

In  
Coupland, N. and A. Jaworski  
2009 The New Sociolinguistics  
Reader. Basingstoke: Palgrave  
MacMillan.

## CHAPTER 41

# Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life

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As many authors have stressed, performances are not simply artful uses of language that stand apart both from day-to-day life and from larger questions of meaning. Performance rather provides a frame that invites critical reflection on communicative processes. A given performance is tied to a number of speech events that precede and succeed it (past performances, readings of texts, negotiations, rehearsals, gossip, reports, critiques, challenges, subsequent performances, and the like). An adequate analysis of a single performance thus requires sensitive ethnographic study of how its form and meaning index a broad range of discourse types, some of which are not framed as performance. Performance-based research can yield insights into diverse facets of language use and their interrelations. Because contrastive theories of speech and associated metaphysical assumptions embrace more than these discourse events alone, studying performance can open up a wider range of vantage points on how language can be structured and what roles it can play in social life.

Much performance-oriented research on contextualization has focused on the grounding of performance in situational contexts. An alternative perspective has begun to emerge from performance studies and other areas that approaches some of the basic problems in linguistic anthropology from a contrary set of assumptions.

Consider for a moment why researchers have had to make such an issue of contextualization, to devote so much effort to establishing that the form, function, and meaning of verbal art cannot be understood apart from context. The reason is precisely that verbal art forms are so susceptible to treatment as

Source: 'Poetics and performance as critical perspectives on language and social life', by Bauman, R. and Briggs, C. L. in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 19 (1990) (*Annual Reviews*) pp. 60-1, 72-78.

self-contained, bounded objects separable from their social and cultural contexts of production and reception. Taking the practice of decontextualization as the focus of investigation, we ask what makes it possible, how it is accomplished in formal and functional terms, for what ends, by whom, under what circumstances, and so on. We are currently far from having conclusive answers to these questions, but the inquiry can open up some productive new approaches.<sup>1</sup>

The past work of most investigators of contextualization has thus tended to take the opposite tack from the one on which we will now embark. It has established how performance is *anchored* in and inseparable from its context of use. Such work – on the ties of performance to the competence, expressive agenda, rhetorical strategy, and functional goals of the performer; on the phatic ties of the performer to the audience; on the indexical ties of the performed discourse to its situational surround, the participants, or other dimensions of the performance event; on the structure of the performed text as emergent in performance, and so on – served to establish how and why verbal art should be resistant to decentering, to extraction from context. We will contrastively ask what it is that makes verbal art decenterable despite all these anchoring counterforces. What makes it susceptible to decontextualization? What factors loosen the ties between performed discourse and its context?

One starting point for these inquiries is a distinction between discourse and text. At the heart of the process of decentering discourse is the more fundamental process – *entextualization*. In simple terms, though it is far from simple, it is the process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit – a *text* – that can be lifted out of its interactional setting. A text, then, from this vantage point, is discourse rendered decontextualizable. Entextualization may well incorporate aspects of context, such that the resultant text carries elements of its history of use within it.

Basic to the process of entextualization is the reflexive capacity of discourse, the capacity it shares with all systems of signification 'to turn or bend back upon itself, to become an object to itself, to refer to itself'. In Jakobsonian terms, with regard to language, this reflexive capacity is manifested most directly in the metalingual and poetic functions. The metalingual (or metadiscursive) function objectifies discourse by making discourse its own topic; the poetic function manipulates the formal features of the discourse to call attention to the formal structures by which the discourse is organized.

Performance, the enactment of the poetic function, is a highly reflexive mode of communication. As the concept of performance has been developed in linguistic anthropology, performance is seen as a specially marked, artful way of speaking that sets up or represents a special interpretive frame within which the act of speaking is to be understood. Performance puts the act of speaking on display – objectifies it, lifts it to a degree from its interactional setting and opens it to scrutiny by an audience. Performance heightens

awareness of the act of speaking and licenses the audience to evaluate the skill and effectiveness of the performer's accomplishment. By its very nature, then, performance potentiates decontextualization.

We may approach the process of entextualization in performance in formal and functional terms by exploring the means available to participants in performance situations to render stretches of discourse discontinuous with their discursive surround, thus making them into coherent, effective, and memorable texts. What discursive resources might serve this end? From a formal perspective, this line of inquiry takes us into familiar territory: the formal organization of texts, the devices of cohesion, and so forth. Here, the close formal analysis advanced in recent years under the stimulus of ethnopoetics, the comparative analysis of parallelism, and the analysis of folklore genres, has expanded our understanding of the textuality of verbal art forms. The means and devices outlined as 'keys to performance' by Bauman (1977) may be seen as indices of entextualization. Conversational analysis, and language-oriented studies of disputing and conflict offer vantage points on the formal analysis of discourse and entextualization and illuminate how the prepared-for detachability of texts may be interactively accomplished. They remind us that participants themselves may be directly and strongly concerned with the social management of entextualization, decontextualization, and recontextualization.

