10 Mediated actions, social practices and contextualization: A case study from service encounters

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Contextualization and mediated discourse analysis

The problem of contextualization has long been a key issue in contemporary approaches to discourse. It has been central in various disciplinary subfields concerned with the description of actual language use. It has also been a factor in epistemological and methodological debates among different analytical paradigms such as CA, CDA, and interactional sociolinguistics (see Duranti and Goodwin, 1992; Gumperz, 1999) regarding the local or global (Cicourel, 1992; Schegloff, 1992) character of context, or its deterministic vs. emergent relation to situated interaction (Gumperz, 2001).

Unlike many other approaches, MDA does not consider the notion of ‘context’ a fruitful concept to account for the complex relations between discourse and society. Scollon (2001a), for example, views the notion of context with suspicion, since it is associated with approaches to discourse that focus in the end primarily on language and see ‘contextual information’ merely as an external set of background determinations:

Many theories of language and of discourse start out with a focus on ‘social action’ such as speech act theory, pragmatics, interactional sociolinguistics, and CDA but then somehow in practice tend to become focused only on text. Other aspects of social action and other mediational means than language and discourse are backgrounded as ‘context.’ Unfortunately, this can lead to a distorted understanding of the relationship between discourse and social action.

(Scollon, 2001a: 4)

In order to account for the complex links relating discursive forms with situated social practices, MDA investigates alternative solutions to the notion of ‘context.’ It does so in at least three ways:
• By stating a ‘principle of social action’ (Scollon, 2000), MDA acknowledges the idea that discourse does not consist exclusively of producing and interpreting utterances, but is best described in terms of the social actions carried out by language users. It aims at shifting the focus away from discourse to the human actions being taken, and therefore argues that social actions should be seen as central and primary units of analysis.

• By conceiving of language as a meditational means, MDA sees discourse as one type of cultural tool contributing to the construction of social actions, but explicitly refuses to see language use as the sole means by which actions are taken (see Scollon, 2001a; Scollon and Scollon, 2003). Because texts necessarily ‘under-represent the meaning present in the actions’ (Scollon, 2001a), other semiotic means, such as material objects or non verbal conduct, are taken into account. From such a multimodal perspective, physical artifacts are not seen any more as ‘contextual’ or background elements, but as units of analysis that play a central role in our understanding of how human actions are carried out in society.

• By exploring how actions and discourses move through time (see Scollon, this volume; de Saint-Georges, 2003), MDA takes into consideration the various rhythmic patterns that constrain mediated actions and aims at making explicit how locally negotiated actions are embedded in long-term ‘timescales’ that link actors, objects, language, and practices both with history and with future states (Scollon, 2002b). Here again, the historical trajectories intersecting in a ‘nexus of practice’ are not perceived as ‘contextual’ or ‘peripheral’ information. Rather, their analysis is seen as necessary for the understanding of the action at hand.

• By ‘expanding the circumferences of discourse’ not just to take into account contextual information, but also to broaden the scope of what linguists interested in actual language use should be able to account for, MDA provides a fruitful alternative to models that focus primarily on text or talk and that artificially conceive clear-cut boundaries between language and ‘extra-linguistic’ realities such as action, culture, history, and objects.

**Contextualizing service encounters: A case study**

In their recent work, Ron and Suzanne Scollon have often based their arguments on mundane examples taken from everyday life in order to stress the idea that actions such as lighting a camping stove (Scollon, 2002a), having a cup of coffee (Scollon, 2001a), or buying a book (Scollon, 2002b) can tell us a lot about discourse, action, and social practice.

At first glance, service encounters can be regarded as relatively elementary social practices. If one returns for instance to Merritt’s definition of service
encounter, one can indeed characterize such interactions as highly predictable, predetermined by a restricted set of scripted actions, and engaging clearly defined and interdependent social roles. However, when faced with empirical data, one cannot fail to notice that service encounters turn out to be far more complex and unpredictable than we intuitively imagine them to be (see Aston, 1988; Filliettaz, 2001).

