

Culture & Communication

Alessandro Duranti

Anthropology 4, Winter 2021

Lecture # 7: Indexicality

The Problem of Context

1. Malinowski said we need to pay attention to the “context of situation”, but how do we know what the “context” is?
2. The “context” of an utterance fluctuates, expands and retracts.
3. There is a constant “battle” over the control of the context and ways to connect to it.
4. This is made apparent in the use of deictics.

Today

1. The context-dependent meaning of language (e.g., deictics).
2. Deictics as one kind of a more general class of signs, called Indexes (or Indexes) that can only be understood in context.
3. Indexes are context-dependent and, in some cases, context-creating (e.g., *sit in this chair* vs. *you need to move over*).

4. Given their dependence on context to be interpreted, indexes are inherently vague or ambiguous and
5. call for collaboration and alignment and
6. can be a source of misunderstanding.

Queen's Toast



Buckingham Palace, May 24, 2011, State Visit to U.K.

Ladies and gentlemen

we are here to celebrate (.)

the tried. tested. and yes.

special relationship between our two countries.

I therefore ask you- now to join me in raising your glasses

to the continued health. happiness. and prosperity

of the United States. of America.

and especially, to the health. of President and Mrs. Obama.

((All stand))

((Band does a drum roll and begins “The Star-Spangled Banner”))

I therefore ask you- now to join me in raising your glasses

As a performative(Austin), this utterance is a directive, in this case a REQUEST (by the Queen) to do something.

And it has the temporal specification “now” (a deictic term).

”Now” must (always) be interpreted with respect to the context of the utterance.

Guests at Banquet



Buckingham Palace, May 24, 2011, State Visit to U.K.

Man grabs glass & puts it down quickly



Buckingham Palace, May 24, 2011, State Visit to U.K.

One problem here is the meaning of the word “now” in the Queen’s request.

The word *now* is a “deictic” term that must be interpreted in context. It is not “today” or “tomorrow” or “much later” but in the Queen’s utterance it is not “right now” either. To know that, one needs to know how things are done in a royal banquet of this kind.

Deictics (a type of “indeces” or “indexes”)

A special set of words, which all languages have to a different extent and level of complexity, that need reference to the context of situation in order to be appropriately interpreted. By themselves, they are ambiguous or vague.

In English, deictics include:

Temporal adverbs like *now, then, soon, later, yesterday, today, tomorrow.*

Spatial adverbs like *here, there, left, right, behind, below*

Demonstratives like *this, that, these, those.*

Personal pronouns: *I, me, you, we, they, them.*

Demonstrative pronouns

“The demonstrative pronouns, “this” and “that,” are indices. For they call upon the hearer to use his powers of observation, and so establish a connection his mind and the object; and if the demonstrative pronoun does that - without which its meaning is not understood - it goes to establish such a connection ; and so is an index.” (Peirce 1998: 110)

(notice the word “connection”, a key word for what indices/indexes do)



sixteen bars alone. And then you guys come in with the- second sixteen.

Kenny Burrell, guitar, rehearsing with students-players



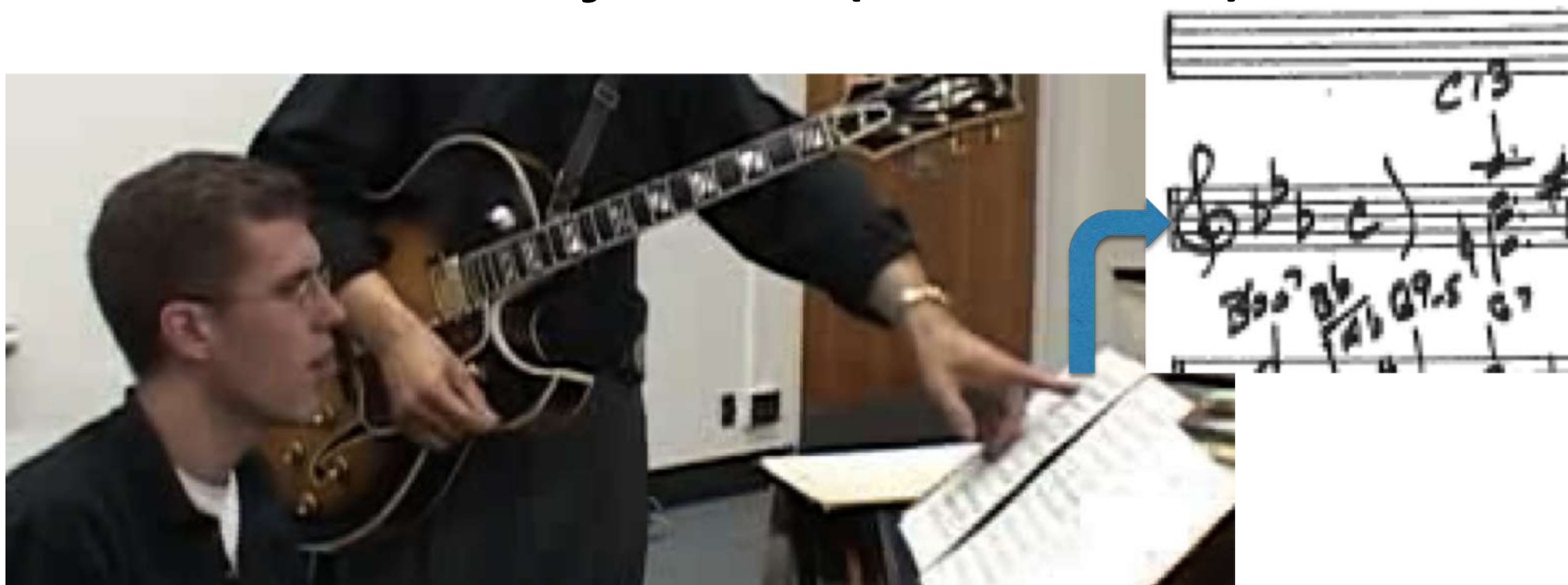
KB; I' ll modulate into: this key.



