context model as well as in that f the other MPs, this identity is prominently represented as a (political) property of the participant category and that this 'information controls much f the interaction. How do we know as analysts, and how do the participants know? First of all, most of `us' know, as part of our shared political (members') knowledge that Tony Blair is at present, at the time f this debate, Prime Minister of the UK. How does such (semantic) knowledge enter the context model of the participants, and how does it show in the interaction? Such knowledge may enter the context model as an inference from our knowledge about the roles f parliament: that apart from MPs also ministers, and especially also Prime Ministers, may appear as speakers, e.g., in order to make declarations, participate in debates and

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answer questions. Thus, hís role as Prime Minister is signaled in thís debate in various ways. In this fragment, as we have seen, by its structural placement at the beginning f the debate: it is the PM who opens the debate and not any MP. This may occur explicitly by the Speaker of the House who may introduce the first speaker as the Prime Miníster, or by his narre, and by giving him the first turn at talk. Secondly, the relevance of the institutional position of Blair as PM shows in his explicitly saying that he will `take' and `allow' as many questions as possible. Such an anticipated permission f later interventions f next speakers presupposes the kind of power and status no other MP has, at least not in this debate. In other words, the pragmatic or contextual presupposition of the uses f these verbs is that the current speaker now enacts a position or identity of authority, and in parliament such authority is conventionally attributed to the Prime Minister (and to the Speaker f the House). Since such a representation (Tony Blair is speaking as Prime Minister) is shared by all MPs, his first interventíon will be heard to be contextually appropriate.

Notice also Blair's explicit, deictic reference to his own knowledge (about what the other MPs will want to do). Normally, social knowledge is shared and hence may be presupposed. By explicitly referring to his knowledge about what the MPs (will) want, he emphasizes that he knows more than what can be routinely expected — namely what other people want, that is, a specific kind f contextual knowledge. How does Blair know this without having spoken to (all) MPs before? Obviously, the information in the K-device f his context model is derived from specific knowledge, probably from the medía, about the kind of controversy the Kelly Affair is, and the kinds f things people will want to know about. In other words, more general knowledge about the current political situation may thus become a relevant part f the current context model: what everybody knows or want to know also applies to the recipients in this situation, that is, the MPs.

Note finally that the representation of the actual discourse is necessarily part of the context model — for the obvious reason that ongoing discursive action itself is part of the communicative situation. That is, *past fragments of a debate, automatically become context,* including the knowledge conveyed by those fragments. Thus, in this

case the definite references to 'the Hutton report' not only presume there is just one such report, but also that Blair knows this report and assumes that also his audience, the MPs, know this report.

Speakers also *plan* their discourse, and in this case this is explicitly the case when Blair presents the major themes he will deal with. In other words, the global meaning (macrostructure) may be part of the context model, or at least closely associated with it. In more theoretical cognitive terms this may mean that the information of the mental model f the events spoken about (the Hutton report etc), may have *access* to the mental model of the current communicative event.

In order to observe a more clearly *interactional* fragment f the debate, consider the following exchange, following the initial presentation of Tony Blair:

(2)   *Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire) (Con):* Is the Prime Minister able to say whether all the correspondence that passed between the BBC, its chairman and director general was made available in its entirety to Lord Hutton?

(3)   *The Prime Minister:* Everything that was relevant to the inquiry was made available to Lord Hutton, and I understand that he has already indicated that he believes he has all the relevant material. I do not believe that there is anything that we concealed from that inquiry. Indeed, I do not think that there has ever been a case in which a Government have disclosed so much information in such a way.

This exchange appears a regular question-answer adjacency pair, initiating with a yes-no question of a conservative MP, replied to affirmatively by Blair, repeating a large part f the question ("all correspondence was made available to Lord Hutton"), but with some changes and additions, as may be expected. Thus, Blair adds the qualification "relevant" to "correspondence", which might be interpreted as that perhaps not *all* correspondence was made available, but only the relevant correspondence — an evaluation that is said to be shared by Lord Hutton himself, and hence confirmed by the independent judge investigating the case. Note though that also this legitimation is hedged by the use f the expression "he believes". A similar hedge is prefaced to his statement that "we" did not conceal anything This is strange, because if one conceals something, one

usually does so intentionally, and so there should not be any doubt about such an act — so that the doxastic modality is inconsistent. Finally, Blair adds a more generalized statement — also hedged by "I think" — about the unique disclosure f information by his government, an obvious example f positive self-presentation.

