

Towards a systemic functional approach to context collapse

Original study

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Abstract: This paper presents an initial systemic functional interpretation of the nuclear features of the phenomenon known as "context collapse", which occurs when multiple online audiences (such as family, friends and coworkers) are "flattened" into a single group of potential recipients. After introducing the fundamental systemic functional dimensions of stratification and instantiation, we briefly present Hasan's systemic description of the contextual parameter of Tenor, which deals with the potential relations and roles enacted by the participants of an interaction. We propose that such a contextual system enables us to describe with theoretical precision the nuclear features of context collapse: besides one-way digital contact in Mode, the selection of [addressee: absent: category] in the system of TEXTUAL ROLES and a generalized vagueness in the system of SOCIAL ROLES. Finally, we outline two major strategies employed to circumvent it: enactment-based and activation-based.

Keywords: context collapse; Systemic Functional Theory; Tenor; textual roles; social roles; contextual strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Since at least Marwick and Boyd's (2011) seminal paper, the phenomenon known as "context collapse" has become an important issue in research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) and, therefore, in the field of computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA). Broadly speaking, context collapse refers to "the process by which online social networks bring together people from various social contexts, thereby creating a diverse networked audience" (Androutsopoulos 2014, 62); or, in other words, to "the flattening out of multiple distinct audiences in one's social network, such that people from different contexts become part of a singular group of message recipients" (Vitak 2012, 451).

Despite the undeniable importance of context collapse for CMC and CMDA, given its impact on the way online users interact, one may say, as Szabla and Blommaert (2020, 251) do, that it is an undertheorized concept, and therefore a limited notion in terms of how accurately research may rely on it and, as a consequence,

how adequately it reflects the real interactive practices of online users. At the same time, notwithstanding the strong concern that Systemic Functional Theory (SFT) has with text-context relations, it seems that systemic functional research has yet to perform a role that could be central to CMC and CMDA: to provide a detailed theorization of the socio-semiotic nature of context collapse. This is what we intend to outline in this paper.

The text is structured as follows: first, we briefly introduce two fundamental dimensions: stratification (and the relation of realization) and instantiation; then, we briefly present Hasan's (2020) systemic description of the contextual parameter of Tenor, which we consider to be central for the definition of context collapse; finally, we propose an initial framework for the systemic functional characterization of context collapse, as well as a description of two major types of strategies employed to circumvent it: enactment-based (which may be exclusive or inclusive) and activation-based.

1 SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL THEORY: STRATIFICATION AND INSTANTIATION

1.1 STRATIFICATION

The notion of stratification in SFT is heir to Saussure (in terms of the dichotomy between signified and signifier) and Hjelmslev (in terms of the opposition between content plane and expression plane), but under the direct influence of J. R. Firth and indirect influence of Malinowski (Halliday 1999; Hasan 1999, 2013; Martin 2016).

The notion of stratification captures the fact that any text has several “levels”: there are sounds (or letters), there are words (and relations between them), and there are meanings that go beyond the values of words and clauses. There are also – and here we see the crucial contributions of Firth and Malinowski – certain cultural parameters that are inferable from the textual meanings: speaking a language “fluently” means not only knowing how to interpret a text in itself as an autonomous product, but understanding the context in which the text was (probably) produced. The opposite direction is also valid: the generation of texts is not simply the production of a series of interconnected clauses, but the activation of meanings compatible with (or “appropriate to”) situational variables.

Based on this reasoning, SFT proposed the following general stratification scheme (for natural languages; other semiotic systems may be distinct, but must keep the division between content and expression):

1. *Expression plane:*

A) Phonetics: “the interfacing with the body’s resources for speech and for hearing” (Halliday, Matthiessen 2014, 25).¹

B) Phonology: “the organization of speech sound into formal structures and systems” (Halliday, Matthiessen 2014, 25).

2. *Content plane:*

A) Lexicogrammar: the stratum that enables the meanings established in semantics to be organized into wordings, and, in turn, to become *sensible* in the expression plane – and not only *intelligible*, as they are in the content plane (Hasan 2013, 278). In other words, lexicogrammar is the content stratum that interfaces with the expression plane.

