

Saga Dialogue and Brynhildr's Mousetrap

Although most saga scholars today would probably express some serious misgivings about the notion that “[saga] conversations are like the talk of living people” (Ker 1957, 183), an examination of this statement might nevertheless lead to a clearer understanding of the differences between saga dialogue and real conversation. Even if it is agreed that Ker merely wants to say that dialogue in the sagas is “vivid” or “lifelike,” I can think of at least three reasons why his remark might be questioned. First, the formulation fails to recognize the inaccuracy of most written imitations of human speech: even an exact transcript of a conversation inserted into a novel would leave out the visual and prosodic elements of talk so essential to its meaning. Second, virtually all real-life utterances would be unusable in a saga, not just because readers would scarcely understand them, but more importantly because saga characters do not resemble real people. Do we really want someone who could jump higher than his own height in his war-weeds and as far backwards as forwards to sound like a flesh-and-blood Icelandic farmer? Third, the tape recorder has revealed that even an indifferent writer can make a character’s speech more coherent, pertinent, and comprehensible than most people’s daily conversational fare. Thus, although it is reasonable to suggest that dialogue in the modern realist novel more accurately represents human speech than saga dialogue does, this superficial resemblance cannot disguise the essential differences between narrative speech and actual talk. As a first step in replacing Ker’s observation with something more useful for literary scholars, we might imagine when reading the dialogue of saga characters that, to quote a student of the novel, “we are witnessing a real conversation but with someone beside us whispering in our ear comments concerning the participants in the discussion” (Hawthorn 1992, 112). What we saga scholars need is a handbook of a saga’s whispered comments, a catalog of conventions that sagas use to give dialogue meaning. In this essay I propose to make a start on the project by applying to an exchange of words in chapter 31 of *Völsunga saga* between Brynhildr and Gunnarr (hereafter referred to as “the exchange”) the analytic methods of linguistic pragmatics, “the science of language seen in relation to its users” (Mey

1993, 5). I will argue that saga conversations are unlike real talk because they are framed, scripted, and read.

Let me briefly explain these three features. Real conversations may be *independent*, whereas narrative dialogue is always *framed*. That is, a conversation may occur without reference to previous or future events, but even when a novel begins with dialogue, it does not occur in a contextual vacuum. A conversation between two strangers on a bus can begin at any point, with no reference to the past or to the future. Narrative talk, however, usually refers backwards (anaphora), or forwards (cataphora), and occasionally it does both, and it always has some relation to the narrative totality.¹ Second, conversation is *contingent*, whereas narrative direct speech is *scripted*.² Conversation is locally managed; without following any rigidly preconceived plan, it develops ad hoc in any direction the participants wish. Narrative speech, on the other hand, is written to conform to a narrative context. No matter what other ends dialogue might serve — to develop character, amuse the reader, create suspense, or introduce information — it must satisfy preordained and externally determined goals. Third, communication in natural conversation occurs the moment a speaker's response is understood by a listener, while in dialogue, communication occurs only when understood by a reader. For a successful conversation to mean something, a speaker must be aware of what his or her partner says and then respond appropriately; even if one participant does not understand everything a partner says, the conversation can continue. It is of no importance whether anyone overhearing the conversation understands, or fails to understand, what is going on. In fact, a conversation could well employ a code designed to prevent an outsider from penetrating the secrecy of a message — for example, a telephone call about a third party actually sitting in the office of one of the participants. However, in dialogue the reader, and not the characters, must comprehend the (always coded) message. To imagine that characters understand dialogue is rather like positing a computer that apprehends what it projects on a screen and prints out on paper. Speakers in fiction must only look like they possess understanding or, alternatively, exhibit confusion, and it is this illusion that constitutes their reality. Thus, a successful conversation may be a spontaneous activity engaged in by live performers who create their own context, plan what they

1. I mean by *context* “those parts of a text preceding and following any particular passage” (Baldick 1990, 45). In sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and pragmatics the term is often used to mean *situation*, and what literary scholars call *context* is labeled *co-text* (see Crystal 1985, 71–72, 79). Thus, for a linguist, the conversation that takes place in a bus between two previously unacquainted speakers has as its context a bus in which two strangers talk to each other; what they say is the co-text. The distinction I am making with *framing* is that in the bus example there need be no direct *carryover* of topics from a previous incident, whereas dialogue presupposes either carryover information, or preparation for something that follows, or both. I discuss the related concept *contextualization* below (58–59).

2. Stubbs (1983, 33) states that such terms as “*spontaneous, unplanned and casual*” apply to natural conversation, and as clarification he cites their opposites, “*artificial, contrived, invented, introspective, intuitive and hypothetical*,” terms that are descriptive of narrative speech.

say ad hoc, and understand each other, but dialogue is precontextualized by the narrative, scripted by a writer, and understood by a reader.

