Adaptation to Context

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ABSTRACT: Argument theorists often stress the idea of adaptation to context as an alternative to seeing argument as linked propositions. But adaptation is not a clear idea. It is in fact a complicated puzzle. Though many aspects of this puzzle are obscure, one clear conclusion is that the question-answer pair is not a good way to conceptualize adaptation to situation.

KEY WORDS: Argument, communication, context, organizations, situation.

My thesis is that the question-answer model is a poor explanation of adaptation to context. This claim would be a straw man if addressed widely to the field of pragmatics, where discussions of relevance and adaptation are often pegged to psychological systems (Sperber and Wilson, 1986) and communicator goals (O'Keefe, 1988). Inside the field of rhetoric, however, the question-answer dyad is *likely* to figure in explanations of adaptation — because of the field's history — in which adaptation has long been seen in near structuralist terms — and because of new developments in the field, e.g., Meyer's (1983, 1986a, 1986b, 1987) revival of questioning as an ontology of cognition and communication.

My reasoning will conform to the following path: I first underscore the degree to which adaptation to situation is brandished as an unelaborated slogan — as if it is a self-evident alternative to programs that treat message design as independent of context, e.g., propositional logic. It is better, I argue, to see adaptation to context as a complicated puzzle. In the second and third sections of this essay, I discuss two features of context that complicate the adaptation idea — the organization of argument fields (Section II) and the competence of the actors within them (Section III). Once we appreciate that organizations are ways of routinizing and channelizing contexts and that differences in competence make for systematic differences in communication performance, we see that the question-answer model is too simple to be useful. And finally I will consider the implications of these complexities for a theory of argument.

I should say at the outset that my prejudices are throughly pragmatic. I see meaning as an emergent creation arising from speakers' mutual

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accommodations. I believe that social actors respond to one another on the basis of perceived intentions — and that though some message characteristics are clues to a speaker's goals, obvious clues are not always available; and still interactants organize impressions and frame actions according to the perceived goals of others. I thus see "context" as inhering in the intersubjective agreements, working consensuses, and social contracts that permit coordinated action. In other words, contexts are situations with brains, circumstances with tongues.

I. RHETORIC AS ADAPTATION

The movement of ideas from one field to another is often a slow process — the intellectual world's version of evolutionary time. This slowness is often due less to overt resistance than to the proliferation and enormity of literatures. It is also attributable to the sins of local focus: a field's actors are more open to outside ideas when they are unhappy with their own. For both reasons, I suspect, Argumentation and Informal Logic[1] have joined in the 1980s a 60 year-old revolution in Anthropology. The revolutionary idea — now venerated as a classic in the social sciences — is Malinowski's claim that utterance and situation are inextricably joined: "the context of situation is indispensable for the understanding of the words" (1923, p. 307).

Argument scholars have made this anthropological turn because they have come to appreciate the limits of interrogating words and propositions abstracted from the pragmatic conditions in which they are used. Their sympathies have never really run with hermeneutics or deconstructionism because their paramount interest has been with — to use Toulmin's phrase — the *uses* of argument. Thus context is now seen as a matter of "real people grappling with real exigencies, in real situations" (Wenzel, 1987, p. 108). To understand the effects of arguments, one must study real disputes; to understand real disputes, one must understand what real speakers intend to say. Thus Geissner (1987, p. 117) advocates starting from "concrete, factual speech situations in a social field of action;" and Wenzel builds on the views of McGee and Scriven to say that "the *only* way to unpack the argument is to put it in the totality of its actual *rhetorical* context. One cannot say with confidence what the argument was without giving a fairly complete account of who said what to whom, with what purpose, on what occasion, in what social and temporal context. And that brings us right back to the material reality of rhetorical experience" (1987, p. 108).

The striking thing about this anthropological turn is its lack of detail. The theorists who put a premium on adaptation to context say little about the particulars of how it works. It is as if they assume that *how* adaptation

works is too prosaic to mention — a matter of mere details that their readers will essily supply. The effect is that adaptation seems more like a slogan than an explanation.