From this perspective, interactions between service providers and clients can be viewed as a very relevant domain of investigation for MDA. The social practices involved in service encounters are mediated by various types of linguistic means: the position of a service provider, for instance, requires an ability to advise clients, to facilitate their choices, to coordinate with other colleagues, to place phone calls, and to find specific information in a catalogue. Focusing solely on these linguistic means, however, gives rise to a distorted and incomplete picture of the semiotic realities taking place when clients and service providers meet. In such settings, joint actions are not taken exclusively through language use, but very often also incorporate nonverbal conduct and references to material objects accessible in the physical environment (see Filliettaz, 2004a). Such elements cannot be ignored by the analyst and should be given central attention within a multimodal approach to discourse.

The data used for this case study are extracted from a large corpus of more than 350 interactions that were audio-recorded in a department store in Geneva during the spring of 2001. This data collection took place during a four-month period of ethnographic fieldwork focusing on how shop assistants and clients coordinate their actions in the context of encounters referring to goods associated with complex technical knowledge. Three specific settings were therefore selected: (a) a sports department; (b) an electronics department; and (c) a do-it-yourself and gardening department.

The excerpt transcribed below is from a service encounter recorded in the do-it-yourself department in July 2001. It is extracted from a five-minute long interaction between a 50-year-old female client (C) and a 25-year-old female assistant (A). The transcription is a translation from French.

(1) C: er a compass do you have a compass?
A: er we might . come and have a look well by compass you mean a small thing for the car right? [A and C are walking towards the appropriate aisle]
C: Yeah
(5) A: maybe this could work
C: if it’s the same that I already have uh ::
A: well let me show you and then you will see [A and C reach the aisle where compasses are]
C: XX I was looking for something a little bit bigger
(10) A: well we don't have anything big here
C: something that would be that big at least [C performs an iconic gesture]
A: yeah something as big as this we don't have we only have small things for the
car uh: you might check if by chance they have one in the electronics
department right below the sports department
(15) C: yeah all right I'll have a look there
A: Yeah
C: because my husband he still hasn't understood . that . a compass points to the
North <A laughs> . so if one turns around like this it points like this if one
turns around like this it points like this if one turns around like this . it points
(20) . like that [while talking, C progressively accomplishes a 360 degrees rotation]
<yes of course> so er : . I have to give him a little lesson but with a small
thing such as this one it's not so convenient <A laughs> I would like a nice
compass it might even be :: a gift for his birthday uh : for next year but <A
laughs> yeah really when one puts a compass like this <yes of course> it
indicates where we are <yes of course> right? it indicates where WE are .
so he says to me uh :: the arrow . I say but the arrow always shows you where the
North is <well yes> then he goes on asking so where is the North? . and I say
you just have to turn around until the arrow points to the North <A laughs> . but
he still hasn't understood . so with a little thing such as this one a tiny little
sphere that is even half hidden he will not understand so I'd like to buy him
a nice compass <A laughs> . thanks
A: you're welcome [pause 3 sec.]  
C: you must meet strange people sometimes don’t you?
A: no it's a pleasure precisely because we meet a lot of different people and that's
(35) what's great
[A laughs] [C’s cellphone rings]

Before proceeding to a more detailed analysis of this excerpt, I would like to
start by making a couple of brief comments about what is going on during this
sequence. What makes this example of a service encounter particularly interesting
to me is the rather complex ways in which the agents negotiate the joint actions
they are engaged in. In the first section of their encounter (lines 1 to 16), the client
and the assistant seem to be contributing mainly to a commercial exchange: the
client performs a request (‘Er a compass do you have a compass?’); the assistant
makes an offer (‘er we might come and have a look’); the client utters an explicit
refusal (‘I was looking for something a little bit bigger’); and finally, the assistant
proposes an alternative solution (‘you might check if by chance they have one in
the electronics department right below the sports department’). At this stage of
the encounter, speech seems to be primarily a matter of exchanging information
in order to achieve some ‘transactional’ goal. It is highly determined by social
practices that shape what could be viewed as a particular kind of 'institutional interaction': a service provider pursues the goal of a client and tries to satisfy their needs. Through doing this, she contributes to enhancing the profit of the company by which she is employed.