I would like now to examine the exchange in order to define the problems it provides for the reader:

Eptir þetta tal [between Brynhildr and Guðrún in their bower] leggsk Brynhildr í rekkju, ok kómu þessi tíðendi fyrir Gunnar konung, at Brynhildr er sjúk. Hann hittir hana ok spyr hvat henni sé, en hon svarar engu ok liggr sem hon sé dauð. Ok er hann leitar eptir fast, þá svarar hon,

(1) “Hvat gerðir þú af hring þeim er ek selda þér, (2) er Buðli konungr gaf mér at efsta skilnaði, (3) er þér synir Gjúka konungs kómuð til hans ok hétuð at herja eða brenna, nema þér næðið mér? (4) Síðan leiddi hann mik á tal, og spyr hvern ek kora af þeim sem komnir váru, en ek buðumk til at verja landit og vera höfðingi yfir þriðjungi liðs. Váru þá tveir kostir fyrir hendi, at ek munda þeim verða at giptask sem hann vildi, eða vera án alls fjár ok hans vináttu; kvað þó sína vináttu mér mundu betr gegna en reiði. Þá hugsaða ek með mér, hvárt ek skylda hlýða hans vilja eða drepa margan mann. (5.1) Ek þóttumk vanfær til at þreyta við hann, ok þar kom at ek hétumsk þeim er riði hestinum Grana með Fáfnis arfi ok riði minn vafroga og dræpi þá menn er ek kvað á. (6) Nú treystisk engi að ríða nema Sigurðr einn. Hann reið eldinn, því at hann skorti eigi hug til. Hann drap orminn ok Regin ok fimm konunga, (7) en eigi þú, Gunnarr, er þú fólnaðir sem nár, ok ertu engi konungr né kappi. (5.2) Ok þess strengða ek heit heima at feðr míns, at ek munda þeim einum unna, er ágæztr væri alinn, en þat er Sigurðr. (8) Nú erum vér eiðrofa, er vér eigum hann eigi, ok (9) fyrir þetta skal ek ráðandi þíns dauða. (10) Ok eigum vér Grímhildi illt at launa. Henni finnsk engi kona huglausari né verri.”

Gunnarr svarar svá at fáir heyrðu,

“Morg flærðarorð hefir þú mælt, ok ertu illúðig kona, er þú ámælis þeiri konu er mjök er um þik fram, ok eigi unði hon verr sínu, svá sem þú gerir, eða kvalði dauða menn, ok engan myrði hon, og lifir við lof.”

Brynhildr svarar, “Ekki höfum vér launþing haft né ódáðir gert, ok annat er vart eðli, ok fúsari værim vér at drepa yðr.”

Síðan vildi hon drepa Gunnar konung, en Högni setti hana í fjotra.

Gunnarr mælti þá, “Eigi vil ek at hon búi í fjotrum.”

Hon svarar, “Hirð eigi þat, því at aldrei sér þú mik glaða síðan í þinni holl eða drekka né tefla né hugat mæla né gulli leggja góð klæði né yðr ráð gefa.” (Finch 1965, 53–54)³

[After this conversation Brynhildr took to her bed, and word was brought to King Gunnarr that Brynhildr was sick. He went to her and asked what ailed her. She made no answer and lay as if she were dead. When he persisted, she answered,

(1) “What did you do with the ring I gave you, (2) the one King Buðli gave me at our last parting (3) when you sons of King Gjúki came to him and threatened to destroy or burn unless you obtained me? (4) Then he led me aside and asked which of those who had come I would choose, but I offered to defend the land and be a commander of a third of the army. There were then two choices to hand, that I would have to marry the one he chose, or be without all wealth and his friendship. He said also that his friendship would serve me better than his anger. Then I considered whether I should accede to his will or kill many a man. (5.1) I judged myself incapable of contending against him,

3. The arabic numerals in parentheses in the exchange are my addition and designate points raised by Brynhildr which I will discuss later.

and so I promised myself to the one who would ride the horse Grani with Fáfnir's legacy, ride through my flame wall, and kill those men I chose. (6) Now no one but Sigurðr dared to ride through the fire because he did not lack courage to do so. He killed the dragon and Reginn and five kings, (7) but not you, Gunnarr, who grew as pale as a corpse, and you are neither a king nor a champion. (5.2) And I swore this oath at my father's, that I would love that man alone who was the most noble born, and that is Sigurðr. (8) Now I am an oath breaker, because I do not have him, and (9) that is why I will contrive your death. (10) And I will repay Grímhildr evil for evil. No woman can be found worse or more cowardly than her."

Gunnarr answers so that few heard,

"You have spoken many false words, and you are a malicious woman, because you malign that woman who is far superior to you, and she was not so dissatisfied as you, nor did she torment dead men, and she murdered no one, and lives in honor."

Brynhildr answers, "I have not had secret meetings nor have I committed any crimes, and my nature is different, and I would more eagerly kill you."

Then she wanted to kill King Gunnarr, but Hǫgni put her in fetters.

Gunnarr then spoke, "I don't want her to remain in fetters."

She answers, "Take no notice of that, for never again will you see me cheerful in your hall nor drink nor play chess nor speak joyfully nor weave gold into fine clothes nor give you counsel."]

