Tenor in a Dynamic Model of Context

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0. Roadmap

- I want to discuss three concepts I think very important in the modelling of context, and applicable to Tenor:

    1. Context (and thus tenor) is dynamic

    2. Context (and thus tenor) is subjective

    3. Context (and thus tenor) is a semiotic system

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- I want to discuss three concepts I think very important in the modelling of context, and applicable to Tenor
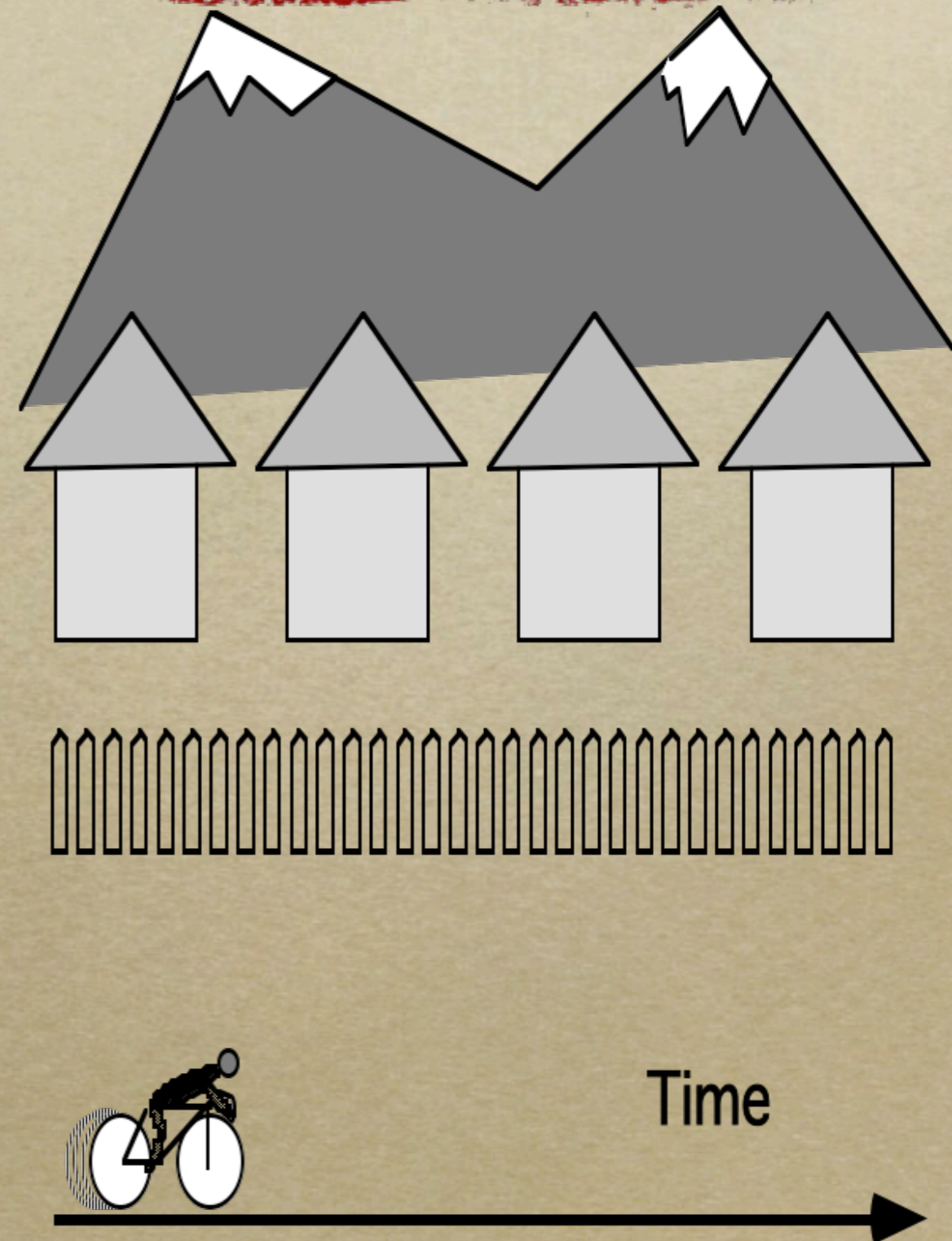
  → 1. Context (and thus tenor) is dynamic

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1. Context is Dynamic

- Context often seen as constant over a text.

