

Online Communication as Context Design

Abstract This chapter introduces and explains the new theoretical concept of *context design*. Our starting point is a concept central to much theorizing of online interaction: ‘context collapse’—that is, the bringing together in one space of people who would not normally interact in offline contexts. This concept has been much cited in social research as a means to explore how users negotiate the management of communication in semi-public sites where they cannot fully predict the audience for their posts and so struggle to evaluate their self-presentation strategies. Although highly influential, the concept has a number of limitations, and we offer instead our own theoretical model premised on the idea that participants on Facebook imagine particularly complex contexts to which they respond as they construct their posts. We call this process *context design*, building on work in sociolinguistics which has explored the dynamic structure of spoken interaction. *Context design* examines how participants take on board a range of factors in imagining the various ways in which their online posts may be re-contextualised (embedded and reinterpreted in new contexts), and looks at how this awareness both shapes and constrains what they say.

Keywords Audience design · Context collapse · Context design
Re-contextualisation

INTRODUCING CONTEXT DESIGN

This chapter puts forward and outlines our concept of *context design* as a key dynamic in the structuring of online communication. We begin by examining the related and widely cited concept of ‘context collapse’—the bringing together in one space of people who would not normally interact in offline contexts—which has been highly influential in social research for exploring how users negotiate the management of their communication in semi-public sites where they cannot fully predict the audience for their posts and so struggle to evaluate their self-presentation strategies (e.g. boyd and Marwick 2011). Despite its wide use in the literature, the concept of context collapse has largely escaped critique. The chapter provides such a critique, looking firstly at the dynamics that exist in the semi-public spaces of social media communication, and then discussing how and whether different ‘contexts’ can be said to collapse into one another. We go on to discuss the extent to which the affordances of a site such as Facebook allow for management of this phenomenon, how awareness of the issue is manifest in people’s behaviour and what types of social implication it can have.

Having analysed the nature of communication in these terms, we go on to argue that our alternative metaphor of context design more accurately captures people’s online behaviour. Building on the concept of audience design (Bell 1984), context design highlights the ways in which social media users imagine and respond to a particularly complex set of contextual variables as they design their posts and interactions. As a theoretical model, this highlights the extent to which social media encounters are shaped by a number of key factors: users’ perceptions of the site they are using, theirs and others’ expectations regarding appropriate behaviour and their media ideologies (see Chap. 1). Below, we illustrate these and other contextual variables through a mnemonic that sits in analogy to Hymes’ (1974) SPEAKING framework. Viewing interaction in this way has important implications for our understanding of how online behaviour is shaped not primarily by the technology people are using, but by users’ responses to their perceptions of what the technology is for, how it functions for this purpose, who they are communicating with and the appropriate norms for doing so.

WHAT IS CONTEXT COLLAPSE?

The term ‘context collapse’ is used to describe the phenomenon that results from the way the affordances of much social media mean that any utterance posted online can be viewed by a potentially very large and unseen audience which is likely to consist of a number of the poster’s (or ‘updater’s’) different social networks, as well as people beyond these networks—all of whom ‘collapse’ into a single space. The issue this raises is self-presentation, and how an individual can address simultaneously the various people that make up their online audience. As boyd (2014, p. 31) defines it, a ‘context collapse occurs when people are forced to grapple simultaneously with otherwise unrelated social contexts that are rooted in different norms and seemingly demand different social responses’. This term gained currency when used by Wesch (2009) to refer to the almost limitless audience that is possible online, and the way that the different local contexts which frame an utterance all blend together. Although a similar dynamic exists to an extent in certain ‘offline’ social situations—e.g. weddings, where the guest list will bring together people from all different parts of a person’s life; broadcast situations, where the broadcaster is addressing a large, unknown audience—because of the affordances of online communication, and in particular the fact that posts are potentially permanent and endlessly replicable (Marwick and boyd 2011), it is of particular salience for social media interaction. In short, on a site like Facebook, a user’s potential audience is likely to be diverse in terms of background and values, and the precise composition of this audience for any one utterance is unknowable (boyd 2001; Marwick and boyd 2011). We discuss further the diverse nature of audiences on Facebook in Chap. 4.

One implication of these ideas about context collapse has been the development of a model of ‘networked privacy’ (e.g. boyd 2012; Marwick and boyd 2014). This model challenges existing ideas about privacy which focus on the individual and which rest on a binary distinction between public and private spheres (see Giaxoglou 2017). The networked nature of social media means that what one user posts can reveal as much about others as it does about themselves and also that this information can quickly circulate (boyd 2012, p. 349). In our own work, we have found that people recognise the risk of threatening the privacy of others when they post online, with one individual claiming not

to post on Facebook ‘Anything to do with financial issues, marital issues, anything that affects other people as much or more than me’ (Tagg and Seargeant 2017). However, withholding posts is not always feasible or desirable, given the positive social capital that can be gained on social media sites like Facebook through disclosure (Ellison et al. 2011). The online situation, therefore, calls for a re-conceptualisation of privacy as a process by which people negotiate collapsed social contexts and write particular audiences into being (Marwick and boyd 2014). Marwick and boyd’s ethnographic work with American teenagers reveals how young people manage the collapsed contexts of their social network accounts by adopting social or linguistic strategies that render the meaning of their posts less accessible to parents and other unintended audiences. Nissenbaum (2010) draws attention to the importance of a contextual approach to determining the ‘informational norms’—norms surrounding what information is shared, how and with whom—in a particular online space. In Marwick and boyd’s (2014) case, the American teenagers could be seen as reinforcing local social norms about the intended privacy of their technically public posts. Similarly, in her study of the publically available parenting forum Mumsnet, Mackenzie (2017) shows how users assume an audience of like-minded users, despite the potentially infinite audience that could gain access to their posts. Such research highlights the significant role that the notion of context collapse has played in redefining our understanding of online social practices.

