"Context" in Context

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In contemporary usage the term "context" refers to a broadly defined background of a composition or a structure, as well as to the parts that precede and follow a given passage. In folklore studies its use draws upon theories and methods in anthropology, linguistics, socio-linguistics, sociology, psychology, and philosophy, and coincides with similar usages in literary theory, history, and cultural studies (cf. Goodwin and Duranti 1992). However, its immediate antecedent appeared in anthropological functional theory. In 1954 William Bascom proposed that any functional analysis required an adequate description of "the social context of folklore," including the time and place for the telling of specific forms; the identity of the narrators and the composition of the audience, as well as the relationship of the narrator to the text; the use of dramatic and rhetorical devices in performance; audience participation; folk classification of traditional genres and the people's attitudes toward them (Bascom 1954:334).

From this perspective contextual analysis explores the contribution folklore makes toward the functioning of society (Bascom 1953:290). Initially, when Malinowski advanced his functional theory in anthropology he sought to discover how the different aspects of culture, including folklore, maintained social cohesion. But when he addressed the issues of *context of culture* and *context of situation* he turned to the question of meaning in primitive languages (Malinowski 1946[1923]:307; 1965[1935]:18). This subtle shift in focus from society to meaning has barely been acknowledged, yet it provides the clue for the kind of reception bestowed upon contextual analysis in folklore studies. When the concept of context emerged in 1971 as an essential component of the re-definition of folklore as "artistic communication in small groups" (Ben-Amos 1971:13) and as a unifying principle for the new perspectives (Paredes and Bauman 1972), folklorists reacted as if it were a new, rather than a familiar, scholarly

term.[1] Its critics defined the concern with context as if it were in opposition to text (Jones 1979a, 1979b; Ward 1977, 1979; Wilgus 1973, 1986;), and its defenders identified the concept of context itself as new together with its ancillary terms of "communication," "conventions," "performance," and "rhetorics" (Bascom 1977; Dorson 1972:45–47). Both critics and defenders bypassed some more fundamental changes that contextual theory introduced into folklore.

FROM EXPLANATION TO INTERPRETATION

The break with traditional scholarly practices involved not so much the consideration of the immanence of context—this has been recognized before—but the shift from explanation to interpretation in the analytical modality of folklore. This change had dual dimensions: analytical and pragmatic. A broad range of previous theories, from the nineteenth-century cultural evolution to modern formulaic theory, have sought to offer a causal explanation of the content, form, actions, and beliefs that comprise the substance of folklore. These theories invariably involve the construction of models and the postulation of universal cultural—not natural—laws that serve as premises that cover attempts to rationalize or explain the persistence of folklore. Such an analytical modality prevails in schools of thought as different as the Müllerian "solar mythology" and the Cambridge-based "myth and ritual" theory. Even when the formulation of a new theory involves the refutation of a previous one, as in the case of formalism and the historic-geographic method, both the new and the rejected approaches nevertheless have shared the analytical modality of causal explanation.

In contrast, contextual analysis does not explain folklore; it interprets it, seeking meanings rather than causes (cf. Honko 1986). It does so by considering not only the text but the entire experience of folklore in society. Such an approach takes the concept of folklore as orally performed verbal art to its logical conclusions, insisting that any valid interpretation consider the entire cultural, social, and situational context. The meaning of a text is its meaning in context. The transference of any folklore text to a different literary, historical, or cul-

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1. There is no discussion of context in the summative symposia that survey the accomplishments of folklore scholarship in the first half of the twentieth century (Thompson 1953). According to *The Centennial Index of the Journal of American Folklore* the term appears first in Miller (1952), and since then, particularly in the sixties, it has become a standard term in folklore scholarship in the United States.

tural context grants it a new meaning. Because of their transient nature, folklore texts do not have single meanings, and any repeated, historically conscious use connotes previous contexts as an integral part of their set of meanings. A valid interpretation is an interpretation of a text in context.

THE TEXT VERSUS CONTEXT CONTROVERSY: A FALSE DILEMMA?

In terms of contextual analysis there is no dichotomy between text and context; nor is it necessary, unless heuristically advisable, to conceive of text and context as levels of communication or as a series of forms embedded in each other and in culture and society. Folklore exists in a contextual state. By turning terms around, Paul Ricœur has proposed a kind of a nominalistic solution to the apparent dichotomy between text and context by conceiving and naming social action as text (1971a, 1971b). In such a renaming, text becomes a metaphor for context. Such a rethinking of cultural events opens them up for inexhaustible interpretations and discoveries of new meanings (Geertz 1973; Hobart 1985).