B) Semantics: the stratum that interfaces language (content plane + expression plane) with context: it is in semantics (or discourse semantics, in Martin’s (1992) model) that interpersonal relations and human experiences are transformed into meanings. Semantics is also responsible for meanings “beyond” the clause and the clause complex.

3. *Context plane:* the stratum in which semiotically relevant cultural categories are organized systemically. Note that the contextual systems presented here are not intended as sociological or anthropological models, but rather as forms of theorizing about the general cultural parameters (and their variables) that must be considered to model the resonance between context and language and, consequently, the heterogeneous nature of the culturally relevant semiotic activity. Context is divided into Field, Tenor and Mode (see below).

SFT posits that the relationship between strata is not random, but ordered and hierarchical. This ordered relation is that of **realization** (\downarrow): the content plane is realized by the expression plane; the context plane is realized by language. Semantics is realized by lexicogrammar; phonology is realized by phonetics. In short:

- context \downarrow language;
- or context \downarrow (content \downarrow expression);
- or context \downarrow ((semantics \downarrow lexicogrammar) \downarrow (phonology \downarrow phonetics)).

The general idea behind the notion of realization is that of (ordered) covariation: semiotic patterns covary with contextual patterns, content patterns covary with expression patterns, and so on.² Thus, when there is (context:) maximal social distance between interactants, one should (semantics and lexicon:) avoid nicknames: unless there is a very good reason for not following this rule, a student will not use a nickname to address a teacher. Similarly, when one is in the sphere of everyday life, one does not, as a rule, expect to use highly specialized terminology such as “unaccusative verb”.

The idea of covariation suggests that there is not only the possibility of a movement from context to language, but also a movement from language to context. For example, it may not be impossible to call one’s teacher “Bob” – this would probably cause a feeling of awkwardness, but such an act could lead to a (perhaps subtle, but significant) change in terms of social distance. In fact, as Hasan (2009, 2013) proposes, it might be better to make explicit that realization encompasses a bidirectional movement that, depending on the case, may be seen as **activation** (from context to language), **construal** (from language to context), or both at once.

This double intertwining of language and context makes up what Hasan (2013) calls the realizational dialectic, which substantiates the classification of SFT as a socio-semiotic perspective. Such a perspective, however, is not completely original, although the Firthian tradition can probably be seen as “pioneering” in this respect; in

1 For discussion on phonetics in SFT, see Matthiessen (2022).

2 Although the notion of covariation captures the phenomenon of realization panoramically, it should be noted that there are different relations in the distinct “stages” of realization (see Martin 1999, 39): between context and language, the primary relation is indeed one of (functionally motivated) covariation; between lexicogrammar and semantics, however, there is a “natural” relation, as opposed to the mostly “arbitrary” relation between content and expression.

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fact, Linguistic Anthropology (Duranti 1997) and the sociolinguistics of style (Coupland 2007) – just to name two examples – are traditions with very similar bidirectional premises, although they developed with little or no systemic functional influence. However, the originality of SFT lies in, among other elements, describing how the cultural functioning of semiotic systems leads to the very organization of the system available for meaning-making.

More specifically, SFT operates with the concept of **metafunction**, which captures the hypothesis that “functionality is *intrinsic* to language: that is to say, the entire architecture of language is arranged along functional lines” (Halliday, Matthiessen 2014, 31; bold and italics in the original). Whenever a clause is produced, it is simultaneously organized in three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual.

The ideational metafunction is divided into two: the experiential and the logical. Experiential meanings are those most closely associated with the commonsense idea of what “meaning” is: language is used to construe (“represent”) experiences – real or imagined, internal or external, concrete or abstract, etc. On the other hand, the logical metafunction deals with how such experiences may form complexes, with different logico-semantic relations between their parts (such as causality, addition, temporality, exemplification, etc.).

