
The Notion of “Character” and the Changing Image of Language in Modern and Contemporary Language Research

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1. Introduction

Different imaginings of the relation of linguistic phenomena to the context influenced the course of scientific study of language since its modern beginnings in the early 20c. One of the pathways linguistics took on the way towards its professed goal of scientific rigor and universality was the path of de-contextualisation and and of narrowing the scope of investigation of linguistic phenomena. While de Saussure's (1916) posthumous "*Cours in General Linguistics* stresses the importance of the social context (cf. de Saussure's 1916/1966: 77-78), his schematized imagining of communication as decontextualized *les têtes parlantes* (ibid., p.11-12) seems to have prevailed for a long time in linguistic investigations (see Bourdieu 1991: 32ff, Hodge and Kress 1995: 15ff, Hasan 2009: 167ff for critique, and Čermák 1997 for a more complacent view).

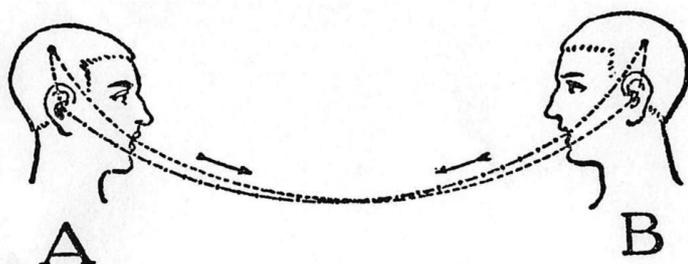


Fig. 1 “*Les têtes parlantes*” (from de Saussure 1966: 11-12)

Half a century later, Chomsky (1965) followed with his influential *Aspects of the theory of syntax*, for the sake of methodological expedience reducing the relevant context of the whole communication process to just a single, unilaterally talking head, that of an idealized "ideal speaker" and to the happenings within it (cf. Hasan ibid.: 168, Bourdieu ibid. for critique).

In both cases , the immediate result of the strict methodological framework with its limited scope of inquiry was that the newly produced knowledge in linguistic theory started expanding rapidly. At the same time, especially in the case of generative grammar, rather soon, the growth hit

the limits imposed by the methodology. According to M. Hashimoto, to name just one prominent researcher among many, he felt the potential of this approach being exhausted as early as the late 1960', and proceeded to do pioneering work on his subject, Sinitic languages and East Asian languages in the then new field of geographical typology (cf. Hashimoto 1981: 7-8). It seems that a great number of linguists in the 'West' were realizing that without taking into account the context in which language phenomena actually occur, further profound insights were impossible.

On the other hand, it was perhaps the social upheaval in Russia at the beginning of 20c that provided the context which produced thinking about language, deeply embedded in the social matrix. Leaning on an older tradition, the original thinkers such as Bakhtin, Vološinov, and their circle were inspired by Humboldt's thinking rather than by de Saussure's, but finally went beyond both (Matejka 1973: 167-169). Concern with the social context of language was also very strong with Prague school (Mathesius, Vachek, Skalička, Jakobson among others, cf. Čermák 1995, Toman 1995) and London school with Firth, Halliday and others (cf. Halliday 1978: 27ff). Moreover, a great number of anthropologists and social scientists, such as Goffman and Bourdieu among others (cf. Giddens, 1989), also had a keen interest in language embedded in its social context. Interestingly, linguistics in Japan, evolving from a different philological tradition, also produced pioneering research concerning the language embedded in its verbal and social context, to mention just the outstanding contribution of the two forerunners of the text and discourse research in Japan, F. Minami (1974) on the structure of modern Japanese, profoundly involved with language in the social context, and his contemporary S. Hayashi (1973) and his work on sentence structure in the context of discourse.

The aim of this paper is to sketch the main aspects of how the imagining of language contributed to the scope of theoretical investigations of language, following the axis from Bakhtin's circle via Halliday's thinking in the framework of systemic functional linguistics, hopefully enriching it with insights of Braudel on the often misunderstood and neglected historical dimension, with perspective provided by Bourdieu's *habitus* and the insights of the recent "character" research in Japan. Finally, I propose an expanded schema of how individual, language and social context are connected.