A preliminary analysis of the exchange might conclude that it looks more like natural conversation than narrative dialogue. That is, it appears to violate the three principles of narrative direct speech just outlined. First, the exchange does not seem to fit its context: Brynhildr summarizes incidents and events as if the reader (and Gunnarr) ought to recognize them when, in fact, she either mentions some of them for the first time or distorts them in the retelling.⁴ Second, even if the dialogue does not appear entirely contingent, it does not seem well scripted; Brynhildr and Gunnarr do not seem to stick to one point; indeed, the problem in this exchange is to determine its point. Third, while wife and husband would seem to understand each other, most readers would be confused by much of what they say. We might want to imagine that the exchange less resembles dialogue than an argument between the next-door neighbors whose wrangling wakes us in the middle of the night. Whereas the neighbors understand what they are saying — conjugal misery has apparently given them plenty of context — we can tell only that they are angry, but not why. The exchange seems like a conversation, because both Brynhildr and Gunnarr take turns, respond, at least in part, to what the other says, and exchange information. The paradox presented by the exchange is that where it seems most like conversation — that is, in its apparently haphazard char-

4. New information is her claim that she gave Gunnarr a ring (1), that Buðli gave her a ring (2), that she and her father had a conversation about her choice of marriage partner (4), that she promised herself to the man who would ride Grani and kill those men she chose (5.1), and that she swore to marry the most noble man born (5.2). Distortion occurs when she alleges that Gunnarr and his retinue threatened her father unless one of them obtained Brynhildr in marriage, whereas in fact their appeal to Buðli and his response, as narrated at the beginning of chapter 29, are remarkably absent of rancor. I will discuss the narrative and stylistic significance of these peculiarities below.

acter — it smacks of bad dialogue. I will argue that pragmatics can help us to resolve this paradox.

One way of demonstrating how the exchange differs from conversation is to analyze Brynhildr and Gunnarr's dispute as if it were a videotaped transcript of an actual argument between the next-door neighbors. My analysis will rely on the methods developed by a branch of pragmatics called conversation analysis, which endeavors to explain what happens when people talk to each other. Conversation analysis has shown that conversations, despite a fairly common belief that they are loosely, even arbitrarily structured, obey their own systems of rules, which differ from those governing other texts. In describing how conversations begin, develop, and conclude, conversation analysis attempts to develop "categories of analysis . . . that participants themselves can be shown to utilize in making sense of interaction" (Levinson 1983, 295). This precept entails the notion that, in contrast to most other forms of language usage, *correct* is not a term that applies to conversation (Mey 1993, 192). That is, there are no generative rules for conversations quite like those for forming sentences,⁵ because there will always be speakers capable of communicating with each other in ways not anticipated by the analysts' book of rules. By applying some principles of conversation analysis to the exchange as if it were raw conversation, I will show why we would understand very little of it as natural language, that is, as an interchange taken out of its narrative context. This simple point supports my contention that the exchange communicates information because the saga frames it and scripts it for us to read.

Perhaps the sine qua non of conversation is "turn-taking" (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974), the participants' willingness to speak and then yield the floor in a give and take manner that resembles two tennis players warming up on court before a match begins. The tennis players and the conversational partners recognize when it is their turn, and seldom does either pair misjudge this moment.⁶ The exchange seems most like conversation because the speeches alternate between Brynhildr and Gunnarr according to the following scheme:

5. Successful and unsuccessful conversations do, of course, occur. Tannen defines these as follows: "It is sharing of conversational strategies that creates the feeling of satisfaction which accompanies and follows successful conversation: the sense of being understood, being 'on the same wave length', belonging, and therefore of sharing identity. Conversely, a lack of congruity in conversational strategies creates the opposite feeling: of dissonance, not being understood, not belonging and therefore of not sharing identity" (Tannen 1982, 217). Generally speaking, the Gumperz school of conversation analysis focuses on unsuccessful conversations in order to study what they tell us about specific social issues (Gumperz 1982a, b).

6. Occasionally tennis opponents warming up will each simultaneously hit a ball across the net in the same way that one participant in an interchange will sometimes speak at the same time as another. While I have no statistics about how often this happens on center court at, say, Wimbledon, conversation analysis has established that this kind of overlap occurs in something like only five percent of the recorded conversations, and like tennis players who hit balls at the same time as their opponents, this mistake is quickly "repaired," the tennis players with a wave of a hand and the conversation partners with various visual and prosodic turn-taking cues that will be discussed below as "contextualization cues" (59). For

G: What's wrong with you (indirect speech)?

B: Where is my ring, etc.?

G: Who are you to criticize my mother?

B: I am different.

G: Don't tie her up.

B: You will have no more joy from me no matter what you do.

Alternation between speakers is, however, not the same as turn-taking, a characteristic of which is that in successful conversations one good turn explains another (Levinson 1983, 321). That is, when A speaks and B responds, any additional remarks will usually help explain the interaction. For example, when A asks "Have you stopped beating your wife yet?" and B pauses for five seconds, then A's comment, "I see you are kind of touchy on the subject," provides an interpretation of the hesitation. Without A's second remark, the significance of the pause for the analyst would be problematical, because there are too many possible explanation for B's reticence. Any additional remarks in this fictional conversation would aid further understanding. Are the two joking, or was A's initial question a hostile opening gambit? Speakers A and B would make this clear in their subsequent "local management" of the conversation. But the major problem in the exchange, which shows us how it differs from conversation, is that virtually nothing said by Brynhildr or Gunnarr helps to explain the obscurities and oddities in each other's utterances. Let us examine this point in some detail.

