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# Context in Systemic Functional Linguistics: Theoretical Developments and Directions

## Introduction to this Special Issue

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### 1. Introduction: Context in social linguistics

Ervin-Tripp observes that “context permeates language, [and] that contextual assumptions affect how we understand language” (1996: 21). She refers to the relationship between language and context as ‘context in language’ and describes several speech events such as requests and addressing others in which elements of context are evident. Ervin-Tripp’s observations reflect a general and accepted view across social approaches to the study of language: that understanding context and its relation to language is of paramount importance to understanding the communicative role of language in social life. This applies not just to research under the banner of sociolinguistics or interactional sociolinguistics, but also to general linguistic theories that treat language as a social system or, in Halliday’s (1978, 1985) terms, a ‘social semiotic’. In such theories *parole* is at least as important as *langue*, to borrow the Saussurean terms, and with the study of *parole* comes the need to study the motivating factors behind variation at the moment of production and the effect of these over the long term on the whole system of interrelated meanings we call (a) language (cf. Hasan [1992]2009).

Duranti & Goodman’s (1992) landmark work on the conception of context brought together papers analysing the relationship between context and language from a variety of perspectives. A common theme to emerge from the collection was that this relationship is not a one-way street, with features of a pre-existing context determining the language produced in response – what is known as the ‘circumvenient’ approach (Martin 2014; Bartlett 2017). Rather, the relationship is seen as dialectical, a bidirectional or

mutual influence, in which the nature of the context is as much determined and affected by the language as the language is by the context. This is a relationship that goes far beyond one of context as cotext (i.e. surrounding text), and delineating the relevant parameters by which text and context interact is one of the persisting and shared problems emerging from Duranti and Goodman's collection.

This bidirectional conception of context is fundamental to Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), and evident in the contributions in this special issue entitled, "Context in Systemic Functional Linguistics: Theoretical Developments and Directions". The purpose of this introduction is to set out a general overview of context as it is theorised in SFL, both in terms of the core principles of the theory and the trajectory of its development. The sketch provides common ground relevant to all the papers in this special issue. Throughout this brief outline we highlight specific aspects of the theory that underpin the contributions and point to the way in which each paper attends to a perceived issue in the current description of context in SFL and in its development in theory and practice. For those interested in following up on the theorisation and analysis of context in SFL, fuller overviews and key papers along the trajectory include Halliday & Hasan (1985), Hasan (1995, 1999, 2014), and chapters in Bartlett & O'Grady (2017) and Thompson *et al.* (2019).

## **2. SFL and Context: Underlying principles**

The core underlying principle in the SFL theorisation of context, and one that distinguishes SFL from other theories and approaches, is that context is a **semiotic** construct. This is not to say that context is a linguistic phenomenon, but rather that it is the point at which the linguistic and the non-linguistic coincide, where the non-linguistic is made relevant to and through the semiotic activity at hand. In this regard the role of theory is to account for this relationship in a systematic and non-random way. Within SFL theory, this two-way relationship between context and language is referred to as 'realisation', the process by which context motivates text and text construes context simultaneously. It is important to note here that whenever SFL linguists refer to the context being realised by language or language realising the context, both aspects of this bidirectional relationship are implied. This conception of bidirectionality is based on the notion that,

while many non-linguistic aspects of a situation are potentially meaning-bearing, the ‘context of situation’ comprises only those elements of the situation that are construed as **relevant** to the ongoing social interaction by the speakers themselves.