However, important changes occur in the second part of the encounter. The client could have simply ratified the assistant’s advice and gone to the electronics department in order to check if more appropriate compasses were sold there. But instead, in an extensively developed turn, she chooses to display elements of her private life to the assistant, talking of such things as her husband, who does not understand how compasses work, and the lesson she wants to give him. In this section of the interaction (lines 17 to 31), the goals ratified by the interacting agents consist much more of 'having a conversation' than of accomplishing a commercial transaction. This has visible effects on the organization of discourse as well as on the situated identities displayed by the participants.

This twofold organization of the encounter raises interesting questions in terms of professional discourse and of theorizing the relationship between discourse and social practices: how do the assistant and the client proceed in order to articulate an institutional and public practice with the sharing of ordinary and private experiences? What do such intimate considerations bring to the construction of joint actions? In what sense do they help the participants elaborate a mutually ratified ‘context’ for their interaction? To what extent are such constructions mediated by language? In the following paragraphs, I will try to give some elements of answer to this set of questions by exploring some of the conceptual tools developed by MDA.

A discursive account of timescales

As mentioned above, MDA argues that it is crucially important not to restrict the scope of action to the narrow and momentary lapse of time during which it is actually performed. Rather, one should systematically take into consideration the fact that the actors, objects, or places that intersect in the ‘nexus of practice’ are embedded in larger timescales: they are at the same time emanations from the past and prefigurations of possible futures (see Scollon, 2002b; Scollon and Scollon, 2003).

In our example, the sequence of interaction between the client and the assistant incorporates many such trajectories. From the perspective of the assistant, this encounter is one element in a series of encounters carried out with other clients during the same day and over a longer period of time. Moreover, this encounter is one among a vast array of other routinely accomplished tasks associated with the position of a professional sales assistant (arranging goods on shelves, attending team meetings, making stocklists, etc.). It is precisely because of such past experiences and other actions external to the recordings that the assistant can expect to
satisfy the client’s request (‘we might come and have a look well by compass you mean a small thing for the car right?’) and is able to project a possible immediate future for her (‘you might check if by chance they have one in the electronics department right below the sports department’).

Similarly, from the perspective of the client, the transaction she tries to accomplish should no longer be seen as a decontextualized isolate. It is tightly linked with past experiences and future projects. Quite interestingly, it should be mentioned that the client herself makes elements of her timescale explicitly accountable to the assistant: she recalls past events (the problems faced by her husband while using a compass) and anticipates future actions such as the lesson she wants to give to her husband (‘I have to give him a little lesson’) or the gift she plans to offer him for his birthday (‘it might even be :: a gift for his birthday uh : for next year’).

These segments of her trajectory are constructed discursively by means of textual constructions of variable complexity. If anticipated actions are briefly evoked by single sentences, the reconfiguration of past experience gives rise to a prototypical case of story-telling in conversation. From line 23 on, the client performs a complete narrative in the technical sense defined by Labov or Gülich and Quasthoff (1986): she utters narrative propositions that enter in a temporal relationship (‘he says . . . I say . . . he goes on asking . . . I say . . . he still hasn’t understood’) and privileges a ‘replaying mode’ of telling in which she tries to ‘make things present’ by performing direct reported speech and sharing numerous evaluative attitudes towards her husband. In other words, the client not only explains to the assistant how difficult it is for her husband to master a compass, but she replays a moment of past action during which she desperately tried to demonstrate how compasses work.

These ‘pre-action anticipations’ and ‘post-action narratives’ can be seen as linguistic accounts of the client’s life trajectory. They show how tightly social actions are intersecting with each other in everyday experience. In our example, these discursive accounts of timescales assume various pragmatic functions in the construction of a mutually ratified action frame: they enable the participants to bridge the public and institutional nature of the encounter with the sphere of privacy and make explicit how the present they share is deeply shaped by larger projects.