In response to Gunnarr's insistence that she tell him what is ailing her, Brynhildr's initial turn mentions ten largely unrelated topics: (1) the ring she gave Gunnarr, (2) its provenance (it belonged to Buðli), (3) the "false" wooing scene, (4) Buðli's "false" threat (the "falseness" will be explained below), (5) Brynhildr's marriage stipulations, (6) Sigurðr the hero, (7) Gunnarr's cowardice, (8) Brynhildr's oath-breaking, (9) her threat, (10) Grímhildr's role in the troubles. Now by definition no one could state categorically that a conversational turn cannot resemble Brynhildr's catalog of woes, but an analyst would almost assuredly conclude from the transcript that she is more than a little garrulous: here is a speaker who has raised to the power of ten an inability to take turns. Moreover, she seems to be violating "a general rule . . . that it is your business not to tell people what you can suppose they know" (Coulthard 1985, 79). Indeed, the exchange resembles, without stretching the comparison too far, recorded instances of "schizophrenic discourse" (Mey 1993, 238–39). In an examination of the exchange as conversation, we would look to Gunnarr's response to explain various points in her turn. We would be disappointed.

Perhaps the main reason for this disappointment is that Brynhildr's turn offers Gunnarr too many topics for him to respond to. After all, it would not be his

obvious reasons, the visual and phonemic evidence essential to conversation analysis cannot be utilized in my analysis. I will attempt to take these aspects into account later, but for now the aspect of turn-taking that I have chosen for my analysis depends upon something that readers can experience, the ability of one written utterance to explain another.

job in a conversation to make clear to analysts what they do not understand in her turn, but to figure out what she is getting at and respond to it. His response (“my mother is not as bad as you are”) suggests that he has decided that the purpose of her turn, in fact its clearest point, is to attack his mother. Notice how much more we would learn if he asked her about some of the obscurer points: the ring (points 1 and 2), or the wooing scene she describes (3), or Buðli’s threat (4), or her marriage stipulations (5). In a real conversation, we might conclude that he avoids answering the question about the ring because he does not understand it. On the other hand, perhaps he is ducking the question. In real life he could have given it to a girlfriend, pawned it to cover gambling debts, or lost it on the golf course. Perhaps he thinks his wife is cracking up and does not want to contradict her version of the wooing scene or deny that he is a coward, and thus retreats to the familiar ground of defending his mother. Whatever the case may be, we would have no clue as to why she begins with a question about a ring, gives her husband a bogus history lesson, and then concludes by insulting his mother. Her next turn, we would hope, would clear up some of the ambiguities. Again, disappointment looms.

Brynhildr’s next turn ignores the points Gunnarr has failed to take up. Most importantly, she does not return to the subject of the ring. We might well conclude from our transcript that the question was not significant. The rest of the turn would further contribute to our sense of her discursive style. Indeed, one of her responses (“I have had no secret meetings”) seems so unmotivated that one scholar suggests emending the text (Heinrichs 1985, 56–57; 1986, 121).⁷ Moreover, when she says “annat er vart eðli” [my nature is different], we cannot be sure whether she means that she differs from Gunnarr or his mother.⁸ Thus, while turn-taking, in the sense that the disputants engage in serial exchanges, does occur in the transcript, we do not learn much from it.⁹ In fact, if this were a real conversation we

7. Given my translation of “eigi unði hon verr sínu, svá sem þú gerir” [and she (Grímhildr) was not so dissatisfied as you are], Brynhildr’s response that she had no secret meetings seems, in addition to being untrue, totally irrelevant. But if we accept Heinrichs’s (1985, 56–57; 1986, 121n17) emendation (“eigi unði hon ver [i.e., *frumverr*] sínum”) and the subsequent translation “and she [Grímhildr] did not enjoy her lover as you do,” then her response makes good sense. As much as I would like to believe that this is what she is saying, I am skeptical of emending an apparently clear reading.

8. In contrast to the well-argued explanations of this statement which Heinrichs offers (1985, 58–59; 1986, 122), I would like to suggest that Brynhildr is claiming another sexual orientation from those of Sigurðr, Gunnarr, and Grímhildr, namely that she is homosexual. Although it is unlikely that she wants Gunnarr or Sigurðr to understand her remark in this sense, this is, at least for modern readers, an additional issue. It would be helpful for the reader to have either Gunnarr in the exchange or Sigurðr later in the saga (e.g., Finch 1965, 56) comment on her uses of *eðli*. A real husband or lover might well ask her, but the saga author (perhaps intentionally) leaves the matter for us to decide. Of course, it is entirely possible that the saga author never conceived of Brynhildr in these terms. For him the fact that she does not want to get married may be simply a social issue. The sagas are explicit about male homosexuality, but they only hint here and there at this orientation among females. For example, in *Brennu-Njáls saga* chap. 35, Hallgerðr observes that Bergþóra has a man’s fingernails (Sveinsson 1954, 91).

9. One thing missing from the exchange are any signs of “turn-competition” (Auer 1992, 8), the fighting for the right to speak. In an interchange as heated as this one, it would be unlikely that there would be

would have to throw up our hands and say that we have too little context to understand more than the simple fact that this marriage has real problems. Arguments overheard in the night are seldom this confusing.