Context of situation is thus distinct from both the Material Situational Setting (MSS) (Hasan 1981) and the context of culture (Malinowski 1923, 1935), though both of these connect to the context of situation in important ways. The MSS, comprising the features of the immediate environment, provides a reservoir of meanings that might be made relevant through language in specific contexts of situation, while the context of culture refers to the ensemble of situations against which each individually gains its meaning. In summary, the context of situation is a theoretical construct that refers to those material and meaning-bearing features that are construed as relevant to the present interaction through the language used. However, identifying such features proves to be far from clear cut as there are multiple ways in which the relevant context, as construed through language, interacts with meanings made in other modalities (see e.g. Bartlett 2016; Bowcher 2018). In the present volume, Bowcher takes up this challenge in her examination of the ‘role of language’ as a semiotic resource within different contexts of situation. In doing so, she considers both the different ‘degree’ to which language is involved in a situation and the different ‘types’ of relationship construed between language and other modalities. Thus, for example, Bowcher explains that a “very high” degree of language involvement is a relevant contextual feature of radio sports commentaries, whereas a “very low” degree of language involvement may be a relevant contextual parameter of certain exercise videos. Taking the discussion one step further, Bowcher considers the different types of involvement that hold between the language and the context. Focusing on the distinction between language as ‘ancillary’ to or ‘constitutive’ of an activity, Bowcher shows how these features can be more delicately distinguished and, while they show tendencies to correlate with the ‘degree of involvement’ of language in a context of situation, they are separate variables.

The underlying idea that language (along with other modalities) construes the context of situation relates to Halliday’s (e.g. 1985) concept of language as a form of social behaviour, rather than the material expression of abstract thought. From this perspective, a specific language system represents a ‘meaning

potential' rather than merely a set of formal rules. This does not mean, however, that 'anything goes'. Rather, "in the construction of a language model, we need to consider meanings and forms at the same time" (O'Donnell 2019: 209) and the relationship between the two. Within SFL, therefore, rather than rules for the correct formation of syntactic structures, there is a distinction made between a semantic 'stratum' of language, as the range of different behaviours that are available, and the lexicogrammatical stratum, as the formal means by which these meanings are realised. Note here, once again, the use of the term 'realise'. This is used to signify that the relationship between the semantics and the lexicogrammar is also a dialectical one, with the semantics motivating the lexicogrammar and the lexicogrammar construing the semantics. Adopting this perspective, the lexicogrammar is seen as meaningful in its own terms, at a different level of abstraction from the semantic options it construes.

The relationship between context and semantics and between semantics and lexicogrammar illustrates the stratal organisation of language, with adjacent strata held together by relationships of realisation. In the first instance, we can say that all potential meanings at the contextual stratum are realised in language through the options available at the semantic stratum, while any particular context of situation is realised by the semantic choices made from that meaning potential at a given time. Note that 'choice' is used as a theoretical term here without any implication of intentionality. The configuration of semantic choices made within a situation is referred to as the 'register' and, where there is a probabilistic association between specific social activities and semantic configurations we talk about 'situation types' and their associated registers (Moore 2020).<sup>1</sup> However, to say that the context is realised by the semantics is only part of the story for, as we have seen, the semantics is realised by the lexicogrammar. This points to a further refinement of the notion of register when viewed from an SFL perspective. Within some approaches to language variety, 'registers' associated with a specific activity type (often referred to as 'genres') are

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'situation type' is thus close to the term genre in other traditions as well as in Martin's (1992) approach to SFL. For Hasan, whose approach we are outlining here, genre has a more specific meaning (1985). She uses the term 'generic structure potential' to refer to the semantic structure of a text. This notion is located in the semantic stratum. It should also be noted that Martin uses the term 'register' to refer to what Hasan (1985) calls the 'contextual configuration', which is located at the contextual not the semantic stratum.

distinguished in terms of the relative frequencies of semantic features they exhibit. Within other approaches, these distinctions are based on lexicogrammatical features. For SFL, however, given that the context is realised by the semantics realised by the lexicogrammar (cf. Halliday 1992), both distinctions are necessary. Thus, for instance, it is not enough to say either that a situation type is characterised by a certain distribution of questions and statements between interactants, nor to say that a situation is characterised by a configuration of interrogative and declarative forms. Bearing in mind that questions can be asked by means of more than one lexicogrammatical structure, depending on a number of situational features, it is necessary to specify both the distribution of interactional roles and the manner by which these are realised if we want an accurate and maximally informative account of register. This idea that the context is realised by the semantics realised by the lexicogrammar (and, further, to phonetics) is known as ‘metaredundancy’ (Lemke 1984, 1992, 2015; Taverniers 2019; Halliday 1992), though the concept covers more than this. The theoretical significance of metaredundancy and the dynamic tension between strata it entails is explained in more detail below and is developed in detail in Taverniers’ paper in this special issue.