- Better seen as something that can change even within a text.

- E.g. Changing register due to changing generic stages

    (Diagram from Petie Sefton)

Time

1. Context is Dynamic

- Nearly all elements of Field, Tenor and Mode are at risk of changing within a text or interaction:

    - **Field**: topic of conversation may evolve during a conversation (cf. Matthiessen logogenetic networks)

    - **Tenor**: An author may start off formally, but gradually moves to an informal tenor.

    - **Mode**: A conversation may start in spoken mode, but shift to writing.

- This is not to say that all of context does change through an interaction: but it is *at risk* of changing.

1. Context is Dynamic

- I will assume a very simple Tenor system:
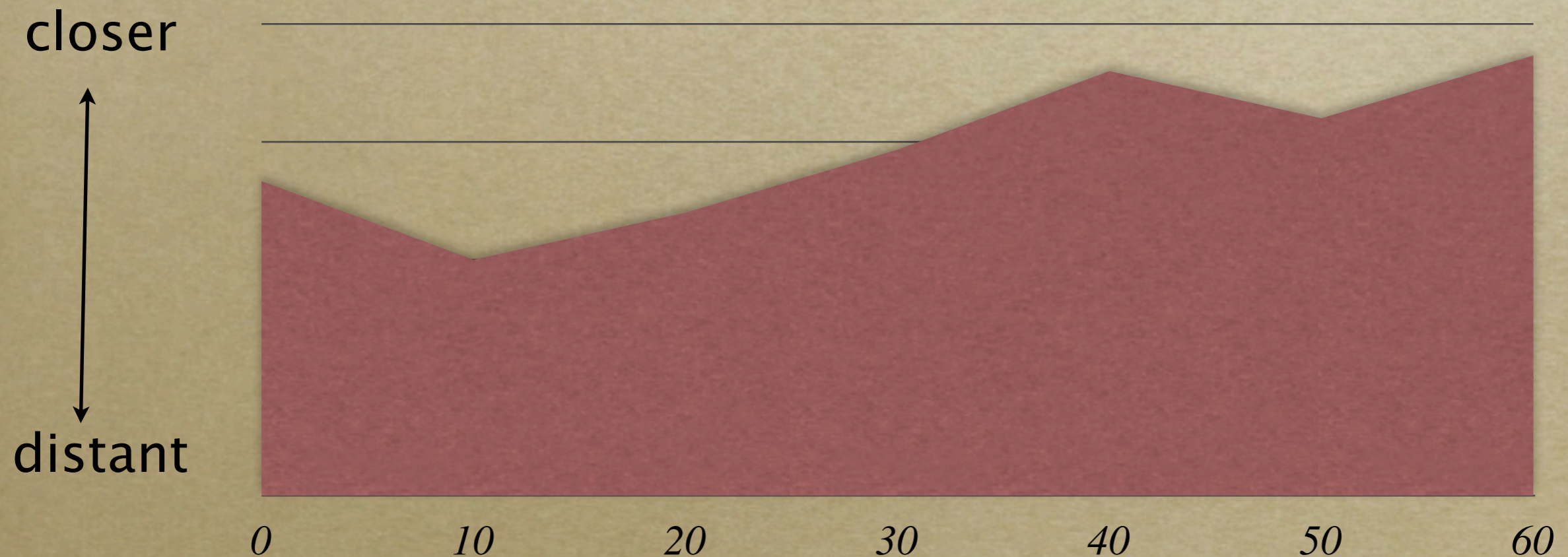   1. **Social roles**:
        i. Equal: Friend-Friend, Husband-wife, colleagues, ...
        ii. Unequal:, teacher-student, doctor-patient, etc.