A second means of showing how little the exchange resembles conversation is to take up another conversation analysis category, “adjacency pairs.” Adjacency pairs — such as question-answer (on the telephone: “Hello, is John there?”/“Yes, just a minute”), greeting-greeting (“How are you today?”/“Fine, thank you”), accusation-rebuttal (“You lied to me”/“I did it for your own peace of mind”), request-compliance (“Would you tell me a little about yourself”/“Well, I was not always so modest”) and offer-acceptance (“Would you like a drink?”/“Just a large one, please”) — predict what speakers will say. These links are fundamental to conversational navigation, because in predicting a partner’s responses, they also control them, at least up to a point. This is all part of local management. Failures to answer a question, to return a greeting, to disregard an accusation, or to accept an offer short-circuit the conversational flow and, therefore, must be explained or justified. That is, if A fails to answer Q’s question, then A usually justifies the omission. Alternatively, the omission is noticed and commented upon by the questioner (Levinson 1983, 303–8). But in the exchange, as we have seen, because these conditions seem not to be met, it breaks down at the first turn-taking. On the other hand, perhaps we are “to assume that whatever follows a question simply *is* the answer” (Mey 1993, 245). That is, the exchange might work as conversation if we assume that Gunnarr understands the question and provides an answer that she comprehends, which in turn causes her to wish him dead. Our problem as conversation analysts would be that Brynhildr and Gunnarr do not explain how they understand each other — for which they are not to be faulted — but we would certainly be puzzled about the information that they had exchanged. We draw a similar conclusion from one other adjacency pair in the exchange, where Gunnarr begins the conversation by demanding (in indirect speech) that Brynhildr explain what is ailing her. Her first turn is presumably her explanation, but how would we understand her answer with only a transcript before us? As we will see later, even sophisticated readers have had trouble answering this question, so it is no wonder that we would be mystified if we could consult only a written text of the conversation. As analysts of such a text, we are befuddled, but sense that Brynhildr and Gunnarr communicate a dark and shared message. Once again, we need literary context, or framing, to dispel the darkness.

The final means of demonstrating the nonconversational character of the exchange is to show how its context differs from that of a conversation. As stated above, dialogue is largely precontextualized, whereas in every conversation the participants themselves must contextualize (that is, provide a context for) their

no attempt to interrupt or otherwise curtail the statement (for example, by “competitive incoming” [Auer 1992, 10]) of such controversial charges as the two make against each other. In a real conversation this competition is often carried out by means of prosodic elements, such as pitch, accent, and volume.

utterances. Overstating this difference to some degree, we might say that the narrative context of dialogue is *given*, while conversational context is *emergent*. In one branch of conversation analysis,¹⁰ *contextualization* has been defined as “all activities by participants which make relevant, maintain, revise, cancel . . . any aspect of context which, in turn, is responsible for the interpretation of an utterance in its particular locus of occurrence” (Auer 1992, 4). *Context* is a “flexible” and “reflexive” notion, whereby “language is not determined by context, but contributes itself in essential ways to the construction of context” (Auer 1992, 21).¹¹ Important in contextualization are *contextualization cues*, devices that “are used by speakers in order to enact a context for the interpretation of a particular utterance” (Auer 1992, 25). Besides the literal meaning of language, the most important cues are prosody (pitch, accent, intonation, rhythm, and loudness), gesture, posture, mimics, and gaze.¹² For obvious reasons we cannot analyze most of these cues in the exchange. But imagine that we could write a dramatic script using only the words in the dialogue, rehearse actors to perform it according to our interpretation of the scene, videotape it, and then analyze it in order to determine how it provides context for all of Brynhildr’s and Gunnarr’s utterances. In the following attempt to carry out these steps, I will show how few contextualization cues the exchange provides and how it thus differs from talk.

Our first problem in dramatizing the exchange is to determine how the dispute is “orchestrated” (Auer 1992, 5), that is, where to emphasize the point at which things begin to heat up. If we wish to supply Brynhildr with cues that she will make a part of her performance, we must know where she ought to begin to express her anger in the form of pitch, loudness, gesture, mimics, and so on. We must also decide how much of this anger she will use for its effect upon Gunnarr: does she simulate good cheer at the beginning, move through easy stages of mounting anger towards rage, or does she begin on a shrill note that gets immediately out of hand? Let us approach the point of highest excitement on her part, if in fact there is such a point, in reverse order, beginning at the segment where Brynhildr’s anger is most obvious (“Ok eigum vér Grímhildi illt at launa” [And I will repay Grímhildr evil for evil]). Her anger is likewise clear when she accuses Gunnarr of cowardice (see [7] above, p. 53/54) and when she states that only

10. The seminal work done in this area is that of Jenny and John Gumperz in the 1970s and continued by John Gumperz in the 1980s and 1990s. See Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz 1978; Gumperz 1982a, b.

11. Participants in a conversation “construe context in order to communicate. This means: language is not only a semiotic system the actual usage of which is determined by the context; this semiotic system . . . is in itself also responsible for the availability of the very context which is necessary in order to interpret the structures encoded in it. Context, therefore, is not just given as such in an interaction, but is the outcome of participants’ joint efforts to make it available” (Auer 1992, 22).

12. Gumperz (1982a, 131) defines them as “constellations of surface features of message form . . . the means by which speakers signal and listeners interpret what the activity is, how semantic content is to be understood and *how* each sentence relates to what precedes or follows . . . For the most part they are habitually used and perceived but rarely consciously noted and almost never talked about directly.”

