

On foci, contexts, figures, and grounds

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The assumption that meanings are (a) conceptual entities and that they (b) arise in and through context leads to an understanding of context as other minds (as developed by Talmy Givón). Based on Givón's framework, an approach is proposed here that combines the notions of context, focus, figure, and ground into primary-plus-secondary focus as a complex figure within contextual ground. Meanings and their dynamicity are attributable to interplays of and interactions between various elements of the configuration. These processes are illustrated with excerpts from two factual accounts of Africa in relation to Europe: Karen Blixen's Out of Africa/Shadows on the Grass and Paul Kenyon's I Am Justice. It is concluded that context as environment (the ecological understanding) does not stand in contrast to context as a mental construct but that it is re-conceptualized as an other-minds phenomenon.

Keywords: *context, focus, figure, ground, Africa*

Bricks, for all practical purposes, hardly mind what other things they are put with. Meanings mind intensely – more indeed than any other sort of things. (R. I. Richards 1936, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*)

1. Towards a coherent model of contextual meaning

The theoretical discussion and analytical exercise below is an attempt to bring four key notions of FOCUS, CONTEXT, FIGURE, and GROUND into a coherent configuration. The wider territory investigated here certainly belongs to one of the most elusive phenomena in the study of language: the dynamicity of meaning.

Consider the following dialogue from a classic author:

- (1) A: *There must be something wrong with the oil line: the engine has started to balk.*
B: *Don't you mean "gas line"?*
A: *Yes – didn't I say "gas line"?* (Hayakawa 1967: 124)

To classify Speaker A's utterance as a slip of the tongue or generally a performance error might be correct but is certainly unsatisfactory: the question is not only why and how it could have arisen but how Speaker B manages to identify it and what happens between the two speakers when their positions come together in the third line.

We will consider this exchange, as well as several other examples, with the goal to modelling context, capitalizing on FIGURE/GROUND ORGANIZATION as a fundamental principle of cognitive alignment (Langacker 1987: 120, 2008: 58ff.; Talmy 2000, vol. I: 215-218), which ultimately goes back to early 20th-c. Gestalt psychology. By analogy, focus is to context as figure is to ground, where focus has variable prominence, which Langacker captures in terms of PRIMARY and SECONDARY FOCAL PARTICIPANTS (or simply foci) – cf. Figure 1 (thick lines in

figures mark primary focus).¹ The analogy is elaborated into a blended configuration,² where the notion of CONTEXTUAL GROUND covers two senses of ground postulated in Cognitive Grammar: (i) as an element in figure/ground organization, and (ii) as the discourse ground (including the speech event, participants, and situational setting). This configuration may depart from the canonical treatment in Cognitive Grammar but in proposing it I follow Langacker’s (2016: 99) idea of constructing “a coherent story” where “everything fits”.

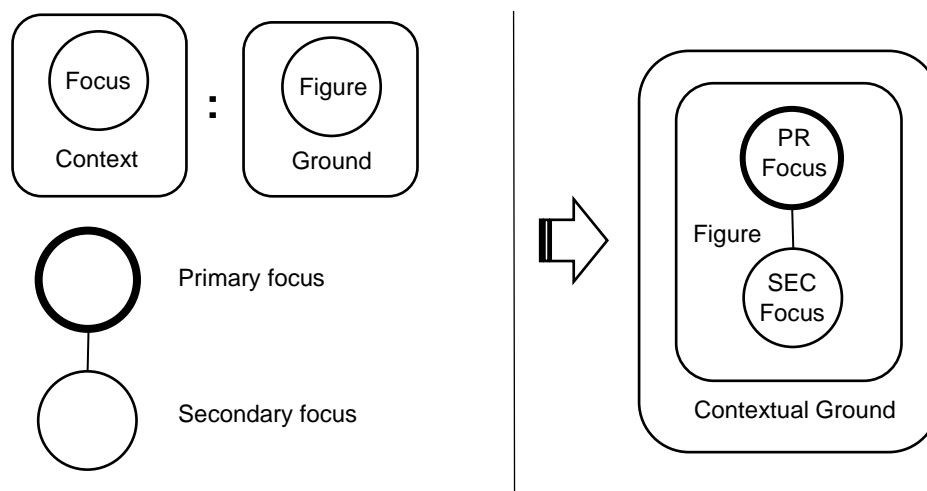


Figure 1: Focus (primary and secondary), context, figure, and ground aligned

How can the model help us handle Hayakawa’s example (1)? First, Speaker A uses *oil line* as primary focus and *the engine* as secondary focus: together they form the figure in the context (contextual ground) of automechanics. Speaker A is in fact suggesting a hypothesis (*there must be something wrong*). Speaker B recognizes the relevant contextual ground (thanks to their knowledge of the subject matter) and realizes that the primary focus does not match the secondary focus, that is, they do not form a coherent alignment. The participants presumably share the knowledge of automechanics, so the mismatch must have to do with the foci within the figure. Therefore, B introduces something else as a candidate for a new primary focus (*gas line*) and the system falls in place. Speaker A readily acknowledges this and reconstructs their initial utterance into a new configuration (Figure 2).