The importance of the notion of context collapse for an understanding of online interaction within sociolinguistics lies in the fact that people typically adjust their style and content according to their understanding of who they are talking to, and thus complex notions of audience result in potentially complex dynamics of communication. Bell’s (1984) framework of ‘audience design’ is useful in theorising these dynamics. The framework was initially developed to explain why one newsreader would vary their pronunciation when reading the news on a different radio station, which he felt was due to their having imagined a different audience. At the time, studies of speaker style were dominated by Labov’s seminal insights into how stylistic variation depended on the degree of attention a speaker paid to their own speech, and Bell’s research helped to propel the importance of audience to the foreground. This is not to say that Bell was the first to explore this line of thinking, and his framework draws on Bakhtin’s (1930s/1981) ideas about addressivity—the ways in which meaning is shaped by both the speaker and the addressee—and on

other interactional frameworks which drew attention to the importance of audience in shaping speaker style (Clark and Carlson 1982; Garfinkel 1967; Goffman 1981; Sacks et al. 1974), whilst also having parallels with speech accommodation theory (Giles and Powesland 1975) and its focus on how speakers converge with, or diverge from, other interlocutors.

In short, audience design holds that the stylistic choices made by a speaker are shaped in part by their consideration of, and accommodation to, the varied segments that make up their audience (Bell 1984). The addressee (the person or people being directly addressed) will have most influence over speaker style, but style will also be shaped by others present in the exchange, including auditors (others whose presence in the exchange is ratified by the speaker) and overhearers (those who are present but whose presence is not ratified). The specific nature of people's relationships is important in determining the impact of these individuals on speaker style, so that in Youssef (1993) study, a child uses standard forms whenever her mother is present, regardless of who the child is addressing. Generally, however, audience design posits that people's influence on speaker style is determined by how they are positioned in the immediate exchange by the speaker. This aspect of the framework—the active positioning of others by the speaker—goes some way to address the criticism made by other researchers (e.g. Finegan and Biber 2001) that the framework is overly 'responsive' in that speakers are seen as reacting to predetermined audiences. The fact that roles are not predetermined but allocated by the speaker is particularly relevant for online situations such as Facebook in which the audience is 'invisible' (Litt 2012) and must be imagined into being; that is, where speakers construct their intended audience through their stylistic choices.

Also relevant in this regard is Bell's (1999, 2001) subsequent development of ideas about 'initiative style shift'. According to these ideas, as well as responding to an imagined audience, speakers may also accommodate to absent third parties, to which the speaker may or may not belong. These acts of accommodation involve what Bell called initiative style shifts in that they do not simply respond to the situation at hand but serve to shape it by drawing on and making relevant other contexts. Responsive and initiative style shifts can be seen as 'two complementary and coexistent dimensions of style' (Bell 2001, p. 165). In virtual situations, however, the distinction between these two kinds of style shifting is blurred, both by the varied and invisible nature of the audience (which, as mentioned above and argued by boyd 2001, requires users

to create a new audience for every post) and by the emergent nature of norms on sites such as Facebook (McLaughlin and Vitak 2011), which encourage users to take the initiative in shaping the online space and determining communicative norms.

As suggested above, the basic principle of audience design also holds for online contexts. However, the particular affordances of communication via social network sites (SNSs) are likely to result in interesting differences between the type of audiences perceived by someone posting on an SNS such as Facebook, and the audiences which Bell's model describes for spoken interaction. Firstly, unlike either conversational or broadcast talk, the type of interactions that typically take place on SNSs are conducted via the written mode and can, therefore, be edited and planned, and yet at the same time they exhibit much of the interactivity and informality that is often found in speech (As a side note, the extent to which the written mode dominates may be shifting, as voice and video messaging appear to becoming increasingly popular on services such as WhatsApp and WeChat). Secondly, to the extent that posts can, therefore, range somewhere along a cline between personal conversation and public broadcasts, SNSs can be described as 'semi-public' forums in the sense that a user's audience, while often large, diverse and unseen, generally comprises people they know. In earlier work on audience design on Facebook (Tagg 2013; Tagg and Seargeant 2014), we found that posts were shaped by users' awareness not only of an active circle of Friends likely to respond to their post but also a wider circle of Friends—distant relatives, old school friends, friends of friends—who may also gain access to their posts. Posters managed this aspect of context collapse by drawing on a range of linguistic and communicative strategies to mark their utterances as public or private, including language choice and code-switching, vague language and contextualised reference. This work, along with other studies (Frobenius 2014; Page 2014a; Johnson 2013), shows how a recognition of context collapse forms the starting point for the development of models of online audience design which begin to explain how social media users manage the complex contexts in which they operate.