From the description so far, it would appear that contexts of situation derive their meaning from the semantic options that construe them, as these are construed by the lexicogrammar. That is not, however, the whole story, as we have to take into account that any meaningful unit, be it a phoneme, a grammatical construction or a message in the semantics, derives its meaning in opposition to other elements working at the same stratum. In this regard SFL, as with many other linguistic theories, follows the Saussurean concept that meaning is ‘relational’ as much as it is compositional. There are two important perspectives that this implies. First, that meaning can be modelled paradigmatically (as discussed in section 4), and second, that to more fully understand the meaning of a context of situation, we have to relate the interactions that occur within that situation to the interactions within other situations and the ways in which these contexts of situation together comprise what is called in SFL the context of culture. Further motivation for this dictum comes from the work of anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1923, 1935), who came to the conclusion that an understanding of language was not possible if divorced from its contexts of use and that this, in turn, could only be understood in relation to the culture as a whole and the relative position of the different

activities within this overarching culture. The implications for adopting this perspective are illustrated in Butt *et al.*'s paper in this special issue, which demonstrates the value of exploring the relationship between the contextual Tenor feature of 'social distance' (see section 3 on Field, Tenor and Mode as context parameters) and the cultural socialisation of individuals which underlies their participation within specific contexts of situation. Such work has rarely been conducted from the perspective of the paradigmatic approach to context, and thus Butt *et al.*'s paper opens up new and culturally rich research prospects.

Given the relationship between register and situation type, there is clearly a connection between registerial variation and contextual variation, such that a systematic account of the relations among registers will reveal much of the relationship among situations. However, before developing this point, it is important to understand the concept of 'probabilistic relationships'. This takes two forms with respect to register. Firstly, registers, and by implication situations, are not differentiated according to a typological logic by which 'a' is distinct from 'b' and divides into 'c' and 'd' which are also distinct from each other. The logic of registers is rather that of topologies (Martin & Matthiessen 1991), in which 'a' and 'b' differ in terms of their respective distributions of non-exclusive features. In other words, registers overlap with registers, and situations with situations but, as long as their respective profiles remain relatively stable and distinct from each other, then we (analysts and interactants) can recognise distinct types. A second feature of probabilistic relations is that the realisation between strata is neither absolute nor constant. That is to say, each instance of a particular situation type is not realised by the same configuration of semantic features. There is enough consistency that the situation is recognisable, but also enough difference to account for synchronic variation and, as a corollary, diachronic change. This same probabilistic relationship holds for different strata as illustrated, for example, when semantic choices are realised by more than one possible lexicogrammatical form. Over the language as a whole, there is a strong but not absolute tendency for particular associations, as between statements and the declarative form, while within specific registers a different but equally strong relationship may hold (cf. Kretzschmar 2015). An easily recognisable example of this would be the characteristic lack of any Mood at all for statements in the shipping forecast, as in:

“Hebrides Gale force 8 backing northeasterly soon, backing  
northwesterly and increasing severe gale force 9 later”.