The explanation of this lack of detail turns on a peculiarity of how rhetorical theorists describe their art.[2] Adaptation is arguably *the* dominant metaphor in rhetorical theory. At least since Aristotle, rhetoricians have been accustomed to seeing their art as versatile, ductile — a chameleon formal cause belonging, as Aristotle says, to no particular subject matter. Formal causes, of course, shape material causes, never the reverse — which is perhaps why, even today, rhetorical theorists insist that rhetorical principles operate uniformly across all fields or subject matters. Adaptation is thus a taken-for-granted part of rhetorical thinking. It is exemplified in perhaps the most oft-quoted definition of rhetoric — Donald Bryant's "adjusting ideas to people and people to ideas."

One of the most intriguing puzzles in communication studies is *how* communicators are able to adapt to situations. In Darwinian terms, adaptability is definitive of human action. We know that people are not routinely stymied by novelty as they move from context to context: they acclimate, accommodate, compromise, conform, and rebel. They are not always slaves to preconceptions and plans: they adjust, calibrate, correct, regulate, and manage. And they are not always swept along by the social currents swirling around them: they rhetorically manage situations and selves; they adjust to the expectations of others; they sometimes persuade others to change their minds; and they often are able to set their private opinions aside in order to negotiate working consensuses with others so that cooperative action can proceed.

Of course we also know that people *are* sometimes stymied by novelty, slaves to preconceptions, and swept along by events. Once we notice that people vary in their abilities to move across contexts, adjust their plans, and rhetorically manage situations, we realize that adaptation to context is a complicated puzzle. Why are some people more proficient than others in translating intentions to communication strategies? Why are some people more oblivious than others to situational details? Why are institutions *sometimes* as deterministic as Douglas (1986) holds — their hapless victims more like marionettes than rational actors — yet other times mere scenarios serving someone's immediate convenience, to be adopted, adapted, or jettisoned depending on the particulars of the moment?

Determinism aside, there is the fact that the social sciences have not unambiguously explained how actors adapt to contexts. In Wenzel's scheme, for instance, does "who says what" make indexicality a psychological phenomenon? Or does it mean that claims are indexical to intersubjectively confirmed knowledge formations? If a balance between subjectivity and intersubjectivity is proposed, how do individuals achieve and maintain it? Does "with what purpose" imply (or assume) competence

in translating intention to performance? Does it confer complete authorical privilege on speakers? Likewise, do references to occasion and context imply competence — that rhetors more or less accurately answer the questions posed by situations? And how do situations pose questions? Which aspects of situations (e.g., message characteristics) call for particular modes of communication? Since contexts are "polyinterpretable" (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1983) and people differ in their constructions of events, how (and by what situational features) is enthymematic communication possible? Since, even within a shared commitment to Grician cooperation, indefinitely multiple enthymematic expansions upon a speaker's utterance may be possible, are there message characteristics, or more broadly, situational characteristics, that more often than not get the *right* taken-for granted premises from listeners? These questions are not unanswerable, but each poses complex problems; and combined, they suggest a complex puzzle. Thus Scriven (1987, p. 25) probes the outer reaches of understatment in saying that "we have never really worked out the engineering to deal with *context-dependence*."

And, of course, ordinary actors have their own puzzles to solve as they confront real situations. It is one thing for the communication theorist to enjoin me to fit my strategies to my aims and quite another for me to do it. How do I recognize a situation as problematic? How do I know when habitual etiquette can no longer be stretched to fit a situation? How do I translate my interpretations and intentions into communication strategies? And which rules apply; dare I use them; and how flexible can I be? These are sometimes trying questions even for reflective social actors. And for less reflective actors, adaptation is often an impenetrable mystery. One succeeds or fails as if by magic, luck, or divine right.

These complications and puzzles stem from the fact that adaptation is dependent on and affected by other factors — some of which can be grouped under two rubrics: sociological and developmental. One's adaptation to context may be affected by the social domain or argument field in which one moves. One's meanings, that is, are indexical to intersubjectively confirmed meanings, so one's actions are maneuvers among socially grounded agreements. And, differently, one's ability to participate in intersubjective enterprises and to transform intentions into performance depends on one's communication competence. These sociological and developmental considerations, of course, are not fully transparent constructs that can definitively clarify adaptation. They pose puzzles of their own. But they are indispensable checks on generalizations about adaptation. And the two rubrics in tandem are sound starting points for explaining how people achieve coherence and continuity in dealing with situations and how and why people differ in their abilities to translate intentions to performance. Thus the next two sections of this essay do double duty; they explain why the organization of argument fields and the communication competencies of the actors within them present complications for overly-

simple views of adaptation; and, so doing, they suggest alternative starting points for explaining adaptation to context.