As the above suggests, the sociolinguistic concept of audience design enables a more nuanced understanding of how context collapse is negotiated through language. Audience design is a more dynamic view of communication than that offered by context collapse, but it remains limited by its focus on 'audience' as the key contextual variable, especially given

that the ‘audience’ is being addressed in a different ‘context’ to that in which they might meet offline. It does not easily explain how people’s ideas about their ‘audience’ emerge both from past offline communication histories with others and also from their perception of the immediate social media context nor does it account for the impact of people’s awareness of the future trajectories of their posts on their language choices.

WHY RE-EXAMINE CONTEXT COLLAPSE?

While the concept of context collapse has been very useful in highlighting this general issue of the broad and complex nature of the online audience for social media postings, and the way in which this phenomenon is more salient in online than offline communication, it is nevertheless a rather blunt tool for a fine-grained analysis of online interaction. For this reason, we go on below to deconstruct the notion and analyse the elements of the phenomenon in closer detail.

A key issue in this respect lies in the understanding of ‘context’ which underpins the metaphor of collapse. In particular, the metaphor presupposes a notion of context as a somewhat fixed set of situational factors which exist independently of what Duranti and Goodwin (1992, p. 3) call the ‘focal event’ or the ‘phenomenon being contextualised’: for sociolinguists, the focal event is likely to be an act of spoken or written communication often referred to as a ‘text’. (The concept of ‘text’ here refers to any specific occurrence of language and communication—e.g. a Facebook post, email, a transcribed conversation which can be either spoken, written, or include multi-modal elements.) For contexts to collapse, they must not only have an independent existence but be conceived of as discrete entities, demarcated from the other contexts into which they collapse. There is also an implied assumption that when a person comes online, they bring an offline context with them—they reproduce the offline context online—a view which obscures the other variables which influence context, not the least of which is what Halliday and Hasan (1976) labelled ‘Mode’—the type of medium or channel of communication—so that the context for any online post is shaped not only by who is being addressed but by the particular platform (e.g. Facebook) and channel (e.g. status updating rather than messaging) being used.

Sociolinguistics—as with other linguistics and social science fields—has witnessed a shift over the last century away from a model of context as a relatively fixed social and cultural setting against which an utterance must be interpreted (Malinowski 1923) and towards a vision of context as a dynamic construct collaboratively brought into being through interaction (Duranti and Goodwin 1992). This understanding of context has implications for the validity and usefulness of the concept of context collapse as a way of understanding how people manage online communications. In this section, therefore, we briefly elaborate on how context has been conceptualised in sociolinguistics, both in consideration of offline and, more recently, online interactions. In doing so, we highlight the value that sociolinguistic insights can bring to a scholarly understanding of social media.

SOCIOLINGUISTIC UNDERSTANDINGS OF CONTEXT

Defining ‘Context’

The concept of ‘context’ has been used in language analysis in at least two distinct ways (Crystal 2003, pp. 108–109). Firstly, it can be used as a synonym of ‘co-text’ to refer to the wider text in which a linguistic feature is used (the ‘linguistic context’). This is the context referred to by corpus linguists who look at ‘key words in context’ (KWIC) and who have found that meaning resides not in a word but in wider phrases (Hunston 2002). It is also the primary focus for discourse analysts who look at language ‘beyond the sentence’; that is, the role of coherence and cohesion in creating a socially meaningful text (Cook 1989, p. 7). The second use of ‘context’ refers to features and phenomenon beyond the text—i.e. the ‘social context’ or situation including (for example) the participants, their relationships to each other, the type of interaction they are engaging in and the medium being used. The social and linguistic ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski (1923) is often credited with highlighting the importance of language in context as a way of interpreting the cultural practices of groups and the way that these are rendered meaningful within the culture and environment in which they take place. In this book, we focus particularly on this second conceptualisation of context, and how it has been developed by linguistic ethnographers and sociolinguists, among others.

It is worth pointing out however that, despite the distinct uses that have been made of co-text and context, it is not necessarily always possible or desirable to distinguish the text (language and its co-text) from its context. For example, texts or stretches of talk themselves can be seen as contextualising other texts or stretches of talk (Goodwin and Duranti 1992). In his study of verse within a story, Bauman (1992) shows how the narration of the story is at once contextualised by the surrounding speech events and provides a context within which the verse is understood. Distinguishing between text, co-text and context is arguably particularly challenging for researchers of online discourse. As Crystal (2011) points out, online texts may be particularly fluid and dynamic and their boundaries hard to define. For example, Crystal asks whether a ‘text’ constitutes one forum message or extends to the entire, continuously growing thread, as well as the other elements visible on the screen (including those generated by the site and those contributed by advertisers) and any hyperlinked texts. In the case of Facebook, this is further complicated by the different platforms via which the site can be used (phone, tablet, PC), each of which has a different physical layout and format.

As well as questions as to where ‘context’ ends and ‘co-text’ begins, there is a lack of agreement about the outer limits of context, and an acknowledgement that not all aspects of context can be available to a researcher (Ochs 1979, p. 2). As Cook (1990, p. 5) concludes in an article entitled ‘Transcribing infinity’, capturing all relevant contextual variables is a ‘theoretical as well as a practical impossibility’. It is this complex, ambiguous and potentially infinite understanding of context which underlies our investigation of how context is perceived, co-constructed and responded to on Facebook.

Mapping the Social

Researchers of language in context initially assumed a systematic set of relations between language and context, which results in predictable patterns in language use according to its context. From a Hallidayan perspective, for example, the ‘context of situation’ is inscribed into, and therefore can be retrieved from, the text:

the context of situation, the context in which the text unfolds, is encapsulated in the text, not in a kind of piecemeal fashion, not at the other

extreme in any mechanical way, but through a systematic relationship between the social environment on the one hand, and the functional organisation of language on the other.

