REVIEWERS for Volume 6

STUDIES IN SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

A Research Annual

Editor: NORMAN K. DENZIN
Department of Sociology
University of Illinois

THE CONTEXTUAL CHARACTER OF
MEANING AND THE DEFINITION
OF THE SITUATION

Elżbieta Hałas

ABSTRACT

The problem of the contextual character of meaning arouses the interest of so-called interpretive sociology. The term ''context of meaning'' has a number of references, however. A short outline of them is presented in this paper. A close relation between the handling of the contextual character of meaning in hermeneutics and pragmatism is pointed out. The main point of the paper is the indication of the connection between the principle of the hermeneutic circle and the notion of the definition of the situation. It evidences the co-existence in the symbolic interactionist concepts of impacts coming from both pragmatism and hermeneutics.

I. INTRODUCTION

The problem of the contextual character of meaning arouses the interest of those sociologists who stand in opposition to so-called conventional sociology. They

claim that the latter is not critical about the meaningfulness of social facts and treats them dogmatically. Both meaning and language—although considered to be the prerequisites of social life—are not in themselves the subject-matter of this sociological orientation. Meaning is seized as being abstract and ready-made, whereas language is considered to be a passive transmitter (Schutz, 1971:4). As opposed to such a viewpoint, phenomenologically oriented sociologists, representatives of ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism—which boasts the oldest tradition—stress that meaning is concrete, created and interpreted. Thus language is a significant, active, social factor. Generally, they claim that meaning is of contextual or situational character (Brittain, 1973; Douglas, 1973, 1974; Perinbanyagam, 1974; Mishler, 1979). This sociological perspective, which is based on the assumption of the contextuality of meaning, is frequently called the interpretive paradigm (Wilson, 1974) or, to phrase it differently, the social definition paradigm (Ritzer, 1980).

The term "context of meaning" has a number of references, so it seems useful to make an outline of them and in this way make its application clearer in sociology. This is all the more useful because the terms "context" and "situation" are not synonymous, though they are often so used by sociologists. Therefore, it also seems important to examine what symbolic interactionists mean by "the contextual character of meaning" in their central concept of the definition of the situation.

II. AN OUTLINE OF THE APPROACHES TO THE CONTEXTUAL CHARACTER OF MEANING

Before a short outline of various approaches to the question of the contextual character of meaning is presented, we should recall important semiotic distinctions introduced by Morris. This will serve as a general frame of reference for the outline to be presented.

In Morris's formulation semiosis (from the Greek *semeion* = sign) is a process in which something functions as a sign. According to him, the study of this process is a task of semiotics, which he, like de Saussure, considers the most general of the disciplines dealing with signs. Morris answers the question of the nature of the sign when he describes its constituent correlates or factors (Morris, 1970:3). He enumerates first, that which occurs as a sign, i.e., its material correlate—the sign vehicle. Another correlate is the designatum—something to which a sign refers. The third factor is the interpretant—the effect produced on a person using the sign, owing to which a certain object becomes a sign for him. This triad of sign relations is made possible by the agent of the process of semiosis, which is sometimes enumerated as the fourth factor, called the interpreter.

The structure of sign relations described in this way recurs in a number of variants in the semiotic bibliography. For example, de Saussure distinguishes

signifiant, signifié and *référent*. Morris's viewpoint, which we will study more exhaustively, is unique. For him, "interpretant" has a behavioral character. "S is a sign of D for I to the degree that I takes account of D in virtue of the presence of S" (Morris, 1970:4). "From the point of view of behavioristics, to take account of D by the presence of S involves responding to D in virtue of a response to S" (Morris, 1970:6).

This solution has not won broader recognition. The ways of defining "interpretant" differentiate semiotic standpoints. However, the thesis prevails that the relation between the sign and its referent is an "indirect one, which consists in its being used by someone to stand for a referent" (Ogden and Richard, 1972:12).

The recapitulation of the factors taking part in the process of semiosis was a necessary introduction preceding the differentiation of Morris's, which interests us here. He distinguishes three dyadic relationships: the relation of signs to their objects, the relation of signs to their users, and interrelations between signs. These are the three levels of the functioning of signs abstracted from the process of semiosis. Morris calls them semantic, pragmatic and syntactic dimensions, respectively. However, he claims that the sign, and, therefore, the meaning, may be described only by combined considerations of all three dimensions (Morris, 1970:6–8).

These three dimensions will be referred to while surveying various ideas of the contextual meaning. It is worth adding that Morris states clearly that the pragmatic dimension of semiosis comprises sociological phenomena which occur together with the functioning of signs (Morris, 1970:39–40).