Language is not used exclusively to construe experiences, but also to negotiate such figures. Every act of language is essentially an *interact*; to act semiotically is always to interact and, in some way, to “play” (often with quite practical “wins” and “defeats”). Thus, the linguistic system includes several resources specialized precisely in its inevitably intersubjective character: the interpersonal metafunction.

Last but not least (the metafunctions are not hierarchised), there are linguistic resources which focus on the composition of texts as cohesive, meaningful wholes. This is the textual metafunction.

The most immediately relevant element for us is the hypothesis that different metafunctions are systematically associated with different contextual parameters. This would give some order to investigate the relationship between language and context. Tenor is associated with the interpersonal metafunction; Field, with the ideational; Mode, with the textual. See Figure 1.

1.2 INSTANTIATION

Besides the stratification/realization hierarchy, there is another dimension of language to which SFT pays special attention: the instantiation scale. This points to the fact that, when studying language, one can do so from points of view dealing with distinct degrees of generality: one can deal with a specific event, a text (an instance), associated with a context of situation; or with the system that enables the occurrence of the instance: the meaning potential linked to the context of culture (Halliday 1999; Hasan 1999; Matthiessen 2022).

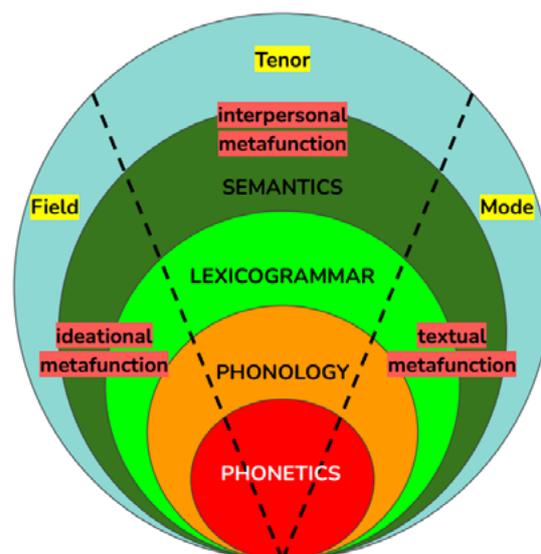


Figure 1: Stratification, metafunctions and contextual parameters. Warm colors: expression plane; shades of green: content plane; blue: context plane. Adapted from Halliday and Matthiessen (2014, 26).

Such scale becomes even more relevant due to the systemic functional idea that, between potential and instance, it is also possible to capture the region between the extremes as a space where meaning *subpotentials* are found: registers and genres (or text-types). While the potential concerns what one *can mean*, in the instance we find what is *actually meant* in a situation; and the subpotentials indicate that specific semiotic options are more frequent in certain types of context than others. The scale also shows that SFT views semiotic systems as probabilistic systems – ideally, every system described for the level of the potential would also be complemented by frequency profiles based on a corpus representing the totality of the language. This is quite difficult (although not impossible), but investigating subpotentials is clearly more feasible, since it requires much more modest corpora (and analyses).

One should also emphasize the fact that a semiotic system (a meaning potential) realizes a context of culture, while a semiotic instance (the text, an act of meaning) realizes a context of situation. This enables us to theorize culture as a “situation potential”: since the 1980s, there have been attempts to describe contextual parameters as system networks, along the lines of systemic descriptions of the linguistic strata. Such descriptions enable us to see culture as potential, since system networks are a form of description which focuses precisely on expounding the possible *choices* in a certain stratum: a system network is a series of interconnected “options” that must be “chosen” (of course, most of the time the “choices” are not conscious, and this is especially true for context, since it is for the most part only indirectly (though language) subject to the interactants’ agency).

We should note again that the description of a context of culture (a “situation potential”) in a systemic functional perspective is not the same as descriptions proposed in the social sciences: in SFT, the emphasis is not on culture as a whole, but on the cultural elements that are systematically associated with semiotic patterns, so that it explains: (1) at the instance pole, the activations and construals that occur throughout a text; (2) in the intermediate region of the subpotentials, probabilistic socio-semiotic patterns, describing usage in situation types; (3) at the potential pole, how the system is organized to realize cultural options.