(Halliday and Hasan 1985, p. 11)

Whilst usefully systematising the link between language and context, the assumption that analysts can reconstruct context from a text neglects consideration of how context is attended to and manipulated by participants as an interaction unfolds (Goodwin and Duranti 1992, p. 9). Dell Hymes' work has been especially important for laying out a set of descriptive constructs for a perspective on context that starts not with the text but with the *social*. Hymes (1972) replaced a grammatical approach based on units of analysis such as sentence, clause and phrase with a socially oriented approach centred around units of analysis such as speech community, speech event and speech act, all of which comprise linguistic and non-linguistic features and are governed not only by 'rules of speaking' but by other social conventions (Cameron 2001, p. 55). Although there have been a number of different attempts to map the contextual features that shape language use (e.g. Ochs 1979), the most comprehensive and widely known is probably Hymes' (1974) SPEAKING mnemonic. This framework details the contextual variables that make up speech events such as conversations or speeches.

- S Setting: that is, where the speech event is located in time and space, as distinct from the 'scene', which is the 'psychological setting' or the 'cultural definition of an occasion' (Hymes 1977, p. 18). Setting is analogous to 'physical' and 'social' spaces;
- P Participants: the people who take part in the speech event, and their role in this (e.g. speaker, addressee, audience, eavesdropper);
- E Ends: that is, what the purpose of the speech event is, and what its outcome is meant to be, from community and individual viewpoints (e.g. to entertain, to chastise, to instruct);
- A Act sequence: the speech acts that make up the speech event (e.g. general question followed by response; speech followed by congratulations), as well as message form and content;
- K Key: the tone or manner of performance (e.g. serious or joking, sincere or ironic)—analogous to Goffman's 'social frames' or footings;
- I Instrumentalities: the channel or medium of communication being used (e.g. speaking, signing, writing, typing) and what language, variety, style or register is selected from the participants' repertoires;

- N Norms of interaction and interpretation: what the rules are for producing and interpreting speech acts and the ‘specific behaviours and properties that attach’ (Hymes 1977, p. 20);
- G Genres: that is, what socially recognised ‘type’ does a speech event belong to, or what genres are drawn on in a speaker’s utterance

(Hymes 1977; see also Cameron 2001, p. 56; Farah 1998, p. 126)

Although Hymes’ model of contextual variables facilitates systematic analysis of a speech event, this is not to say that it is necessarily applicable to all social situations nor does it provide insight into the wider social or cultural significance of a particular event (Cameron 2001). As we shall see, however, the model proves useful in isolating the different aspects of context that people must attend to when designing the particular context for an online post, and below we put forward our own mnemonic for better understanding online communication in the light of our ideas about context design.

From Style to Stylisation

Meanwhile, William Labov’s pioneering work (Labov 1966) had spearheaded the formation of a new field of study: variationist sociolinguistics, or what has since been termed ‘First wave variation studies’ (Eckert 2012). The field came to be characterised by the use of quantitative methods through which broad correlations between linguistic patterning and wider social structures could be made (Labov 1972; Trudgill 1974). This work succeeded in confirming and detailing the systematic and socioeconomically stratified nature of linguistic variability. However, the focus on pre-existing macrosocial categories (e.g. age, gender, nationality) relegated people to ‘bundles of demographic characteristics’ (Eckert 2012, p. 88). This limitation was addressed to some extent by the second wave of variation studies, which adopted ethnographic methods in order to explore how people position themselves in relation to macrosocial categories. But whilst avoiding the abstract conception of context used in the first wave, studies continued to explain linguistic patterns as a *product* of social context (Eckert 2012). It was not until the third wave, in the twenty-first century, that researchers began exploring language variation as emerging from

people's dynamic enactment of speaking styles (Coupland 2014; Podesva 2007). As Eckert (2012, p. 98) concludes, '[i]t has become clear that patterns of variation do not simply unfold from the speaker's structural position in a system of production, but are part of the active—stylistic—production of social differentiation', which has implications for an understanding of the symbiotic relationship between style and context.

Interactional sociolinguistics, and in particular the work of John Gumperz (e.g. 1982), can be seen as instrumental in initialising this re-conceptualisation of the notion of context (Verscheuren 2010, p. 171). Through his ethnographic research, Gumperz challenged the validity of generalised and abstracted notions of context, as well as the assumption that straightforward correlations could be made between speech communities and linguistic features. Instead, he showed that language use was shaped by people's perceptions of the relationships between linguistic forms and social realities, and that these could only be understood through situated, ethnographic investigation of unfolding interactions: what he referred to as an 'ethnography of communication' (Gumperz and Hymes 1972). He observed how certain features—particularly prosody—are drawn upon to signal to interlocutors how an exchange is to be interpreted; in other words, they are used as a means of contextualising an utterance. To adopt Goffman's terminology, these features signal the social framing (i.e. the way of organising social experience) of an utterance, which offers expectations about how it should be understood. In addition, they can also indicate a change in how an utterance should be interpreted; what Goffman calls a shift in footing or 'a change in the alignment we take to ourselves and the others present' (Goffman 1981, p. 128). Importantly, these 'contextualisation cues', as Gumperz calls them [and which he glosses as 'any feature of linguistic form that contributes to the signalling of contextual presuppositions' (Gumperz 1967, p. 131)], are not pre-existing or pre-determined associations between context and language, but themselves emerge as part of and contribute to the interactive construction of context.