¹ Primary and secondary focal participants are Langackerian constructs of trajector and landmark, which we will not be using for the sake of explanatory simplicity. Furthermore, in Langacker’s diagrams and in his terminology, thick lines mark profiles against the base. While we are not referring to these notions, either, the idea of profiling a substructure within a larger configuration is basically parallel to that of identifying an element as primary focus.

² Although different in detail, this idea of a blended configuration certainly owes much to Fauconnier & Turner’s (2002) Conceptual Blending theory.

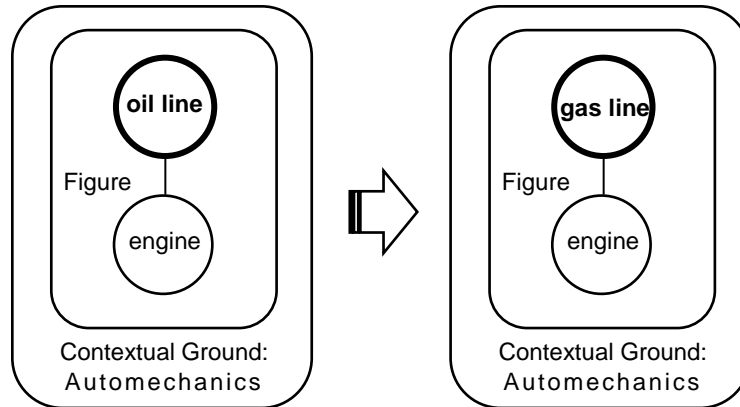


Figure 2: Example (1): change of primary focus

How does that shift proceed? I propose that it takes place thanks to context as OTHER MINDS, the idea developed, even if not originally devised, by Talmy Givón (2005).³ In that framework, context is not a shared situation but “the assumption that the mental representation that is currently activated in my mind is also currently activated in yours” (Givón 2005: 101). And so, the assumption shared by A and B about each other’s minds allows them to overcome the initial misunderstanding in their conversation. A’s starting point is legitimate: the speaker hopes that B will recognize the figure/ground alignment that is being constructed, which indeed B does. In fact, B does more: he/she recognizes the *misconstruction* of the figure/ground alignment and is able to correct it by not only making the right judgments of A’s mind but projecting what must have been *intended* by A. Thus, B can build a model of A’s *intended* primary and secondary foci and of the entire figure-ground configuration, despite its flawed execution on the part of A. The ability to do this is “the most profound adaptive strategy of a social species” (Givón 2005: 62) – it is in fact paradoxical because something as weak as an *assumption* of what another *thinks* can be expected to cause problems, rather than helping to overcome them.⁴

The reader will have realized by now that the bringing together of focus-vs.-context with figure-vs.-ground into a coherent model is not a new idea: if not earlier, it was proposed by William Hanks (1992) in his work on deictics (drawing, among others, on Bühler 1990 [1934]) and concisely summarized by the editors of the volume in which it appeared:

Describing what is being conceptualised as the *focal* event implies that it is in some sense more salient and noticeable than its *context*... there does seem to be a fundamental *figure-ground relationship* implicated in the organisation of context, with the *figure*, what we are calling the focal event, standing out from a more amorphous *ground* as the official focus of attention. (Duranti & Goodwin 1992: 32 [emphasis original])

Hanks’ approach well illustrates the meaning of *contextus* ‘a joining together’, bringing together various elements into one texture (from Latin *texere* ‘to weave’, ultimately from the

³ For a more comprehensive view on the issue, within and without language, cf. Malle & Hodges (2005), with one chapter also being co-authored by Givón.

⁴ It has been observed that depending on their experience, contextual clues, or otherwise relevant preferences, speakers can intentionally reverse figures and grounds (cf. Thiering 2011 for an exploration of the phenomenon in language), a process not fundamentally different from primary v. secondary focus reversal within the figure that we have here.

