



## Contextualization Cues

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### What is it?

Contextualization cues are signalling mechanisms used by speakers to indicate how they mean what they say. For example, in how the phrase “I love that idea” is uttered, a speaker indicates whether she really appreciates the idea (i.e., that her utterance should be interpreted literally), or if she actually dislikes it (i.e., that her utterance should be interpreted as sarcasm or joking). Uses and interpretations of contextualization cues – or, “contextualization conventions” – are deeply shaped by individuals’ cultural backgrounds.

Contextualization cues include features of language (i.e., elements of linguistic structure such as words and syntax) and those that go along with language (i.e., paralinguistic features such as pitch, tempo, laughter, and nonverbal signals), and thus are omnipresent in interaction.

### Who uses the concept?

Anthropological linguist John Gumperz coined the term contextualization cues as part of his theory of conversational inference, which explains how mutual understanding is achieved in social interaction. Miscommunication and breakdown in intercultural encounters may result from unshared contextualization conventions, and may contribute to larger social problems such as ethnic stereotyping and differential access to opportunities. Scholars in fields such as linguistics, anthropology, and communication draw on the concept of contextualization cues to study intercultural encounters; it is also used to explore how conversational rapport and shared frames of interaction are created when cultural backgrounds and conventions are shared.

### Fit with intercultural dialogue?

Even in interactions involving well-intentioned participants who overtly seek to achieve intercultural understanding, dissimilar uses and interpretations of contextualization cues may create problems. To circumvent miscommunication in intercultural dialogue, it is helpful to learn about different cultural groups’ contextualization conventions, as well as to communicate openly about one’s own.

### What work remains?

Research continues to illuminate how uses of contextualization cues differ across cultural groups, including in key everyday contexts including education, business, and medicine. Contemporary communication media provide new sites for exploring how contextualization cues influence intercultural encounters, and ultimately the achievement of joint understanding.

### Resources

- Gordon, C. (2011). Gumperz and interactional sociolinguistics. In R. Wodak, B. Johnstone, & P. Kerswill (Eds.), *Sage handbook of sociolinguistics* (pp. 67-84). London: Sage.
- Gumperz, J. J. (1992). Contextualization revisited. In P. Auer and A. di Luzio (Eds.), *The contextualization of language* (pp. 39-53). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Yamada, H. (1997). Organisation in American and Japanese meetings: Task versus relationship. In F. Bargiela-Chiappini and S. Harris (Eds.), *The language of business: An international perspective* (pp. 117-135). Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press.