Like most linguistic anthropology of the time, Gumperz's work drew on spoken interactions and he, therefore, drew attention to the role of prosodic markers as contextualisation cues. In her later study of Greek emails, Georgakopoulou (1997) shows that contextualisation cues are relevant not only in spoken interactions and synchronous online chat but also in asynchronously exchanged online messages. She shows how, in the absence of verbal cues, participants drew on 'code-centred

contextualisation cues' (p. 149) which, for the multilingual email writers in her study, often took the form of code-switching as well as style-shifting. Through switches between standard Greek, local Greek dialects and English, the writers constructed 'a multivoiced and pastiche style' which 'forms the context within which activities on email can and should be interpreted' for that community of friends (Georgakopoulou 1997, p. 147). Below we take a wider look at how the dynamic, socially constructed understanding of context has shaped research into online settings.

Context Online

A number of assumptions relevant to context appear to underlie early research into social exchanges via the Internet: that a distinction could be made between the online and offline worlds; that online communication was 'bodiless' (Hall 1996; Sutton 1999) and decontextualised (Meyrowitz 1985); and that existing social contexts and identities are irrelevant online (Turkle 1995). Technological and social changes, as well as developments in the way online discourse is theorised, challenge these assumptions, showing firstly that people's existing social roles—as parent, family member, employee—can remain very relevant online (Tagg and Seargeant 2017) as can social categories such as gender (Newon 2011). Secondly, it has become evident that online activities should increasingly be seen as an extension of what an individual or group is doing offline (see, for example, Monaghan 2014). As Jurgenson (2012) argues, the fact that we are often 'online' shapes our perception of the world when we are 'offline' (for example, we might use Google to resolve a face-to-face debate), just as we never leave behind the 'offline' when we go 'online'. Mobile devices, in particular, are seen as enabling processes of multitasking which extend across online and offline environments (Cohen 2015; Lyons and Tagg in preparation). This everyday blurring of online–offline boundaries was strikingly reflected in the highly publicised release in July 2016 of Pokémon Go, an augmented reality game which required players to find and target virtual creatures in real-world locations, often with alarming consequences [e.g. people getting into car accidents while playing the game while driving (Mullen 2016)]. Increasingly, therefore, rather than seeing virtual interactions as being decontextualised and divorced from 'real life', researchers are now

recognising the apparent richness and complexity of context in online interaction.

Far from being decontextualised, then, digitally mediated interactions are seen more and more as involving the careful negotiation of multiple contexts and thus particularly complex processes of ‘contextualisation work’ (Androutsopoulos 2014, p. 6), that is, the active construction and negotiation of context as part of the communicative exchange. According to Moore (2004), online interactions involve a ‘doubling of place’ in the sense that digitally mediated communication makes relevant a virtual as well as a physical context. Jones (2009) shows how people transfer their attention between a number of different virtual and physical spaces as they carry out social and communicative activities. He describes, for example, how posing for, taking and looking at photos is at once part of a night out for young Hong Kongers, whilst simultaneously a way of engaging with a virtual community (and see also Lyons 2014, who draws attention to the discursive strategies people use in co-constructing a shared online space, including the discursive enactment of physical actions).

The relative lack of access to social cues in social media contexts—accent, gender, age, tone of voice, facial expression, gesture—does not render offline contexts irrelevant, but it does mean that interlocutors must recreate or exploit offline contexts through the resources available online in order to co-construct a shared online context which shapes interpretations of their posts. In boyd’s (2001, p. 119) words, social media participants engage in *writing* themselves into being. That is, their postings are contextualised not through physical co-presence but through the use of largely visual and often text-based resources—spelling, punctuation, font, emoticons, emoji, stickers, photos and so on. Their understanding of context is not individual but social or ‘networked’; as Marwick and boyd (2014, p. 1058) point out, users ‘must understand how others have shaped the context and operate accordingly’, and in this way reproduce and maintain the context. The importance of this contextualisation work for the issues dealt with in this book lies in the agency which it implies users have in shaping online contexts. In Androutsopoulos’s (2014, p. 17) words, the implication is that online context is ‘not just delimited by technological means but construed by speakers and audiences’.

Despite this growing body of work on the topic, much of the relevant literature remains limited to one-to-one interactions through relatively private channels, such as chat rooms and text messaging (e.g. Jones 2004,

2009; Lyons 2014). Status updating on a semi-public site like Facebook, which is our focus here, is likely to be particularly complex in this respect. Firstly, as boyd (2001) points out, given the potentially wide yet invisible audience on Facebook, updaters cannot be certain as to who will read their posts and thus they must engage in constructing the various contexts in which they envisage their posting be read. Secondly, as well as generating new contexts for an update, updaters must also contend with the awareness that unintended ‘overhearers’ may be listening (i.e. those people who have access to their posts by, for example, being friends of friends), and thus adopt complex audience design strategies aimed at targeting some individuals and excluding others (Tagg and Seargeant 2014), which again requires a nuanced understanding of contextual variables.