II. THE ORGANIZATION OF ARGUMENT FIELDS

One proof that adaptation to context is a complicated puzzle arises when we consider the social frameworks in which most arguments occur, viz., organizations. Arguments, after all, rarely occur on an empty stage; they arise amid a clutter of detail — stage settings that affect arguers' intentions, their interpretations of options, and the meanings of their actions. Argument, in other words, is embedded in processes best explained using the conceptual tools of organizational theory.

I elsewhere (Willard, 1989b) make a case for seeing discourse domains or argument fields as organizations — and thus for joining aspects of the organizational literature with argumentation. I can only hint at the possibilities presented by this merger, but the main reason for using the organization idea may be apparent. Organizations, both as theoretical constructs and as real entities, are ways of describing practices as embedded in larger structures. Organizations are self-consciously built on assumptions, rationales, and methods for adapting to multiple contexts. Their structures are metacommunicative: they specify and institutionalize, e.g., the interrelationships between the vocabularies of specialized roles and professions (McPhee, 1985, pp. 162—163). These *structures* (Giddens, 1974, 1976, 1979, 1981, 1984) are animated by, and they are media for, situated action (Poole, 1985, p. 101). Action, that is, both "*produces* and *reproduces* structure and the related social system" (McPhee, 1985, p. 164). Ideas are made flesh through practices, structures are brought to life (and reaffirmed) by human action. Organizational studies embody a unity of theory and practice because every organization is someone's version of that unity — a concrete operationalization of common ground, perhaps the most clearcut instantiation of Mead's generalized other. And some fields function as discourses operating within contexts defined by organizations. Cost-benefit analysis, e.g., arises in analytical contexts that are given meaning and practical continuity by agencies, corporations, and disciplines.

To see argument as an organizational phenomenon, as a kind of interaction that occurs inside organizations of different complexity, is to change our ways of conceptualizing dispute and decision-making. It *inter alia* forces us to see contexts as emergent, synergistic packages of formal structure, task foci, intentions, and indexicality-all embedded in a larger framework that has been self-consciously designed to persevere over time. Models of argument and decision-making that ignore or bracket the dense details of context are likely to misunderstand how arguments do and should work.

One case in point is the idea that daily discourse arrives at turning

points at which, *inter alia*, arguments may start and stop. How arguments start is too complicated a matter to address in a short essay (see Jackson, 1987; Jacobs, 1987; Willard, 1989, pp. 42—45), but a simple example may suffice to illustrate the effects of organizational embeddedness. Deiter (1950) proposes the *stasis* construct to explain the idea of a stopping point. In Greek physics, motion is seen as punctuated, not punctuated equilibria but starts and stops. The pendulum arcs to a critical point, stops for a moment, then begins its downward plunge. The momentary stop is the *stasis*. Translated into argumentation, *stasis* means stopping points — argumentative points we reach where the action cannot continue unless something happens. For the Greeks, these stopping points were momentary equilibria — analogous to conversational turns that require or prefer argumentative responses from an interlocutor so that the conversation can continue. I prefer to use *stasis* to denote stopping points of any sort, including points of disagreement so intransigent and basic that cooperative discourse cannot proceed until the *stasis* is breached. On this usage, *stasis* is a precursor to one version of the incommensurability thesis: there are debilitating disagreements — points of dispute beyond which discourse cannot proceed unless agreements are reached that transcend the obstacle.

There are two flaws in this reasoning — mine and Deiter's. First, though arguments stop, they are often replaced by other arguments. Most arguments occur within organizations whose broader purposes keep the discourse moving whether or not particular disputes get settled. *Within* organizations, *stasis* is often localized — dispute localization being essential to the organization's survival. The second mistake is endemic to physical metaphors: one focuses on a *single* or isolated phenomenon. The *stasis* idea pictures a *thing* brought to a halt, obstructed by some*thing*. But arguments co-occur: they overlap and mingle with other discourse. A striking characteristic of complex organizations is their internal equifinality — multiple means and channels for achieving ends. Disputes thus admit of multiple solutions: one is not *either* stopped cold *or* forced to surmount a disagreement, for even deep differences can be submerged or bypassed if other motives take precedence. The preference for agreement is such a regnant motive (Willard and Hynes, 1988), but the press of events and the motives of other actors may take many forms.