    2. **Social Distance**: close vs. neutral vs. distant

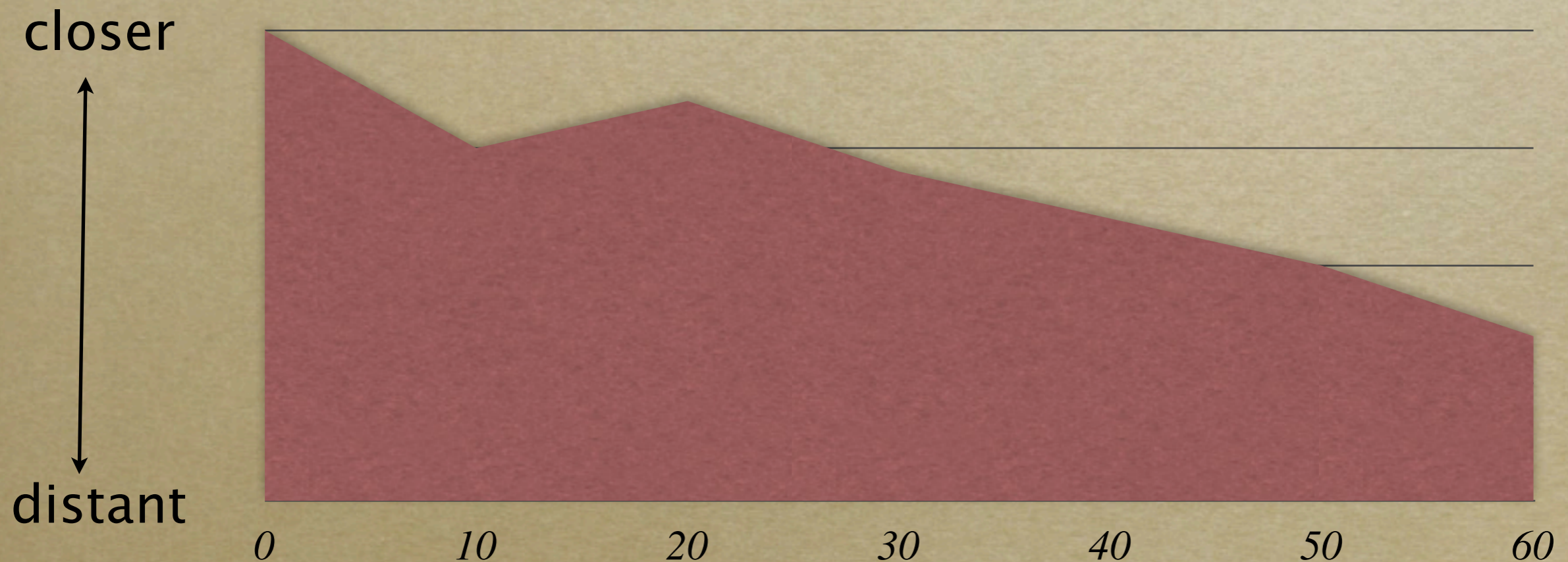   3. **Knowledge Roles**: who is recognised as the primary knower