And finally, the possibility of entextualisation (Bauman and Briggs 1990, p. 73)—the detachment of a text from its original setting and its re-contextualisation elsewhere—is particularly salient in semi-public, networked environments like Facebook. Androutsopoulos (2014) theorises online entextualisation in terms of ‘sharing’, a process which involves selecting posts, styling them and negotiating with others. Sharing a post as an act of entextualisation is also an act of transformation which imbues the original post with personal or social significance and thus creates ‘significant moments for a networked audience’ (p. 4). As Androutsopoulos (2014) argues, the act of sharing—of ‘[u]nderstanding such moments and participating in their interactive negotiation’ (p. 6)—presupposes a great deal of shared background knowledge and user alignment. Nonetheless, as far as the original poster is concerned, posts that are shared or remixed will appear in new contexts which make them available to unanticipated users and which frame these posts in different ways, leading to new interpretations. In our *Creating Facebook* research, we have found that people often try to guess the possible future trajectories of their posts, and that this contextualisation work often shapes what and how they post (Tagg and Seargeant 2017). We return to these three points—the unknown audience, the existence of overhearers and the possibility of entextualisation—later in this chapter.

Summary: A Sociolinguistic Perspective on Context Collapse

Bringing this all together, the question we seek to answer in this book is whether the concept of context collapse can account for a model of context as actively co-constructed by users in the course of their online interactions; and, if not, how these online processes can best be

conceptualised. On the one hand, the metaphor is a striking one which to some extent has transcended its metaphorical connotations to stand for a shortcut for the kinds of situations generated in online spaces such as Facebook, and in this sense is useful for discussions of networked privacy and audience design. On the other hand, our discussion so far points to limitations to the concept in terms of the extent to which it accurately models what happens when people interact—both offline and online.

The main issue is that as a metaphor it rests on the assumption that, on online sites such as Facebook, various offline contexts are reproduced in one virtual space. The metaphor thus relies on a problematic understanding of ‘context’ as being discrete, fixed and pre-existing. This understanding sits in contrast to sociolinguistic understandings of context. Sociolinguists, as we have seen, would say that contexts continually shift that one utterance sets the context for the next, that people interact in a dynamic fashion which reshapes their perceptions and so the contextual frame in which interlocutors use to give meaning to their utterances continuously shifts. Contexts, according to this interpretation, do not exist independently of a text and nor are they ‘countable’ as implied by the metaphor. Another assumption implied by the metaphor is that offline contexts can collapse into, and coexist within, one online space. This assumption rests on the understanding that offline contexts can be reproduced online, specifically through the individuals (the Facebook Friends) which a user associates with a particular context. This understanding can be challenged on at least two fronts. Firstly, it foregrounds audience as the key aspect of context at the expense of other contextual variables, such as those highlighted by Hymes (1974). Hymes, neglecting among other things to consider the impact that the change of mode (the shift in medium) might engender when people move online to Facebook. Secondly, it assumes that any one of a user’s Facebook Friends represents—and involves the user responding to—a particular offline context, when in reality people’s offline lives are likely more complex than that implies.

As well as assuming that offline contexts are reproduced online, the metaphor also rests on the assumption that these contexts then coexist as discrete entities which a user may or may not attend to. From a sociolinguistic perspective, it is not so much that these contexts continue to exist online, but that features of their offline realisations remain available to speakers (‘updaters’ or ‘posters’) as potential

influences on their stylistic choices. In that sense, offline contexts do not pre-exist in this online space, but are made relevant through (to borrow Bell's term) the updater's initiative style shifts. This is in effect where audience design comes in, because Bell's (and others') point is that people do not respond to a pre-existing audience but construct an idea of the audience through how they design their interactions. How people perceive the audience is based on what they know about it and what they understand the consequences of the audience are for how they should come across. What we are suggesting, by drawing on a sociolinguistics understanding of context, is that the styling of an utterance involves far more than a concern for audience, but the imagining and reproduction of much fuller relevant scenarios; by responding to how you think your mother might react to what you say, you are bringing into play a long-term communication history, social ideologies as they relate to parenthood, the various domestic and social settings that make up your relationship and so on. In other words, the process of choosing how to style an utterance brings in many other dimensions alongside audience.

Given the complexity of the typical Facebook network, updaters likely orient towards what Blommaert (2010) refers to as multiple centres of influence as they actively construct a context for a particular posting. Facebook, like other online sites, can thus be seen a 'polycentric' space in which people attend simultaneously to a number of coexisting, often competing, orientations which can include traditional sources of authority, peer group norms or 'abstract entities and ideas' (Blommaert 2010, p. 39) all of which cut across traditionally perceived offline (and online) contexts. As Androutsopoulos and Staehr (2017) point out, however, research into social media has tended to neglect consideration of the polycentricity of online interactions or to take into account the fluidity of online and offline norms and the ways in which resources and normative centres are entextualised and taken up across online sites. Our re-conceptualisation of context collapse in terms of polycentricity moves us away from a responsive or reactive model which assumes distinctions between the online and offline text and context, towards a model which recognises the active way in which users work to co-construct an online context shaped by their awareness of centres of normativity and their shifting orientation towards them. In the next section, we develop this further as we elaborate on our concept of 'context design'.

CONTEXT DESIGN: A REFINED MODEL

Our concept of context design takes into account the fluid, socially co-constructed nature of context in order to better understand the communicative dynamics that shape social media encounters. In processes of context design, we argue, people shape their utterances in response to the various centres of influence which they feel are likely to determine how their utterances are interpreted by different members or segments of their intended or possible audience. In other words, they design a context for each utterance which draws on, sustains and extends existing sources of authority regarding what is deemed appropriate or valued behaviour. Crucial to this process is the argument that people are not responding to a complete pre-existing social setting but that, in styling an utterance, they are involved in actively constructing the context or frame in which it will or can be interpreted.