Another case in point is perhaps the richest view of context — the Burke-Goffman theatrical metaphor. The focus on organizational context exposes the flaw in this metaphor — that an argument is not an isolated event on a stage. When arguments occur, other things are happening. Others are taking care of business, routines are being followed, other arguments are occurring. A better, though imperfect, view is of a many-ringed circus: a jangle of performances, too many to keep track of in a big organization. This equifinality of organizations illuminates the same fault in the *stasis* metaphor: it is too stark, clear, and romantic. *Thesis* —

antithesis has cinematic air, like a showdown in a western. Some studies focus on disputes in organizations in much the same mano-a-mano way (Donohue, 1978, 1981a, 1981b). But most arguments are not showdowns at high noon. Most are punctuations of routine activities — of a piece with a tapestry of events whose organizational context gives them coherence. There is evidence that dilemmas are often confronted, and partly resolved so that they may be confronted once again (Blau and Scott, 1962; Lourenco and Gildewell, 1975). This implies not only that physical metaphors are divorced from context but that the idea of context itself has a context. Indeed, the focus on organizations changes one's conception of context because, however one defines context, situations have contexts, which have broader contexts, and so on. The organization construct displays these contextual layers.

This is perhaps why the Challenger episode remains mysterious, despite intense public scrutiny and a formal investigation. By all accounts, there existed "strong and unanimous" opposition to the launch among the engineers and this opposition was not suppressed; yet NASA went ahead. It might seem that a clear narrative thread, poised one might say, upon a cleanly set stage, was mysteriously subverted. Seeing the decision-making process in the singular, I believe, is where the investigators went wrong. Putting the engineer's opposition in the larger organizational context makes it more believable that protests that seem powerful post facto may not have seemed so exigent at the time. The NASA decision-makers, trying to rationalize their decision, may be unable to satisfactorily describe the complexity of the goings on.

This may be a weakness of the narrative paradigm (Fisher, 1987). Inside organizations, multiple stories, scattered voices, and tangled plots weave intricate webs. The stories we use to explain and rationalize events may be fabulous, ways of imposing narrative rationality on events that seem alien or mysterious. The genesis of decisions in organizations may inhere in multiple tracks, jumping across one another, exchanging, and permutating. Organizations are not massively parallel processors (computerese for what computers have to be to simulate the human brain) — economic expediency works against too much redundancy — but every complex organization contains enough equifinality to complete projects. Given enough momentum, any project can plow past even entrenched opposition. The momentum for the Challenger launch doubtless stemmed from news coverage: every delay prompted increasingly shrill network coverage; some of the inertia came from institutional trust; some of it came from the fact that the safety documents got signed. These varied elements do not touch on the same pressure points. It is not as if we have coherently arrayed evidence and warrants building around a single Aristotelian practical syllogism (the conclusion being "launch"). The launch of Challenger did not issue from a single narrative thread extending

unbroken from start to finish. That linear thinking is just why the ensuing disaster is so mysterious.

The reader who is skeptical about the parallel between fields of discourse (especially the disciplines) and organizations may now see that the point is not trivial. The reason why the "rational thread" of intellectual progress in the disciplines is so hard to discern, or seems like a Foucauldian deception, lies largely in the organizational complexity of the disciplines. This explains why ideas sometimes seem to seep into the mainstream and why the narrative thread of intellectual progress seems to be missing.

III. COMPETENCE AND PARTICIPATION IN ARGUMENT FIELDS

The best proof that adaptation to context is a complicated puzzle arises when we consider differences in communication competence. Communication, after all, is achieved "in ways which are as different from one another as walking is from plane flight" (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, p. 3). These differences in performance reflect systematic individual differences in communication competence.

Communication competence involves a progressive integration of communication skills into an organized system: "as individuals change with development, they come to have different communication-constituting concepts, different patterns of message organization, and different modes of message interpretation" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 80). O'Keefe thus interprets her research as revealing the existence of three different message design logics (MDLs) that turn on systematic differences in the assumptions people make about communication — what it is, what it can do, and how it works. Speakers have, that is, different implicit theories of communication that lead them to organize and interpret messages differently. She terms these MDLs "Expressive," "Conventional," and "Rhetorical" — labels that represent not only a classificatory device for deriving coding schemes but a grammar that explains the production of particular message characteristics. These empirically derived MDLs require that we modify our thinking about adaptation to situation.