Now, how does Blair's context model account for the structures of his intervention? Fírst of all, he needs to represent the previous speaker as an MP, and more specifically an MP f the opposition, and interpret his utterance as a question. The question is obviously relevant, because it directly deals with the relation between the government and Lord Hutton. Blair's answer shows that he indeed has interpreted the previous utterance as a question, first by relevantly responding to the question, and secondly by repeating part of the wording of the question. This is only possible when Blair remembers these words, and hence that the very formulation of the previous question is represented in his context model, as postulated in our theory (previous text becomes part of the context). Speaking about Lord Hutton and the (relevant) material also presupposes f course that Blaír shares knowledge with the previous speaker (and all MPs) about Lord Hutton and what his task was. Blair refers to himself with the deictic expression 'I', which is the normal (unmarked) case for speakers. However, this is not generally the case for parliamentary debates, where leaders of govemments may use 'we', or `this government', or similar expressions. Indeed, he also uses deictic 'we', which may be interpreted as referring to 'bis' government or administration. Given the hedged form "I believe", he however leaves open the possibility that unbeknownst to him, others f his government might have concealed something: Blair does not say that *he* did not conceal anything. Note also that the deictic use f 'I' not just refers to Blair or the speaker but also to him as Prime Minister, and hence to him as leader of thís government. Símilarly the use of `we' as referring to himself and the government also means that in the context model Blair needs to represent himself as PM and as leader of the government, because it is as such that he also prides himself and his govemment as being uniquely generous with his disclosures.

The next conservative MP ís more crítical:

(4)   *Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con):* The Prime Minister has had some notice of
        this question, because I asked it two minutes before Lord Hutton began the
        presentation of his report a week ago. The evidence before Lord Hutton
        includes a copy of an e-mail about the dossier from the Prime Minister's chief
        of staff, which asks: "What will be the headline in the Standard on day of
        publication? What do we want it to be?"

The headline turned out to be, '45 Minutes From Attack'. Does the
Prime Minister agree that that headline was wholly misleading? Why
did not the Government take steps to make it clear that it was
misleading?

(5)   *The Prime Minister:* All of that was covered in the inquiry? [Interruption.] It
        was, actually. I will not go into the detail of the explanation, except to say that
        if I could ensure that every Evening Standard headline read as I wished it to, I
        would be a happier man.

This speaker begins with a deictic reference to the very question he is
about to ask, comparing it to the one on a previous occasion. Such a
statement only makes sense when the speaker has a context model in
which the current utterance and its illocutionary function (a question)
is represented, as a plan am now going to ask a question'), *and* that
the current context model also has access to a previous one, namely to
what was asked before. We see that context models in this sense are
just like any other event model representing our personal experiences
and that are the basis of current recall.

       After reminding the audience of a specific piece of possibly
damning evidence (about Blair's chief of staff), the MP asks what
seems like another Yes/No question, but which is a ritualized form f
formulating a critical statement ("Does the Prime Minister agree
that..."). This formula, which characterizes special parliamentary
sessions in the House of Commons, in which only questions may be
asked and no statements made, may thus be interpreted as a statement,
and since the upshot f the statement may be interpreted as a past
negative act of a prominent member f Tony Blair's administration, it
will generally also be heard as an accusation in the current situation.
Such an accusation makes contextual sense only if the current speaker
is engaging in opposition to the (actions of the current) government,
and representa himself as member of the (conservative) opposition,

and defines his recipient as the Prime Minister. The latter he obviously does, because he does not use the deictic pronoun *you,* as would be the normal deictic expression in a dialogue, but uses the much more formal function-address. He also shows his awareness that Blair, his political opponent, is responsible for the government's actions, because he does not just refer to the newspaper (which obviously the government is not supposed to control) but to government control afterwards of the misleading headline of the newspaper. Note again that all of this is not explicitly expressed, referred to or oriented to', but part of the fragments of the context models f the participants that control the interaction. In such cases, thus, it would generally be better, also in CA, to speak f mutual `presupposition' than `orientation', which at least suggests some form of shared knowledge.

These various contextual presuppositions also include the speaker's awareness of now speaking in parliament. Also the formal style in this exchange, as well as in the other ones, should be seen as a discursive manifestation f the MPs' awareness, as represented in their context models, that they are now in parliament or in a forinal institution in which such formal style is mandatory.

Blair, as may be expected, does not accept such critique, and instead f affirming or denying the accusation, he simply refers to the Hutton Report. The *Hansard* transcript here signals "Interruption", which usually refers to audible protests from several MP. That also Blair interprets this interruption as an expression of doubt or protest of some MPs may be inferred from his confirming expression "It was actually", which presupposes an accusation or a doubt f those who interrupted him. Again, such an expression makes cense only when Blair represents the interruptions in his context model as a critique or doubt about his previous statement. Obviously, it would *not* do in this case to merely describe the intervention f the MP as a question.