In summary, SFT provides the following framework: texts (instances) realize contexts of situation; contexts of situation are, in turn, instances of a context of culture, which is realized by a meaning potential.³ See Figure 2.

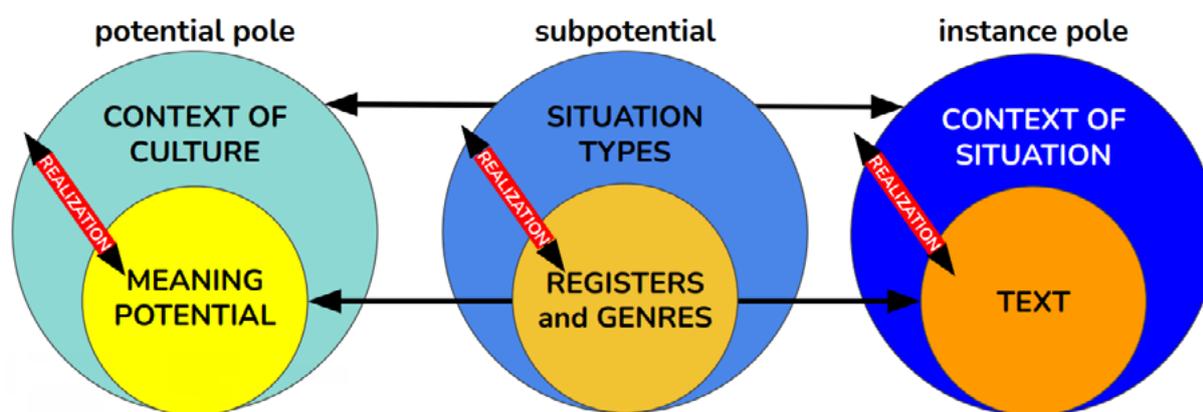


Figure 2: Instantiation and realization.

2 DESCRIBING TENOR AS A SYSTEM

As suggested by the brief definitions presented at the beginning of the paper, context collapse crucially involves the roles and relations enacted by interactants: who is talking to whom and what is the relation between them. In systemic functional terms, these features are described in the contextual parameter of Tenor. We will now present very briefly how this parameter may be described in terms of its internal options, drawing primarily on Hasan’s (2020) system for Tenor.

Tenor is described in terms of three major systems (the order is merely expository):

1. AGENTIVE ROLES describe the roles associated with the actions allocated to each interactant (e.g. interviewer-interviewee; salesperson-client; doctor-patient; teacher-student). These examples are pairs of very specific (“delicate”) agentive roles; for their global characterization, Hasan (2020) proposes three subsystems:

A) GOAL ORIENTATION, which refers to the fact that the interactants are not always aware of what is the goal of the interaction (they may be [aware]⁴ or [unaware] of it);

B) COMMENCEMENT, which deals with the fact that the “potential of beginning interaction is variable” (Hasan 2020, 333). It may be [free], in which anyone can begin the interaction, as is common in loosely institutionalized contexts, or [governed], in which coercions control who speaks first;

C) and ACTUAL OPENING, which “specifies which interactant actually begins the interaction” (Hasan 2020, 333). There are two options: [initiator], the one who utters the first turn of the interaction, and [respondent], who responds to that turn.

Thus, instead of simply stating that in a (face-to-face) classroom situation the agentive roles of teacher and student occur, the system enables us to indicate that in such a case there is typically [goal orientation: aware: both] (although it is possible that, empirically, we find that

students are often not aware of the goals of the class, which is clearly a problem), [commencement: governed], and [actual opening: initiator] for the teacher and [respondent] for the student(s). Systemic description, therefore, allows for more analytical detail, comparability, and rigor.