A. Contextual Meaning as Viewed by Structural-Functional Linguistics

Linguistic structuralism contributed a great deal to the systematic analysis of signs. The most important distinction constituting structuralism is this opposition: language—speech (*langue—parole*). The proper subject-matter of structuralism is *langue* as an abstract system of signs—the code. It differs from speech because it is abstracted from concrete communicative situations (Ricoeur, 1975:98). The assumption that language is a closed system—a structure—is, in fact, a peculiar assumption of the contextual character of meaning. A language sign does not exist in itself but in connection with other signs (Apresjan, 1971:37). It is a consequence of the general thesis that each language unit, beginning with phonemes, has its own place in a system of relations (Lyons, 1976:89). Meanings are connected with interrelated signs conditioned one by another. While dealing with interrelations between signs, structuralists distinguish two important types of these, i.e., paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations. The former are identified on the so-called vertical axis, whereas the latter are identified on the horizontal one. Paradigmatic relations are those of similarity

in a system (e.g., of synonymy or homonymy). Syntagmatic relations are those of contiguity and mutual connection (Apresjan, 1971:50; Giglioli, 1972:59). In the study of relations of paradigmatic character, the range of possible alternatives is studied, whereas in the study of syntagmatic ones, sequential organization, defining and defined elements are studied. To give an example, the word "little" in the expression "two little cats" is in a syntagmatic relation with the words "two" and "cats," and in a paradigmatic relation with the words "big," "white," "black," etc.

The structure analysis, owing to the idea of the system, overcomes the theory of meaning which isolates words (Gadamer, 1979:109). The system is a kind of context.

Within structuralism itself, while dealing with the functions of language, there has already started, to some extent, the study of its concrete usage. This turning point was achieved by the Prague School, with Jakobson at the head. In connection with this change of theoretical approach, context of meaning became extended to the process of communication. Jakobson proposed a scheme of the communication act, whose elements are sender, recipient, message, code, referent and medium (Guiraud, 1974:18). He distinguishes six language functions: informative, which is defined by the relation: message—referent; expressive (message—sender); the function of appeal (message—recipient); phatic—serving to keep up the contact (message—process of communication); metalingual (sign—code); and poetic (relation of the message to itself). The meaning of the act of communication is described in terms of its functions.

Communicative context of meaning, as presented by Jakobson, seems to belong to the pragmatic level. His interest is in the code used by the sender and the recipient of the message. However, this pragmatic context is, to a large extent, limited. One can observe the predominance of the code. Only two of the functions distinguished by Jakobson—the phatic and that of appeal—link the fact of communication with activity. Communication, in Jakobson's treatment, remains first of all the expression of thoughts and information. The informative function is the primary one. The context of meaning comprises first of all semantic and syntactic dimensions. It is a code used for communicating something. Therefore, it only supperficial that the context of meaning is pragmatic. Action as such is not the subject of the studies. Influence exerted during the process of communication shapes motives and attitudes of future actions at best.

B.   Various Approaches to the Pragmatic Context of Meaning

1.   Performative Function of Language

The forerunner of the idea of the pragmatic context of meaning was Malinowski—founder of sociolinguistics (Firth, 1970:94–96). He was of the opinion that neither words, nor even sentences, but only utterance in the context of

the situation constituted a real linguistic fact. According to Malinowski, language, not as an abstract scheme—as it had been understood even by Jakobson—but as a sort of action, connected with other forms of action, should be treated as a part of actions. The chief function of language does not consist of conveying thoughts or following mental processes, but of playing an active pragmatic role in people's behavior. The principal function of language, according to Malinowski, is the performative and not the informative function. It was Malinowski who, for the first time, distinguished the phatic function, which was then referred to by Jakobson. According to Malinowski, language is not the "shadow of reality." Words are not "labels attached to things" (Malinowski, 1966:9). Words primarily act, produce, and achieve certain goals. The proper context of meaning is action itself. Meaning is an effective change produced by an utterance in a context of situations; meaning equals function in a context of situation (1966:214, 223). This context, according to Malinowski, consists of the cultural context of beliefs, or the cultural context of reference, and the context of the role-division in interaction, that is—as Malinowski says—social situation (1966:244ff). As has already been pointed out, Malinowski was concerned first of all with the performative function of language. Utterance is at the same time performance; it intervenes in reality. The best example is furnished by magic utterances. In Malinowski's approach, the pragmatic context of meanings dominates over or even swallowes the syntactic and semantic dimensions.