2. Language in social context

2.1 Vološinov and Bakhtin: language embedded in society

M. M. Bakhtin, Vološinov and their circle, inspired by von Humboldt's view of language as activity, developed an approach focusing on language as verbal interaction, rejecting the language as system view as a mere theoretical construct. Here, I follow Vološinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (MFL), often ascribed also to Bakhtin. Vološinov is definitely on the von Humboldt's side, stressing the primacy of language as verbal interaction." (cf. Vološinov 1973: 94, Matejka Appendix 1 of MFL, p. 167-169). Vološinov clearly specifies the social nature of language:

1. Language as a stable system of normatively identical forms is merely a scientific abstraction, productive only in connection with certain particular practical and theoretical goals. This abstraction is not adequate to the concrete reality of language.
2. Language is a continuous generative process implemented in the social-verbal interaction of speakers.
3. The laws of the generative process of language are not at all the laws of individual psychology, but neither can they be divorced from the activity of speakers. The laws of language generation are sociological laws.
4. Linguistic creativity does not coincide with artistic creativity nor with any other type of specialized ideological creativity . . .
5. The structure of the utterance is a purely sociological structure. The utterance, as such, obtains between speakers. The individual speech act (in the strict sense of the word “individual”) is *contradictio in adjecto*. (Vološinov 1973: 98)

The context of communication is viewed as being firmly social, to the extent that even the internal structure of utterance reflects it being a “*purely sociological structure*”. This view is largely confirmed by Minami’s (1974) pioneering analysis of Japanese sentence into four layers, the outmost two being closely connected with the social context of situation.

Vološinov’s ideas were also further developed in the field of developmental psychology by Vygotsky (1962), stressing the role of the social nature of language in child’s intellectual development.

Work of E. Goffman on every day conversation which started in 1950’ with introduction of ‘dramaturgical metaphor’ influenced development of not only sociology but also ethnomethodology and discourse studies (cf. Goffmann 1956, Giddens 1989, Manning 1992). Thus, about 40 years after Vološinov sociologists and sociolinguists in the USA arrived at similar ideas. D. Hymes, for example, appealed for rethinking of linguistics from the point of view of “language as part of communicative conduct and social action” (Hymes 1972: 316).

2.2 Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*

Another important contribution to imagining of language is by Pierre Bourdieu, anthropologist and sociologist who’s notion of *habitus* has profound implications also for linguistics (cf. Bourdieu 1991). Next is a sketch of some basic positions in Bourdieu's thought.

Bourdieu developed his notion of *habitus* out of the wish to go beyond the dichotomies of *social* and *individual*, of *subjectivism* and *objectivism*, to clarify how ‘how the “outer” social and “inner” self help to shape each other’ (cf. Maton 2012: 49). Thus, he developed his “theory of practice”, with *habitus* as the one of its key concepts. What is particularly relevant for our argument here is that Bourdieu was critical about ‘rational action theory’ generalizations and idealizations and its teleological implications, especially in various theories of rational agent in economics and in the

rationalistic approaches proposed in the framework of the philosophy of language and pragmatics. He was particularly reserved about Austin's (1962) theory of performative utterances, the reason being that Austin's theory neglects social conditions enabling such utterances (cf. Bourdieu 1991: 73). In Bourdieu's reasoning, agents can act in a systematic way without rational premeditation (cf. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 125) and the notion of *habitus* is introduced to explain how this is possible.

Bourdieu defined *habitus* in several versions, developing the notion through time. His later definition (Bourdieu 1990: 53) is given here:

...[S]ystems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as *structuring structures*, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the *operations* necessary in order to attain them. Objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor.

The main characteristics of *habitus* can be recapitulated as follows. *Habitus* is a property of actors (individuals, groups, institutions); a **structure, structured** by one's past experiences; **structuring**, i.e., helping to shape one's present and future practices; it's nature is thus clearly dialectic in relation to practice. It is a set of **dispositions** (emphasis by the author). Here, the concept of "disposition" is presented in Bourdieu (1977: 214) as follows:

... *result of an organizing action*, with a meaning close to that of words such as structure; it also designates *a way of being, a habitual state* (especially of the body) and, in particular, *a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination*.