In other words, without a (mental) context model, as defined and analyzed, we would be unable to account for parliamentary debates as a form of *political interaction,* and not just as any kind f conversation. Of course, contemporary CA does admit an account f the institutional nature f this form f interaction. However, it does not explain how such an `institution' actually is able to influence talk. There is only one way to do this: through the representations f this

institution in the context models that are the interface between social structure and talk.

Finally, also the rest of the MP's turn exhibits a fragment of his context model when he says that "he will not go into the detail of the explanation", which also refers to his current speaking plans. Blair's final, slightly ironic assertion (that he would be a happier man if he could control the headlines), obviously implies that he as a Prime Minister does not control the press, and that hence the criticism of the previous speaker does not have any ground. He does not say so explicitly, but by ironically showing that he obviously cannot control the press, and saying that he therefore cannot control its headlines, he implies that the previous question has no point, and hence that the critique is misguided or spurious. What he does *not* comment on though is the more specific critical question about what 'his government *could* or *should* have done afterwards, namely to point out that the headline was misleading. I have little doubt that *not* answering the question, or not (completely) reacting to critique, will be heard by many MPs as one of the ways Tony Blair seems to avoid his responsibilities in this affair, and that they will represent such an interpretation in their current context models. Evidence of such an assumption however would have to come from next speaker turns — or by other types f methods and analyses (interviews, etc.). In other words, the *assessment* f context models does not only come from detailed discourse and interaction analysis, but may be based on many other methods, such as participant observation, comparison with similar events, think-aloud protocols, later accounts of participants, and so on.

We see that the context model as construed by Blair allows him to first avoid a direct critical question f a political opponent by referring to the report, then to affirm a point being doubted by the MP, and then finally to reject the critique in an indirect way by showing that he is not responsible for the headlines in the press. This typical parliamentary interaction between the Prime Minister and an MP of the opposition is managed by the participants through their context models in which they mutually represent the other and his political identity and functions.

4. Conclusions

After these theoretical proposals and brief analyses, the question is
whether and how my account in terms of context models has anything
to offer *analytically* that goes beyond an interactional analysis,
whether or not within the CA framework. My theoretical claims are
clear: interactions can only be managed if participants also keep an
ongoing, subjective interpretation of themselves, other participants,
and their properties and relations, and other relevant aspects f the
communicative event as represented in some kind f mental model.
These context models define what participants find or make relevant
for their ongoing contribution. Previous actions cannot influence
current actions directly, but only the current speaker' s *interpretation*
of these previous actions is able to influence the production process of
the ongoing action. Although this point is formulated in cognitive
terms, it is in my opinion consistent with basic ethnomethodological
principles.

      However, what does such a theoretical model allow us to say
analytically about actual talk that would typically not be part f an
analysis that is limited to 'observable' aspects f the current inter-
action? Also on the basis of our observations of an exchange in the
British House f Commons, we might point to the following relevant
properties f this interaction that need to be accounted for in some
kind f context model:
• The general knowledge of the world, British politics, Iraq, etc. that
enable the participants to produce and understand their speeches.
• The general knowledge about this kind f interaction or debate in
parliainent, presupposed by turn taking, time distribution, the first turn
of the MP, (type of) questions f the MPs, the critical interventions f
the opposition, etc. Indeed, the whole institutional order controlling
the exchange — beyond the normal rules of interaction — needs to be
relevantly instantiated in the current context model. That Tony Blair
as PM speaks first is an instantiation of such knowledge. Nothing in
the (previous) interaction — not even a turn allocation of the Speaker
of the House — suggests that Blair is supposed to open the debate.

• The specific mutual knowledge f the participants, Tony Blair and the MPs, about the current communicative events and its participants, the first as Prime Minister and Head f government, etc. Only when assuming this specific communicative knowledge f the participants can we explain that the MPs address Blair explicitly as PM in the first place, even when he does not first introduce himself as such. And only thus we may analyze Blair's interventions as reactions to what he knows to be questions f a member f the opposition. Indeed, not here, but in many other situations, members f the own party and those f the opposition are addressed with different formulas.

• The interpretation f the various deictic expressions should not be described as referring to objectively' present things in the communicative situation, but as elements f the mental models participants have f that situation. This explains among other things that and why the participants use the specific designations, e.g., 'Prime Minister' instead f `you' or 'Tony' when speaking to Blair.

• The deictic self-description f the current exchange as `this is a debate' by Blair requires a context model in which the relevant interactional genre is already represented. Nothing in the current or previous turns defines this exchange as a 'debate' — except the communicative 'plan' f the current speaker.

• The same is true for his presentation f the points he will raise — that is, the coming topics of his presentation.