PIE root **tek-* ‘to weave, fabricate, make; make wicker or wattle framework’). The notion of interweaving in considerations of context also links with the notion of FRAME, defined in the same volume as something that is “placed around the actions and utterances of the participants which provides for the sense in which they are to be taken” (Kendon 1992: 326), and which goes back to the work of Erving Goffman (1963, 1974) (see also Fillmore 1982). Goffman’s frame analysis is based on the notion of RELEVANCE: focused interaction involves a particular “definition of the situation” shared by participants with regard to what is considered relevant or irrelevant in that situation. Ultimately, we have a view of contextual ground not as something that is “just there” but something that is “placed around” the focus with regard to what is considered relevant – it is a dialectic construct that involves the speakers’ projected focus (or foci) and their judgements of relevance.

How are we, in this light, to understand John Firth’s maxim that “each word when used in a new context is a new word” (Firth 1957: 190)? Let us revisit Hayakawa’s example (1). When *oil line* is used by Speaker A as the primary focus vis-à-vis the secondary focus of the balking of the engine, it acquires a new meaning. That new meaning strikes Speaker B as incongruent, given the contextual background of his knowledge of automechanics. As a result of this mismatch, Speaker B changes the primary focus from *oil line* to *gas line*, thus reshaping the entire configuration (because the semantics of any element in a configuration both draws on the configuration as a whole and has a bearing on it). It is the meaning of the whole that gives a word (or expression) the novelty status that Firth talks about: expressions do not activate meanings *in* context, they do so *along with* context; indeed, they *are* context to one another.

2. Contextual meaning in action

2.1 *The data*

We will explore how and to what effects primary and secondary foci interact with contextual grounds in literary discourse. Selected fragments of two books will be used for the purpose: Karen Blixen’s (Isak Dinesen’s) *Out of Arica* plus *Shadows on the Grass* (joint edition, Blixen 1985) and Paul Kenyon’s *I Am Justice. A Journey out of Africa* (2010). The former is a now classic early 20th-century memoir of a female Danish citizen who runs a coffee farm in Kenya. The latter is the story a Ghanaian teenager Justice Amin, who escapes from his native Ghana, through Libya and across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. In many senses, they are very different accounts (not only because the former is a first-person, the latter a third-person narration). Blixen was an affluent European business person, active at a time when being a white farm owner in Kenya was a privileged position, available to few (although, admittedly, much harder for women, given the male-dominated environment at the time). In *I Am Justice*, Amin is a nobody: a teenage boy raised and abused by his shamanistic uncle. The mirage of Europe is for him the mirage of heaven. Amin repeatedly risks his life during escape, as well as risking the lives of his younger brother and sister, whom he leaves with his uncle with the hope of being able to eventually help them too. The differences between the books in terms of geography, time, the political and social contexts, relative statuses of the protagonists, and their individual life stories are stark. But both deal with Africa, both are written by European authors, and both are memoir-type literary accounts of real-life events, with a journalistic slant.

We will go through a selection of excerpts from the two narratives, discussing several types of processes that concern the various configurations of foci, figures, and contextual

grounds. Both the differences and the parallels between the books are the reason why they have been selected as sources of examples: the general subject matter is comparable⁵ but the details of context are sufficient to provide ample material for a discussion of variation. In a sense, the choice is arbitrary – but it is always better to support one’s theoretical claims with authentic than with made-up examples.

2.2 *Overextension of contextual ground*

The first type of process, overextension of contextual ground, can be illustrated with this fragment from the Front matter of Ryszard Kapuściński’s *The Shadow of the Sun*:

This is therefore not a book about Africa, but rather about some people from there – about encounters with them, and time spent together. The continent is too large to describe. It is a veritable ocean, a separate planet, a varied, immensely rich cosmos. Only with the greatest simplification, for the sake of convenience, can we say “Africa”. In reality, except as a geographical appellation, Africa does not exist. (Kapuściński 2001 [1998])

Africa is varied and heterogeneous but is not readily seen as such.⁶ It is the apparent “sameness” of the continent, not its diversity, that transpires in Blixen’s example (2):

- (2) *When you have caught the rhythm of Africa, you find that it is the same in all her music.*
(Blixen 1985: 23-24)

The primary focus in this music metaphor is “rhythm”, while “music” itself is secondary focus – in fact, it is the “music of Africa” (a rather abstract notion in itself), given that Africa acts as the contextual ground. But recall that Blixen’s experience of the continent is basically limited to her Kenyan farm and its neighbourhood: although she does periodically go away, she can hardly be said to travel throughout Africa.⁷ Rather, it is from her location in Kenya that she *extends* her context onto the whole land (a metonymy: FARM FOR AFRICA), with maximally low granularity of viewing and a holistic outlook. At the same time, this is a spatial, as well as a metaphorical kind of extension: Blixen takes the reader from the level of individual experience to that of the entire continent, plus from the music that she is familiar with to all other “kinds of music” that the African life may potentially involve.⁸

⁵ Especially as far as the English translation of Blixen’s memoir is concerned: cf. the parallel “out of Africa” in both titles (the original Danish title is *Den afrikanske farm*).