Such variation in the realisation of speech functions in the lexicogrammar is not accidental, however, but is motivated by the context itself. For example, in the shipping forecast, historically transmitted by radio to seagoing vessels in noisy and potentially hazardous conditions, essential information has to be transmitted in a consistent format, with minimal distraction and maximum intelligibility. Functionally appropriate lexicogrammatical patterns emerge to fill this niche and associations are strengthened between these forms, the meanings they convey, and the contexts of situation in which they occur. These co-relations are, therefore, dependent to some extent upon the constraints and affordances of the medium of transmission and the context of reception. And as we head further into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the range of such mediums and their relative affordances are growing at an unparalleled rate, giving rise to a burgeoning discipline of multimedia or multimodal studies, and broadening the scope of context-text studies. Within the current issue, Liang addresses this issue by investigating a computer mediated discourse known as *danmaku*, demonstrating how the technical affordances of this medium and the interactional contexts in which it is used lead not only to the emergence of new configurations of experiential, interpersonal and textual meanings, but also to new ways of expressing and organising such meanings both lexicogrammatically and through other graphic means. Across different situation types, therefore, we see familiar meanings being created in distinctive ways. The lack of absolute correlation in realisation between strata is a key aspect of metaredundancy, which we can now explain in full, following Lemke’s (2015) adaptation from Bateson and Peirce.

The concept of ‘redundancy’ means that specific meaningful features tend to co-occur, with the result that an association is formed between them, and the presence of one feature predicts the presence of the other. An example from linguistics would be the association between yes-no interrogatives and a rising intonation pattern. However, as suggested above, different associations hold in different contexts, and

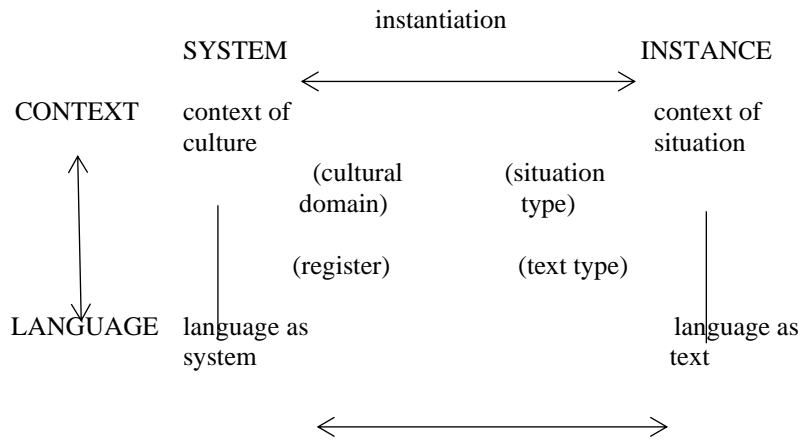


recognising this is essential for effective communication. In technical terms, we can say that a redundant relationship between ‘a’ and ‘b’ only holds for context ‘X’. A corollary of this, however, is that not only can we predict a specific context ‘X’ when the redundancy relationship between ‘a’ and ‘b’ is in operation, but also that we can predict the redundancy between ‘a’ and ‘b’ when we are aware that we are in context ‘X’. There is thus a metaredundant relationship between context ‘X’ and the redundant relation between ‘a’ and ‘b’. Important to note here is that context in these terms can apply at different levels; it is not equivalent to the ‘context of situation’. Rather, the semantics acts as a context for the lexicogrammar, the context of situation acts as a context for the semantics, and the context of culture acts as a context for the context of situation. The notion of metaredundancy, therefore, encompasses the key SFL concepts of stratal organisation, probabilistic relations and diachronic change, and accounts for the necessary connection between them. Taverniers’ paper in this issue elaborates on this through a consideration of the dynamic process of instantiation in interaction with stratification and metafunctions. The dynamic nature of semiosis has received only cursory, and predominantly practical, attention in contextual studies across the SFL literature; Taverniers’ paper opens up a much-needed theoretical approach to this issue, with a focus on the textual metafunction and its central role in theorising the relationship between language and context. Furthermore, since the textual metafunction is probabilistically more aligned with the contextual feature of Mode, Taverniers’ paper provides a rich theoretical backdrop to both Bowcher’s and Liang’s papers.