Sigurðr dared ride through the flames. So much is obvious, but how are we to instruct the actress playing Brynhildr to handle utterances 1–5.1? How will her abilities as an actress contextualize the relevance between the question about what Gunnarr did with the ring and her account of the false wooing? It is here, I would argue, that the exchange differs most from conversation. Brynhildr’s speech is hardly more than a stringing together of a series of narrative non-sequiturs. Chief among these is her reinvention of the wooing scene. She appears to be telling Gunnarr something that he already knows, but in fact she is really telling him something he (and the reader) already knows to be untrue, namely that he and his retinue threatened Brynhildr’s father. In a conversation, he would ordinarily interrupt her at some point in this revised history, presumably no later than in the middle of (3), “ok hétuð at herja eða brenna, nema þér næðið mér” [and threatened to destroy or burn unless you obtained me], in order to correct her aberrant version. At the least he would say something like: “But we did not threaten your father.” We would therefore instruct Brynhildr to speed up her delivery in order to prevent an interruption at this obvious “transition relevance place,” that is, a point at which a turn ends and another speaker takes over (see Levinson 1983, 297). As we read the exchange, however, there is no suggestion that Gunnarr, here or anywhere else, competes for a chance to make this objection. We would have to add much to the scene in order to make this exchange seem more like a conversation.

Indeed, one of the first things we would notice about the exchange is that, unlike conversations — or, for that matter, dramatic dialogue or any other pragmatic use of language — the participants do not seem interested in eliciting responses. Brynhildr ticks off a list of topics from her agenda — whatever it may be — and when she is finished, Gunnarr is left to respond. Her topics do not contextualize themselves, in two senses of the word. First (the sense of the word in conversation analysis), she never seems to make clear to Gunnarr what the question about the ring has to do with her unhappiness; how, we must ask, could he know what ring she is talking about? Second (the literature scholar’s sense of context), this ring is problematical, for she seems to introduce a third ring. We remember that two other rings have figured in the saga up to this point: (1) *Andvaranautr*, which Sigurðr plunders from Fáfñir’s hoard and gives Brynhildr as a betrothal ring (in chap. 25; Finch 1965, 44.3–4); (2) an unnamed ring that Sigurðr, having changed shapes with Gunnarr during the “chaste nights” (Heinrichs 1986, 119) gives Brynhildr in exchange for *Andvaranautr* (in chap. 29; Finch 1965, 50.5). But because we have seen neither Buðli give Brynhildr a ring nor her give one to Gunnarr, this third ring is a mystery. If we could be sure of this ring’s context, among other things its significance, then we could dramatize Gunnarr’s reaction to her question. But as I demonstrated in the discussion on turn-taking above, Gunnarr fails to respond to this question. If he does not know what she is talking about, then we could instruct him in the videotaped reenactment to express surprise in his mimics and gestures and, perhaps, in his gaze, either directly at his

wife or his brother, Hǫgni, who is present during the exchange.¹³ If he does know what she is talking about and refuses to answer her question, then we would try to have him express his understanding, most likely by gazing knowingly at Hǫgni without allowing his wife to see his face. Readers who have commented on this ring, however, appear to have no idea of its function within this exchange. In fact, it has been regarded as evidence that the author did not harmonize his sources (Heusler 1969, 270). We could sketch several variations on the dramatic possibilities of the ring question, but until we understand its function — a matter I will take up below when I discuss the literary context of Brynhildr's speech — we would be unable to direct the actor portraying Gunnarr at this point. Notice how the text, unlike a conversation, gives us virtually no help in deciding whether Gunnarr understands Brynhildr's gambit. I assert, at least for the time being, that whether he does or not is insignificant. A conversation analyst, unlike a literary scholar, would be unhappy if one participant's degree of understanding could not be established.

Another of Brynhildr's statements that fails to contextualize itself is her version of the wooing scene (see [3], [4], [5.1], and [5.2]). Here again we are dealing with two meanings of contextualization: first, her remark appears not to fit the narrative context, because Sigurðr, Gunnarr, and Hǫgni did not threaten her father, she was not present when they visited Buðli, and she made no oaths about choosing only the man who could ride Grani or would kill certain men; second, what is the relation between this embellished account of the wooing and her question about the ring or her accusation that Grímhildr is the source of her woes? How would we instruct the actor playing Gunnarr to react to this narrative account, except to have him express bewilderment? But then we would be imposing our bewilderment upon Gunnarr when we have no evidence that he is, in fact, confused. Could it be that the character Gunnarr understands what she is up to? But as a character in a narrative, as opposed to a participant in a conversation, he has no understanding of details unless the author thematizes his reaction to them, something which the text does not do. That is, the text does not allow Gunnarr to express surprise, and it would seem to be a problem to interpret something absent from the text.

So far we have seen how the exchange differs from conversation. These differences suggest that the exchange would mean little out of its narrative context, because the characters' language does not seem to create a context that makes their remarks comprehensible: they, after all, have no understanding of what is said. Conversations, on the other hand, are comprehensible to analysts because they first make sense to the participants, who give their utterances meaning by

13. Conversation analysis would also deal with Hǫgni's nonspeaking presence in terms of *gaze*, not only the duration, intensity, and frequency of his alternating glances from Brynhildr to Gunnarr but theirs directed at him. My discussion, in the interests of economy, leaves out this element.

using mutually understood, if tacit, conversational cues. When analysts understand these cues, they too can make sense of talk.

I would like to suggest that the exchange does not resemble actual talk or direct speech in the modern novel but should be regarded as a saga device in which characters say things to satisfy narrative expediency. Moreover, I will argue that the exchange attempts to weave a competing narrative into the dominant part of the *Brynhildr* story. Finally, I will show that this competing narrative contextualizes the exchange in such a way that several obscurities can be explained. Let me take up these points in order.