**Motives and contextualization**

Elements identified in the preceding section have not only to do with time but also with motives, another of MDA’s central concepts. In Scollon’s view, defining the motives associated with actions raises important methodological issues to social sciences, since one can always identify a multitude of possible candidates as motives for human action. As a solution to this ‘general shakiness of any analytical
process that might attribute motives’ (Scollon, 2002b), Scollon proposes that motives are primarily discursive constructions:

Put in contemporary terms . . . the causes of that action are discursive constructions, not behavioral primes, though they might well have been constructed ‘in advance’ as anticipations. That is immaterial to the case. In this view of human motives, whether they are post-action narratives or pre-action anticipations, any and all motives are matters of discourse, not psychological or material primes.

(Scollon, 2002b: 8)

From this standpoint ‘motive analysis’ does not aim so much at identifying fundamental or ‘true’ causes for the action, but consists in paying attention to how participants ascribe explanations to the actions in which they are engaged.

In our example, it is important to stress the idea that timescales and motives seem to be closely interrelated: when expressing past experiences and future projects, the client explains the reasons why she takes part in the encounter and ascribes causes to her presence in the do-it-yourself department. Analytical philosophers – especially Anscombe (1957) – have clearly shown that a theory of action must distinguish between ‘what the agent aims at or chooses’ – their intentions – and ‘what determines the aim or choice’ – their motives. From this perspective, one could say that the discursive expression of timescales precisely aims at making her motives accountable for the assistant.

This being said, it begs a further question: why does the client make her motives visible in these circumstances? In what sense do these explanations contribute to contextualizing her mediated actions? In what sense do these explanations contribute to contextualizing her mediated actions? As a tentative answer to these questions, I would like to argue that such mediational means seem to satisfy crucial pragmatic functions, both on the objective level of the commercial transaction at hand, and on the more subjective level of the management of the relationship between the interacting agents (Filliettaz, 2002, 2003). On the level of the transaction taking place, discursively expressed motives help the client to justify why she cannot accept the assistant’s offer: the compasses available in the shop are not satisfactory because they are felt to be incompatible with the client’s needs in the practices she refers to (giving a lesson, making a gift): ‘I was looking for something a little bit bigger’; ‘so with a little thing such as this one a tiny little sphere that is even half hidden he will not understand’. In other words, motives seem to clarify the ‘felicity conditions’ of this economic transaction and contribute to specify under what conditions the client guarantees her engagement in the joint action.

The expression of motivational information is also not unrelated to more subjective components that shape interpersonal encounters. As Habermas (1984) has clearly shown, in the wake of Goffman (1959), interactants often engage in a
sort of 'theatrical representation' in which they aim to manage the image they give of themselves. By sharing subjective personal experiences, they accomplish face work and negotiate what one could call the *dramaturgical dimension* of their joint action. From this standpoint, the story-telling and anticipatory discourse associated with the expression of motivational information help the client to present herself as competent, devoted, and obliging: she knows how to master a compass and wants to help her husband to do so. The assistant seems to adopt a highly empathic attitude regarding the drama played by the client, as shown by the frequent backchannel signals (<yes of course>, <well yes>, etc.) and laughs. Motivational information thus also helps the agents to position themselves with regard to the relation they build with each other.

*Cognitive artifacts as mediational means*

As argued by Scollon and Scollon, it would be a great mistake to pay exclusive attention to discursive mediational means. In the excerpt under analysis, the presence of a material object such as the compass obviously plays a central role in the ability of the interacting agents to frame the actions in which they are engaged. More precisely, compasses in the interaction seem to assume successively three distinct semiotic positions:

- In the client’s request and in the initial section of the encounter, the compass appears as a discourse topic: it is present in the environment under the form of a linguistic sign but is not yet incorporated in any physical object.
- In contrast, when the client and the assistant reach the appropriate aisle where compasses are sold (lines 6 and 7), the transactional object takes physical shape. It is not only a semantic content referred to by speakers, but a real object whose material properties are accessible to the agents and give rise to various appreciations: 'I was looking for something a little bit bigger'; 'so with a little thing such as this one a tiny little sphere that is even half hidden he will not understand'. At this level, the compass as mediational means does not satisfy the 'felicity conditions' of the transaction and leads to a reorientation of the client.
- Beyond its 'linguistic' and 'material' modes of existence, it seems that at certain points in the encounter, the compass also functions as a 'cognitive artifact,' which is to say as an external device that stands for, refers to, or represents a thing that exists in the world (Norman, 1993). Although the interactants never physically handle the object of transaction, the client simulates its manipulation by accomplishing a 360 degrees rotation around an axis: 'so if one turns around like this it points like this if one turns around like this it points like this . it points like that'. In
these circumstances, the compass functions as a symbol embodied in the situation by gesture. This simulation is crucially important in the client’s discourse: it enables the client to transpose the object from the transactional setting to other practices in which it is used. It also leads her to express internalized actions and discourses associated with the compass in her past experience.