When updating status on Facebook, users must typically take into account what is usually a particularly complex set of contextual considerations, given the invisible but potentially intradiverse nature of their potential audience and thus the various, often competing and overlapping centres of influence towards which orient. In relation to this, a number of researchers have pointed to the increased likelihood for self-reflexivity given the conditions in which online posts are composed (Deumert 2014; Tagg 2016). According to Androutsopoulos and Staehr (2017), reflexivity is heightened by the ‘temporal gap between composition and release’; that is, opportunities for engaging in processes of context design are made available in the time the poster has between composing a message and transmitting it (hitting send) as well as the fact that posts can be revisited and scrutinised after they are sent. Online reflexivity is also likely to be enhanced as a result of the feedback which online posters on a site like Facebook receive from their intradiverse audience when they are forced to consider, through exposure to conflicting perspectives, their own views. This may be part of a more general trend in contemporary conditions of globalisation; as Coupland (2003) argues, new diversities and mobilities are serving to shake people’s assumptions about social relations in ways that increase reflexive behaviour. On Facebook, this feedback loop is enforced by the way users are encouraged by site design decisions to reflect on, and respond to, others’ posts through ‘liking’ them or commenting on them (Androutsopoulos and Staehr 2017). This observation lies at the heart of context design:

the way in which users respond to previous experiences on the site when styling future posts. To return to the main point above then, processes of context design, which are also part of the process of targeting and styling spoken utterances, may be somewhat more conscious, elaborate and potentially problematic in online situations, given the inherently reflexive property of online writing and the nature of invisible, intradiverse online audiences.

Models of audience design such as Bell's (and these models' application to online situations) take into account the constructed nature of audience but, by focusing on this as their central concept, they neglect the other contextual elements to which speakers and online users must attend. An individual's understanding of their audience includes their awareness of, for example, the personal network of each audience member, the wider social and cultural norms to which they ascribe, and the situations that may arise if they do not address them appropriately. Building on existing frameworks for spoken interactions such as Hymes, we argue that Facebook users must, primarily, take into account the following elements when styling a post and designing the context in which it is intended to be understood. Below, we organise the elements within the mnemonic of POSTING, in analogy with Hymes' (1974) SPEAKING framework [note: Thanks to Korina Giaxoglou for suggesting this mnemonic].

- P Participants: the context constructed in a post is shaped by the poster's general knowledge of the people they are friends with and their experience of their past behaviour and interaction on the site, as well as the more immediately relevant feedback provided by their interlocutors' responses to their posts. As soon as someone comments on a status update, for example, the status updater is more likely to orient to them and their likely expectations in ensuing posts, be these either comments in the same thread or subsequent updates. As we explain in Tagg and Seargeant (2014), people whom a user sees as 'active Friends'—those who can be expected to reply, based on past behaviour—are likely to have a greater influence over the stylisation of a post than those who tend not to reply or about whom the node user has only a vague awareness. Importantly, the more immediately relevant feedback provided by a reply does not make the intended audience any more 'real', but rather we can describe the imagined audience as being more or less 'grounded' in relevant evidence.

- O Online media ideologies: as discussed in Chap. 1, people's ideas about the purpose of Facebook in relation to other platforms, and how status updating works in relation to other channels on Facebook, shape the kind of post they will contribute to the site.
- S Site affordances: awareness of, and attitudes towards, affordances, both of the site itself and online texts more generally. As discussed above, affordances are also socially constructed; it is not simply the case that Facebook 'has' affordances which people either do or do not recognise. Rather, they are the product of people's awareness and use of potential site functionalities.
- T Text type (or mode) in which the communication takes place. That is to say, the fact that online communication is often typed, includes the ability to use visual resources, and is characterised by physical distance, quasi-synchronicity and networked resources.
- I Identification processes: as Leppänen et al. (2014) argue, the performative co-construction of 'self' is a key element of online interaction. When posting, users are not only taking into account external or 'other' centres of influence but are actively involved in positioning themselves in relation to existing norms—(dis)aligning themselves with particular ideologies, discourses and individuals, as well as attaching themselves to, or distancing themselves from, ascribed social roles (Tagg and Seargeant forthcoming). Thus, context design also involves an awareness of self and of the ways in which an individual wishes to perform and make visible their identity, commonality, connectedness and belonging (see also Leppänen et al. 2017).
- N Norms of communication: these will vary between groups at different scales of interaction (Blommaert 2010). On a higher scale, interaction on Facebook will be shaped by widely circulating cultural, religious and political beliefs and values, such as the reverence accorded to the monarchy in some countries, adherence to a liberal doctrine or ideas about what constitutes racist or sexist behaviour. On a lower scale of interaction, local peer norms regarding appropriate behaviour between friends and how Facebook should be used, for example, will extend between offline and online spaces but will also be to some extent platform-specific or related to communication on a particular site (i.e. shaped by the affordances of Facebook and the purposes to which it is put). In certain cases, norms could include specific regulations as a result of policies laid down by the site company, such as the prohibitions on Facebook

against nudity, as interpreted and negotiated by particular user groups and, often, imposed by legal regulations. These multiple, often conflicting centres of influence sit at the heart of our analysis of acts of offence.