1. Context is Dynamic
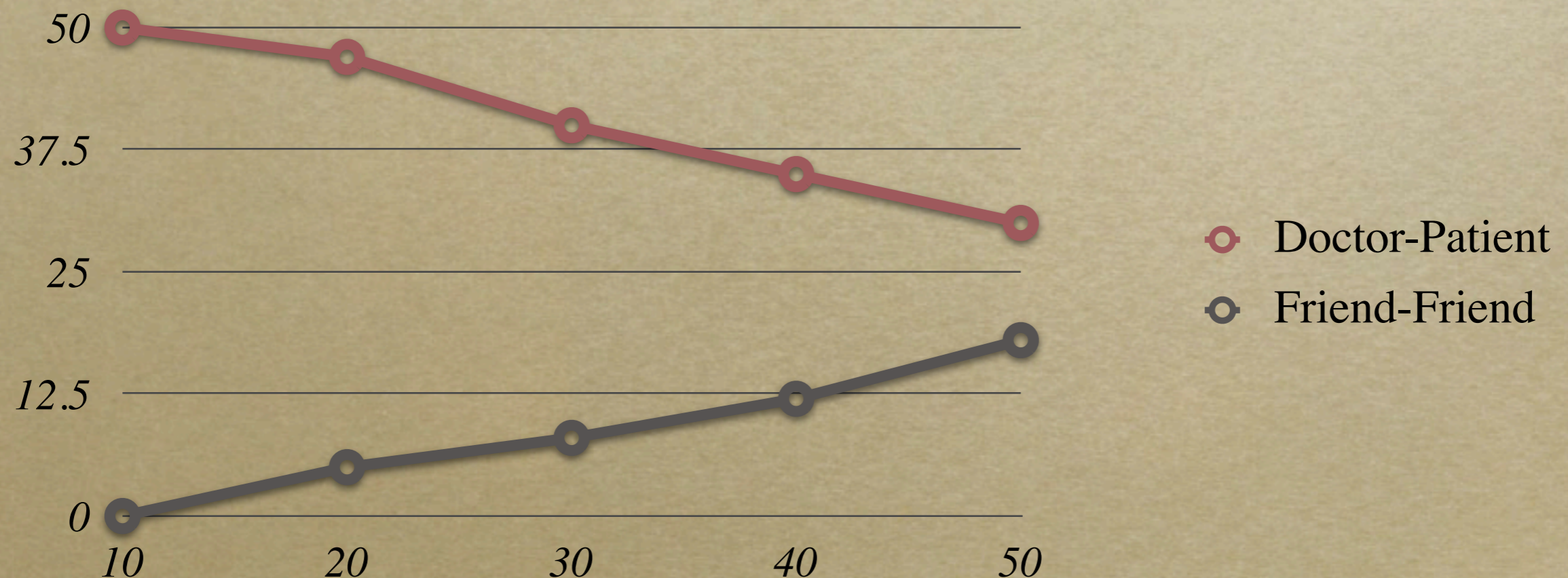
- **Social Distance** can change through a conversation

1. Context is Dynamic

- In this case, social relations worsen as the conversation unfolds:

closer

distant

0   10   20   30   40   50   60

1. Context is Dynamic

- **Social roles**: the degree to which particular social relations drive the conversation may change as the interaction unfolds

1. Context is Dynamic

- **Knowledge roles**: the degree to which each participant is considered the primary knower can change as the topic of conversation changes