2.   Illocutionary Acts

The problem of pragmatic context of meaning is also handled by the British philosophy of language, whose prominent representatives are Austin and Searle. They continue the pioneering research of Malinowski. They reflect on the meaning of speech as action—performance. They answer by presenting the concept of a threefold structure of the speech-act. They distinguish locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary levels (Ricoeur, 1971:533) in speech. The locutionary level is the act of saying. The illocutionary act is the level of the force, that which we do in saying. It is the level of activity—"doing things with words." The third level is that of the perlocutionary act. It is the effect—that which happens through saying. It is that which we do by saying. The three distinct levels of the speech-act constitute the context of meaning. It has a pragmatic character. Language is a kind of activity (Searle, 1972:137). To speak means to engage oneself in certain behaviors—to greet, warn, command, announce something. Searle states, as Malinowski did, that in order to make those acts of speech possible, it is necessary to fulfill one preliminary condition. A definite social situation must take place (1972:154), for instance, the position of authority in the case of giving an order, a meeting in the case of greeting. This social situation constitutes the pragmatic context of meaning of the speech-acts in a wider understanding of this term.

3. Indexical Expressions

We should also pay attention to the treatment of contextuality of meaning in the discipline of logic where the so-called pragmatic context was dealt with, too. Nevertheless, it was given a different sense from that presented above. What is meant here is Bar-Hillel's recognition of so-called indexical expressions. They are those expressions whose referents depend—as Bar-Hillel says—on the pragmatic context of their usage. It must be emphasized that Bar-Hillel states clearly that the degree of the dependence on pragmatic context, also called a situation, is different for different expressions (Bar-Hillel, 1954:359). To give an example, the referent of the expression "Ice floats on water" in various situations of its usage is fixed to the extent that one can abstract it from the pragmatic context, whereas the sentences "It is raining" and "I am happy" are indexical expressions. In this case, one can not speak about one referent. That is why Bar-Hillel chooses to speak of the function of language and not of its meaning.

In his concept of the indexicality of expressions, Bar-Hillel extends the problem known as occasional expressions, such as pronouns, adverbs of place, etc., whose meanings are defined by the "here and how" of the utterance in which they are used. Bar-Hillel claims that indexical communication is indispensable (1954:361). It is not a "weak point" of language which could be improved.

Contextual character of meaning, as viewed by Bar-Hillel, refers to its dependence on pragmatic context, called a situation. Situation—"occasion"—is of ostensive character. It is limited to the set of elements perceived through senses that may be indicated "here and now."

4. Pragmatism on the Contextual Character of Meaning

Pragmatic context of meaning was most accentuated in pragmatism, a philosophical trend whose foremost representatives were James, Devey, Pirce and Mead, who at the same time were forerunners of symbolic interactionism. It is worth mentioning that the ideas of pragmatism also inspired Malinowski, whose concepts were treated above. The term "pragmatic," used by Morris and referring to the dimension of meaning that comprises the users of signs, was coined just in connection with the ideas of pragmatism (Morris, 1970:29). Philosophers of this orientation expressed the conviction that not only thought is the source of meaning. Meaning is created in the process of action and is attached in the first place to this very process. The analysis of meaning—according to pragmatists—can be limited neither to already shaped semantic content nor to its form. This, as has been shown, is the structuralist view.

Originally, meaning is a social phenomenon. Ultimately, it resolves into the manner of action. Mead, whose concepts will be presented below, openly stated that meaning is primarily a characteristic of action and only secondarily a characteristic of objects. He distinguishes three categories of objects: physical, social and abstract. An action directed at a certain object is the context of its meaning.

"Meanings are ordered ways of acting which have evolved in past experiences and are constantly reaffirmed in new experiences" (Shibutani, 1961:139).

Meanings are unstable, mutable. They can fluctuate from person to person and situation to situation. Meaning boils down to the behavior toward objects in a concrete situation. For instance, a tree may mean, depending on the context, a shelter, an object of cult, an obstacle on the way, or an object of aesthetic admiration. Pragmatists treat language as an act of communication. Utterances are subordinated to the interests and intentions achieved in action.

Pragmatists go still further and say that the proper context of meanings is the situation of interaction. Mead claims that the meaning of a symbol is constituted by the response of the partner in interaction. At the same time, interaction is understood as a communicative event. "Therefore, meaning is a formation of objectively existing relations between certain phases of social activity and is not a psychical supplement to this activity. . . . The character of meanings . . . is connected with exhibited . . . social processes" (Mead, 1972:109).

"Objects are created in the categories of meanings within the social process of experience and behaviour thanks to mutual adjustment of actions and reactions of different individual organisms taking part in this process" (1972:110).

"Reaction of one organism to a gesture made by another is the interpretation of such a gesture and constitutes its meaning" (1972:114).

Thus, pragmatic context of meaning as viewed by Mead, a leading exponent of pragmatism, is enriched by the idea of interaction. Pragmatic context is defined as the co-constitution of meaning by partners in an interactive situation.