While all successful dialogue satisfies narrative expediency of some kind (see page 52 above), direct speech in sagas assumes a relatively large narrative burden. Put simply, saga dialogue tells more of the story than novel dialogue usually does. Quite frequently, saga characters make statements that contradict or add to narrative matter that we have previously read. In all such cases the statements comprise inaccurate reports of the actions, because the characters fabricate events. Such details are initially mystifying and seem to be a snag in the narrative fabric of a saga, whose patterns at times resemble the linear arrangement of scenes woven into a tapestry which we take in as we stroll by. These postpositional narrative additions — which we might think of as unannounced flashbacks — interrupt the flow of the narrative, causing us to look back a page or two at a scene that straightforwardly portrays some simple action. The additions revisit the previously narrated scene and, as it were, reopen it for new narrative coverage. We might want to think of this procedure as the text's reshuffling the deck of cards that make up a type-scene: at one point in the saga, the aces are at the top of the deck, but later on when they are no longer needed they are buried further down in the pack as other cards are dealt. While as novel readers we are used to the fixed arrangement of the narrative details, medieval saga readers or hearers presumably regarded the rearrangements as a “new deal,” during which the dealer deals another hand from a deck that is stacked to cater for changing narrative needs. Although this narrative method strikes us as decidedly odd, the formula is actually quite simple: dramatize a scene, and then later add to this scene whatever details are needed. To discuss the implications of this saga habit would take us beyond the limits of the present discussion (see Heinemann 1994 for a fuller discussion of this type-scene), but an examination of *Brynhildr*'s sleight-of-hand tricks will teach us how to read the exchange.

Brynhildr creates a new context that gives a different slant to her story. In recontextualizing the wooing scene,¹⁴ she embellishes two scenes portrayed at the beginning of chapter 29:

14. We remember that she tells us that her father initially insisted that she marry the man whom he would choose from among the three suitors who threatened to destroy his realm unless they obtained his daughter as a bride. She then states that she stipulated, presumably with her father's agreement, that she

Þeir [Gunnarr, Sigurðr, Hogni, and their retinue] búa nú ferð sína listuliga, ríða nú fjöll ok dali til Buðla konungs. Bera upp bónorðit. Hann tók því vel, ef hon vill eigi níta, ok segir hana svá stóra at þann einn mann mun hon eiga er hon vill. Þá ríða þeir í Hlymdali. Heimir fagnar þeim vel. Segir Gunnarr nú ørendin. Heimir kvað hennar kjör vera, hvern hon skal eiga. Segir þar sal hennar skammt frá, ok kvazk þat hyggja at þann einn mundi hon eiga vilja er riði eld brennanda er sleginn er um sal hennar. (Finch 1965, 48)

[They prepared their expedition cunningly, ride over mountains and through dales to King Buðli's. They make their marriage proposal. He received it well, on the condition that she does not refuse it, and says she is so proud that she will marry only the man whom she wishes. Then they ride to Hlymdalir. Heimir welcomes them warmly. Gunnarr states their business. Heimir said that the choice of her husband will be her own. Says that her bower is nearby and said that he thought she would desire only the one who could ride through the burning flames that surround her bower.]

I do not regard Brynhildr's tale in the exchange as narrative excrescence — as an unnecessary doubling testifying to the text's sloppy construction — but rather as a redeal of the kind discussed above. Heimir's reference to the condition that the successful suitor must conquer the flames, the saga's first mention of the flame wall, implies that Brynhildr has been actively seeking a mate and that the fire-enclosed bower is a test to choose a suitable husband (Andersson 1980, 240). It tells us nothing about why Brynhildr employs this device or when she first began to make use of it. But her postpositional addition to this story makes clear that she has been pressured into marriage by her father: apparently fed up with his daughter's celibate state after Sigurðr has left her in the lurch, Buðli tells her that she is going to have to marry and that this time he will do the choosing. To counter his proposal, she forces or persuades her father to agree that she will marry only the man who rides through her flames, etc.¹⁵ Thus, the competing narrative tells us that when suitors appear at Buðli's or Heimir's, she retreats to her bower until, unable to penetrate the flame wall, they give up and ride on. The flame wall is designed to *eliminate* all suitors, not to provide a test that screens out those who are unworthy. She never expects anyone to penetrate the flames because the stipulations that she places upon the successful suitor all point directly towards Sigurðr. But because he was already married when she set the conditions for the suitor, she assumed that he would never make the attempt and that her

would marry only “the one who would ride the horse Grani with Fafnir's legacy, ride through my flame wall, and kill those men I designated.” A reader of this article would be outraged at my summary if I had changed some of the details!

15. This is reminiscent of her stipulation, after Óðinn has condemned her to marriage, that she will marry only a man who knows no fear: “Ek fellda Hjúlmgunnar í orrostu, en Óðinn stakk mik svefnþorni í hefnd þess ok kvað mik aldri síðan skyldu sigr hafa ok kvað mik giptask skulu. En ek strengða þess heit þar í mót at giptask engum þeim er hræðask kynni” [I killed Hjúlm-Gunnarr in battle, but Óðinn pricked me with the sleep thorn to avenge this and said that never again would I gain a victory and that I would have to marry. But I, in return, made a solemn vow to marry no one who knows fear] (chap. 21; Finch 1965, 35.19–22). In both cases it is unclear why she has the power to compel both Óðinn and her father to accept these conditions. All the conditions imply that she wishes to marry no one.

celibacy would therefore continue forever.¹⁶ Thus, the exchange's wooing scene portrays Brynhildr's efforts to avoid marriage after Sigurðr's departure.