Speaker A   Speaker B
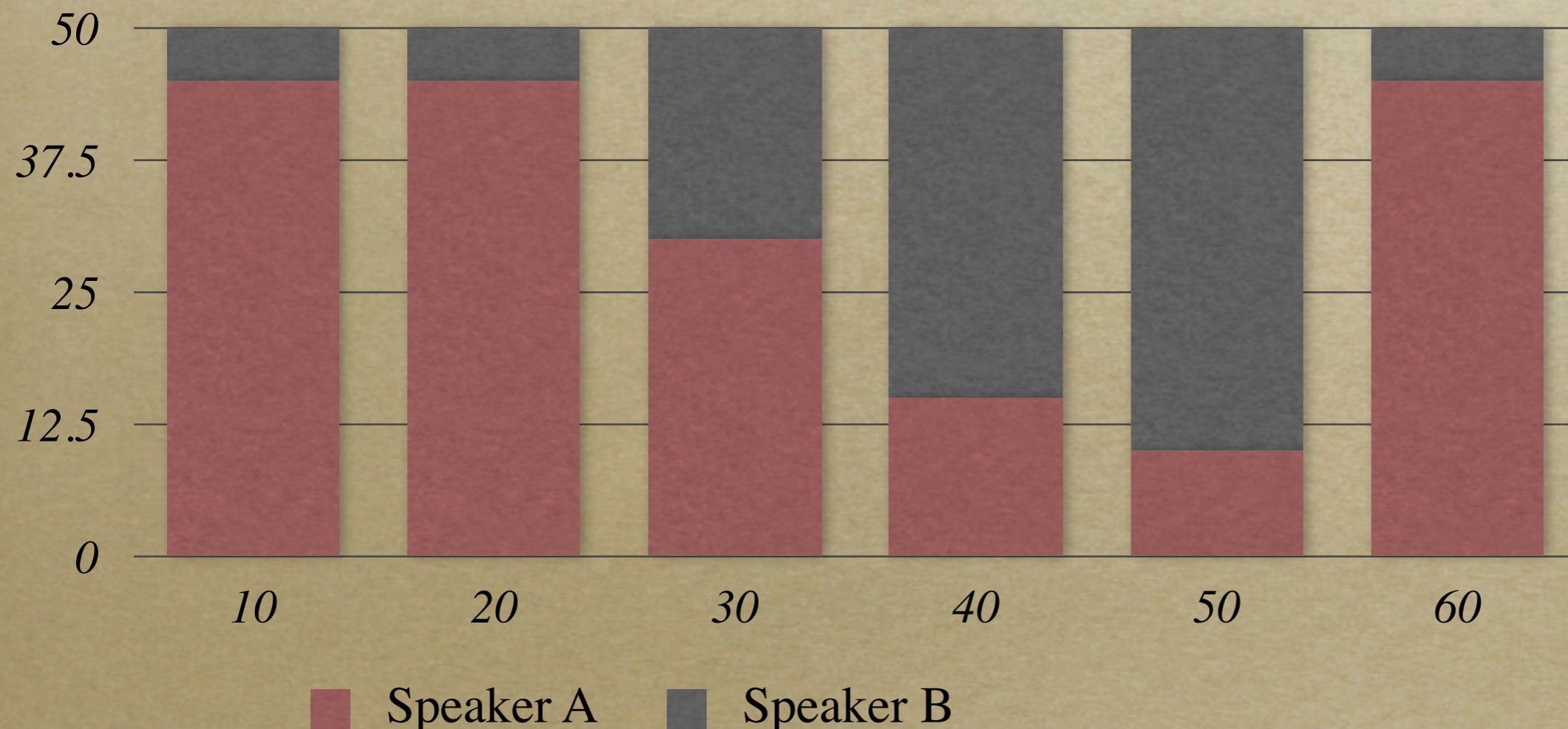
1. Context is Dynamic
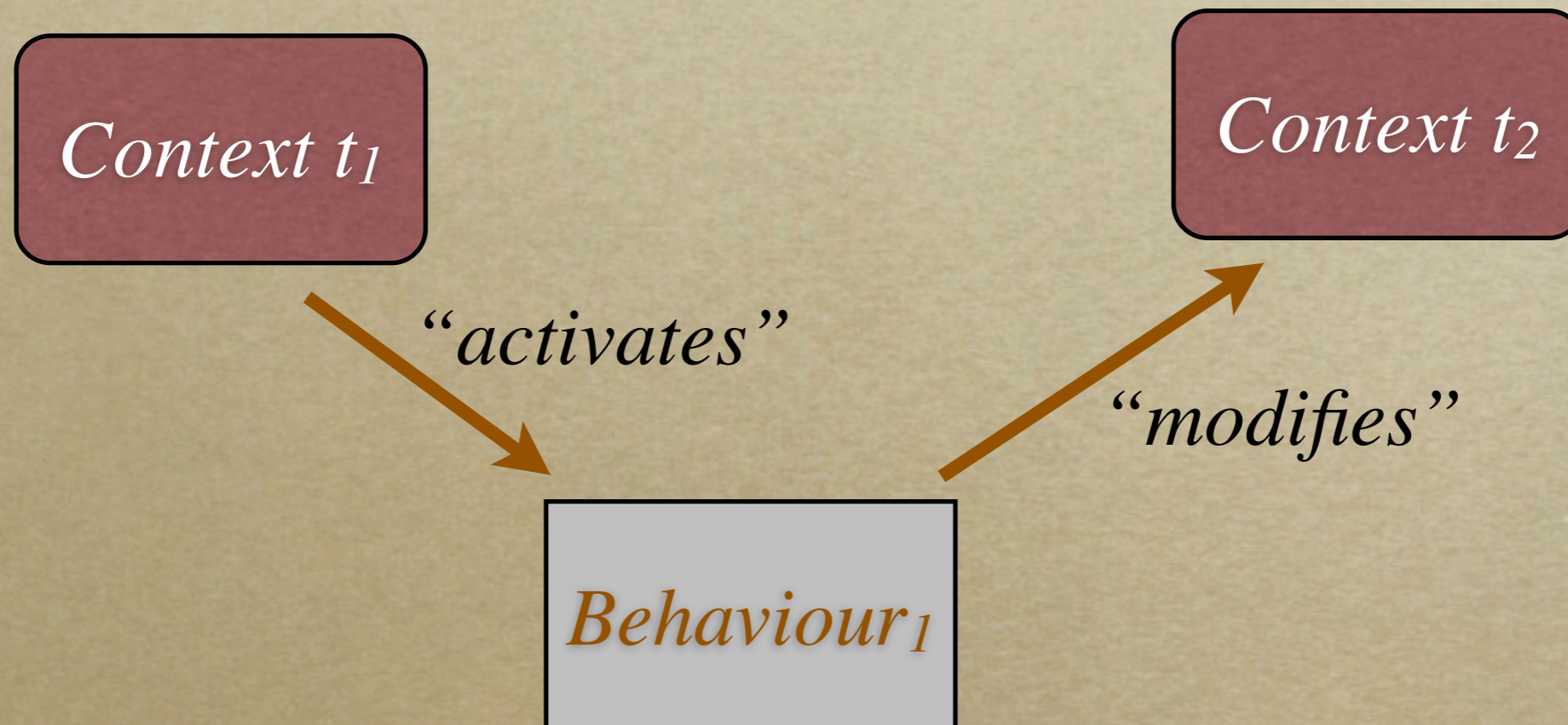