At the same time, such a metaphoric view of context as text underscores the potential dangers of absolute individualization of performance situations (Scharfstein 1989:59–66). Each single utterance, each single performance of repeated and repeatable text could be likened to a poem, or any singular artistic creation. In fact Robert Georges (1969, 1976) has foreseen this quandary into which contextual analysis could lead, although he regards it a virtue not a vice. According to him "the total message of any given storytelling event is generated and shaped by and exists because of a *specific* storyteller and *specific* story listeners whose interactions constitute a network of social interrelationships that is *unique* to that particular storytelling event" (1969:324, emphases mine).

Theoretically, contextual description increases the specificity of each folklore performance. As no two poems are alike, so no two tellings, singings, or recitings of texts duplicate each other. The likelihood that there will be a convergence of all factors that make up a folklore performance is very slight. However, context tempers the uniqueness of any utterance and its message. The social conventions and regulations, the cultural and language rules, and the genres of speech that govern folklore performance in any context would

restrain the uniqueness of any event, and subject it to cultural conventions of communication, of which speakers are aware and in which they have a variable degree of competence (Bauman 1977; Bauman and Briggs 1990; Hymes 1962, 1964, 1971, 1972, 1974:135–141; Lewis 1969; Lyons 1972:83–84; Mailloux 1983).

Pragmatically, context is the interpretant of folklore. The term interpretant is taken from Charles Sanders Peirce's (1839–1914) semiotics. Though the term context is absent from his account, a synthesis of Peirce's semiotics with linguistic, philosophical, anthropological, and folkloristic theories points to the conclusion that context functions as the intepretant of folklore messages (Bauman 1977; Ben-Amos 1971, 1977; Givón 1989:1–2, 69–76; Goffman 1974:440–441; Levinson 1983:22–23; Shapiro 1983:14–15, 49–60; Wittgenstein 1968:142–143[525]; 188). Context, like the interpretant, is an "agent of mediation" (Shapiro 1983:15) between signs and their objects; applying them to concrete situations (Eco 1976:1460), it modifies and determines the meaning of words (Langer 1976[1942]:139), and it transforms the perception and conception of objects (Hahn 1942). John Dewey early on pointed out a fact that has become axiomatic in folklore and museums studies, that the context of the fine arts museum interprets ethnographically obtained utensils as art (1958[1934]:6–9, 26). Karl Bühler's formulation for language is aptly applicable to folklore: "the symbolic field of language [. . .] provides a second class of clues for construction and understanding, one that could be covered by name *context;* thus, in general terms, the situation and the context are the two sources that in every case contribute to the precise interpretation of utterances" (Bühler 1990[1934]:169).

Such an interpretive function is particularly valuable in comparative analysis of folklore, in which fixed texts, well-formed themes, narrative patterns, and stock figures recur in different cultures. Their meanings and significance are context-dependent. Diffused as they are, their narrators, singers and reciters are oblivious to their broad, even global distribution; for them, they have meanings one text at a time, one figure in a society. In each particular case, context functions interpretively, attributing to the utterances the meanings the speakers and listeners perceive in them. When a text is stable, on either a thematic, morphological, structural, or metaphoric level, and the context is variable, it is the latter that affects the differences in the meanings texts might produce, and therefore it is the context that functions as the interpretant of folklore texts.

Nevertheless, the context dependency of folklore appears to be subject to gradual variation. Textual stability and contextual dependency are in direct relationship to each other. The briefer and the more stable a folklore text is, the higher is its context dependency; and, conversely, the longer and consequently verbally more variable a text is, the lower appears to be its contextual dependency. The meaning of proverbs, for example, is highly context-dependent, and consequently abstractly indefinite (Krikmann 1984; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1973; Seitel 1976); whereas tales, even epics, that have a wider range for textual variation, retain stability of meaning in a variety of contexts in a single culture, and thus have lower contextual dependency.

Such an observation is applicable mostly to the immediate context in which a performance occurs. But as far as the context of culture, writ large, is concerned, even longer and looser texts cannot extricate themselves from its constraints. Even those texts that have an apparently lower context dependency draw their specific meanings from the broad context of their specific society, the language in which they are performed, and the cultural symbolic system that interprets them. They are equally bound by the ideology, historical knowledge, modes of thought, value system, aesthetic principles, and principles of behavior that comprise the context of culture. These relations between texts and contexts have become evident in numerous studies on specific genres and their performance in different societies.

CONTEXT AND GENRE

In illuminating the complexities of texts in contexts, folklorists drew on a rich tradition of research on specific genres in different societies. A theoretical emphasis on performance, rhetoric, and social interaction played a crucial role in grasping genre-specific relations between texts and contexts.