Linguistic
expression
(« this ») +
Pointing
gesture

KB; I' ll modulate into:: **this key.**

The index (« this » + gesture) directs the pianist to look and discover the « Object » (Referent)



KB; I' ll modulate into:: this key.

Questions? Observations? Comments?

What's Next?

The problem of context is ubiquitous and hidden.

A key question, mostly implicit and hidden, is “What is happening next?” or “Who is next?”

This is made apparent in situations where people take turns.

Indexes can help answer this question.

Turns at soloing in Jazz Orchestras

In jazz orchestras musicians follow the written (or memorized) score and some of them also take “turns” at improvising (they play a “solo”)

How do they know when is their turn at doing their “solo”?

It can be planned ahead (and in the score) or ...

“You are next!”



Bobby Rodriguez conducts Band at Catalina Bar & Grill -
4-7-2014

Index points to ...

The pointed index finger directs the attention toward something or someone who is co-present.



There is a spatial and temporal contiguity between the gesture and the “referent” of the gesture.

The “context of the situation” is supposed to do the rest.

Ethnographic Question

As a member of the band, what do you need to know in order to interpret what Bobby Rodriguez's pointed finger means?



What about situations in which a person's hands are occupied?

How is the “pointing” (or indexing) done?

Body re-orientation



UCLA Jazz Students Performing on Ellington's Birthday - 4-29-2016



Kenny Burrell turns to drummer, 8-14-05



All of these gestures or changes in posture are examples of indexes (or indices).

An index is one of the 3 types of signs identified by C.S. Peirce, the other 2 are icons and symbols.

3 kinds of signs

“There are three kinds of signs. Firstly, there are *likenesses*, or icons; which serve to convey ideas of the things they represent simply by imitating them. Secondly, there are *indications*, or indices; which show something about things, on account of their being physically connected with them. Such is a guidepost, which points down the road to be taken, ... or a vocative exclamation, as “Hi! There,” which acts upon the nerves of the person addressed and forces his attention. Thirdly, there are *symbols*, or general signs, which have become associated with their meanings by usage [=convention]. Such are most words, and phrases, and speeches, and books, and libraries.” (Peirce 1998 *The Essential Peirce, Vol. 2,* p. 5)

C. S. Peirce's 3 kinds of signs

1. Icon  (imitating something of a “rabbit”)
2. Index  (contextually associated with a “rabbit”)
3. Symbol *rabbit* or [ræbɪt] (conventionally associated with the concept of “rabbit”)

INDEX

“... a sign, or presentation, which refers to its object not so much because of any similarity or analogy with it, nor because it is associated with general characters which that object happens to possess, as because it is in **dynamical (including spatial) connection** both with the individual object, on the one hand, and with the senses or memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign, on the other hand ...” (C.S. Peirce “Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs,” p. 99; emphasis added)

Gesture & Deictic combined



“((gesturing with right arm)) in the section to my right.”