- Traditional model of behaviour in context
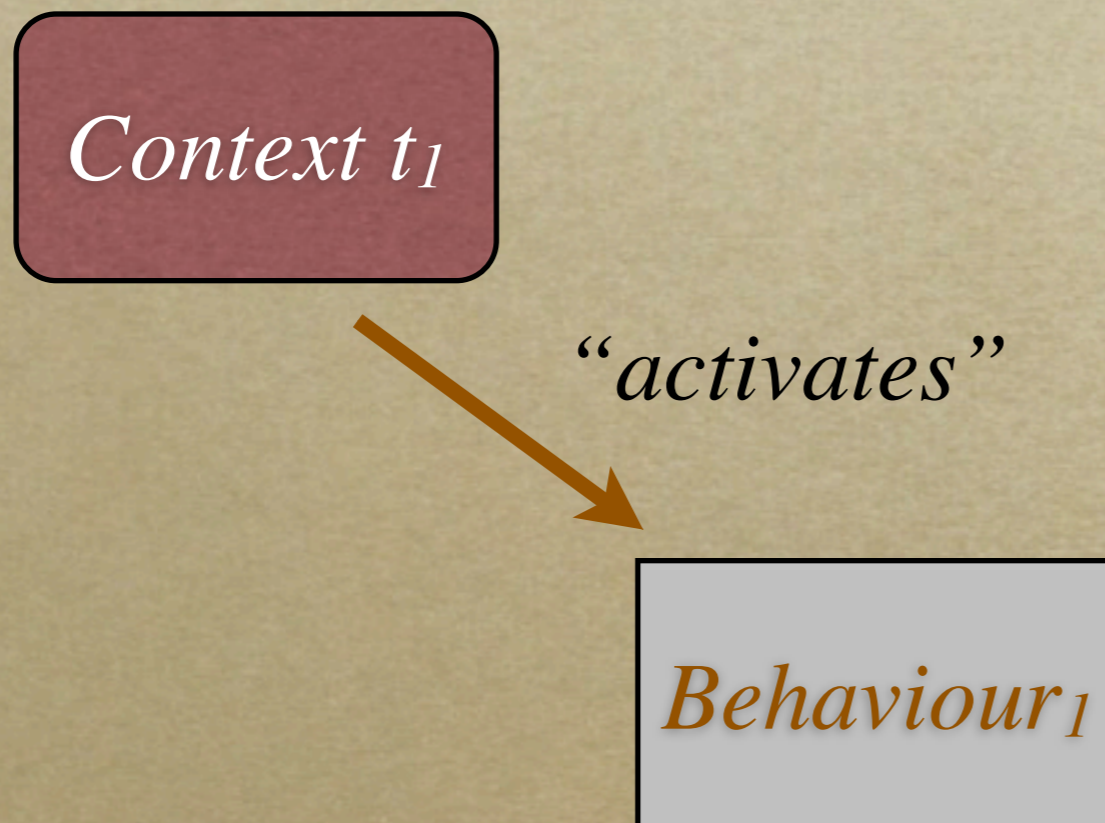
1. Context is Dynamic