Further, "dispositions" constituting *habitus* are acquired through a gradual process of **inculcation** with the stressed importance of early childhood experiences). They are **structured** by one's past experiences, they are **durable, transposable**, i.e., acquired in one context but can be used elsewhere, and finally, **generative** (in the sense that they are generating practice). (see definition above and Bourdieu 1977: 85, 92ff).

Habitus does not act in vacuum. It is one of the components of Bourdieu's theory of practice, the other two being the **field** and the **capital**, i.e., one's position in the "field". *Habitus* is acquired and it operates in relation with one's current circumstances, the particular social space, i.e., the **field** (emphasis author's).

Practice in Bourdieu's framework consists of three components: *habitus* with capital and the field. Practices are the result of "an obscure and double relation" (cf. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:

126), “*une relation inconsciente* (an unconscious relationship)” (cf. Bourdieu 1980: p. 119) between a *habitus* and a field.

A metaphor frequently used by Bourdieu to explain the “field” is that of a football field - with its proper rules of the game (practice) and different positions of players in it. The relation between the field and the *habitus* in Bourdieu’s framework is reciprocal, dialectical. “On one side it is a relation of conditioning: the field structures the *habitus* ... On the other side, it is a relation of knowledge or cognitive construction. *Habitus* contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world.” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 127). In Maton's words: “...the field, as part of the ongoing contexts in which we live, structures the *habitus*, while at the same time the *habitus* is the basis for actors' understanding of their lives, including the field” (Maton 2012: 51). Again, the dialectic nature of the relationship is stressed.

Finally, relation of *habitus* to language, i.e., linguistic *habitus* consists of a sub-set of language related dispositions constituting the whole *habitus*. Linguistic *habitus* has corporeal dimension. The way we speak, including our accent, intonation are revealing the social character of *habitus* at linguistic level (Bourdieu 1991: 17).

2.3 Braudel: insight from history

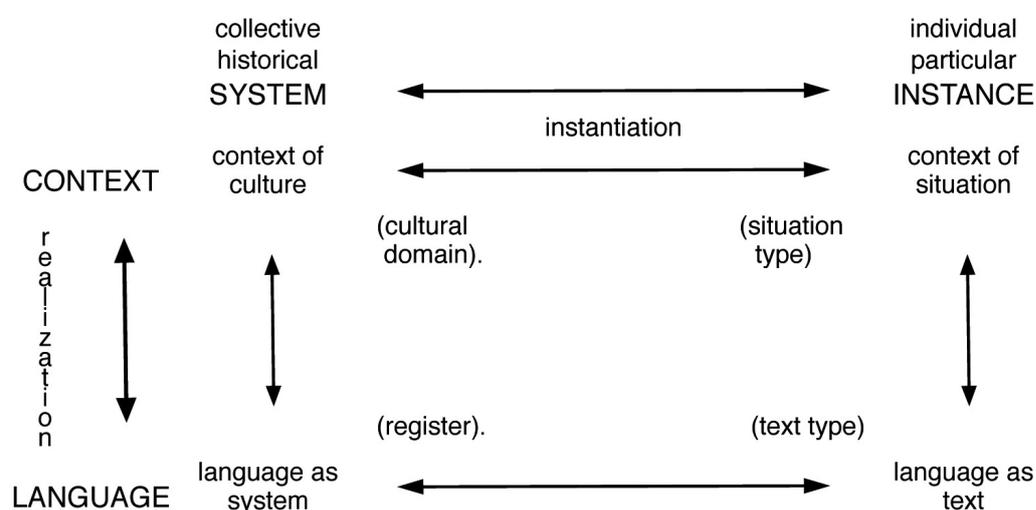
French historian, F. Braudel in his paper ‘*Histoire et sciences sociales: La longue durée*’ (Braudel 1958), addressed to social scientists, anthropologists, psychologists, linguists etc., discusses distinction between two different ways of looking at historical phenomena, i.e., between “*histoire événementielle*” (history of events) and “*longue durée*” (long duration). The long duration view was conceived by Braudel working on problems of economic history in opposition to view provided by the history of events. These two notions thus imply two radically different views of time. One is “short time”, i.e., time on the individuals’ everyday life scale. The other is the time of “*longue durée*”, the necessary framework for observing historical phenomena which evolve through long stretches of time. Contrary to the short time history of events, “*longue durée*” is also evolving in a way unconsciously, actors are not aware of the force lines which reveal themselves only through the longer perspective. With regard to linguistics, Braudel clearly identifies “*longue durée*” in language as its systemic aspect, both on collective level and individual level, thus corresponding to Bourdieu’s linguistic *habitus*, operating at the unconscious level (ibid.: p. 745). In a way, Braudel is thus also a forerunner of the view of language as emergent phenomenon, implied in Bourdieu’s *habitus*, and explicitly proposed by P. Hopper (1987) and others.

