

Classroom as Context: Procedural Consequentiality in a Secondary English Classroom

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Discussions abound concerning the role of context when examining data from a conversation analytic (CA) framework. Lively debates concerning the place of gender, class, and other cultural constructs in CA (e.g. Schegloff, 1997; Wetherall, 1998) have led some to conclude that nothing other than the talk itself can be used when practicing CA. However, Schegloff (1991, 1992) has noted at least two instances when the relevance of contextual features can be shown. One of those notions, termed *procedural consequentiality* (Schegloff, 1992), denotes that a certain aspect of context affects how the interaction unfolds. This brief discussion will analyze such a spate of talk, where the very direction of the conversation is contingent on the fact that a teacher is interacting with students.

These data were recorded in an Advanced Placement English Literature classroom in the fall of 2001 at a public high school located in the northeastern United States. Students and Teacher are seated in a circle, discussing the final chapters of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Teacher has reviewed the main points of the discussion from the day before, and has opened the session with a question regarding the antagonist. At that moment, a student asks Teacher for clarification concerning what the class had talked about previously:

I Wasn't Here Yesterday ...

- 1 Deb: → >I wasn't here yesterday but< were we like (.) stuck on the fact that he had to be
2 either good or e:vil? ((holds right palm upwards))
3 (.)
4 Andy: → No:: we were st[uck on the °fact that° ((moves mouth, shakes head))]
5 T: → [NO. we were stuck on the fact to what extent] is he good or
6 to what extent (.) is he e:vil.
7 (0.2)
8 T: And I- and I posited out there to sorta have one uh- (.) one anchor that he was (0.2)
9 the embodiment (0.2) of: (0.6) of e:vil.
10 Deb: Well isn't the embodiment (.) isn't that (0.2) like he is (.) like the evil being?
11 T: Right. And what I meant by that 'e was- he was the embodiment of evil (.) in the
12 moment (0.2) that (.) that Marlowe met him, not that he was (0.4) born evil
13 and was going to die evil=
14 Deb: =yeah
15 (0.4)
16 T: but (.) y'know at the moment that [he was ((unintelligible))
17 Deb: [yeah yeah ((unintelligible))
18 ((T and Deb laugh))
19 T: → \$Aren't y- (.) aren't you upset that you missed yesterday?°\$
20 Deb: → \$I ↑a::m.\$
21 Todd: → ((sarcastic voice)) (We had some) good points

In the first line, the context of the classroom plays a direct role in the student's turn. Deb is asking Teacher to halt the present discussion and take time to meta-reflect on the previous day's discussion. Deb precedes her question with an account (*I wasn't here yesterday*). By explaining her reason for imposing upon the teacher's agenda, Deb signals recognition that as a student, she should not be managing the direction of the lesson. Therefore, she spends part of her turn explaining why she needs to do so. Also, by mentioning her absence, Deb addresses the attendance aspect of the classroom context. Because the other members of the class were present the day before, she is taking up class time in revisiting what had been another day's topic. In owning up to her absence from the outset, Deb and Teacher can bypass possible topicalization of classroom attendance, and focus on Deb's query. Addressing the physical presence or absence of a student can only make sense in a context where attendance is expected; in a public school setting, students are required to be in class. Teacher returns to the subject of Deb's absence later in the exchange, with teasing words for Deb (*Aren't you upset that you missed yesterday?*). Teacher makes light of the situation, and two students—including Deb herself—collaborate with Teacher in teasing Deb for her absence. However, the very trajectory of this teasing depends upon the fact that class attendance is compulsory.

The two turns following Deb's question demonstrate a mini-struggle for control of the discussion, as both Andy and Teacher (lines 4-6) attempt to respond to Deb, with Teacher forcefully taking the reins of the discussion's direction. That is, Teacher loudly cuts Andy off with a *NO* (line 5), which serves both to answer Deb and interrupt Andy. Yet, Teacher's answer is offering a mere echo of Andy's words. It seems that Andy's assessment of the previous day's conundrum was going to be 'correct' in Teacher's view, for she repeats verbatim his phrasing. However, Teacher does not give Andy the interactional space to continue his utterance; instead, she says it herself. Andy's words literally become silenced, as he continues to mouth exactly what the teacher is saying. There seems to be a mutual recognition here (perhaps reluctantly on Andy's part, as he makes it a point to demonstrate that he has been reduced to ventriloquism) that, although the thought may be shared by Teacher and Student, the turn belongs to the Teacher. I argue that this type of turn-usurping can only be accomplished because the participants are orientating to a contextual feature of student-teacher exchanges, in which teacher talk is privileged, and teachers reserve the right to regain the floor at any moment.

This short analysis merely scratches the surface of how context plays a role in the unfolding of this interaction. Other notions certainly come into play here as well. In these particular lines, however, I have attempted to show that procedural consequentiality plays a crucial role in what happens during these moments of class time. Considering the classroom setting enriches the analysis of these turns at talk.

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