Beyond formal features, frame analysis, the phenomenological investigation of the 'worlds' created in performance, studies of the interaction of verbal performance and accompanying media such as music, dance, and material objects, analysis of composition process, and a range of other lines of inquiry illuminate the process of entextualization in performance. The task is to discover empirically what means are available in a given social setting, to whom they may be available, under what circumstances, for making discourse into a text.

Performance is clearly not the only mechanism of entextualization. Our claim, rather, is that performance as a frame intensifies entextualization. It is also important to recall that performance is a variable quality; its salience among the multiple functions and framings of a communicative act may vary along a continuum from sustained, full performance to a fleeting breakthrough into performance (Bauman 1984). Likewise, entextualization is a matter of degree across the speech genres of a community. Full performance seems to be associated with the most marked entextualization, but such correlation is far from perfect; a rigorously entextualized stretch of discourse may be reported, or translated, or rendered in a frame other than performance. This is an area that will reward further investigation.

The foregoing brief survey of entextualization must suffice here in establishing that discourse may be fashioned for ease of detachment from situational

context. Processes that anchor discourse in contexts of use may be opposed by others that potentiate its detachability. If we now consider what becomes of text once decontextualized, we recognize that decontextualization from one social context involves recontextualization in another. For present purposes, we consider the decontextualization and recontextualization of texts to be two aspects of the same process, though time and other factors may mediate between the two phases. Because the process is transformational, we must now determine what the recontextualized text brings with it from its earlier context(s) and what emergent form, function, and meaning it is given as it is recentered.

At this stage, we can only suggest schematically and programmatically what some of the dimensions of the transformation may be. It helps, of course, if one has good data on successive points in the process, but examination even of apparently isolated texts may be productive precisely because a text may carry some of its history with it. Moreover, a succession of recenterings may be encompassed within a single event.

For example, in performing a treasure tale popular among Spanish-speakers in northern New Mexico, Melaquias Romero provides a summary of the tale, a performance of his parents' version, and several retellings based on other versions of the narrative. Such recenterings may also be simultaneous rather than serial. Mr. Romero thus presents a key scene in the treasure tale, a dialog between a shepherd and his boss, as it was retold by the boss to another shepherd, who in turn recounted it to two friends; Mr. Romero then recounts the way these two individuals presented the narrative to him (see Briggs 1990).

In mapping the dimensions of transformation one could employ any one of the following elements while keeping in mind the crucial task of examining their interrelations.

1. *Framing* – that is, the metacommunicative management of the recontextualized text. In Goffman's terms (1981: 124–159), what is the footing adopted toward the text in the process of recontextualizing it? Is it linked to prior renderings as a repetition or quotation? Here, the recent growth of interest in reported speech and metapragmatics will be of special importance, as will developing research on blended genres, in which performed texts of one generic shape are embedded in texts of different generic shape. The differential framing of texts as they are rendered in rehearsal as opposed to performance is also worthy of further research.

2. *Form* – including formal means and structures from phonology, to grammar, to speech style, to larger structures of discourse such as generic packaging principles. Focus on this dimension of formal transformation from one

context to another affords insights into the evolution of genres. One especially interesting formal transformation is the recentering of text by metonymic substitution: mentioning the place where a narrated event happened, or a key portion of the plot, for example, to evoke the whole in the hearers' minds.

3. *Function* – manifest, latent, and performative (perlocutionary and illocutionary force; see above). A primarily ritual text, for example, may be used in entertainment, practice, or pedagogy.

4. *Indexical grounding*, including deictic markers of person, spatial location, time, etc. The analysis of 'metanarration' represents one productive vantage point on this problem.

5. *Translation*, including both interlingual and intersemiotic translation. At issue here are the different semiotic capacities of different languages and different media. What happens if a text is transferred from Zuni to English or from oral narration to print? These issues have been central to the enterprise of ethnopoetics and to the problematics of transcription. They thus afford an important critical and reflexive vantage point on our own scholarly practice as linguistic anthropologists.

6. The *emergent structure* of the new context, as shaped by the process of recontextualization. Texts both shape and are shaped by the situational contexts in which they are produced.

To this point, we have sketched a framework for the investigation of decentering and recentering largely in formal terms. But just as the formal analysis of the processes and practices of contextualization is a means of investigating larger social and cultural problems, so too the analysis of decontextualization and recontextualization will stand or fall as an anthropological enterprise by the degree to which it illuminates problems of broader concern. Let us suggest, then, some problem areas in which such an investigation might be productive.

The decontextualization and recontextualization of performed discourse bear upon the political economy of texts (Gal 1989; Irvine 1989), texts and power. Performance is a mode of social production; specific products include texts, decentered discourse. To decontextualize and recontextualize a text is thus an act of control, and in regard to the differential exercise of such control the issue of social power arises. More specifically, we may recognize differential access to texts, differential legitimacy in claims to and use of texts, differential competence in the use of texts, and differential values attaching to various types of texts. All of these elements, let us emphasize, are culturally constructed, socially constituted, and sustained by ideologies, and they accordingly may vary cross-culturally. None of these factors is a social or

cultural given, for each may be subject to negotiation as part of the process of entextualization, decentering, and recentering.