3. Language and social context in Systemic Functional Linguistics

One of the central tenets of Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) is that for scientific study of language, understanding the connection of the working of language in relation to the social processes is of utmost importance. It has been decisive in shaping SFL endeavors in language

research (cf. Hasan 2009: 166). Over the years, Halliday and his circle developed a consistent and revealing conception of the context of situation, deducing from it three contextual parameters, *mode*, *field* and *tenor*. These parameters were related to specific language variations (cf. Hasan 2009: 166-167). At the basis of this perspective on the social context of language is the view that it is discourse, the process aspect of language, which is central to language research, echoing Bakhtin and Vološinov (cf. Hasan 2009: 167). Linguistics as narrowly envisioned by de Saussure and Chomsky was unable to explain synchronic variation and diachronic change. To cope with this problem, it is necessary to include in language research both, the view of language as system, and language as process in specific social context (cf. Hasan 2009: 168).

The following schema, put forward by Halliday (1991/2007) and refined by Hasan (2009: 169), tries exactly this: to make explicit the connection of language, context of situation and system.



Note: Culture instantiated in situation, as system instantiated in text.
 Culture realized in/construed by language; same relation as that holding between linguistic strata (semantics: lexicogrammar: phonology: phonetics).
 Cultural domain and register are 'sub-systems': likeness viewed from 'system' end.
 Situation type and text type are 'instance types': likeness viewed from 'instance' end.

Fig. 2 SFL model of relationship between language and context (Hasan 2009: 169)

This schema envisions two aspects, *system* and *instance*, two levels, *context* and *language*, and four basic categories, *context of culture*, *context of situation* and *language as system* paired with *language as text*. The levels of *context* and *language* in the schema do not need a special comment. *Context of culture* is the systemic aspect of social context. *Context of situation* is the immediate social context of a particular communicating activity. In a similar way, *language as system* is the systemic aspect of language. *Language as text* is the processual aspect of language in particular communication activity (see Fig. 2).

These four categories, i.e., *context of culture*, *context of situation* and *language as system*, together with *language as text* are organized along two dimensions, vertically through the relation

of *realization* and horizontally through the relation of *instantiation*. Vertical relation, *realization*, connects two sets of notions. The first is the relation (i) between the *context of culture* and *language as system*. The second is the relation (ii) between the *context of situation* and *language as text*. Thus, in the doublet (i) *language as system* is realization of *context of culture*, in Hasan's (ibid.) words, "[c]ulture realized in/construed by language; same relation as that holding between linguistic strata (semantics: lexicogrammar: phonology: phonetics)." We can see the doublet (i) as the collective, systemic, i.e., structured, nonrandom, aspect. It is also corresponding to *longue durée* aspect of history in Braudel's (see above) terms. In Bourdieu's (1991) terms, context of culture would correspond to *institutions* (including both formal and informal systems in a particular society. This aspect is thus historical, systemic, collective aspect of the language related to context. Opposite to doublet (i) is realisationally related doublet (ii), i.e., *context of situation* and *language as text*, the *instance* of (i), in Braudel's (ibid.) terms, belonging to particular, "short time span history of events" (Hasan's ibid. 169).