5. Horizons of Everyday Knowledge

The issue of the contextual character of meaning involves its problematical character. These are found to be two sides of one and the same question. Schutz explicitly considers the contextual character of meaning in connection with its problematical character. He presents this issue on the level of the functioning of systems of everyday knowledge as well as on the level of interactions which are qualified by this knowledge. To start a brief presentation of this issue, we should recall the phenomenological notion of natural attitude in everyday life, borrowed by Schutz from Husserl and Scheler. The natural attitude is characterized by the obviousness of meanings. Schutz says, however, that this obviousness is given in a changeable horizon of knowledge. In his terminology, obvious meanings are typifications of experiences of objects—interpretative constructs of acts, persons etc. That which is obvious belongs to a certain context of knowledge in a given situation. Schutz distinguishes obvious typifications as the kernel of that knowledge. Other elements of everyday knowledge in a given action situation are unevident and uncertain. They form, to use a metaphorical expression, a sort of a field surrounded by an indefinite horizon of knowledge (Schutz and Luckmann, 1974:8–15). However, this horizon is experienced as that which can be ex-

plained. This means that context may be developed. "The stock of knowledge pertaining to thinking within the life-world is to be understood not as a context transparent in its totality but rather as totality of 'self-evidencies' changing from situation to situation, being set into relief at any given time by background of determinancy" (1974:9). Experiences must be placed in a context to acquire meaning. Meaning is constituted by relating the concrete experience to a remembered frame of reference, for instance to a similar former experience. (Schutz, 1972:122). The horizon of reference system may be changed, enriched with new elements belonging to the context of knowledge. This context is constituted by the subjective stock of knowledge of a person's social biography and the social stock of knowledge (objective ideas, beliefs, norms, etc.) with which the subjective stock of knowledge overlaps to some degree. This is, in fact, the multitude of contexts. The stocks of knowledge which are the source of typifications construct finite provinces of meanings—"multiple realities" or "worlds" of everyday life (the reality of work, pastime, religious experience etc.).

So it is apparent that, according to Schutz, the meaning activated in concrete situations goes beyond the "here and now" of the situation. The pragmatic context of meanings and situations are different notions for Schutz. The former is the stock of everyday knowledge activated in action, whereas the latter refers to spatial and temporal *occasion* of action.

It is a misunderstanding to claim that meaning, according to Schutz, is constituted by solitary Ego. First, interpreting Ego is a participant of intersubjective world of everyday life and draws from the stocks of social knowledge. Second, it is not only the reflecting Ego but is acting as well. It is governed by pragmatic interests. Third, it is the influencing Ego involved in interactions. That is why meaning in interaction is co-constituted by partners.

Schutz's elaboration of the contextual character of meaning is multiple. We can distinguish three dimensions. It has the syntactical dimension—meanings compose systems of inter-related typifications articulated in language signs. It has the semantical dimension—typifications belong to the stocks of knowledge about reality—or rather, realities. It has the pragmatical dimension as well, since the context of knowledge is always somebody's knowledge activated in the situations of actions and interactions. The negotiation of typifications is, according to Schutz, an important process. Schutz's standpoint distinguishes itself from all approaches presented above, for Schutz studies the context of meaning as a course of interpreting the reality by the interactant people. Therefore, his standpoint combines both the hermeneutic and the pragmatic approaches.

C.   Hermeneutic Idea of Context

Originally, the problem of contextual character of meaning belongs to the current of hermeneutic reflection. This tradition, as has already been mentioned, is apparent in Schutz's approach. Presently, a number of various cognitive un-

dertakings are understood through hermeneutics. Hermeneutics (f. Gk hermēneutikos—concerning interpretation), according to the founder of contemporary form, Dilthey, are the principles of interpretation, or consistent rules of understanding of meanings preserved in signs (Dilthey, 1982:293). Such a definition of hermeneutics recurs. Hermeneutics is applied first of all to the interpretation of meaning preserved in the basic system of signs, i.e., language. This means that it is applied to the written documents of culture—texts.

The idea of the context of meaning, as suggested by the word's etymology, refers to a more fundamental notion—that of the text. Hermeneutic treatment of the text differs from the structural approach. This issue was accented by Ricoeur by making use of the famous concepts of Benveniste. Benveniste distinguished linguistics of language and linguistics of discourse. Insofar as a sign is the fundamental unit of language, a sentence is the fundamental unit of discourse. For a hermeneutist, text, along with oral utterance, is a form of discourse, i.e., language-event. "Discourse is the counterpart of what linguists call language-system or linguistic code" (Ricoeur, 1971:533). To recognize difference between the analysis of meaning on the level of language and on the level of discourse is crucial in order to understand the relationship between sociological analysis of meaning and other disciplines concerning meaning.