- G Goals or immediate purposes or ends when posting. So, for example, one might be making a joke or being ironic, in which case it is necessary to signal this in order to create the context in which your post can be interpreted. This role may be fulfilled by contextualisation cues such as emoji and emoticons.

Our argument, then, is that on Facebook users have a semi-conscious awareness of these elements (as well as other less-prominent elements) in relation to how their posts are likely to be received and interpreted, and that this awareness influences their behaviour on the site.

As well as attending to these elements of the polycentric space when designing the context in which their postings are interpreted, we argue that Facebook users also take into account the trajectory or multiple trajectories along which their posts might travel. The notion of a text's trajectory (Blommaert 2005) allows for the fact that texts do not exist solely in their original context but that they move around by being reproduced and reinterpreted in new contexts. As originating in Bauman and Briggs' (1990) work, this process of entextualisation—the lifting or 'decontextualising' of a text from one context to be 'recontextualised' in another—can involve transformations in the meaning of a text or language resource and in the value accorded to it. For example, a comment made by a politician during a debate may be removed from that context and re-appropriated as a meme by those opposing that politician. The words will remain precisely the same, but the meaning, by dint of the way these words are re-contextualised, is quite different. On Facebook, users may attend to the likelihood of entextualisation through online sharing (Androutsopoulos 2014) that selected posts will appear in numerous newsfeeds, including those of Friends of Friends and that they may be restyled or reframed during their trajectories by the nature of the comments they attract and by the posts they appear alongside (that is, what Androutsopoulos calls 'negotiation'). A post could also be interpreted (without being reused) in a different context—e.g. by a child looking at his father's newsfeed. Previous research has explored the way in which even private digitally

mediated communication between two persons makes relevant multiple spaces—the virtual space, multiple physical spaces (e.g. Jones 2004)—but our approach highlights the increase in complexity engendered by the conditions of online social networking, brought about not only by the large, intradiverse audience but also by largely unpredictable processes of online sharing or entextualisation. Facebook users must potentially attend to an almost infinite array of communicative spaces that may be made relevant through intradiversity and entextualisation.

In seeking to understand this complexity, we identify the main ‘stages’ of the text trajectory that a user may attend to when writing a post as likely to include the following:

- The longer communicative histories between a user and members of their Friends network. How a post is stylised on a social network site like Facebook is likely to be grounded in the posters’ awareness of their existing and habitual relationships with individual friends and friend groups, including the norms and values the posters assume these friends to have, their shared background knowledge, existing communication history and the posters’ understanding of the potential offline implications of their post, which can range from upsetting someone to losing their job. Posts thus draw on, extend and transform longer term patterns of interaction.
- The immediate online setting of Facebook. This is defined by the speaker’s understanding of Facebook and of the different people who make up their friends as well as their understanding of how this intradiversity can be managed (i.e. through built-in affordances or linguistic strategies).
- Imagined future trajectories of posts. This is based on an understanding of relationships which are dynamic and which exist in time (e.g. posts persist, they can be re-posted, your Friends list may grow, privacy settings may be changed—all of which means that people at some unanticipated future date may look at and interpret what you have written). Our research in this area suggests that people can be constrained in what they post by the feeling that they lack control over the future trajectory of their posts—a phenomenon which we have called ‘fear of extextualisation’ [note: Thanks to Adrienne Lo for suggesting this term] and which involves awareness that their posts may be interpreted differently if or when they are re-contextualised.

A final, crucial element of context design lies in the extent to which people navigate and manage the multiple centres of influence to which they variously orient. How context is designed depends on people's awareness of the competing norms and sources of authority, but also on their sense of agency in acting on this awareness. This relates to the linguistic and communicative strategies they are able to implement in achieving their interactional aims, the resources they have available and what they choose to or can do with them and the extent to which they feel they can exploit the site affordances. Users' agency will be constrained in various ways not only by their awareness of what is available and their access to resources, but by their social roles and how they are positioned by others. Focusing on the strategies available to users, and what users have to say about them, is a key aspect of the methodology involved in investigating the construction of context.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the premise of our theoretical model is that participants on Facebook imagine particularly complex contexts to which they respond as they construct their posts, a process which we call 'context design'. Although context design is a feature of all interaction, it is of specific note online—at least in written interactions—due to the increased likelihood for reflexivity and by the particular nature of the typical online audience for postings on sites such as Facebook. The concept examines how participants can take on board a range of factors in imagining the various ways in which their online posts may be re-contextualised (embedded and reinterpreted in new contexts) and looks at how this awareness shapes and constrains what they say as they construct the contexts in which they wish their posts to be interpreted. It thus draws on a sociolinguistic understanding of context as co-constructed as well as on audience design models which draw attention to the way in which elements of context are co-constructed through stylisation in order to explain the communicative dynamics shaping interactions. As one of our interviewees, Jacob, sums up the implications of context design:

- (2) I think that the topics that are chosen actually end up shaping what Facebook is for many people. So I think in certain groups of people, choosing to talk about different topics, that becomes their Facebook experience.

[Jacob, interview]

In other words, Facebook, as a space for communication, is shaped by how its users decide to use it. Their decisions about what to post create a particular user experience, which then goes on to shape future contributions to the site. As we discuss later, this then has implications for our understanding of the relationship between technology and society, and in particular the extent to which online technologies can be seen as determining, or as a product of, social interaction.

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