From an analytical or descriptive perspective, metaredundancy implies an ever-moving and constantly shape-shifting target, displaying constancy in neither qualitative nor quantitative features. One response to this problem, illustrated in the current papers from Butt *et al.*, Bowcher and Liang, is to focus in on small datasets at different points within the overall architecture, and to identify intra- and interstratal reactions at that point, while keeping an eye on the larger context around, above and below the features in focus. Thus Butt *et al.* seek to identify the parameters of Tenor that motivate different semantic behaviours while attending to variation from above in terms of distinct contexts of culture; Bowcher identifies relevant parameters of Mode and Field across different texts and the contexts of situation they

realise; and Liang focuses on the affordances of a complex channel, the semantic behaviours this motivates and the distinctive lexicogrammatical and other means by which these are realised.

Figure 1 brings together in simplified form the various theoretical relationships within the SFL architecture of language as described to this point.



**Figure 1.** The relationship between context and language, system and text. (adapted from Halliday 1991[2007]: 275)

On the vertical axis of Figure 1 we see the relationship of realisation between context and language. Focusing on the right-hand side of the figure, we see that a specific context of situation is realised by an individual text (or, more specifically, the configuration of language features that comprise the text). On the left-hand side of the figure the idea is that the context of culture, as the sum of potential situations, is realised through the language system as a meaning potential. We thus have a movement from left to right in the figure from potential to instance, and this axis is accordingly referred to as the ‘cline of instantiation’. Within the figure we also see areas between these two poles of potential and instance, and these represent zones where probabilistic relations hold between categories of social activity and subsections of the

language system as the relevant meaning potential within such activities. Thus, for example, near the instance end of the cline, we have situation types being realised by text types, while nearer the system end we have whole cultural domains with their associated registers. The papers in this special issue explore different domains within this complex architecture: Both Liang and Butt *et al.* focus on situation types or identifiable registers, whereas Bowcher focuses on a range of different instances of context/texts.

It is necessary to clarify here that as instantiation is conceptualised as a continuous cline from system to instance, then any point of this cline will reveal probabilistic relations. The ‘points’ on the cline labelled as cultural domains/registers and as situation type/text types are just convenient imaginaries. It should also be noted that there is an ambivalence to the term register that is obscured by this figure and that is often missed in SFL writing (as pointed out in Moore 2020). While register is the general term for the set of meanings associated with (or ‘at risk’ in) a specific cultural domain, the term also applies to the configuration of language features in any individual text (see also Bowcher this issue). In other words, every text, no matter how unorthodox, has its own register.

One further point to note is that the necessarily static representation in Figure 1 conceals the tensions and dynamics that are constantly at play along both axes, and which remain undertheorised and underexplored in the SFL literature. Building on her 2019 paper on semantics in SFL, Taverniers’ paper in this special issue explores a variety of spatiotemporal interfaces that exist between context and the language system and how the resources of the textual metafunction are employed to index and orchestrate these relations. Taverniers thus opens up the potential for interconnecting with other approaches to social linguistics and context through providing a theoretical account of context as a “layered simultaneity” of timeframes and through incorporating ideas associated with the scalar approach to text analysis developed by authors such as Blommaert (2007) and Blommaert *et al.* (2015) (see also Bartlett 2017, 2018 for further connections between SFL and scales theory).

### **3. Parameters of Context**

The account of context-text relations as developed to this point gives rise to three fundamental questions: What are the relevant social parameters by which a situation can be defined? What are the specific linguistic features by which these social features are realised? and, following the topological approach described above, to what extent does the realisational relationship between specific social and linguistic features hold across diverse contexts? These are questions that have engaged, entertained and vexed SFL scholars for more than half a century.