⁶ Similarly, the Cameroonian philosopher and historian Achille Mbembe says in an interview: “Africa [...] is as diversified as Europe, Asia, or the Americas – it’s just that the West prefers not to see that” (Mbembe 2019: 12; translated from the Polish: AG).

⁷ I ask the reader to excuse my conflating the author (Karen Blixen) with the protagonist of her text (specifically, her English text). It is a questionable move from the point of view of literary analysis but I believe it is rather harmless given the purpose of this study. Blixen, after all, does write about herself.

⁸ I cannot resist relating a personal experience at this point. When in early 1990s I was an exchange student at a university in Pennsylvania, the US, I was struck by the question the locals asked me: “How do you like it in Pennsylvania?”. In fact, I didn’t experience being in Pennsylvania as anything salient; rather, I saw and felt myself as being in the USA, across the ocean, and on the other hemisphere. This was, at the time, the only USA that I knew first-hand. When the locals focused their lives against the background of the state, I did so against the background of the entire country (or perhaps even the globe). I could only “deflate” my context from that broad

If Blixen looks at Africa in low resolution, the main protagonist in *I Am Justice* moves from low to high resolution.

2.3 Towards greater resolution: from figure to ground?

Consider the exchange in (3), between Justice and one of the people he knows, concerning his planned escape:

- (3) *'What about Europe?' Justice would say. 'Europe is my target.'*
'Ah Europe! If I am able to. If God allows. There is no better place.' (Kenyon 2010: 31)

The figure is Europe, the implied contextual ground is Africa: when regarded in very low-resolution, the former is evaluated positively, the latter negatively. But then there is progression towards greater resolution and a more analytic view. Europe (or, for that matter, the world outside Africa), is no longer viewed as homogeneous but involves more and more details:

- (4) *Inside there were booths where customers, mainly African migrants, phoned home or browsed the internet. It was there, in the spring of 2007 that Justice began following world events with a new eye, acclimatising himself to the outside. He read about the kidnap of BBC journalist Alan Johnston, the disappearance of Madeleine McCann, the Virginia Tech massacre, events that no longer seemed far away. He studied the English premiership, and followed the match live as Manchester United beat Roma 7–1 in the Champions League. He was preparing the ground, making sure that by the time he arrived he would no longer be a stranger.* (Kenyon 2010: 130)

“The world” is contracted here to European and American matters – but because America is out of reach for the refugees, the main focus is on Europe. Also, although the kidnapping of Alan Johnston took place in the Gaza Strip, Johnston is a British journalist at the BBC, so the matter has an obvious European significance. On the whole, a number of specific events are mentioned that function as primary foci, regarded against the secondary foci of the countries where they take place, and against their relevant contextual grounds: sport or current affairs. The migrants hope that those details will become part of their regular everyday context – that they will, through familiarization and entrenchment, change their status from figure to contextual ground. (As it turns out in the book, these are largely futile hopes.)

Contextual grounds do not only provide context/grounding for a figure, they can also interact with one another.

2.4 Interaction between contextual grounds

scope to its portion when I began to travel around the US. This is a process reversed to what Blixen does and what Kapuściński and Mbembe allude to.

Blixen's "afrikanske farm" is her vantage point for regarding what lies beyond but it can itself be an object perceived from a bird's-eye-view:

- (5) *In the wildness and irregularity of the country, a piece of land laid out and planted according to rule looked very well. Later on, when I flew in Africa, and became familiar with the appearance of my farm from the air, I was filled with admiration for my coffee-plantation, that lay quite bright green in the grey-green land, and I realized how keenly the human mind yearns for geometrical figures.* (Blixen 1985: 17-18)

What Blixen calls here the "human mind" is of course the Western or the European mind. She is taking her own individual perspective, generalized, through her Western cultural and mental predisposition, into what she considers "human", thus excluding from her considerations the African mind (or eye), regardless of the respect that she has for Africans. It is doubtful whether the Africans actually yearned for geometrical figures to the same extent as the Dane or appreciated what the human hands had done to the land.