1. Access depends upon institutional structures, social definitions of eligibility, and other mechanisms and standards of inclusion and exclusion (even such practical matters as getting to where the texts are to be found).
2. The issue of legitimacy is one of being accorded the authority to appropriate a text such that your recentering of it counts as legitimate. Cultural property rights, such as copyright, academic standards of plagiarism, and their counterparts in other cultures all regulate the exercise of legitimate power over performed discourse, as do such social mechanisms as ordination, initiation, or apprenticeship. Not only do institutional structures and mechanisms confer legitimate authority to control texts, but the reverse potential also exists: Contra Bourdieu (1977: 649), the appropriation and use of particular forms of discourse may be the basis of institutional power.
3. Competence, the knowledge and ability to carry out the decontextualization and recontextualization of performed discourse successfully and appropriately, may be locally conceived of as innate human capacity, learned skill, special gift, a correlate of one's position in the life cycle, and so on (e.g. Briggs 1988; Fox 1988: 13–16).
4. Finally, values organize the relative status of texts and their uses into a hierarchy of preference. Texts may be valued because of what you can use them for, what you can get for them, or for their indexical reference to desired qualities or states – Bourdieu's cultural capital (1984).

All of these factors – access, legitimacy, competence, and values – bear centrally on the construction and assumption of authority. From Hymes's early formulation (1975), in which performance consisted in the authoritative display of communicative competence, authority has held a central place in performance-oriented analysis. Hymes's definition highlights the assumption of an authoritative voice by the performer, which is grounded at least in part in the knowledge, ability, and right to control the recentering of valued texts. Control over decentering and recentering is part of the social framework and as such is one of the processes by which texts are endowed with authority, which in turn places formal and functional constraints on how they may be further recentered: An authoritative text, by definition, is one that is maximally protected from compromising transformation.

While the implications of the decentering and recentering of discourse for the construction and exercise of power may be approached from a variety of vantage points, including cultural conceptions of the nature and uses of performance, institutional structures, or ideology, the situated practice of decontextualization and recontextualization is an essential and foundational

frame of reference. In this sense the investigation of decontextualization and recontextualization continues the program of the ethnography of speaking, adding a conceptual framework, centered on discursive practice itself, that links separate situational contexts in terms of the pragmatics of textuality. Moreover, the chain of linkages may be extended without temporal limit, for texts may be continuously decentered and recentered. At one level, this illuminates the process of traditionalization (Bauman 1990), the telling and retelling of a tale, the citing and reciting of a proverb as these recenterings are part of the symbolic construction of discursive continuity with a meaningful past. Attention to such processes locates performances, texts, and contexts in systems of historical relationship. At another level, the tracing of chains of decentering and recentering offers a unified frame of reference for the analysis of control over discourse that extends from the small-scale and local to the global. A given folktale performance, for example, may be traced through connected processes of decentering and recentering in local oral tradition, in the nationalization of culture as it is appropriated by learned elites in the service of nationalist ideology, or in the internationalization of culture as it is held up to view as part of world literature.

Our approach to the decontextualization and recontextualization of texts also contributes operational and substantive specificity to Bakhtin's more abstract notion of dialogism (1981), increasingly influential in linguistic anthropology and folklore. If indeed, as Bakhtin tells us, our mouths are filled with the words of others, the program we have outlined here is designed to elucidate how these dialogical relations are accomplished, and in ways that take full account of form-function interrelationships and the sociology and political economy of Bakhtinian dialogue.

A further significant payoff offered by the investigation of the decontextualization and recontextualization of texts is a critical and reflexive perspective from which to examine our own scholarly practice. Much of what we do as linguistic anthropologists amounts to the decontextualization and recontextualization of others' discourse, which means as well that we exercise power along the lines outlined above. To be sure, the exercise of such power need not be entirely one-sided; our interlocutors may attempt to control how their discourse will be entextualized and recontextualized. These processes have significant implications for the methods, goals, and not least, ethics, of our profession.

## NOTE

1. The problem of decontextualization (and recontextualization, of which more below) has been the principal focus of a seminar at the Center for Psychosocial Studies, chiefly

under the rubrics of the *decentering* and *recentering* of discourse. These terms draw on poststructuralist usage in the process of offering a critique of the perspectives in which that usage is rooted (Bauman 1987). Through the work of the group's members, these terms have begun to gain wider currency in linguistic anthropology (e.g. Hanks 1989; Parmentier 1989). We employ 'centering', 'decentering', and 'recentering' here, interchangeably with 'contextualization', 'decontextualization', and 'recontextualization'.

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