Hermeneutics dealing with text as a kind of discourse is related to pragmatism in this respect. Both hermeneutics and pragmatism place meaning in the context of event. It is worth recalling four features characterizing discourse and constituting speech-event (Ricoeur, 1975:240). They evidently refer to the text, too.

1. Discourse is of actual and temporal character, in contrast to the virtual and beyond-time existence of language-system.
2. Discourse has always its subject, its speaking "Who," whereas system is "nobody's."
3. Discourse has symbolic character; it refers to something in the world, whereas language signs only refer to other signs of the system.
4. Discourse has an interlocutor, its "Whom." It is an actual exchange of message, whereas language-code is only a prerequisite of communication.

Text belongs to the category of event as described above. The statement that meaning belongs to the text—is in a certain context—should be understood in such a way that meaning is placed in the four above dimensions of event. So the context is of communicative character. However, the situation of writing-reading differs from the situation of speaking-listening. Text—recorded utterance—has additional, specific features beside those described above. They are molded on the basis of the features already mentioned and do not eliminate them. These are the following:

1. fixation of the meaning;
2. its dissociation from the mental intentions and purposes of the author;
3. display of non-ostensive references;
4. universal range of addressees (Ricouer, 1975:246).

Such an approach differs from radically pragmatic concepts of meaning that place it in an ostensive context. The above four features constitute the objectivity of text. It is the phenomenological objectivity of the intentional being—noema. The ascertainment of the contextual character of meaning does not mean its subjective, psychological formulation. The text reveals that sense becomes detached from the event. The sense of the language-event and not the event as such is recorded in the text. To put it differently "noema of speaking" is inscribed (Ricoeur, 1971:532). Hermeneutics, like phenomenology, recognizes transcendence of the notion or of the meaning towards experience, and thus towards action, too. Such a standpoint is noticeable in Schutz's views. The sense of the text is a certain whole since text is not a mere sequence of sentences. The totality of the text manifests itself through a certain hierarchy of themes. It is something different from the subjective intentions of the author. This objective meaning of a text must be constructed. Nevertheless it may be constructed in a variety of ways.

Showing how, according to Ricoueur, text belongs to communication-discourse, showing that it is an event whose meaning, however, goes beyond this event, we have reached the central idea of the contextual character of meaning as seen by hermeneutics. This idea is known as the principle of the hermeneutic circle (Ricoeur, 1971:550; Bronk, 1982:304). A famed rule says that the whole should be understood on the basis of parts and parts on the background of the whole. Reconstructing the meaning of the text has a circular character, i.e., one needs to have initial assumptions concerning the whole in order to recognize the nature of the parts. These initial assumptions result from invention. They are "guessed" and must be validated in the further course of the interpretation. Interpretation of the text is a process evolving in time. In connection with the above, hermeneutics makes use of two notions of context: heuristic context and actual context (Lonergan, 1976:162). In the former, heuristic meaning, context is in fact an indication of where to look for the real context. These are the initial assumptions, the preliminary horizon of understanding. The actual context is in fact a passage from the initial assumption—assumed horizon—to the more comprehensive horizon of the meaning of the text. This constantly developing context of meaning is transferred by hermeneutists onto the interpretation of the whole sphere of people's actions and their results. However, constantly developing understanding of the text fundamentally remains the model of all sorts of interpretations.

III. DEFINITION OF THE ACTION SITUATION AS THE CONTEXT OF MEANING

The notion of the definition of the situation is regarded a key and constitutive concept for symbolic interactionism (Farberman, 1970:147–153, Stebbins, 1982). It is related to the assumption that action is formed actively on the basis of changeable meanings assigned to objects (Blumer, 1969:15). This assumption distinguishes symbolic interactionism from the approach of cultural determinism, according to which action is conditioned by general, abstract, social systems of meanings and values—maxims and norms of actions. As maintained by symbolic interactionism, the course of action depends on the situation in which meanings are interpreted. Symbolic interactionism claims that the situational factor may be studied systematically and that situational action has its own regularities which can be established. As a matter of fact, there is no unreserved agreement among interactionists as to what a situation is as a theoretical concept effective for investigating social facts. The idea of the situational character of meaning is handled in a number of ways (Stebbins, 1982). This notion is repeatedly employed intuitively. Nevertheless, it differs from the daily use of the term. In common parlance, a situation means conditions independent of a person (e.g., "I cannot do anything in this situation"; "I am compelled by the situation"). Situation as a concept of symbolic interactionism has nothing in common with objective conditions as they could appear to an absolutely competent observer.