In order to outline the general SFL approach to addressing these questions, we can trace a theoretical trajectory that begins with the work of Halliday's mentor and contemporary of Malinowski, J.R. Firth. Firth was primarily a phonetician, but even in this field his work extended beyond the description of phonetic variables and a language-internal account of historical change, as was the norm in his day, to consider the different social conditions under which different forms were observed as synchronic variation. This was an enterprise that Firth never completed, but his preliminary categorisation of these variables resulted in three broad parameters for describing a "context of situation for linguistic work" ([1950] 1957: 182) as follows:

- A. The relevant features of participants: persons, personalities
  - (i) The verbal action of the participants
  - (ii) The non-verbal action of the participants
- B. The relevant objects
- C. The effect of the verbal action

Firth's contextual features and linguistic features both referred to variables in the material world, to setting and sound. Extending the connection to a specifically linguistic system of relations came about through Halliday's functionally-oriented descriptions of Chinese and then English. These descriptions developed Firth's concept (after Saussure 1960) that the lexicogrammar of a language could be described as a network of paradigmatically related meanings, or *systems*, with each item gaining its meaning (or *valeur*) in opposition to the other items in the system (see Butt & Wegener 2007 for a fuller historical

account). The important theoretical repercussion of Halliday's descriptive work was his finding that the grammar divided into three distinct subsystems, each of which was tightly interconnected internally but only loosely connected to the other two systems. These three subsystems related to three distinct aspects of meaning making relating to three fundamental functions of language, labelled 'metafunctions' in SFL: the 'ideational', which describes real and imagined things and events; the 'interpersonal', which establishes dialogic relations between interactants; and the 'textual', which organises language into coherent and comprehensible flows of meaning. This tripartite division of the grammar into metafunctions therefore represents a more systematic conception of 'function' than those proposed by other scholars. As Halliday (1985) explains, scholars such as Malinowski (e.g. 1923), Bühler (1934) and Morris (1967) had approached language function from the perspective of how language as a pre-existing system is put to use in different contexts, whereas the metafunctional hypothesis claims that function is "a fundamental property of language itself" (Halliday 1985: 17).

This perspective provided Halliday with the means to extend and modify Firth's preliminary classification, with some modifications, to the relationship between context and the language system as a whole. The three parameters of context were refined and labelled as Field, Tenor and Mode, defined as follows (Halliday 1985: 12):

The FIELD OF DISCOURSE refers to what is happening, to the nature of the social action that is taking place: what is it that the participants are engaged in, in which language figures as some essential component?

The TENOR OF DISCOURSE refers to who is taking part, to the nature of the participants, their statuses and roles: what kinds of role relationship obtain among the participants, including permanent and temporary relationships of one kind or another, both the types of speech role that they are taking on in the dialogue and the cluster of socially significant relationships in which they are involved?

The MODE OF DISCOURSE refers to what part language is playing, what it is that the participants are expecting language to do for them in the situation: the symbolic organisation of the text, the status that it has, and its function in the context, including the channel (is it spoken or written or some combination of the two?) and also the rhetorical mode, what is being achieved by the text in terms of such categories as persuasive, expository, didactic, and the like.

As can be seen from the glosses provided, each of these broad groupings is internally differentiated in terms of the various aspects of the semiotic environment they relate to and the meaningful contrasts between these. This suggests that context can be represented as a network of meaning relations in the same way as Halliday's grammatical system (see Halliday & Matthiessen 2014) and the semantic networks (Hasan 2014) that mediate between the context and lexicogrammar, as described above. And extending Firth's tripartite division of non-linguistic context to the linguistic features that realise this context gives rise to the idea that variations in Field will have reactances in the ideational metafunction; variations in Tenor will have reactances in the interpersonal metafunction; and variations in Mode will have reactances in the textual metafunction. This is known as the 'context-metafunction hook-up' (CMH) hypothesis (Hasan 1999), though in later work Hasan (2014) preferred the term 'context-metafunction resonance' (CMR) hypothesis. This concept has not met with universal acceptance even within SFL, not least as a result of the underspecified definitions of Field, Tenor and Mode that have persisted for over six decades. Bowcher (2013, 2014), for example, has questioned whether the distinction between verbal and non-verbal activity represents a distinction in Mode or Field, a question she explores further in her paper in this special issue.