However, the import of this passage clearly lies beyond pure topography: it alludes to the political and social context of colonial land ownership, of shaping the land, exercising power over it, giving it a new quality in terms of landscape but more broadly in all those extended senses.

Apart from interaction between contextual grounds, there is also, quite predictably, a vivid dynamic between the two kinds of focus, primary and secondary, within the complex figure and relative to the contextual ground.

2.5 *Inversion of foci within complex figure (1)*

After her return to Denmark, Blixen receives a letter from her African servant Kamante, who writes in somewhat broken English:

- (6a) *Write and tell us if you turn. We think you turn. Because why? We think that you shall never can forget us. Because why? We think that you remembered still all our face and our mother names.*

She comments in her memoir:

- (6b) *A white man who wanted to say a pretty thing to you would write: "I can never forget you." The African says: "We do not think of you, that you can ever forget us."* (Blixen 1985: 66)

There is a contrast in the conceptual configuration constructed by "the African" vs. "the white man", the African's mental state and the white man's mental state, depending on which element is picked as the primary focus (Figure 3).

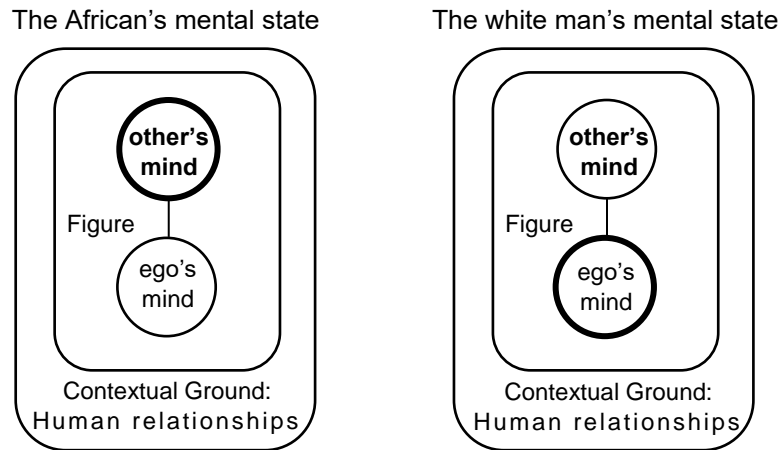


Figure 3: *Inversion of foci within the figure. Thick circles mark focal elements*

For the African, the primary focus is the other person's ("your") state of mind (*write and tell us, you shall never can forget us, you remembered*), while the state of mind of the conceptualizer, the ego, is secondary focus (*we think, tell us, forget us, all our face, our mother names*). For the European white man, it's the inverse: the primary focus is "ego", the conceptualizer's mental state, whereas the secondary focus is the other participant ("I can never forget you"). Both configurations are set within the contextual ground of human relationships.⁹

2.6 Inversion of foci within complex figure (2)

A perhaps even more telling instance of inversion is illustrated in (7):

- (7) *I had six thousand acres of land, and had thus got much spare land besides the coffee-plantation. Part of the farm was native forest and about one thousand acres were squatters' land, what they called their shambas. The squatters are Natives, who with their families hold a few acres on a white man's farm, and in return have to work for him a certain number of days in the year. My squatters, I think, saw the relationship in a different light, for many of them were born on the farm, and their fathers before them, and they very likely regarded me as a sort of superior squatter on their estates. (Blixen 1985: 19)*

Again, we are dealing here with two configurations of primary vs. secondary focus vs. contextual ground. Blixen's perspective is grounded in exercise of power: she owns the land, the native forest, together with the people on that land (*my squatters*). The people are the primary focus, the secondary focus is the conceptualizer herself, and the contextual ground is the land/farm as a legally certified possession. But those people also have a perspective and also perceive the land as "theirs": the white person is the primary focus, relative to themselves as the secondary focus, and relative to the farm as the place that they have always inhabited. This is not legally certified: indeed, the law requires them to work off their stay on the land. Thus, the two conceptualizations differ in what they select as their primary and secondary foci

⁹ If one can generalize from this example, which is of course somewhat risky, the import of each configuration is decisive as to what one might call the worldview, or the "philosophy of life" of each side.

but also in the nature of their grounds: the legally binding deed of ownership vs. the tradition of “always being there”.