Pragmatically Pointless Communication: Some communications are notable for their disassociation from context. *Expressive messages* (O'Keefe, 1988), for instance, are more biographical and idiosyncratic than conventional or rhetorical. Such messages are the opposite of Poincare's claim that questions frame the horizons of their answers: though they seem to be responses to immediate stimuli, Expressive messages are more relevant to the speakers' psychologies than to intersubjective agreements with others. The Expressive communicator is using a particular implicit theory of communication — an *Expressive Design Logic* which assumes that "language is a medium for expressing thoughts

and feelings" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 84). Communication is a process in which I express what I think or feel so that others can know what I think or feel. Successful communication is clear expression — messages being repositories for meaning independent of context. Expressives thus impress us as being rather literal in their creation and understanding of messages: they don't see that expression can be made to serve multiple goals; and "they interpret messages as independent units rather than as threads in an interactional fabric, and so seem to disregard context" (1988, p. 84).

Messages, in other words, are simple expressions of beliefs (1988, p. 85). "The idea that messages might be systematically designed to cause particular reactions is alien (and possibly reprehensible) to the Expressive communicator. ... There are two (and only two) possible relations between speaker intentions and messages: the message can express the speaker's current mental state fully and honestly, or the message can convey some kind of distortion of the speaker's current state — a lie or an edited version of the whole truth. This limited view of communicative purpose gives rise to a desire to conduct communication as full and open disclosure of current thoughts and feelings, to concern for the fidelity of messages, and to anxiety about deceptive communication" (1988, p. 85).

The symptomology diagnostic of expressiveness includes "pragmatically pointless content:" a lack of editing, lengthy expressions of the speaker's wants, even if the listener has already heard them or can do nothing about them, redundancies, noncontingent threats, and insults. Second, "semantic and pragmatic connections between Expressively generated messages and their contexts and among elements within Expressive messages tend to be idiosyncratic and subjective rather than conventional and intersubjective."

Conventional Discourse: In contrast to Expressive messages, which are psychologically reactive to contexts, we have messages that display a conventional, rule-following reaction to context. The root assumption of *Conventional Design Logic* is that "communication is a game played cooperatively, according to socially conventional rules and procedures." This subsumes expressiveness: "language is a means of expressing propositions, but the propositions one expresses are specified by the social effect one wants to achieve rather than the thoughts one happens to have" (1988, p. 86). One accommodates to conventional methods, as, e.g., speech act theory suggests. Conventional communication is constituted by cooperation. One plays the game, obeys the rules, and fulfills one's obligations:

> Conventional messages generally have some clearly identifiable core action being performed that is easily characterizable as a speech act; the elements of such messages are generally mentions of felicity conditions on the core speech act, the structure of rights and obligations that give force to the speech act being performed, or the mitigating circumstances or conditions that would bear on the structure of rights and obligations within the situation (e.g., excuses). Just as the connections among message

> elements involve classic pragmatic coherence relations, the connections between messages and their contexts display a conventional basis for coherence. (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 87)

Competence is thus a matter of appropriateness: one succeeds insofar as one occupies the correct position in a situation, and uses one's conventional resources for obligating the interlocutor, behaves competently as a communicator, and is dealing with an equally competent and cooperative interlocutor

Proactive Discourse: Where Conventional messages are reactions to context — the meaning of claims thus being anchored by features of context — there is another mode of communication that sees context as something to be created through coordination and negotiation. It shapes situations and selves to fit a communicator's goals; the goals are the question, the created context the answer. O'Keefe (1988) calls this the *Rhetorical Design Logic.* The key words here are intersubjectivity, negotiations, coordination, and from Burke and Goffman, dramaturgical enactment. Rhetoric, in other words, is *proactive* not reactive. My knowledge of how communication strategies convey character, attitude, and definitions of situation allows me to create social reality and to create deep interpretations of others' actions. Thus, O'Keefe says, context is not an anchor for meaning but a resource to be negotiated and strategically exploited (1988, p. 88). Rhetorical messages display a typical pattern of content and structure. They "contain elaborating and contextualizing clauses and phrases that provide explicit definitions of the context. They convey a definite sense of role and character through manipulation of stylistic elements in a marked and coherent way" (1988, p. 88). The function of such messages is negotiation. Different speakers can adopt different voices and thereby talk different realities. The whole point is thus to achieve consensus on a definition of situation — finding an agreeable narrative or a common drama.