Blumer calls the attribution of meanings to objects taken into account in action "interpretation of the situation" (Blumer, 1969:83–89). Using the term "interpretation," Blumer emphasizes that the determination of the meaning of the situation is a process in which the agent is actively involved. Blumer's concept of interpretation of the action situation is more often referred to as the concept of the definition of the situation.

The first handling of the concept of the definition of the situation can be found in the Methodological Note to "The Polish Peasant in Europe and America" (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1976:85). Thomas and Znaniecki understood the situation as a set of values and attitudes an individual or a group has to deal with in the process of action. Action aims at solving a situation which makes—as the authors say—a practical problem. The definition of the situation means interpretation of circumstances understood as the total of accessible values which can become the object of action, as well as the awareness of attitudes, i.e., possible action toward these values. As Thomas and Znaniecki say, a purpose of the action is moulded in the definition of the situation—the image of the final effect and the ways leading to it.

Znaniecki advanced his own formulation of the definition of the situation and presented action—interaction in particular—as the dynamic system of values constructed in its course (Znaniecki, 1936:71–84).

Thomas is, after all, regarded to be the founder of the concept of the definition

of the situation. His formulations won popularity and laid the foundations for the further development of this concept. In "The Unadjusted Girl" he stated that "Preliminary to any self-determined act of behaviour there is always a stage of examination and deliberation which we may call the definition of the situation" (Thomas, 1975:67). Directly connected with the concept of the definition of the situation is his famous theorem: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." This formula has been found to bear a distinct trait of pragmatism (Kando, 1977:96). That which is real is separated from that which is true—if it is possible to hold the absolute idea of the truth at all. From the point of view of pragmatism, a situation is what is considered by a person to be a situation. However, it is equally important that this thesis may be interpreted phenomenologically as inseparability of reality from consciousness. Here, a postulate to study the inevitably biased everyday experience can be seen—a fundamental postulate of the sociology of knowledge. The thesis of constructing reality on the basis of interpreted meanings which have real consequences is also inherent here.

We should note that the situational character of meaning as viewed by symbolic interactionism is not limited to ostensive references. A situation is not a setting—a number of elements which can be pointed out in the "here and now" of the face-to-face interaction. However, it is true that the importance of the analyses of the situation in direct interaction is especially accentuated. Some authors, while speaking about the situation, render it as if they meant only a face-to-face situation. To give an example, Stebbins says that the definition of the situation is the "overall meaning of the immediate situation" (1982:1). Goffman's "neglected situation" is "an environment of mutual monitoring possibilities, anywhere within which an individual will find himself accessible to the naked senses of all others who are present and similarly find him accessible to him" (1977:63).

As has been stressed, the situation is constituted by those aspects of reality which are important for the actor. Therefore, a situation is rather a metaphorical scene whose temporal and spatial frames can be broadened or narrowed by the subject (Brittain, 1973:83). In his work on symbolic interactionism, Hewitt states: "A situation, in other words, is a matter of definition—it is an assembly of socially defined objects located at a particular intersection of time and place that is itself a matter of social definition" (1979:121).

By the social process of definition he means interaction. This is not only a cognitive process, since the definition of the situation results from the interactions between the partners who define the meanings. A pragmatic obliteration of the difference between thinking and acting is reflected here. In accordance with the pragmatic concept of meaning, the definition of the situation comprises both forming one's knowledge about objects and communicating this knowledge, as well as actions directed towards these objects.

Symbolic interactionism maintains that even in routine situations people do

not employ ready-made meanings but create them, at least to some degree, through dialogue, negotiation and mutual interactions. Therefore, the definition of the situation constitutes a pragmatic context of meaning in the full sense of the word. This concept reveals the functioning of meanings as the social process.

However, the concept of the definition of the situation as it is outlined in the treatment of symbolic interactionism is not only a consequence of inspirations coming from pragmatism. The symbolic interactionist approach to meanings does not restrict them to "ordered ways of acting toward objects." Meanings transcend events. Only as such can they be interpreted by the agents. If one says that the definition of the situation consists in "applying names to it, to the other participants in the interaction, to themselves, and to particular features within the situation, and use the resulting definition to organize their own behavior accordingly" (Stryker, 1980:54), it means that one assumes the socio-cultural matrix of meanings expressed and made objective in language. It will be shown below that the concept of the definition of the situation is in an equally close relation with hermeneutic viewpoint of the contextual character of meaning as it is with pragmatism.

The key aspect of the definition of the interaction situation is the recognition of the participants' roles represented (Turner, 1977:24). Roles are seen as meaningful groupings of behavior. The determination of the partner's role is a condition of grasping the sense of his line of action. Role is a sort of ideal concept which enables people to see each situation of interaction as a more or less explicit set of roles. Interpretative understanding of roles results in the recognition of the concepts of role-taking and role-making as directly related to the concept of the definition of the situation.