Indexes come in all kinds

1. As specific expressions, e.g., deictics like *now* and *here*.

2. As familiar questions

A; Are you busy tonight? <- indexes a forthcoming invitation

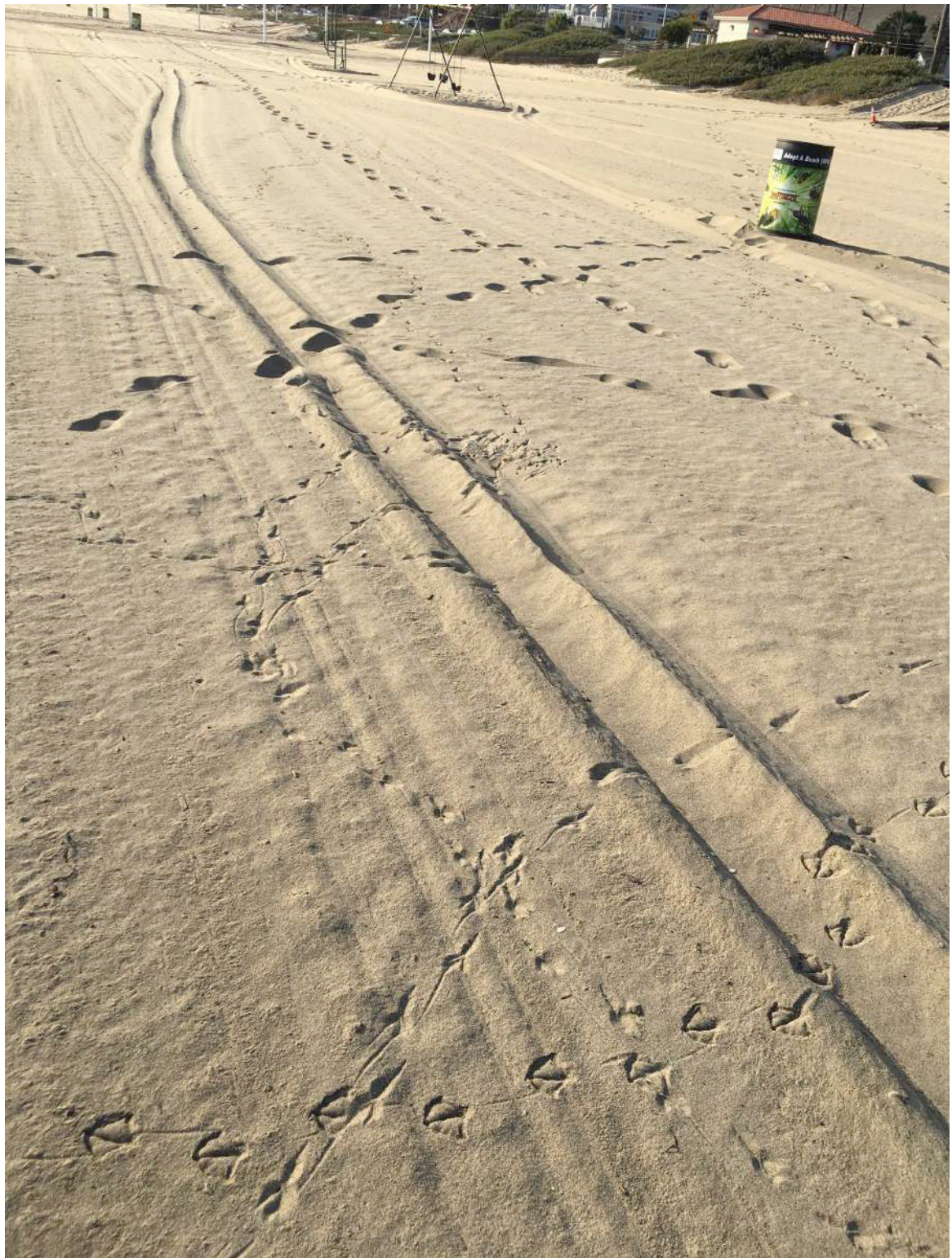
B; No.

A; Wanna come over for dinner?

3. As traces of past (e.g., who was here?), current, or future actions/events (e.g., someone else is coming).



Can you find
indexes in this
picture?



Review

1. The context is needed to communicate.
2. Deictics are a type of “index” that mean something not by “representing” a concept but by connecting to the context.
3. Indexes can be words (*now, there*), gestures (e.g., pointed finger, change in body orientation), traces of past or future actions in the spatio-temporal context.
4. Indexes are context-dependent (e.g., I need *that*) and context-creating (e.g., you are next).

Review (Cont.)

4. Indexes call for the knowledge of the immediate, past or future (projected) context of interaction.
5. Given that they are inherently vague or ambiguous indexes can be a source of misunderstanding
6. And call for collaboration.