Rhetorical Design Logic puts a premium on interpersonal harmony and consensus. It values careful listening, psychological analysis, and adaptation to others in the creation of intersubjective understandings. I am concerned with the goals I want to achieve, so I design my communication to achive desired effects rather than simply to respond to others. My communication strategies are "steps in a plan or as moments in a coherent narrative or as displays in a consistent character (and usually all of these). In short, the internal coherence of rhetorical messages derives from the elements being related by intersubjectively available, goal-oriented schemes (1988, p. 88).

These three MDLs generate similar messages in simple situations. Their differences become apparent when people need to manage multiple, even conflicting goals, e.g., cases where one wants to criticize yet offer face

protections to another person. The Expressive believes that the purpose of communication is the clear expression of thoughts, so the rule is, *be tactful* — edit the message or be less than frank. The Conventional will *be polite* by using off-the-record communications and conventional politeness forms such as apologies, hedges, excuses, and compliments (Brown and Levinson, 1974). The Rhetorical assumes that communication creates situations and selves; the solution: *be someone else*, by transforming one's social self or identity, by taking on a different character in social interaction. The rhetorical solution is create a new drama, or new characters, so as to minimize the conflict of interest (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 91).

Thus we have three different ways of dealing with situations. With Expressive messages, we have a class of communications for which the proactive rhetorical possibilities for strategically affecting others is missing. Expressive messages are not usefully reactive either, even though, O'Keefe says, the reason why Expressives speak is that some immediately prior event causes a reaction and then a desire to express what one is thinking. The Expressive "responds" to an idiosyncratic and subjective "situation," not to a conventional and intersubjective situation, or to a negotiated reality. Adaptation to situation, for the Expressive, is thus either a tautology or a kind of dishonesty. The Conventional, conversely, responds to the game apparently being played using the orthodox etiquette and methods suggested by the context. The Rhetorical might employ any of these strategies plus another: one solution to the problems posed by complex situations is to redefine situations and selves, rules and roles, so as to create a mutually acceptable — and workable — cooperative plan.

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR A THEORY OF ARGUMENT

It is important that argument scholars recognize that context-adaptation is a puzzle, not a program. For one thing, as we have just seen, this recognition underscores the degree to which each piece of the puzzle depends upon research traditions and literatures outside Argumentation and Informal Logic. To use a language I have defended elsewhere (Willard, 1989s), the importance of context pushes us away from the traditional core of our disciplines toward their peripheries, where intersections with other fields are more readily noticed. An arguer's interpretation of (or obliviousness to) situational details may be explicable as matters of cognitive development, perceptual readiness, cognitive and communicative style, and dogmatism or open-mindedness — all standard constructs in outside fields, and each a general label for a substantial literature. A person's ability to translate intentions into performance may turn on interpersonal complexity, language development, and — the focus I have taken here — knowledge about communication.

For another thing, the recognition that adaptation is a puzzle will keep us skeptical toward claims that any single method by which humans preinterpret and prejudge contexts can constitute a complete explanation of adaptation. The view most deserving of our skepticism is the narrative paradigm — not because people do not often seek narrative rationality in events, but because they often should not. I have elsewhere argued (1989b) that Argumentation scholars are prone to text-worship — a literary arch-rationalism in which the rationality of intellectual change is thought to inhere in a field's documents. My point is not only that documents often trade upon Foucauldian deceptions — bogus narratives that rewrite a field's history so that its current consensus seems to be a rational outcome — but that this bias is inherent to the literary focus.

I argued at the outset that adaptation is a not-to-be-questioned presumption in rhetorical theory. Inside this sweeping panorama the question of how people adapt to contexts is addressed with equally vast brush-strokes. And what is paradoxical in Aristotle's system — the tension between human behavior seen as motion and as action — has not improved with age. Aristotle's idea of appropriateness is often treated as if it is a structuralist thesis — rhetorical action being a next move in a Wittgensteinian language game, a second pair-part in an adjacency pair, an effect of narrative form, or the answer to a question.

Thus every conventionally socialized rhetorical theorist knows what Poincare means by the claim that questions frame the horizons of their answers — and what the gestaltist Kohler means by saying that the answer "'sticks' in the question. A good question and a good answer are not matters of chance: they fit each other as the key and the lock" (quoted in Waller, 1970, p. 165). Rhetorical adaptation is a matter of answering the questions posed by rhetorical situations. Thus, "a speech is given rhetorical significance by the situation, just as a unit of discourse is given significance *as* answer or *as* solution by the question or problem; . . . the situation controls the rhetorical response in the same sense that the question controls the answer and the problem controls the solution (Bitzer, 1968, p. 6).