Seen along the horizontal axis, *system* and *instance* are connected by the relation of *instantiation*. In Hasan's (ibid. 169) words, "[i]nstantiation is the relationship between a potential and its instance". Thus, in doublet (iii), *context of culture* and *context of situation*, the former is the potential, the systemic aspect, and latter is an instance of that potential. Similar relationship pertains also in the doublet (iv), *language as system* and *language as text*: the former is again the potential, the systemic aspect and the latter is an instance of this potential at the level of language. Hasan elaborates further: "There exists a dialectic between language system and language use: the system furnishes resources towards the formation and interpretation of the process, and the process furnishes resources towards the system's maintenance, innovation, and change...[T]he recognition of the instantiation relation opens a legitimate avenue for the description of practices that contribute to language maintenance, the two faces of which in a living language are stability and change, regularity and variation." (Hasan, ibid. 170-171). This observation in the framework of SFL resonates well with Bourdieu's view of *habitus* and its formation (cf. "structuring structures").

Hasan stresses that the difference between the system and its instance is the time depth. According to Hasan (ibid. 169), instance is 'immediate and experienced', while system, being the '**ultimate point of the theorization**', is shaped based on 'significant properties of instances'. This view evokes Braudel's distinction between history of events and *long durée*. But while *instance* is indeed belonging to the history of events, the conception of *system* differs from *long durée* in as much as it is conceived as theoretical construct.

Cultural domain and *register* are respective subdomains of the *system of culture* and language as system, covering variation: different cultural domains are associated with different registers. Discussing properties of *register*, Hasan (ibid. 171), evokes Bourdieu, stressing the centrality of register in the life of speaker and his/her social positioning, and by extension, in the community, pointing out that register is actually what Bourdieu is calling 'structured structuring structures'. On the instantiation side, *situation type* and *text type* are types of particular configurations of instances

of *context of situation* and *language as text*, belonging to some *cultural domain* and its associated *register*. (cf. Hasan, *ibid.* 169)

4. Character research in Japan

SFL model of language in relation to the context of situation discussed in the previous section puts stress on the general relationship between the *system* and *instance*, while the nature of individual's knowledge of system, both as *context of culture* and as *language as system* is not elaborated. This matters in the case that is topic of this section. Since about year 2000 Japan has seen a new type of research, focused on actual data from popular literary genres, including *manga* (comic strips), language used in social media and live TV shows. The central notion of this new wave of research is "character" (cf. Sadanobu 2015, Sadanobu 2011). "Character" is revealed in individual's interaction with its immediate context of situation, and used as explanatory principle to explain particularities of such interactions. Another perspective, embodied in the notion of "role language", proposed by Kinsui (cf. Kinsui and Yamakido 2015) is concerned with language based representations of characters in fiction and everyday discourse. "Character" research, especially in Sadanobu's version, is focusing on individual characteristics, both linguistic and interactional, of particular "characters".

Being central to the issue discussed in this paper, a short outline of Sadanobu's "character" follows. Sadanobu distinguishes three types of 'character' (cf. Sadanobu 2015:10 ff): (i) *dramatis personae*, (ii) *kyarakuta* (character) in the every day sense, referring for example to the usage in *manga* and characterized by specific line art (cf. Sadanobu (2015:11). This is character employed for stereotypisation and identification of a drawn character in *manga* (comic strips) or *anime* (animated cartoons) and by extension, also for stereotyping of characters in everyday life. (iii) Character in Sadanobu's sense: "*character*" as a situation based embodied self. In Sadanobu's words: "The third type of character, put succinctly, is the situation-based self...I decided to use the word 'character' as my own specialized term to refer to this third type (Sadanobu 2015:13, see also Sadanobu 2011).

Sadanobu's motivation behind his notion of "character" is, as in Bourdieu's case, his skepticism towards 'rational action theory' (RAT). There are cases of speech acts that can not be explained by reason/logic based pragmatics alone, such as sudden switching from standard speech to one's home town dialect in a particularly stressful situation or a sudden patronizing attitude expressed in relation of an older woman towards a younger male colleague during a company trip (cf. Sadanobu 2015:19). Therefore teleological view of language use must be insufficient as an explanation (cf. Sadanobu (2015:15-21).

The notion of "character" is on purpose based on spontaneously evolved descriptive pre-theoretical notion developed in their everyday language usage by Japanese speakers. Thus, "character" does not translate simply as 'character' in English everyday sense, even though

Sadanobu does translate it as “character” (with quotation marks) in his technical (‘special’) sense (c.f. Sadanobu, 2015:15).