As has been said, "partner" is the main object to be defined. It is necessary to recognize the range of values important for him, as well as his actions towards these values, in order to determine one's own line of action toward this partner. The agent himself is most important among the partners' relevant values. Anticipating, assuming the partner's view of the actor is called taking-the-role-of-the-other. Sometimes, role-taking is understood as the process of defining the partner's role in general. " 'Role-Taking' is a process of devising and discovering consistent patterns of action which can be identified with types of actors" (Turner, 1977:26). Sometimes, as has been already mentioned, this concept is limited to consciously seeing oneself from the point of view of the other person. "Role-taking is one way persons learn how others locate them and of others' expectations for their behavior" (Stryker, 1980:63). The content of the partner's role identified in such a way is preserved only temporarily and it is tested in the further course of the interaction. Acting according to the principle "as if" concerns, not only the partner, but also other elements of situation, toward which initial assumptions defining their meaning are made.

These preliminary definitions are "tentatively asserted and played out, modified and even discarded as the interaction proceeds" (Stryker, 1980:142). This is a creative process of verifying the initial assumptions of interaction. This testing

does not only take place on the cognitive level. It is not only the exchange of meanings between the partners; it also means intervention into the objective world. A consequence of these activities is in the first place the partner's reactions which confirm or question the partner's assumptions concerning the situation of the activity. For this aspect of the changeability of meanings and their construction in the course of the interaction, Mead's notion of emergence is employed (McHugh, 1963:23–28). The idea of emergence corresponds with the idea of the hermeneutic circle—seeing the parts thanks to a certain idea of the whole and defining the whole through proceeding exhaustive study of the parts. The fundamental hermeneutic principle, "one must have some idea of the general context in order to understand the particular," is exemplified by the notion of the emerging definition of the situation.

A twin concept to the concept of emergence is that of relativity-multiple points of view (McHugh, 1963:28–32). Agents define the situation in a variety of ways and must negotiate their viewpoints. However, as symbolic interactionism claims, at least the minimum of intersubjective knowledge is necessary to render the interaction possible. Exchange of these viewpoints and the social process of constructing the interaction would not be possible without a common system of communication. Symbolic interactionism pays special attention to language as a necessary condition that makes intelligible interactions possible. Symbolic interactionism does not deny the existence of a broader social structure. It does not reduce society to a sum of interactions. Just as Schutz, representatives of this orientation maintain that interactions are always rooted in a broader, previously interpreted context (Brittain, 1973:48).

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The above brief outline shows that while characterizing the assumptions of symbolic interactionism, or to put it differently, so-called interpretive sociological orientation, we should not stop at a general formulation of the postulate of taking into account the contextual character of meaning. There are various approaches to this issue. It seems useful to distinguish semantic, pragmatic and syntactic levels on which discussions on the contextual meaning proceed.

The idea of the pragmatic context is also pregnant with meaning. It was understood either as the utterance, as the performance (Malinowski, Austin), as an ostensive situation in which a given utterance is spoken (Bar-Hillel), or as the stock of everyday knowledge (Schutz), or, finally, as the interaction (Mead).

Out of all the presented treatments of the contextual chracter of meaning, the hermeneutic one stands out. It unites all the dimensions of the analysis of meaning distinguished by Morris. Close relation between the handling of contextual meaning in hermeneutics and pragmatism has been pointed out. Both approaches deal with contextual meaning on the level of communicative event. However, there is still one important difference. Pragmatism studies behavioral aspects of

meanings. It studies behaviors toward meaningful objects. Hermeneutics places meanings in the noematic sphere of intentional beings.

The main point of this paper is to indicate the connection between the hermeneutic principle of the developing context of meaning—the hermeneutic circle—and the notion of the definition of the situation. This connection points at the co-existence in the concepts of symbolic interactionism of impacts coming from both pragmatism and hermeneutics. Those relations call for further investigations.

In connection with the above statement, Schutz's analyses seem to be of particular relevance for symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism should also devote more attention to the possibilities of applying Malinowski's and Austin's concepts of performative acts in its studies. Interactions, as viewed by symbolic interactionism, while communicative acts, are not reduced to the "exchange of messages," but are performances, after all.