Taking into consideration the various semiotic faces of the compass in our example shows how central this mediational means can be in the present circumstances. Indeed, it is mainly this object, with its various material characteristics, that connects the multiple practices integrated in the present nexus: the practice of a service encounter, the practice of using a compass, the practice of giving a lesson, the practice of making a gift for a birthday. Not only does it shift from one possible practice to another, but it travels through time (the past, the present, and the future), and among various actors (the client, the assistant, the husband). In sum, it can be seen as an essential element of cohesion in the various contexts experienced and discursively represented by the interacting agents.

Conclusion: Reframing a social practice

To conclude, I would like to return briefly to the final comment made by the client before her cell phone rings. After the completion of her narrative, she thanks the assistant and seems to initiate a closing sequence. She then briefly addresses the assistant by saying: ‘you must meet strange people sometimes don’t you?’

Her question produces various interesting effects on the situation. First, it contains an appreciation of her own conduct and manifests a reflexive attitude regarding what has happened in the encounter. The client and the assistant are not only acting together, but they are also sharing considerations about how their actions have been carried out. Second, this statement ascribes a judgment of ‘strangeness’ to her contribution to the encounter. By doing so, she makes explicit that service encounters are framed by underlying expectations, and that her behavior may be seen as challenging such expectations: in her view, simulating the handling of a compass and proposing an extended narrative of past and private experience are not usual contributions associated with the role of a client.

In sum, this example shows that discourse assumes important functions in the way actors orient themselves in mediated actions: it makes social practices visible by expressing some of the premises that frame the situation (see Goffman, 1974); and it enables the participants to negotiate these premises by taking distance with the frame. From this standpoint, it becomes crucially important to go beyond a clear-cut delimitation between deterministic and more constructionist approaches to action. Preceded by general cultural expectations, but necessarily negotiated in
specific situations, mediated actions do not come down to a predetermined set of scripted conducts. Nor can they be described satisfactorily as strictly emergent processes. Rather, they are best conceived as a combination of both typified social knowledge and interpersonal negotiation, in which language intersects with other mediational means.

By exploring the various ways in which action and discourse may be related, MDA aims to bring some discipline and systematic methodology to such a fine-grained conceptualization of mediated action. It is in this sense that it proposes to go beyond a strict delimitation opposing ‘text’ and ‘context’ and to elaborate new approaches for describing the complex linkages between language and society.

Notes

1 ‘... an instance of face-to-face interaction between a server who is “officially posted” in some service area, that interaction being oriented to the satisfaction of the customer’s presumed desire for some service and the server’s obligation to provide that service’ (Merritt quoted by Aston, 1988: 27).

2 In order to deal with frequent space shifting, the data were collected by means of a light recording device. Seventeen volunteer sellers had been equipped with microphones and portable mini-disc recorders. The clients were informed about the recordings by means of posters made visible at the entrance of the store. Additional information was provided to those who wanted to know more about the research. The recording was complemented by fieldnotes.

3 I use the following transcription conventions: (...) indicate appropriately timed pauses; (:) indicates that the syllable is lengthened; underlining indicates overlapping talk; and square brackets ([ ]) mark nonverbal behavior or events; uninterpretable sequences are transcribed with XXX.

4 Following Drew and Heritage (1992: 22), one can define institutional interaction as follows:

Institutional interaction involves an orientation by at least one of the participants to some core goal, task or identity (or set of them) conventionally associated with the institution in question. In short, institutional talk is normally informed by goal orientations of a relatively restricted conventional form.