Layered Contexts

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This brief essay focuses on a single turn in an interchange between an adult educator (Anna), and a five-year old girl (Claire), who are playing math games together. Using multiple layers of contextual information, the paper shows how much interactional work can be involved in teacher talk, even in an informal setting. First, conversation analysis (CA) is used to analyze the turn in question, as well as its sequential context. Next, data from a participant interview is described within the context of Goffman's (1974) theories of *frames* and *footing*. Thus, four layers of context—turn, sequence, participant interview, and frames—work together to help describe this pedagogical interaction.

In the following excerpt, Anna and Claire are sitting on the living room floor, getting ready to play number games with poker chips and dice. This is their first time working together, and Anna, who specializes in preparing children for kindergarten, has just emptied a bag of colorful chips onto the floor.

My Own Pile

1 C: <we could collect them into different si- inta the same <u>sizes</u>.
2 A: →we could collect them in same <u>sizes</u> but let's collect them- we could collect
3   them by ↑<u>c</u>olors too we could make piles of <u>e</u>ach color.
4 C: I- I like to make my own little °↓pile.° (C is making a pile that includes red, blue, and
5   white chips.)
6 A: make your pi::le, (0.2) take your pile 'n make l- make- see how high a pile of red ones,
7   ok?

Anna starts lines 2 and 3, the focus of this essay, with the collective pronoun *we*, and then goes on to offer one possible method of sorting the pile of chips in front of her and Claire. The fact that this method (organizing the chips by size) is being compared to other alternatives is suggested by her use of the modal verb *could* and the slight emphasis on the word *sizes*. Then, instead of stopping at the first transition-relevance place (TRP) (after *in same <u>sizes</u>*), she continues on with *but*. The conjunction shows that Anna has more to say, allowing her to keep the floor at a point where a next turn by another speaker could possibly be relevant. Following *but*, Anna uses the collective word *lets*. She then interrupts herself, a possible sign of some kind of trouble with the turn, and suggests that they sort the chips by color rather than size. The end of the next turn-constructional unit (TCU) (after *by ↑<u>c</u>olors too*) offers another possible TRP. At this point, the turn could be considered both grammatically and pragmatically complete. Not only is *we could collect them by ↑<u>c</u>olors too* a complete clause, but it also seems to allow Anna to accomplish her goal for this turn—suggesting that they sort the chips by color rather than by size. However, the turn is not intonationally complete. Rather than using the downturn intonation associated with a completed phrase, Anna continues speaking, going on to describe exactly how she wants to sort the chips. Thus, an analysis of this single turn shows Anna trying to accomplish two seemingly incompatible goals. Her use of the collective words "we" and "lets" suggests that

she wants to align with Claire. At the same time, Anna uses several strategies, both grammatical and intonational, to make sure that she keeps control of the floor.

Looking at the lines immediately preceding and following this turn—the sequential context—offers further proof of Anna's potentially conflicting intentions. Comparing lines 2 and 3 with Claire's turn in line 1, we see that Anna starts by copying Claire's speech almost word for word (*we could collect them*), suggesting an attempt to align with Claire's suggestion before offering an alternative. Even more interestingly, Claire's response (lines 4 and 5) shows her orienting to (and disagreeing with) Anna's attempt to control the interaction by suggesting that they sort the chips by color rather than size. Rather than agreeing with Anna's proposal, Claire says *I- I like to make my own little °↓pile.°* while actually making a pile that includes several colors.[1]

After watching a video recording of this interaction, Anna confirmed that she had two very different goals for this single turn. One way of describing her conflict is in terms of Goffman's (1974) theories of *frames* and *footing*. Frames, as introduced by Bateson (1972) and further developed by Goffman, can help describe participants' understandings of what kind of interaction they are engaged in at any moment. For instance, in the above excerpt, Claire starts the interchange by offering something that she and Anna could do together (line 1) with the chips piled in front of them, suggesting that she frames the interaction as one of communal play, of doing something together. However, as the participant interview showed, Anna's frame for this interchange is essentially pedagogic. Discussing the interaction, Anna said that she wanted to sort the chips by color in order to prepare for a math game she had planned for later in the session. She also explained that her final TCU (*we could make piles of each color*) was an effort to move from a more abstract idea to the first concrete step she wanted to take with Claire. That is, after broadly suggesting that they *could* collect the chips by color, she describes exactly how they should complete the task (making piles). She went on to say that the idea of speaking very concretely and dividing tasks into clear steps are important aspects of her teaching philosophy.

At the same time, Anna didn't want to "disenfranchise" Claire or to sound "authoritative." For this reason, she purposefully used Claire's exact phrasing, including the word *collect* (instead of "sort," which would have been her own choice). She thus chose to frame what could have been an order—"Sort the chips by color."—as a communal activity, using the word *lets*.

When describing the shifting relationships participants may have with an interaction and their fellow interlocuters, Goffman (1974) uses the term *footing*. Footing is similar to framing, but from the point of view of a particular speaker. Anna, then, was moving between two very different footings in this interaction. Essentially, she was trying to speak both as teacher and as friend. Her use of *we* and *lets* show her establishing a footing as Claire's equal, or fellow playmate. On the other hand, in her insistence on keeping her turn, and on sorting the chips by color rather than size, she took on the more authoritative footing of teacher—or at the very least of adult.

The four layers of context described in this brief essay show the very complex interactional work teachers may undertake in a seemingly simple spate of talk. It is interesting to note that sequential and ethnographic context—a CA analysis and a follow-up interview—led to very similar findings. They also complemented each other well. Both showed *what* the speaker was trying to accomplish (i.e., a careful balance of control and alignment). The CA transcription

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[1] It should be noted that the addition of non-verbal action adds another layer of context to this analysis.

also showed *how* the speaker was able to achieve this potentially difficult task, while the interview gave some insight into *why* she thought it was important. Additionally, both the CA analysis and the interview provided helpful data for a frame analysis of this conversation. Or, to put it differently, the concepts of frames and footing provided a broader context in which to situate the detailed analysis. This suggests both that a discussion of context must start with a definition of the kind of context in question, and that multiple contexts can add depth to an analysis of teacher talk.

REFERENCES

Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind.* New York: Ballantine Books.
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