However, notice that access to the perspective of “the Natives” is provided through Blixen’s consciousness (*I think, very likely*) and is therefore modal and intersubjective. We access the “minds” of the Africans as they are projected by Blixen, who apprehends their primary focus from her own perspective.¹⁰ That focus is Blixen herself (Figure 4).

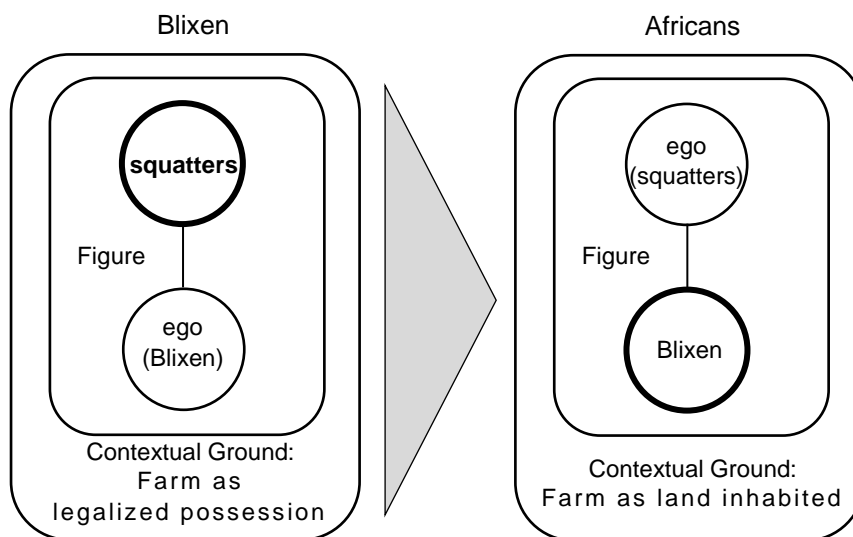


Figure 4: *Inversion of foci within the figure: Native African perspective through Blixen’s consciousness*

Example (7) is also a good illustration of the difference between ECOLOGICAL context, i.e. context as environment (cf. Matthiessen & Teruya 2016: 235) and Givón’s notion of context as “knowing other minds”. In other words, in contrast to understanding context as a pre-given container with entities *in it*, context might itself be a construction:

[A] context is not there objectively, waiting to be noticed. A context is construed on the fly, for the occasion. It is a *synthesis de novo*. (Givón 2005: 72)

Specifically, it is a *constructed mental process*:

the relevant social context during communication are neither the audible words nor the visible gestures, but rather the mental states of beliefs and intention of one’s interlocutor – whether present or presumed. (Givón 2005: 8)

That we see ourselves in part the way *they* see us is one consequence of our having developed the capacity to represent *their* mind; and conversely, to take advantage in our self-representation of their capacity to represent *our* mind. (Givón 2005: 236 [emphasis original])

¹⁰ In Simpson’s (1993) now classic classification, this is type A (internal, subjective 1st-person) narration, in which the narrator uses *verba sentiendi* (*think*) and probability judgements (*very likely*) in reference to the reality being experienced.

The relationship between Blixen and the Africans in example (7) is built precisely in accordance with that kind of intersubjective understanding of context as (i) what one side believes themselves to be, (ii) what they believe the other side to be, and (iii) what they believe the other side to think. Moreover, being a mental construction, context can be claimed to extend here beyond the conceptual ground and encroach on the figure and the foci within it: primary and secondary focus are mental constructions and so they *are context* with respect to each other. At the same time, they maintain their status as a complex figure with respect to the contextual ground relevant to a given conceptualizer: for Blixen it is the legal status of the land, imposed by Europeans, for the Africans it is their continuous, generations-long presence on this land.

2.7 Context: physical or mental

What has just been said about context, i.e. its status as a mental construct, does not invalidate its ecological role as a situational environment. Indeed, the two can contrast or coalesce, producing semantic effects. Note example (8):

- (8) *During my first months after my return to Denmark from Africa, I had great trouble in seeing anything at all as a reality.* (Blixen 1985: 335)

However, after some time back in her home country, Blixen's memories of Africa and her perception of Denmark change:

- (9) *I have not heard from Lulu, since I went away, but from Kamante I have heard, and from my other houseboys in Africa. It is not more than a month since I had the last letter from him. But these communications from Africa come to me in a strange, unreal way, and are more like shadows, or mirages, than like news of a reality.* (Blixen 1985: 64)

Blixen's journey out of Africa takes place in two domains: physical and mental; they act as relevant contextual grounds (or a complex contextual ground) in a single act of conceptualization (Figure 5).