Proverbs are quotations from entextualized tradition (Mukařovský 1971) in which a speaker brings to bear upon a situation the full authority either of the communal past, or of an individual who is called on emblematically to channel cultural wisdom, in order to resolve a particular social conflict (Abrahams 1968a, 1968b; Arewa 1971; Arewa and Dundes 1964; Briggs 1988:101–170). Such an application of authority occurs in situations of litigations as well as in informal, conflict-resolving, conversations that can be pedagogical in

nature. By the very use of proverbs a speaker claims authority. Most folklorists have obtained the relevant ethnographic information through hypothetically reconstructed contexts of situations; however, more recent studies attempt to observe directly the dynamics of proverb use (i.e. Briggs 1988:101–170).

The riddle, which has often been associated with the proverb as its complement or opposite, appears to contrast with it contextually as well. Cross-cultural surveys of the pragmatics of riddling indicate its prevalence among children and youth rather than the elderly. Pedagogically riddles instruct, but without morals. People pose them in situations of ritual crises rather than social conflicts. In African societies, in addition to their purely entertaining value, riddles serve to instruct pubescent initiates, and in medieval European and Asian cultures they were part of courting behavior and wedding ceremonies—a past practice that tales and ballads reflect (Tale Types 851 "The Princess Who Cannot Solve the Riddle," and 851A "Turandot;" Child No. 1 "Riddles Wisely Expounded"). They create a cognitively fictive world, with a reversed relation to the phonetic or semantic verbal order a culture knows. Riddles invoke humor rather than judgment; play and fantasy rather than ethical values, as proverbs do. People perform them in association with other genres of entertainment, rather than in conjunction with legal procedures (Burns 1976).

The contexts of ballad singing have similarly largely been situations of entertainment. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Scotland, for example, farm hands performed them during work and in leisure and festive times (Buchan 1972:255–270; 1985:62–65). In the urban centers of England, even earlier literature and documents attest to singing on streets and in the marketplace (Würzbach 1990), and together with recitation (Goldstein 1976), they have been the main staple of male pub singing (Dunn 1980; Pickering 1982, 1984; Renwick 1980). The broad range of textual variations of ballads appears to be more performer- rather than context-dependent (i.e., Niles 1986; Porter 1976, 1986). Singers maintain a relative thematic stability of the ballads, adhering to their own tradition and personal style, contributing thereby to a low degree of context dependency of ballad texts. Yet in words, symbols, images, and themes they draw upon local, current, and historical events, ethical values, and cultural mores that provide the broader context for creativity, interpretation, and understanding (Pickering 1982; Renwick 1980; Toelken 1986a; 1986b).

The need to examine the communicative context of singing is well recognized (Andersen 1991; Pickering 1984).

Of all the folklore forms, narratives have been subject to contextual analysis more than any other genre. Albeit, most studies have focused on a single aspect of storytelling rather than encompassed the entire situation. Contextual analysis of folktales has evolved through studies of the roles of narrators, either itinerant or resident in specific societies, the repertoire of individual narrators, the telling occasions and events, and the narration of specific genres. The social interaction in narrating situations and the poetics of performed texts in context, observed or reconstructed, have been among the recent research directions (Bauman 1986; Bauman and Briggs 1990; Mills 1991).

EMERGING DEFINITIONS OF CONTEXT

Methodologically there are several proposals for the contextual analysis of folklore forms. Richard Bauman proposes that the fieldworker in folklore organize the data around six broad foci: "(a) *context of meaning* (what does it mean?); (b) *institutional context* (where does it fit within the culture?); (c) *context of communicative system* (how does it relate to other kinds of folklore?); (d) *social base* (what kind of people does it belong to?); (e) *individual context* (how does it fit into a person's life?); (f) *context of situation* (how is it useful in social situations?)" (Bauman 1983:367). Kaivola-Bregenhøj (1992) distinguishes in the narrating process the situational context, the linguistic context (Brown and Yule 1983:46–50), the cultural context, the cognitive context, and the generic context. And in the discussion of the context of ballads, Barre Toelken proposes to examine "(1) the immediate *human* context of performance . . . (2) the *social* context . . . (3) the *cultural-psychological* context . . . (4) the *physical* context . . . (5) the *time* context, the occasion on which the performance takes place" (Toelken 1986:36).