2. TEXTUAL ROLES, in turn, concern the distinction between speaker and addressee. Both roles are always semiotically present in the text: every utterance implies a speaker who talks to an addressee. There is, however, a fundamental distinction: while the speaker is always materially present at the moment of production (after all, he is the text-producer), the addressee may or may not be present. Thus, the ADDRESSEE may be [present] or [absent]; if they are [absent], they may be a specific [person] or a [category], which may be [imaginary], in which case the speaker has to deal with a very diffuse image of the addressee (e.g., a new resident sending a message to the residents of the building) or [actual], in which there is more detail on what to expect from the addressee (e.g., an experienced teacher sending an email to a class). Hasan (2020) proposes that the

3 For discussion on modeling nonverbal semiotic systems in terms of stratification, metafunction and instantiation, see Martin (2011), Matthiessen (2022), and Farhat and Gonçalves-Segundo (2022).

4 Following Hasan’s (2020) conventions, we use brackets to present the options of system networks.

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SPEAKER, on the other hand, may be described in terms of his ATTITUDE (neutral, positive, or negative) towards a FOCUS (the addressee, the activity in the process of interaction, or another element).⁵

3. Finally, SOCIAL ROLES comprise the following subsystems:

– PERSONAL INTERACTIVE BIOGRAPHY (SOCIAL DISTANCE) corresponds roughly to what other perspectives call “solidarity” or “intimacy” – it concerns the “horizontal” proximity between the interactants, which is based primarily on the quantity and quality of their past mutual experiences (hence the “biographical” character). It ranges from [minimal] to [maximal] distance.

– STATUS corresponds to what other frameworks call “power,” dealing with the “vertical” differences between the interactants. Thus, there may be an [equal] or [hierarchical] relationship; if hierarchic, it may be [visible] or [invisible] (for example, a boss who becomes “friends” with subordinates may appear to be on an equal footing, but in fact, there is still hierarchization – the rights for acting on the subordinated are maintained).

– ASCRIBED ATTRIBUTES refer to aspects of the interactants that are commonly interpreted as unalterable: according to common sense, we have little or no agency over them. They include (and can be expanded and/or modified, if relevant to the analysis): gender, ethnicity, age, and kinship.

– ACHIEVED ATTRIBUTES are those commonly thought of as characteristics over which the interactants have some “power of choice” (which is often illusory), including material capital, symbolic capital, and level of recognition (e.g. whether the interactant is a “newcomer”, “well-known”, or “established” person in a certain social space).

3 INTERPRETING CONTEXT COLLAPSE SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONALLY

We now return to context collapse. Such a phenomenon occurs when users of digital platforms have to deal with an invisible and potentially very diverse audience. For example, Facebook users, when preparing a post on their “profiles”, usually have to keep in mind that all their “friends” will be able to read it, which usually includes family members, coworkers, “true” friends, acquaintances, etc. Since, as the studies of Goffman (1959), Bell (1984), Coupland (2007), and many others show, the presentation of the self depends crucially on the person to whom the self is presented, such a vague audience may end up causing conflicts, anxieties, etc.

Think, for example, of the case of a young homosexual who has already “come out” to some of her friends, but still presents herself as a heterosexual person to her family. On the one hand, “revealing” posts about her sexuality could be received with surprise and even

reprimand by family members; on the other hand, if she chooses to present herself as heterosexual, this will probably be interpreted as something not very “genuine” or “authentic” by her closest friends. This is, of course, a straightforward and extreme case (with equally extreme consequences), but the important element here is to note that this blurring of the addressee affects an important part of digital interactions and, thus, deserves theoretical scrutiny.

In the following example (Figure 3), there is a screenshot in which we see a message where the user’s mother writes: *What’s wrong with you. What the fuck is that shit you just posted on facebook.* The screenshot was published jokingly, but it precisely reflects the risk of dissonance between what one posts and who reads one’s posts – and context collapse increases the chance of such dissonance.



Figure 3: The consequences of context collapse (iFunny 2021).