- A Dynamic model of behaviour in context

$$\boxed{Context\ t_1} \xrightarrow{\text{"activates"}} \boxed{Behaviour_1} \xrightarrow{\text{"modifies"}} \boxed{Context\ t_2}$$

1. Context is Dynamic

- We choose our behaviour so as to maintain the current context, or to change it towards one more to our liking.

- However, we cannot know with 100% certainty the effect of our actions.

- Our choice of action is conditioned by **intended contextual effect**, rather than actual effect.

Concept 1: **Target context**: the contextual configuration that a behaver expects to result from their behaviour

0. Roadmap

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2. Context is Subjective

- Individuated Context: Some models of context assume that that the context is objective, undifferentiated for the various interactants.

- However, as Hasan points out (in response to the question "what is going on?"):

"The reality captured by the answer is filtered reality, and the active agent is the interactant -- it is his focus that informs the answer, so, although the answer is rooted in the objective, its point of departure is the subjective one." (Hasan 1981, p106).

2. Context is subjective

- Participants differ in what they bring into an interaction -- they have different experiences and goals, so they may enter the interaction with different perceptions of the situation.

- And within the interaction, they may attach different values to the verbal and non-verbal action, and so evolve their notion of contexts in different directions (although one role of dialogue is to bring these divergences back into line).

- Having possibly divergent models of context, each participant may thus perceive different actions as appropriate or inappropriate to the current point of time.

2. Context is subjective

Concept 2: **Perceived context**: the contextual configuration that a particular interactant believes best describes the current point of interaction

2. Context is subjective

- Behavioural choice in a dynamic model

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3. Context is a semiotic system

- In the SFL model, there is an assumption that context constrains what we can do.

- However, in some cases, a participant does not act in relation to their perceived context, but rather in relation to some situation which they want to bring about.

3. Context is a semiotic system

- For instance, take a situation of two colleagues, between which there is reasonable social distance.

- If one of them wishes to lessen the social distance, she may start to speak and act in ways more associated with lower social distance.

- She acts in accord to her own desired situation rather than in regards to the tenor which is established and understood by the participants.

3. Context is a semiotic system

- Several reactions to this attempt to change the situation are possible:

  1. The other party could accept it, and shift to the new level of social distance.

  2. They could ignore it, and continue to act in accordance to the established view of the relationship.

  3. They might react against it, imposing more social distance as a punishment for over-familiarity.

  (offer&acceptance, offer&rejection, offer&counter-offer)

3. Context is a semiotic system

- Projected context: This assumes that participants are not acting in accord to the perceived, established, situation, but rather, using their action to project alternative situations, as part of a strategy of establishing a new situation (cf. Cloran 1987 on contextual re-negotiation).