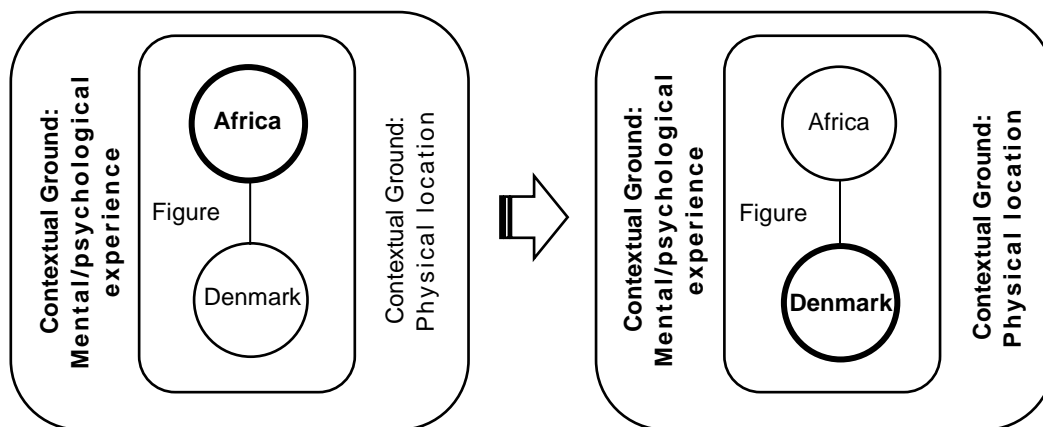


Figure 5: *Shift of primary vs. secondary focus with respect to mental vs. physical contextual ground*

Initially, upon her return, Africa is remembered as sharp and vivid, Denmark as fuzzy and vague: within the context of mental experience, Africa is primary focus and Denmark is secondary.¹¹ This is inconsistent with the physical domain because Blixen actually is *in* Denmark, although her state of mind overrides her physical location: what the mind produces counts more than what the eye can see.

With time, the arrangement reverses: Denmark begins to be focalized as clear, Africa becomes fuzzier and recedes into the role of secondary focus. Now the physical proximity to Denmark coincides with the clarity of its mental image, so that the primary-to-secondary focus configuration within the domain of mental experience is consistent with the physical contextual ground.

Finally, we will consider contextual ground in its capacity to invoke the (i) physical or geographical/topographical domain, (ii) the political domain, and (iii) the social domain in an excerpt from Kenyon's *I am Justice*.

2.8 Context: geographical vs. political vs. social

The excerpt portrays the situation of Justice Amin and other refugees some time after they had been rescued from the Mediterranean Sea. Their perilous and dramatic passage took them into Europe, across (A) the geographical/topographical *boundary* of the sea, as well as across (B) the political *border* between Libya and Italy, but they are still unable to break (C) the social *barrier*:

- (10) *It wasn't long before reality crashed in. They were homeless, jobless migrants. They couldn't speak the language. They knew no one, had no connections. They were spectators staring out from behind the gates of charity hostels or worse still, from the dark corners of railway stations where they'd bedded down for the night. They were in Europe, but not of it.* (Kenyon 2010: 241 [emphasis original])

The three kinds of contextual ground, three dividing lines that I propose to associate, respectively, with a boundary, a border, and a barrier, are of course axiologically non-neutral. A boundary is usually the outer limit or perimeter: *Oxford Collocations online* mentions *redrawing* or *crossing* a boundary; boundaries that *extend* onto something and boundaries being *pushed back*. Things can be *at* or *beyond* a boundary; one can *drive over* or *across* a boundary; a river may *form the boundary*. A boundary is thus something natural, something that belongs to the essence of a given entity. Borders and barriers are different from boundaries inasmuch as they seem to be human-imposed, but they are also different from each other: Underhill (2017: 37) has identified borders as at least potentially “good” and barriers as “bad”. According, again, to *Oxford Collocations online*, people usually *cross borders* or *drive/slip/escape/flee across/over borders* (e.g. *They slipped across the border at nightfall*). In contrast, one usually *builds/erects/installs* or *breaks through a barrier* (e.g. *The crowd managed to break through the barriers and get onto the pitch*). Borders mark a territory or provide safety can allow for mutual access; barriers are installed to separate, divide, and block access – they have to be pulled down to yield.

¹¹ A juxtaposition of a country with a continent is asymmetrical but it is facilitated by the metonymic extension of Kenya (Blixen's direct experience) onto Africa, as we saw in example (2).