Similar phenomena occurred long before the internet. Goffman (1959), for example, quotes the following passage:

We are all, in our compartmentalized responses, like the man who is a tyrant in his office and a weakling among his family, or like the musician who is assertive in his art and self-effacing in his personal relationships. Such dissociation becomes a difficulty when we attempt to unite these compartments (as, were the man who is a tyrant in his office and awaking in his home suddenly to employ his wife or children, he would find his dissociative devices inadequate, and might become bewildered and tormented). (Burke 1953, 309, *apud* Goffman 1959, 136)

However, with the internet and social networking sites, what was once a relatively rare phenomenon has become a much more common risk, which requires strategies by the speakers (such as the ones we will present in section 4) to “circumvent” the possible negative consequences.

The question, then, is: how to define such a phenomenon based on the theoretical apparatus offered by SFT? Besides the fact that there must be one-way digital Mode (the speaker must not have direct access to the recipients of the text), it seems to us that Hasan’s (2020)

5 Note that attitude in Tenor is not identical to the ATTITUDE subsystem in the discourse semantic system of APPRAISAL proposed by Martin and White (2005): contextual attitude would indeed be typically realized by attitudinal meanings, but they are different systems in different strata (although they are partly redundant, which is due to their strong realizational alignment).

description of Tenor provides us with the basic elements of a systemic functional interpretation of context collapse.

First of all, let us examine the system of AGENTIVE ROLES. As we saw earlier, these are the roles assumed by the interactants according to their actions. Based on how context collapse is usually defined and on our previous research, it seems to us that the options of AGENTIVE ROLES are not crucial to determining context collapse (although they may be affected by it), which deal primarily, as we will show below, with specific configurations in the TEXTUAL ROLES and SOCIAL ROLES systems.

Let us begin, then, with textual roles. As explained above, the system describes two main elements: SPEAKER and ADDRESSEE. In terms of the speaker's ATTITUDE, there does not seem to be a crucial element for the definition of context collapse: although highly attitudinal utterances are probably more intensely affected by context collapse (which is mainly due to the affiliative importance of attitudes – see Martin (2010), Knight (2010) and Farhat and Gonçalves-Segundo (2021b)), "neutral" utterances are not immune to the phenomenon. For the addressee, however, a necessary condition for context collapse seems to be the following "chain of choices": [absent: category], with a strong tendency towards [imaginary] (i.e. not [actual]) categories. The configuration [absent: category] (i.e. not [present] or [absent: person]) is what allows for the multiple audiences to be "flattened" into one in the first place: if the addressee were [present], even if internally varied (such as what commonly happens in weddings, where family members, friends and acquaintances are grouped together), the speaker can, at least in principle, address (with vocatives or multimodal resources) specific (groups of) interactants, circumventing the collapse; if it were [absent: person], the speaker, while already dealing with a certain blurring of the addressee, would still have a precise interactant in mind.

However, the strongest consequence of the addressee configuration [absent: category] is actually in the SOCIAL ROLES. What happens is that, in these circumstances, the categorization of the addressee becomes extremely undefined, so that their attributes (including social distance) are all left "unselected":⁶ in most cases of context collapse, one cannot be sure about the SOCIAL DISTANCE between the interactants (e.g. is it a close friend or a simple acquaintance?), about their relative STATUS (e.g. is it a colleague, a subordinate or my boss?), about their ASCRIBED ATTRIBUTES (e.g. is it a cisgender man?, a transgender woman?, someone my age, younger or older?, a relative?, etc.), and even about the ACHIEVED ATTRIBUTES (e.g. is it someone rich?, well-known?, famous for their scientific contributions?, etc.). Although the blurriness of status, social distance, and some of the ascribed attributes are

perhaps the most common causes of "communicative anxiety", the fact is that some digital contexts may be characterized by a generalized blurring of all social roles.

Thus, we can now propose a systemic functional definition of the phenomenon known as "context collapse": context collapse occurs when the TEXTUAL ROLE of the addressee is [absent: category], and this leads to a blurring of their SOCIAL ROLES.