It is also important to note here, what “character” is not. Firstly, it is not a personality (*jinkaku*), or a person (*jinbutu*). In traditional view, personality and person do not change, and if they do, it can be problematic - e.g. ‘split personality’. Secondly, “character” is not style. Style changes, easily and the change of style is seen as intentional, based on rational choice, as for example in the case of polite speech (*keigo*) (cf. Sadanobu 2015:12-15). “Character” is best understood in its relation to the context of communication. Sadanobu sees it as a fulcrum (balancer) between inner and external pressures (cf. Sadanobu 2015:16).

A further property of “character” is that it is actually changeable, though perceived as unchangeable. On the other hand, it is important to stress that the change in “character” is not premeditated, intentional; it tends to spontaneously reveal itself via the relationship with a particular context (cf. Sadanobu 2015:12-15).

5. Theoretical stance and convergence of perceptions about language

5.1 Empirically based approaches to language

Basic insights of the “character” research share a lot with the approaches sketched in the preceding sections. The notion of “character” as not something an individual is conscious of a priori, but springing out of the reciprocal relationship of subject and the context of situation stresses the relational aspect of “character”. Such conception of “character” resonates very well also with Vološinov’s and Bakhtin’s view of language as primarily interaction (cf. Vološinov 1973:130).

Further, it is important to note that Sadanobu’s intuitions about “character” share a lot with Bourdieu’s thinking about *habitus*. Both sprung from scepticism concerning the RAT as the basis of human practice, both stress the embodied nature of “knowledge” as the unconscious guide of human practice. To my understanding, at the level of a particular individual, “character” can be considered very similar to a semi-permanent subset of *habitus* (cf. Bekeš 2018 for a more detailed discussion).

Last but not least, “character” research reveals a lacking aspect of the SFL model: i.e., how to treat in this model the individual and on the particular aspect of intuitive systemic knowledge, which is the focus of “character” research.

5.2 Convergence

From the different approaches sketched here it can be seen that basic theoretical stance can have far-reaching consequences for the relevance of results produced by a particular approach.

Stress on abstraction as a methodological decision, i.e., separating language from the social context, as seen in the case of de Saussure and Chomsky, lead to a burst of important but limited insights about language.

Focus on language in its social context, i.e., on language as process, activity, interaction, on the other hand, led to similar basic insights, regardless of the discipline where the particular inquiry was initiated. Bakhtin, Vološinov and their circle starting from literary studies. In a way Bakhtin, Vološinov and their circle provided a wider framework which, when transmitted to the "West" in 1960' inspired language and literary research there. SFL approach having roots in anthropological investigations into language and society, was later inspired also by work of Bakhtin's circle. Bourdieu, having background in anthropology and sociology, arrived also at language and its relation to society (Bourdieu 1991). And last but not least, "character" research, wishing to understand certain aspects of language variety in the popular culture and social networks, became conscious of the importance of the social aspects of linguistic reality for adequate explanation of observed phenomena. All these approaches chose the view of language as interaction as their starting point. Convergence of the notions of Bourdieu's *habitus* and Sadanobu's "character", as astounding as it seems, is thus perhaps just a natural consequence of researchers' orientation towards their object of investigation, rather than towards apriori assumptions.

5.3 Expansion

Braudel's (1958) stress of the dual nature of history, *longue durée* and history of events, is also relevant more widely in humanities as he himself has pointed out already. This distinction is important for framing the acquisition of *habitus* and "character" as well as for the understanding of systemic nature of culture and language as a phenomenon and not only as an abstraction.

To conclude, based on insight by Bourdieu, Braudel and Sadanobu, in this section I propose an extension of the SFL schema (Fig. 2) to include, besides the collective systemic *longue durée* aspect also individual systemic *longue durée* aspect.

(i) In the SFL schema (Fig. 2), the conception of system as the 'ultimate point of the theorization' (Hasan 2009: 169) should be replaced with the conception of system in its phenomenological aspect, as a result of actual *longue durée* processes, i.e., the system as collectivity of institutionalised as well as implicit norms (Bourdieu 1990: 57), reflected in intuitive grasps of how to interact of individual members of community in the widest sense, connected and mutually influenced through their interaction.