I am not saying that everyone agrees with Bitzer. His essay was vigorously discussed and challenged. But notice that, if we ignore Bitzer's intentions, his position can be given two interpretations. We can read it as an Aristotelian/behavioristic claim that exigences summon behavior much as stimuli court responses. And we can read it as a James-Dewey pragmatism — the situational exigence being one's goals; the rhetorical response being one's means-end reasoning to achieve one's goals. This pragmatist reading may violate Bitzer's intentions, but it is, I submit, a commonplace view of rhetoric.

Notice how far this picture of rhetoric moves us from adaptation to

situation. We cannot, for instance, continue to picture the situation as given — as preexisting and thus, to one degree or another, predetermining utterance. Nor can situations be seen as remaining constant over the course of interaction. The idea of a working consensus implies that the provisional agreements of one moment can be altered, jettisoned, or renegotiated in the next. Communication, in other words, is emergent. And perhaps the most radical consequence becomes apparent if we assume that speakers frame their actions to their cognitive systems — their construct systems in use at a given moment. This picture reverses the order of events in comprehension: "It is not that first the context is determined, and then relevance is assessed. On the contrary, people hope that the assumption being processed is relevant (or else they would not bother to process it at all), and they try to select a context that will justify that hope: a context that will maximize relevance. In verbal comprehension in particular, it is relevance which is treated as given and context which is treated as a variable" (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, p. 142).

In other words, Aristotle's formal cause is back with a vengeance. Contexts are, in important respects, epiphenomena of cognitive processes and public agreements. They are *informed* by our hopes and preferences and by our interpersonal achievements with others. They have as much narrative rationality as we want or are able to give them; their questions are such that they fit our available answers.

And this may be too indefinite for rhetorical theorists who want to make encompassing claims about adaptation to context. For them, there is something distasteful about admitting that adaptation is indefinitely variable. And it is hard to deny part of their point, for humans in certain cultures do display commonalities — for instance, a preference for narrative form. Literary form *is* a way of defining reality. But this doesn't mean that langauge defines contexts, literary or lived, everywhere in the same way. Consider, for instance, Meyer's (1983, 1986a, 1986b, 1987) "problematology." His position is too expansive to adequately depict here: it is an omnibus diagnosis of the demise of Cartesian certainty, the "tragedy of culture in the twentieth century", and a "new theory of language and argumentation" (1986c, p. 127). But one aspect of Meyer's position bears on the question of adaptation to context — the idea that there is a *law of complementarity* between form and context: "The more informative the context is, the less form needs to mark the problematological difference, and conversely. The context plays the role of a *problematological differentiator*. It indicates to the other what are the locutor's problems, and therefore what he wants and expects, as well as the relevant aspects of these problems" (Meyer, 1987, pp. 124—125). Context stands to rhetorical action as question to answer, stimulus to response. And here we hear Aristotle's voice, despite Meyer's efforts to move away from the Greeks:

the fit of action to context is one of formal and final causation. Notice, for instance, the similarities between Meyer's view and that of Wallace (1970, p. 38):

> The beginning of the act is determined by a problematic, unresolved situation. . . . Speaker and listener respond to the situation, each for his own purposes. The speaker — the efficient cause — decides he has something to say, and his decision is taken in light of a goal whose probability of achievement appears good. . . . The goal, together with its contextual circumstances, constitutes the stimulus situation to which the speaker responds. In responding, he draws upon his experience for relevant materials. . . . In other words, his experience, which constitutes the sum total of his being at the communicative moment, is unorganized with respect to the task until the speaker's sense of purpose and direction organizes it. The response develops in ways decreed by form.

And form, as all neoAristotelians know, follows function. Meyer's interest is more literary than Wallace's:

> Fiction auto-contextualizes the elements we implicitly find in everday life. As a consequence, form bears the weight of problematological differentiation: The more explicit the problem, the more literal the materialization of the resolution. The instance that immediately comes to mind is that of the detective story, in which there is a plot, an enigma, and, at the end, the solution (1987, p. 126).