This largely positive portrayal of borders is of course an idealization, it pertains to the semantic potential of the lexical item *border*, not the actual political practice. That practice is, of course, much less encouraging: borders are often assigned the barrier-like function of blockage, as we are witnessing (in 2020) in Europe, Australia, or the USA. (Anderson 2001 shows how the “bridge” and “barrier” facets of borders negate and contradict each other.)

Example (10) portrays the situation of the migrants when Europe as the outside becomes their new inside – but only in the (A) geographical and to some extent (B) political sense (the migrants are offered several integration and employment programmes), while (C) socially they remain outside it. With the sea behind them and the official political climate basically positive, their social status is that of outsiders. Indeed, to an extent they also stay aloof in the literal sense, cf. in (10) above: “They were spectators staring out from behind the gates of charity hostels or worse still, from the dark corners of railway stations where they’d bedded down for the night”. The migrants remain outside the “real” Europe: they are physically *on* the continent but not partaking *of* the continent. Belonging is not exhausted by the container metaphor: what the metaphor proposes (“they were *in* Europe”) suggests a new inside that is contradicted by the expression of (non-)belonging (they were “not *of*” Europe).

Example (10) also lends itself to an analysis in terms of foci, contexts, figures and grounds. Justice and the other refugees are primary focus against the secondary focus of Europe, with all the relevant differences being attributable to contextual grounds: (A) geographical/topographical (boundary), (B) political (border), or (C) social (barrier). The crossing that the refugees have made is successful in the first sense and partially in the second, political sense, but unsuccessful, or unrealized, in the last one (Figure 6).

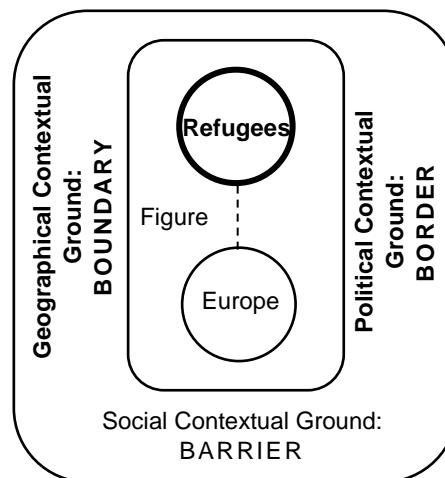


Figure 6: *Geographical boundary, political border, and social barrier as contextual grounds*

3. Recapitulation

Let us again refer to Givón and his view on context as environment (ecological context) and context as construction of others’ minds:

The adaptive-selectional mechanism proposed by Darwin [...] is founded upon the interaction of organisms with their *environment*; that is, their context. What is more,

the environment to which organisms adapt or “fit” is not a purely objective entity, but rather the *relevant* environment as *construed*, selectively, by the behaving-cognizing organism during adaptive interaction. This relevant environment is often social, and thus includes both the construed “objective” behavior and construed *mental states* of others, be they cooperative or hostile. (Givón 2005: 35 [emphasis original])

Note that Givón does not *oppose* the ecological understanding of context as environment and context as mental construal: he recasts the notion of environment as something mentally construed rather than objectively “given”. (Inasmuch as this is the case, we need to slightly update our analysis of example (7) above: “Farm as legalized possession” and “Farm as land inhabited” are mentally constructed environments for conceptualizations.) In *Out of Africa* and *I am Justice* the protagonists construe their conceptualizations with regard to comparable physical or geographical environments at the general level (Africa vs. Europe) but construed as *relevant* from very different perspectives and in different social conditions: with regard to who they are, what they want, etc. It is relative to those parameters that primary vs. secondary foci, figures vs. grounds, and contextual grounds are constructed, construed, maintained, set against each other, reversed, merged, and otherwise mentally processed.

Interestingly, the notion of relevance and the role of the conceptualizing subject is also appreciated in those areas of scientific inquiry that are to a far larger extent concerned with objectivity, hard facts, and measurable results. The scope of scientific inquiry thus includes, in a reflexive manner, those who perform it. The conceptualizing subject acts as the ultimate reference frame in a process where both the complex figure (with its internal configurations of foci) and the contextual ground are construed for the purpose of the entire configuration. Meaning-making in the use of language, but also in the sense of understanding the universe *sensu lato*, does not stem from the stasis of foci *in* context, or figure *against* contextual ground, but proceeds through the inherent dynamism of that configuration, which involves foci *along with* contextual ground.

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