This takes us to the third of the questions posed above: to what extent does the realisational relationship between specific social and linguistic features hold across diverse contexts? To answer this question we need to return to the concept of metaredundancy, to the probabilistic nature of associations and to Hasan's (2013: 279) concept of a 'contextual configuration' of Field, Tenor and Mode features at play

in a given situation. From this perspective, we would not in fact expect that a specific contextual feature is always realised linguistically in the same way. Rather we would expect the more complex relationship that if two contextual parameters are held constant then variation according to the third parameter will predominantly be realised through variation in the corresponding metafunctional component of language. The exact nature of this realisation will not be identical, however, to the realisation of the same feature in contexts in which the other two parameters are set differently. Thus for example, a change in Tenor will probabilistically be indexed through the interpersonal grammar for both email discussions of politics and oral shopping transactions, but the distinctions will not be identical in both contexts (in line with the concept of metaredundancy). While statistical support for the CMH may appear desirable (cf. Hasan 1999), the enormous potential for variation in contextual configurations makes statistical modelling incredibly demanding (see Clarke 2012 for the sole attempt to date). Moreover, statistically-based approaches are only as robust as the descriptions of the qualia they enumerate. In the case of interstratal relations, this entails a detailed description of and differentiation between complex configurations of features, a process which necessitates a return to situated instances of text. And in line with Taverniers' discussion of the comparative extension and abstraction of the text-to-context interface, different researchers will focus on different domains of interconnection. This is evident from the papers in the current issue.

In Butt *et al.*'s paper, the focus is on differences in Tenor choices across seemingly similar situations and the role of intercultural differences in activating these differences. The paper illustrates through (con)textual analysis Hasan's formulation that distinct contextual configurations of Field, Tenor and Mode, rather than motivating a unique set of semantic options, reset the probabilities of occurrence for the semantic features within a single system. The paper thus not only provides both an illustration of the effectiveness of system networks in modelling context from a linguistic perspective but also presents a motivated refinement of the relevant paradigmatic oppositions within the system of Tenor.

Bowcher, in contrast, focuses on the relationship between language and other semiotic modes and the relevance of these relationships in different contexts of situation. On the basis of her (con)textual analysis, Bowcher develops networks for the ROLE OF LANGUAGE, in terms of the 'degree' and 'type' of

involvement and, through analyses of several texts/contexts, demonstrates how options in the ROLE OF LANGUAGE intersect with options from Field and thus how different features configure across different contexts of situation.

Liang adopts a different approach again, focusing on a corpus of verbal interactions mediated by the computer interface danmaku. Building up from the evidence of her data set, Liang seeks to account for regularities in the types of activity that danmaku users engage in, the interpersonal relationships they invoke, and the distinctive semiotic means by which they carry out such behaviours. In this way Liang's paper not only provides evidence to support the concept of metaredundancy, but also highlights the distinctive contributions of different semiotic modalities to the overall contextual configuration of Field, Tenor and Mode variables and the construal of the situation as a semiotic construct.

We see, then, from these three case studies, that the elaborate relational architecture of SFL, presented in low relief in Figure 1, is extended and enhanced through a multiplicity of different focuses and that, in each case, the analyst's eye is fixed not only on a single focal point, but on the network of relations above, below and across from that point.

#### **4. The Paradigmatic Representation of Context of Situation**

Before concluding this introduction, we briefly explain one final theoretical and analytical apparatus relevant to understanding the approach and projected research directions represented in the papers in this special issue – the system network. It is in the system networks developed for lexicogrammar by Halliday in the 1960s that the roots of the paradigmatic representation of context lie (Hasan 2014: 14). As a means of representing choice across the strata of language, the system network offers a 'systemic' description (Halliday 1967: 37). Halliday explains the relationship between system, systemic description and structure in the following way:

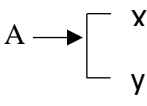
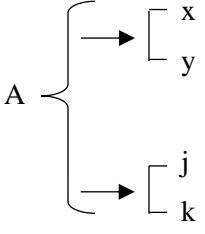
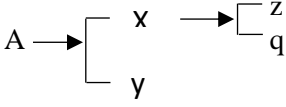
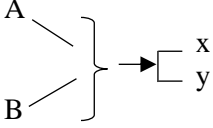
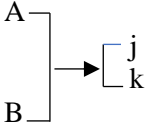
A system is a set of features one, and only one, of which must be selected if the entry condition to that system is satisfied; any selection of features formed from a given



system network constitutes the ‘systemic description’ of a class of items. Such a ‘selection expression’ is then realised as a structure, the structural representation being fully derived from the systemic; each element of the structure is a point of entry into a further system network.” (Halliday 1967: 37)

There are 5 key relations involved in setting out system networks. These are displayed in Figure

2.