• Blair's explicit deictic reference to his knowledge about what the MPs will want to know presupposes that in his context model he not only represents his audience as MPs, and not only that they share the general knowledge f the world, British politics and parliamentary debates, but also that given the current political situation they may ask questions not directly related to the Hutton Report. Thus, Blair not only (implicitly) anticipates specific questions, he also explicitly refers to this anticipation as some kind f contextual knowledge. Such a reference only makes cense when he actually has a context model that features such knowledge. And as a consequence the MPs also will have a context model about Blair' s context model, and hence may feel entitled to ask broader questions. These are among the few instances in this debate where interactional recipient design becomes explicit.

• And again, now at the pragmatic level, the announcement that he will take questions. This presupposes that he has the status, position, role or power to decide whether he will take questions or not — apart from pre-structuring the exchange for the next speakers. These presuppositions are represented in Blair's context model — as well as in those f his audience, as their later questions presuppose.

• The question of the first conservative MP presupposes that he knows that at that point he is able to ask a question, that he knows to whom he is addressing the question, and whether the recipient may be expected to have the information required. At the same time, since the MP is a member of the opposition this question may be heard by Blair and others as part f a critical inquiry — namely whether he disclosed everything. Blair's answer confirms that possible interpretation. There is however nothing explicitly critical in the MPs question, so that only a context model representing the speaker as a member f the conservative party will allow the plausible inference that a question of the opposition usually is intended to be critical f the government.

• The moves of positive self-presentation f Blair as leader f the government by denying that no previous government ever disclosed so much, can only be interpreted as such when both Blair and the MPs know that Blair is the current leader f the government, as is the case for most turns in this debate, but also if they know that the government had been widely accused of hiding information — as also the following interruptions, displaying doubts or protests, suggest. This is not strictly speaking contextual (pragmatic) knowledge, but (semantic) knowledge about the political situation in the UK during the Iraq war. However this knowledge becomes interactionally relevant when Blair sees himself obliged to defend himself and his government or to legitimate his actions. The self-presentation is part f that more general strategy — not limited to this debate. In other words, MPs know that what Blair is now doing is an instantiation of a more general interactional and communicative strategy to save his reputation.

• As the reference of the next conservative speaker shows, participants need to have a mental representation f communicative events, because he refers to a previous intervention in which he asked the same question.

• The critical question of this speaker (about the misleading headline in the newspaper), presupposes a context model in which he knows that his direct recipient is the Prime Minister, as we have seen before, and hence responsible for the actions f his chief of staff, and responsible for the possible negative implications of a misleading headline.

• The formulaic use of "Does the Prime Minister agree that..." in a critical question can only be interpreted if the participants share a mental model of the current parliamentary debate and its rules, implying that this is the polite and normative way to make critical statements when no statements may be made, but only questions asked. Of course, the routine presupposition of such questions is that the implicit critique or accusation will be rejected.

• Blair's statement that "he will not go into the detail of the explanation" not only announces and pre-structures part of his own contributions to the debate — which presupposes that he must have a representation f the current debate in the first place, featuring plans of what he is going to do or not — but also has the power to avoid a clear answer or to go into detail when asked to do so. He can only accountably, relevantly and legitimately make such a statement when he self-represents himself in the current situation as having such power. Indeed, it is *not the social or political situation, including Blair's position and power, that enables this kind of interventions, but rather his self-representation as such.* Indeed, he may `objectively' have such power, but currently not represent himself as such, and then be much more cooperative.

We see that even in .a few exchanges there are many points that would remain un-analyzed or only superficially analyzed without an account in terms of the context models f the participants. We also see that much f these context models involve knowledge and opinions about the kind of interaction, institution, participants and their relations and properties. That is, several aspects of the debate, such as the adjacency pairs, the invitation to ask questions, the recipient design about the nature of future questions, the avoidance of an explicit answer, etc would and should be accounted in the usual interactional way. However, most of the relevant aspects of this debate that make it an interesting *political* debate and more specifically a

parliamentary debate and as threatening to Tony Blair and his government are to be explained in terms f the mental models — and the general political knowledge and beliefs — f the participants.

On the basis f these observations and theoretical arguments, I conclude that the role of context in conversation analysis needs to be thoroughly reexamined in the light of a more sophisticated sociocognitive approach that combines interactional, discursive and cognitive analysis. I generally agree with the CA point of view that it is didactically if not theoretically prudent to limit contextual `explanations' to those that have an explicit basis in talk or text itself. However, we have seen that such a criterion is too vague to handle, and in need of a more explicit theory that tells us more about relevance, about what or what is not explicit or implicit, what exactly is 'observable', and how we account for the countless mental aspects that appear to mediate between social situations and conversation.

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