Therefore, one can see that it is not context as a whole that collapses, but the social roles assumed by the addressee – and, consequently, by the speaker, since the presentation of the speaker's self depends crucially on who interprets their presentation. One may, however, have the impression of "total" collapse because the context has a "permeable" nature, which means that systems in different parameters are strongly associated in probabilistic terms, so that vagueness in social roles may be reflected in vagueness in other parameters (think, for example, of vagueness in SPHERE OF ACTION (part of Field) – if we do not know who our addressees are, we also do not know to which area of cultural activity they are associated: a linguist may be undecided about treating his audience as part of their sphere of expertise or external to it).⁷

4 CIRCUMVENTING CONTEXT COLLAPSE: ACTIVATION AND ENACTMENT

The definition presented above, although brief, enables us to suggest two major types of strategies for dealing with context collapse. Digital behavior that can be classified according to such strategies is reported (although not with the terms we will use below) in Vitak (2012), Davis and Jurgenson (2014), Androutsopoulos (2014), Farhat and Gonçalves-Segundo (2021a, 2021b), among several other studies.

The first strategy is **activation-based** (i.e. from context to text): in these cases, to avoid blurring social roles *before* publishing anything, one looks for or tries to "create" contexts in which social roles are perceived as more stable. This is a digital version of what Goffman (1959, 49) called "audience segregation": "the individual ensures that those before whom he plays one of his parts will not be the same individuals before whom he plays a different part in another setting".

This occurs, for example, when a Facebook user accepts only part of the users who want to be "friends" with them or creates an alternative profile (possibly using some kind of pseudonym) exclusive to certain groups of users (for example, their "close friends"). In Brazil, this practice has become common on Instagram with the so-called "dix" profiles, which only accept as followers a select group of users; the platform itself, however, now

6 Unless the speaker chooses to semiotically enact a specific social role configuration for the addressee, which we will point out below as a possible strategy for circumventing context collapse ("exclusive enactment").

7 And, therefore, there can also be a blurring of the AGENTIVE ROLES, since the speaker's purpose may be interpreted in different ways: an ironic questioning can be interpreted as a genuine demand for information, and as a consequence the role of "ironist" may be confused with that of "inquirer".

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directly deals with this phenomenon by proposing, in its “stories” feature, the option of “close friends” (suggesting [minimal] SOCIAL DISTANCE), which also restricts access to the published content, allowing the users to “handpick” their audience.

In our work on *LDRV*, a famous Brazilian Facebook group (Farhat and Gonçalves-Segundo 2021a, 2021b), our analyses suggested that the group serves the function of creating the impression of a relatively homogeneous audience, thus enabling a feeling of intimacy (again, [minimal] SOCIAL DISTANCE) and acceptance of non-hegemonic social attributes (especialmente related to gender and sexuality). The peculiarity of this case is that the group had hundreds of thousands of members: it is a rather special kind of context – a huge crowd that behaves as if intimate with itself. This would justify, at least in part, the popularity achieved by the group. By analyzing posts from another group, *Dias de Cinefilia* (DDC – “Cinephilia Days”), we found that, in addition to minimizing social distance, the group was also perceived as conducive to enacting a specific kind of symbolic capital related to the active (and sometimes ideologically charged) experience of watching films and TV shows, which would not be as suitable for the general “profile” space (for initial explorations on affiliative movements in this group, see Farhat (submitted for publication)).

In the following example (Figure 4), taken from the DDC group, one sees that the user takes it for granted that the audience is familiar with the films *Promising Young Woman* and *Eighth Grade* – a much less likely assumption for a “collapsed” context.

The other type of strategy is the “opposite” (i.e. from text to context), although it is perhaps not impossible to use both strategies simultaneously: it is the strategy of Tenor **enactment** (i.e. the interpersonal facet of the more general relation of construal: text construes context; interpersonal meanings enact Tenor). By using enactment-based strategies, one seeks to circumvent context collapse from within the text itself, enacting identities for the addressees (and, consequently, for the speaker) that allow one to avoid the social blurriness caused by the collapse. This is close to what Bell (1984) called “audience design”. We suggest two main subtypes for enactment-based strategies:

1. one can enact an **“inclusive”** identity for the different social roles potentially assumed by the addressees, and thus attempt to be appropriate for a very heterogeneous audience (this is close to what Hogan (2010) calls the “lowest common denominator” strategy);

2. one can, instead, adopt an **“exclusive”** strategy, enacting a relatively well-defined addressee, which may exclude some of the users that do access the text.