Operationally, these, and possibly other, categorizations of contexts are instrumental for research purposes. However, the two key and polar terms that are fundamental to contextual analysis and are inclusive of kinds of contexts are *context of culture* and *context of situation*. Both terms are Malinowski coinages. The context of culture (Malinowski 1935[1965]:18) comprises the reference to, and the representation of, the shared knowledge of speakers, their conventions of

conduct, belief systems, language metaphors and speech genres, their historical awareness, and ethical and judicial principles. Context of culture is the broadest framework for the perception and interpretation of folklore. The concept draws upon a broad spectrum of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century trends of thought, ranging from Romanticism to Marxism, from cultural evolution to psychoanalysis. Common to these intellectual movements is the principle of aesthetic dependence on national, ethnic, economic, religious, social, and ideological factors. Accordingly, any aesthetic expression is rooted in and explained by its context of culture, which in turns it reflects. Within folkloristic anthropological discourse (Bauman 1983), culture as a whole is the context upon which aesthetics, and folklore as art, depends. Culture comprises the set of symbols, ideas, beliefs, and knowledge that interprets folklore utterances for speakers and listeners. In the literal interpretation of the term *context* as a frame for communication, *context of culture* serves as the broadest contextual circle which embraces all other possible contexts.

In contrast, the situation is the narrowest, most direct context for speaking folklore. The exploration of the *situation* as a context for the performance of folklore has been, by far, one of the most stimulating recent research directions. Malinowski considered the situation of speaking as the key for the interpretation of verbal messages. Dealing with cryptic phrases that people exchange in the course of action when they are familiar with each other and with their task at hand, Malinowski considered the concept of situation as a keystone in his ethnographic theory of language; he saw it as playing a crucial function in the formation of meaningful statements (Malinowski 1923: 306–309).

Malinowski himself drew upon the formulations of linguists and psychologists. Among them was Philipp Wegener, who proposed a theory of situation (*Situationstheorie*) for language. In his psychologically oriented typology Wegener distinguished three situations in which context provides ways of understanding single word utterances: situations of perception, situations of remembrance, and situations of consciousness (Wegener in Abse 1971:135–138). More directly, Malinowski found support for his ideas in discussions with and in reading the work of A. Gardiner. According to Gardiner's theory, speech requires the occurrence of a speaker, a listener, a word, and "the speaker and the listener must be in the same spatial and temporal situation" (1932:49; see 49–52). Karl Bühler formulated a model of

speaking along similar lines. He drew upon Plato's dialogue on language, *Cratylus* (1990[1934]:30–39), emphasizing the instrumental, communicative nature of language. Bühler constructed a triangular model representing the speaking situation with sender (expression)/receiver (appeal) and a message that represents objects and states of affairs (1990[1934]:35).

In linguistics "the context theory is perhaps the most influential single factor in the growth of twentieth century semantics" (Ullmann 1959:65). For folklore studies, Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) provided the link by which Czech structuralism, American pragmatism, and London linguistics converged in the formulation of a starting point for the emergence of contextual analysis. He considers context to have a referential function in verbal communication: "The addresser sends a message to the addressee. To be operative the message requires a context referred to ('referent' in another, somewhat ambiguous, nomenclature), seizable by the addressee and either verbalized or capable of being verbalized" (Jakobson 1960:353). As methods have evolved, and awareness of the use of the concept of context in other disciplines has grown, the context-of-situation has changed from a passive referent to a scene of interactive relations between speakers and their words. Trends in several fields either helped to forge such a conception of the situation, or developed it in parallel directions. In psychology, contextualism was initially a theory of perception (Pepper 1938; Hahn 1942), but in recent years psychological studies have proposed to account for context as an interactive reality (Rosnow and Georgoudi 1986). In philosophy, both American pragmatists and ordinary language philosophers considered context to be central for understanding and interpretation. John Dewey articulated this approach in regard to thought and art (1931, 1934). Among the ordinary language philosophers, Wittgenstein insisted on the importance of context for determining the significance of words (1968: § 525, 539, 652, 686; pp. 181, 188), while Austin (1962), followed by Searle, (1969)[2] considered speech as a form of action in a situation (Goodwin and Duranti 1992:16–19). In terms of folklore, most significant has been the dramatological model in sociological analysis that exposed the complexity of face-to-face and framed interaction (Goodwin and Duranti 1992:22–25). A later influence has been that

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2. In a later essay John Searle (1980) incorporates the context of culture into the context of situation, pointing out the importance of the *background* of speech.

of Bakhtin and his circle that conceived of literature, as a theme and
as an act, in dialogic terms in which context is "potentially unfinalized"
(Bakhtin 1986:147); these ideas have been further developed in
American literary theory (i.e. Culler 1981). Yet of all these trends,
most crucial in its influence on contextual analysis was the ethnogra-
phy of speaking (Hymes 1962, 1964, 1971, 1972; see Brown and Yule
1983:35–58; Goodwin and Duranti 1992:25–27), especially in its di-
rect impact on folklore studies (Bauman 1977, 1983; Bauman and
Briggs 1990).