The purpose of this device explains the mystery confronting Brynhildr and Heimir after Sigurðr/Gunnarr has penetrated her flame wall:

Þann sama dag fór Brynhildr heim til fóstura síns ok segir honum af trúnaði at til hennar kom einn konungr — “Ok reið minn vafroga ok kvazk kominn til ráða við mik ok nefndisk Gunnarr. En ek sagða at þat mundi Sigurðr einn gera, er ek vann eiða á fjallinu, ok er hann minn frumverr.” (Finch 1965, 50.7–12)

[The same day Brynhildr went to her foster father's and tells him privately that a king had come to her “and rode through my flame wall and said that he had come to marry me and identified himself as Gunnarr. But I said that only Sigurðr, to whom I swore an oath on the mountain, could do this, and that he was my first lover.”]

Precisely why they are puzzled becomes clear only after Brynhildr adds her wooing scene in the exchange to the two scenes narrated at the beginning of chap. 29. Heimir has been a party to Brynhildr's secret use of the flames to maintain her celibacy, and they cannot understand what has gone wrong with the plan. The two earlier wooing scenes momentarily place the reader in Buðli's state of ignorance: it looks to us, as to him, as if she is seeking a husband. But the exchange's revised wooing scene disabuses us of this notion by forcing us to run through the plot once again until we discover the precise character of her stratagem. As we turn over this plot in our minds, we seem to discover its ingenuity on our own and thus to embrace it as if we were part of the secret. The strangeness of this central episode results from its riddling quality and not from an alleged inability to harmonize sources.

Another effect of the revised wooing scene is that it contextualizes Brynhildr's remarks. Her first move after confiding her confusion to Heimir is to provoke a quarrel with Guðrún at the beginning of chapter 30, who blurts out the solution to the riddle. More than one reader has found this scene, or its form, pointless (See 1981, 222), but if we understand that she is seeking information as to how she was tricked, the encounter makes perfectly good sense. She blanches when Guðrún shows her the ring not because she learns that she has been deceived — she already smells a rat — but because she learns for certain that Sigurðr is a party to the plan. Thus she resolves upon revenge and decides to investigate further by asking Gunnarr what he did with the ominous ring. On a naturalistic level Brynhildr uses the ring question as a trap. That is, if the ring she is referring to is the one she ostensibly gave him when he spent the three nights with her dur-

16. The postpositioning of Brynhildr's wooing scene is a structural means of emphasizing what logic also tells us: that the flame wall came into use *after* Sigurðr took leave of Brynhildr. If it had been in existence while Sigurðr was still available for marriage, or if she had used it to test *all* suitors, then Sigurðr would have had to face the flames in his own person. But the fact that he betrothed himself to Brynhildr twice without doing so makes clear that the device comes into play only after his marriage to Guðrún. Thus, the semiotics of structure tells us that the device is not merely something mentioned after the fact but an important part of the plot that is presented when its significance is most effective.

ing the chaste nuptials, then Gunnarr cannot know what ring she is talking about simply because he was not there. Nor, presumably, can he know the history of the ring, so that he cannot say, "but Buðli did not give you that ring, rather it was given to you by Sigurðr when you betrothed yourself to him on the mountain." Conversely, we can assume that he knows everything because Sigurðr told him what happened: after all, the purpose of the sword placed between the two of them would make little sense unless Sigurðr reported it to Gunnarr afterwards as a guarantee that as proxy wooer he did not exceed his mandate. Naturalistically, Gunnarr might have been able to say that he gave Guðrún the ring. On the other hand, he may well have seen that the jig was up, all was lost, and they were in for hard times ahead. We could spin versions of this scenario ad infinitum, but although this might well be the function of such dialogue in a novel, I believe that the exchange has very little psychological function and is designed merely to provide us with narrative information. This mixture of new information with untrue events causes us to fill in the plot so as to foreground Brynhildr's situation. Finally, she is outraged not because she obtained the lesser man, but because Sigurðr tricked her into relinquishing her desired celibate state.

I have tried to show that saga dialogue differs from actual talk. Moreover, direct speech in sagas little resembles dialogue in novels. We should not exaggerate this last point, for saga and novel dialogue are often similar because both obey narrative rather than conversation laws. By the same token I would not deny that some direct speech in sagas resembles both direct speech in novels and real conversations. This resemblance is inevitable given the number of times characters in sagas exchange information with each other. As saga characters are types who speak only "in character" as a necessary attribute of their type and not, as in a novel, in a manner that develops their psychological depth so as to make them comprehensible to readers, some saga dialogue will resemble talk. But these cases are never of much significance, nor are such instances of any great length. Both are imitations of real talk, even though they often differ from another. Once we adjust ourselves to the unusual convention of postpositional renarratization, then we can explain much about dialogue in the sagas. The whispered comments that novel readers are used to hearing in their ears find their counterparts in the saga's sometimes rather insistent tugging at our earlobes that tells us "this is not real conversation, but information that you need to know to figure out a tricky part of the story." How typical the exchange between Brynhildr and Gunnarr is of saga dialogue in general is a point I will leave for my readers to decide. There is no point in attempting to deny that I have chosen the exchange because of its problematic nature, and if it is true of law that hard cases make for bad law, then it may also be correct that difficult saga dialogue may be the wrong place to begin to define its essential character. I can only hope that my observations, if found convincing in their application to *Völsunga saga*, may have a more general significance.

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