The tradeoff, then, is between situational informativeness and formal effects. Facing an uninformative situation, I will look for organizing and interpretive schemes. Form, as Meyer says, will bear the weight: "deliteralization in language occurs under the influence of context: the literal formulation is then used to convey some other meaning, being given the context of utterance. The whole problem is to know what happens when the context is minimal as in literature" (1987, p. 125). *Why* is it the *whole problem*? What if it is the *wrong* problem?

The answer presumably is some version of life imitates literature or that there is no difference in principle (see Meyer, 1986c, p. 150) between logical inference, rhetorical inference, and literary interpretation. The inference permitted by such equations is that we interrogate situations much as we read texts. This *looks* like a solution, but it is a bigger puzzle than any of the others we have considered. Problematicity, for Meyer, is the openness and plurality of the answers a reader might give to the questions posed by a text. "There is no underlying proposition which would already be there, as being the so called 'intention of the author.' . . . There is no answer to be discovered, or sought, other than problematicity itself, i.e., textuality as performing the act of questioning in being a text" (1987, p. 126). The more explicit the text, the less problematic the reader's interpretive task; the less explicit the text, the more dependent it is on its form to get the reader onto the preferred agenda of questions and the more open it is to allowing variation in answers.

Knowing this, what do we know about adaptation to context? We *know*, it seems to me, that people find it easier to know what to do in cases where the possibilities are concretely detailed and people's preferences are clearly communicated. We then *guess* that situations, like literatures, vary in informativeness, and that the messages available in contexts will be indefinitely open to alternative interpretations (O'Keefe, 1989). We thus *assume* that there is an interplay between situational informativeness and the need for (and effects of) form. But this is not a solution to the adaptation puzzle-indeed it presents an effective objection to any equation of literary and situated discourse. Where an author's intentions may be hermeneutically bracketted (or deconstructively ignored) vis-à-vis a text, interactants are rarely so cavalier about other' intentions. Indeed there is less reason to think that people respond to communicative acts than to think that they respond to the perceived intentions of other actors (Kreckel, 1981). Thus, it seems to me, we know very little about how adaptations to context work.

CONCLUSION

Adaptation to context is a problem, not a solution. It is puzzling because it is dependent on organizational context and because it varies systemically with speakers' communication competence. Thus, though they certainly don't exhaust the subject, the tools of organizational and developmental analysis may be useful elements of a broader explanation of adaptation. Indeed a view of communication competence, I have argued, is a necessary condition of understanding differences in how speakers succeed and fail to fit their actions to contexts. Thus, it seems to me, using adaptation to context as a defining characteristic of rhetoric is a mistake: Expressives *don't* adapt; Conventionals use rules and etiquettes to participate in conventionally understood games; and Rhetoricals creatively redefine situations and selves so as to facilitate common projects. The general idea of adaptation seems ill-suited to all three logics of message design.

The most immoderate view of adaptation to context is the question-answer pair — which makes rhetorical action an answer fitted as if to a question to particular situational features. This, to my mind, is the least satisfactory formulation. It ignores conversational emergence and interpretive differences; it disregards the organizational structures and processes within which most controversies are embedded; and, by its simplicity, it assumes uniform communication competence. To be sure, human action *is* sometimes intended as an answer to the questions posed by contexts. But this proposition doesn't explain the *fit* of answers to questions. *Fit*, I have argued, is the intriguing puzzle.

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NOTES

[1] Informal logicians have not unreservedly embraced adaptation to context. Most of them I imagine, would agree with Woods (1980: 62) that the principal content of informal logic is fallacy theory. However, I have elsewhere (Willard, 1989) argued that *as practiced*, fallacy theory strongly inclines toward situational analysis. As each fallacy is winnowed with exceptions, situational details become the organizing criterion for deciding whether someone's reasoning is fallacious. Thus, intentionally or not, informal logic must take seriously Johnson and Blair's (1980: x) call for "a focus on the actual natural language arguments used in public discourse, clothed in their native ambiguity, vagueness, and ambiguity."

[2] Traditional rhetorical theorists have not *precluded* the proactive view of rhetoric. On reading an early draft of this paper, Joseph Wenzel noted that Cicero's notion of oratorical genius includes the idea of breaking convention. But this does not detract from the importance I am imputing to the reactive view. Even in claiming that rhetoric changes the world, traditional rhetorical theorists have seen rhetors as respondents in time: in reacting to one situation they create another.

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