The context of situation is an interactive arena in which the speak-
ers' age, status, and gender gain symbolic significance in their com-
munication. Similarly, code, style, and measure, intonation and dra-
matization, genre and its conventions, and time and place of
performance convey meanings. In the totality of the situation its dif-
ferent components interact upon each other, having the capacity to
constantly redefine and renegotiate the framework for communi-
cation (Auer and di Luzio 1992; Gumperz 1982:130–152; 1992).
Within the context of situation there is a correlation between the
semantic values of its various components. For example, old age im-
plies authority and traditionality and is appropriate for the speaking
of proverbs, but not for riddling which challenges the established
cognitive system and for which youth is more suitable. In an interac-
tive context of situation, age itself, and for that matter other compo-
nents, are negotiable.

Seemingly narrowly defined, the context of situation is still a com-
plex analytical entity and infinite reality that we can neither observe
nor comprehend with our finite human minds. On the one hand, the
location of performance may include items that have little or no bear-
ing upon the communication, and their enumeration may result in
the fallacy of inventory (Young 1985:116; Silverstein 1992) or inclu-
siveness and false objectivity (Briggs 1988:13). On the other hand,
certain aspects, like the psychological disposition of the speakers, cru-
cial as they are, may have only a covert presence in the context, or may
relate to events that are beyond the boundaries of the situation al-
together. What then is the scope of the context of situation? Young
(1985), like Quine (1961:60), proposes to apply the principle of rele-
vance. Therefore, "not only is not all of the surround context but also
not all of the contexts are in the surround" (Young 1985:116). Al-
though the principle of relevance is subjective and lacks precision, it
is compatible with the interpretive nature of contextual theory.

FOLKLORE IN AND OUT OF CONTEXT

Methodologically, the interpretation of context of situation has been further compounded by the demands of folklore research. Folklorists have a dual paradoxical goal of obtaining texts and observing their performance in society undisturbed by the folklorist's own presence. From that perspective Goldstein proposes to view contexts as *natural, artificial* and *induced* (Goldstein 1964:80–90; Briggs 1986:11–13). These concepts are relevant to inventory-focused field projects. They describe the degree of scholarly intervention in the performance, and also can be turned around to suggest the ways narrators and singers interact with the collectors (Haring 1972; Mills 1991). Yet it is misleading to describe any collecting situation as either natural or artificial, evaluating it in terms of some ideal uninterrupted performance.

Context is a value-free concept, and no one contextual situation is privileged over any other. Therefore, any investigative situation constitutes its own context, regardless of its approximation to any imagined or real researcher-free performance. The presence of a folklorist in a recording situation is meaningful for any narrator or singer and can serve to enhance his position in the community or to present to an outsider the traditions with which he and his community identify. The contexts in which people perform folklore forms in their own society are *events*. An event, "the root metaphor contextualism," (Sarbin 1977:4) is a culturally defined context to which the speaking community allocates forms of discourse and which has known rules and conventions for folklore performance. It is possible to violate the rules of an event but not those of a context, because a performance that is in violation of one set of conventions has its own context. No utterance can be out of context because any new situation has its own context within or outside the cultural system of communication. Furthermore, if such a violation is deliberate and meaningful, it implies a higher degree of context dependency because the performance acquires its significance from being counter to traditional convention and rules. The performance of folklore forms can be within their culturally defined events or outside their boundaries, but they can never be out of context.

In a technological world people present their traditions in print, in mass-media, in festivals of folklore revival, and in exhibitional displays before tourists. The performance of folklore in such contexts

involves self-reference, drawing attention to its own traditionality. Its condemnation as inauthentic, and the emergence of the contrast between genuine and spurious folklore that such performances inspire (Handler and Linnekin 1984; Handler 1988) involve terms of evaluation in which traditionality has a privileged positive position. However, such events, productions, and performances have their own contexts which are authentic unto themselves, and in which an account of the traditionalization process is required for their interpretation (Hymes 1974; Bauman and Briggs 1990). Therefore, the concept of context has challenged folklore research not only in traditional societies, but also in modern settings. It involves the extension of the idea of folklore into new contexts (Boyce 1990; Schwartzman 1984), and in the analysis of the display of traditionality, as in the case of folklorism, the exhibitory context imbues folklore with political and sentimental implications and meanings (Abrahams 1981; Bausinger 1990; Bendix 1988, 1989.)[3]

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