REFERENCES

Apresjan, Jurij
  1971   Koncepcje i metody współczesnej lingwistyki strukturalnej. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.
Bar-Hillel, Jehoshua
  1954   "Indexical expressions." Mind 63:359–379.
Blumer, Herbert
  1969   Symbolic Interactionism. Perspective and Method. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
Brittain, Artur
  1973   Meaning and Situations. London: Routlege & Kegan Paul.
Bronk, Andrzej
  1982   Rozumienie. Dzieje. Język. Filozofia hermeneutyczna H. Gadamera. Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL.
Douglas, Jack D.
  1973   The Social Meanings of Suicide. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
  1974   "Understanding everyday life." Pp. 57–79 in J. D. Douglas (ed.), Understanding Everyday Life. London: Routlege & Kegan Paul.
Dilthey, Wilhelm
  1982   Pisma estetyczne (Zbigniew Kuderowicz, ed.). Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe.
Farberman, H. A.
  1970   "The definition of the situation." Pp. 147–153 in G. P. Stone and H. A. Farberman (eds.), Social Psychology through Symbolic Interaction. Waltham, MA: Xerox College Publishing.
Firth, J. R.
  1970   "Ethnographic analysis and language with reference to Malinowski's views." In Man and Culture: An Evaluation of the Work of Bronisław Malinowski. London.
Gadamer, Hans-Georg
  1979   Rozum, Słowo, Dzieje. Szkice wybrane (Krzysztof Michalski, ed.). Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.

Goffman, Ervin
1977   "The neglected situiation." Pp. 61–66 in P. P. Giglioli (ed.), Language and Social
        Context. London: Penquin Books.
Guiraud, Pierre
1974   Semiologia. Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna.
Hewitt, John P.
1979   Self and Society. Symbolic Interactionist Social Psychology. Boston: Allyn and Bacon,
        Inc.
Kando, Thomas M.
1977   Social Interaction. St Louis: The C. V. Mosby Company.
Lonergan, Bernard J. F.
1976   Metoda w teologii. Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX.
Lyons, John
1976   Wstep do jezykoznawstwa. Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe.
Malinowski, Bronisław
1966   Coral Gardens and Their Magic, Vol. 2: The Language of Magic and Gardening.
        London.
McHugh, Peter
1963   Defining the Situation. Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc.
Mead, George H.
1972   Umysł, osobowość, społeczeństwo. Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe.
Mishler, Elliot G.
1979   "Meaning in context: is there any other kind." Harvard Educational Review 1(49):1–
        19.
Morris, Charles
1970   Foundations of the Theory of Signs. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Ogden, G. K. and I. A. Richard
1972   The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of
        the Science of Symbolicm. London: Routlege & Kegan Paul.
Perinbanyagam, Robert S.
1974   "The definition of the situation and an analysis of the ethnomethodological and drama-
        turgical view." Sociological Quarterly 15:521–542.
Ricoeur, Paul
1971   "The model of the text: meaningful action considered as a text." Social Research
        38:529–562.
1975   Egzystencja i hermeneutyka. Rozprawy o metodzie (Stanisław Cichowicz, ed.). War-
        szawa: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX.
Ritzer, G.
1980   "Sociology: a multiple paradigm science." In G. Ritzer (ed.), Issues, Debates and
        Controversies. An Introduction to Sociology. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.
Schutz, Alfred
1971   Collected Papers, Vol. II. Studies in Social Theory. (A. Brodersen, ed.). The Hague.
1972   The Phenomenology of the Social World. London: Heinemann.
Schutz, Alfred and Thomas Luckmann
1974   The Structures of the Life-World. London: Heinemann.
Searle, J.
1972   "What is a speech act." Pp. 136–156 in Pier Paolo Giglioli (ed.), Language and Social
        Context. London: Penquin Books.
Shibutani, Tomotsu
1961   Society and Personality: An Interactionist Approach to Social Psychology. Englewood
        Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Stebbins, Robert
1982   "The definition of the situation." In A. Furnham and M. Argyle (eds.), Social Be-
        haviour in Context. London: Allyn and Bacon.
Stryker, Sheldon
1980   Symbolic Interactionism: A Social Structural Version. Menlo Park, CA:
        Benjamin/Cummings.
Thomas, W. I.
1975   "Definicja sytuacji" in Elementy teorii socjologicznych. Pp. 67–69 in W. Derczyński,
        A. Jasińska-Kania, J. Szacki (eds.). Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe.
Thomas, W. I. and Florian Znaniecki
1976   Chłop polski w Europie i Ameryce, Vol. I. Warszawa: Ludowa Spółdzielnia
        Wydawnicza.
Turner, Ralph
1977   "Role-taking: process versus conformity." Pp. 20–37 in A. Rose (ed.), Human Behav-
        ior and Social Process: An Interactionist Approach. London: Routlege & Kegan Paul.
Wilson, Thomas P.
1974   "Normative and interpretive paradigms in sociology." Pp. 57–79 in J. D. Douglas
        (ed.), Understanding Everyday Life. London: Routlege & Kegan Paul.
Znaniecki, Florian
1936   Social Actions. Poznań: Polski Instytut Socjologiczny.