The “inclusive” enactment strategy is prominently adopted by experts who want to get out of their “filter bubbles” and thus disseminate typically inaccessible knowledge. In the following tweet (Figure 5), for example, Atila Iamarino, a well-known Brazilian biologist, strives to “translate” a specialized expression; by doing so, he

inclusively enacts his addressee: non-biologists now have a better chance of understanding the retweeted graph.



Figure 4: An instance of the activation-based strategy. Translation: “I’ve just noticed that Bo Burnham, who plays Ryan in *Promising Young Woman*, was the one who wrote and directed *Eighth Grade*. And what a perfect movie!”.



Figure 5: An instance of the inclusive enactment strategy. Translation: “Positivity rate = how many tested and had COVID. It is one of the most consistent measures of the increase in cases. In this case, at least among the inhabitants of São Paulo who test privately, there is a record number of cases.”

In contrast, in the following Facebook post (Figure 6), a well-known Brazilian linguist enacts a very specific addressee – someone who is able to interpret the humorous nature of the post, which is based on the homonymy between a literary theorist and a tennis player.

Círculo de Bakhtin em festa: Medvedev venceu um Grand Slam!

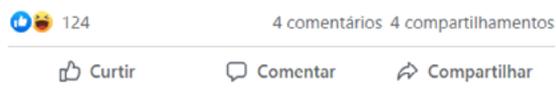


Figure 6: An instance of the exclusive enactment strategy. Translation: “The Bakhtin Circle is celebrating: Medvedev has won a Grand Slam!”

Being an “established” academic certainly favors the use of such a strategy: the same post, if published by someone with few expert colleagues as “friends” on Facebook, could result in embarrassing reactions, such as “what’s that? I can’t understand what you meant” or, more subtly, it could cause an image of “presumptuousness” for the speaker – someone who displays their symbolic capital exclusively, and thus neglects the potential “layperson”.

The strategies are represented in Figure 7. Future research could test and improve them (for example, by expanding the delicacy of the strategies).

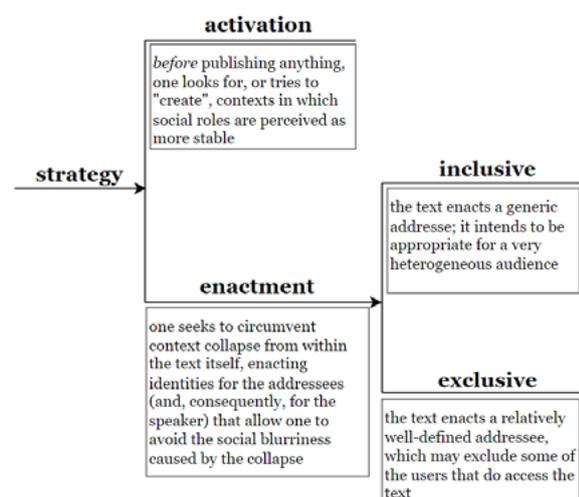


Figure 7: Activation and enactment strategies.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our goal in this paper was to begin outlining a detailed theorization of the socio-semiotic nature of context collapse. This led us to propose, in addition to a systemic functional definition of the contextual elements that are at the core of the phenomenon, an outline of two major types of strategies that are used for circumventing context collapse. Therefore, we highlight that the impact of the phenomenon in question, while certainly not negligible, is not as negatively ubiquitous as one might

expect – users have already quite consolidated “defense mechanisms” at their disposal.

These and other issues deserve further research. We hope that, with empirical testing of the categories proposed, the theorization will be improved. And we must always keep in mind that oversimplifications regarding semiotic activity are a danger to be avoided at any cost – and that is especially true for online semiotic practices.

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