	<p>A is the entry condition for options <math>x</math> or <math>y</math>. If <math>A</math>, then choose either <math>x</math> <u>or</u> <math>y</math>.</p>
	<p>A is the entry condition for two simultaneous systems. If <math>A</math>, then choose either <math>x</math> or <math>y</math> <u>and</u> either <math>j</math> or <math>k</math>.</p>
	<p>A is the entry condition for options <math>x</math> or <math>y</math>. If <math>A</math>, then choose either <math>x</math> <u>or</u> <math>y</math>. If <math>x</math> is selected, then choose either <math>z</math> <u>or</u> <math>q</math>.</p>
	<p>There are two entry conditions, <math>A</math> and <math>B</math>, for choosing <math>x</math> or <math>y</math>. If <math>A</math> <u>and</u> <math>B</math> then choose either <math>x</math> <u>or</u> <math>y</math>.</p>
	<p>There are two possible entry conditions for choosing <math>j</math> or <math>k</math>. If either <math>A</math> <u>or</u> <math>B</math>, or both <math>A</math> <u>and</u> <math>B</math>, then choose either <math>j</math> <u>or</u> <math>k</math>.</p>

Selection Expressions: These represent choices made in the system networks. Selection expressions are enclosed in square brackets. A forward slash denotes simultaneous systems. A colon denotes a choice after an entry condition has been satisfied.

e.g. [A:x:z] *z* is a feature of *x*, *x* is a feature of *A*.

[A:x/j] *j* is a feature of a system simultaneous with *x*, and both are features of systems of *A*.

Other Conventions: Systems are presented in small capitals (e.g. ROLE OF LANGUAGE); features in systems are enclosed by single quotation marks (e.g. 'social distance'); the contextual parameters are presented using initial capitals (e.g. Field).

**Figure 2.** A summary of network principles and conventions (cf. Halliday 1967; Halliday & Matthiessen 2014).

As a representation of the features of context of situation, the system network, while it is an ongoing project, aims to represent the “variant possibilities” of each of the parameters of context and to “maximis[e] the chances of order and precision” in contextual description and analysis (Hasan 2014: 14). However, as with the representation of the SFL architecture in Figure 1, the formalisms behind systems networks, while aiming to capture their representational power, also expose an oversimplification of relations that are multiplex, disparate, emergent, contingent and fleeting – all features of the contexts which are highlighted in the papers included in this special issue. In this regard, some scholars question the possibility of modelling context through system networks at all (e.g. Wegener 2011: 76). In partial response to this position, we would suggest that such an undertaking only makes sense if it is not seen as finalisable and if we accept from the outset that a mapping of the parameters of context in a single comprehensive system can never capture the synchronic complexity of situated language use, far less its diachronic instability. However, working within restricted spatiotemporal domains, the identification of differences that make a difference provides us with a more nuanced and multifaceted tool for delving into the relationship between language as a meaning potential and the living of daily life. That such connections are partial and fleeting is predicted by the theory itself.

In attempting to illustrate both the power and the complexities in modelling context from a systemic perspective, the papers in this special issue are building on the profound theoretical legacy of Halliday and

Hasan, extending their descriptions of language and context as interfacing systems of meaningful distinctions, developing their ideas in light of recent research, and making connections between the conceptualisation of context in SFL and other approaches that share the same general conception of language as a social semiotic. And as the papers indicate, there is a long and interesting journey ahead.

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