(ii) The two aspects, envisioned by the model, *system* and *instance*, should be revised, to include besides the *system* in its collective aspect also the *system* in its individual aspect, that is, individual's particular intuition about the *system* both at the level of context and at the level of language, i.e., the *system* in its individual's, ontogenetic, i.e., *longue durée* dimension, or, in other words, *habitus*, as the third member of the triad. Instantiation then actually happens between individual's *habitus* and particular context of situation.

The two levels, *context* and *language*, and four basic categories, *context of culture*, *context of situation* and *language as system* paired with *language as text* remain the same.

The result, is presented in Fig. 3 below.

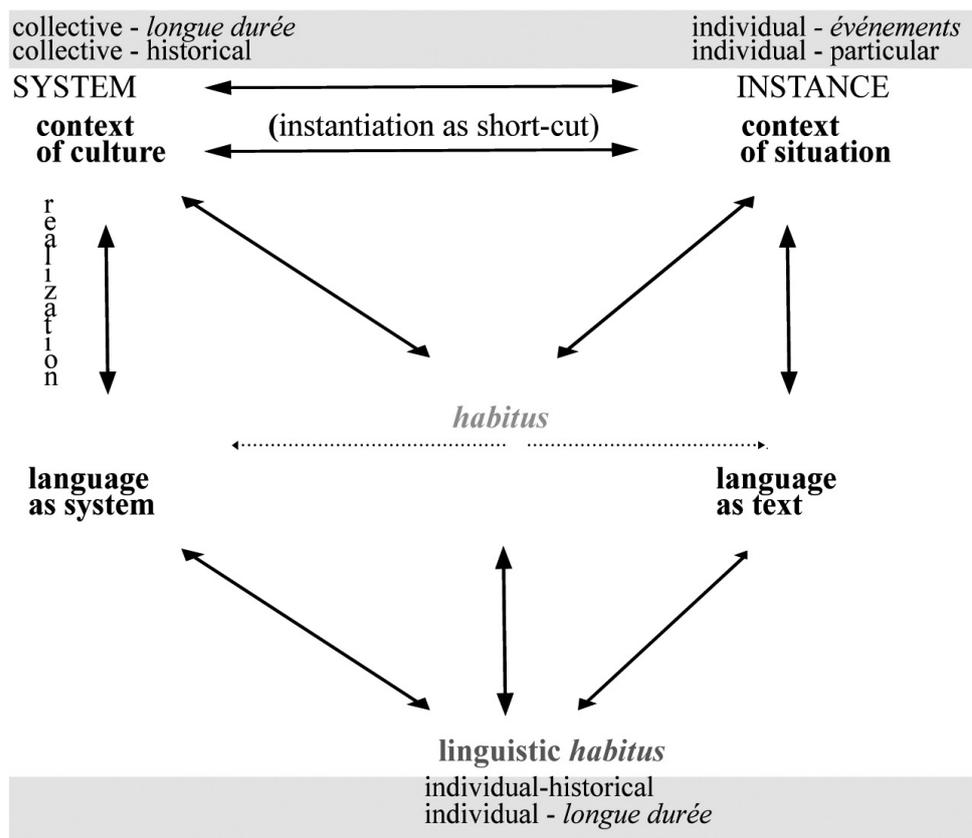


Fig. 3 Integrated expanded schema of language and context relationship

In light of this proposal, the original schema in (Fig.2 can be seen as a kind of methodological short hand, linking directly collective/systemic and individual aspects of a more complex relationship presented in Fig. 3.

6. Conclusion

In my paper I tried to present the shifting of the image of language and its relation to social context, as an aspect of “The Human Image in a Changing World”.

The notion of “character” developed by Sadanobu, by its partial converging towards Bourdieu’s *shabitus*, in spite of both approaches stemming from totally different theoretical backgrounds, and from totally different points in this changing world, provided a final motivation for the integration of insights ranging from Bakhtin’s circle, via SFL, Bourdieu and Braudel to Sadanobu into a proposal for an expanded imagining of relationship between language and its social context.

The expanded schema can serve to put focus on the relation of collective systemic aspect and individual systemic aspect of language in society. More generally, it can thus hopefully contribute to interdisciplinary and cross/disciplinary study of language and society regardless of the starting point of particular inquiry.

Acknowledgements

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