- Our ability to do this rests within the strong contextual appropriacy of language and action: when we behave in a manner consistent with an alternative context, we can construct in the mind of the other participants the alternative situation.

- In other words, our behaviour **projects** a situation.

3. Context is a semiotic system

- **Example**: in a pub with friends, one says "Would my esteemed colleague…" bringing to mind a courtroom setting.

- **Example**: the mode "written to be spoken" can be better analysed as:

  - *Actual situation*: written

  - *Projected situation*: spoken

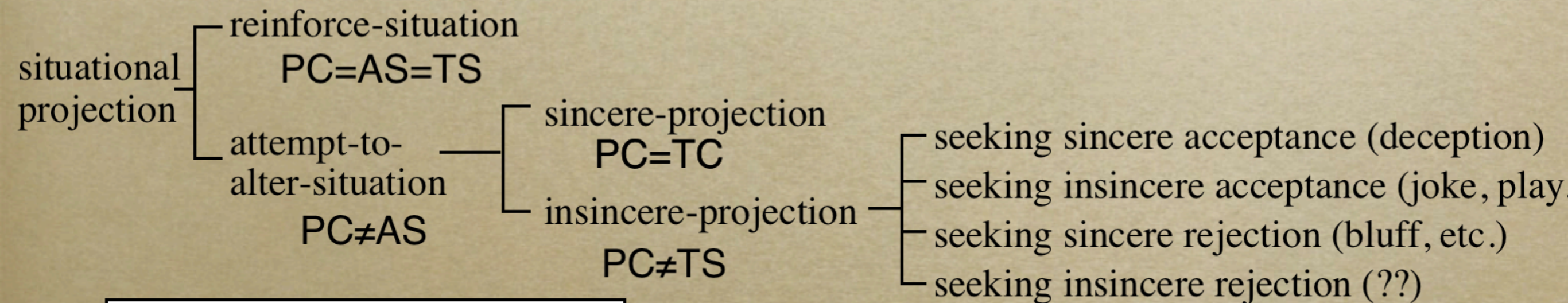Concept 3: **Projected context**: the contextual configuration that most naturally explains the behaver's behaviour.

3. Context is a semiotic system

- In the general case, the situation projected by our behaviour has strong correspondence to the perceived situation: we use our language and action to reinforce the situation.

- However, we can use divergences between projected and actual situation to negotiate new contexts.

3. Context is a semiotic system

- Where projected situation differs from the actually perceived context...

reinforce-situation
PC=AS=TS

situational projection

attempt-to-alter-situation
PC≠AS

sincere-projection
PC=TC

insincere-projection
PC≠TS

seeking sincere acceptance (deception)

seeking insincere acceptance (joke, play)

seeking sincere rejection (bluff, etc.)

seeking insincere rejection (??)

Key: PC: Projected Situation
AC: Actual Situation
TC: Target Situation

3. Context is a semiotic system
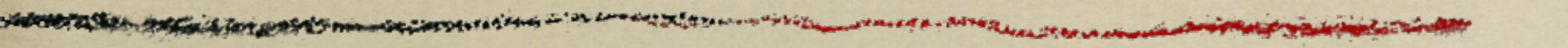
- Projecting social distance: humour

Octr. 4th. 1762

Miss Adorable,

By the same Token that the Bearer hereof *satt up* with you last night I hereby order you to give him, as many Kisses, and as many Hours of your Company after 9 O'Clock as he shall please to Demand and charge them to my Account: This Order, or Requisition call it which you will is in Consideration of a similar order Upon Aurelia for the like favour, and I presume I have good Right to draw upon you for the Kisses as I have given two or three Millions at least, when one has been received, and of Consequence the Account between us is immensely in favour of yours,

John Adams

3. Context is a semiotic system

Projected Social distance: deceit

Hello!

You know, they are so many people in the world, but some of them are alone, because they didn't find their halfs yet, as it is so hard.
If you are alone and want to find your love, you can write me and we'll start communicating. I'm alone and looking for a good man, who will give me his love and care. Who knows, maybe we can fill up our lonely hearts with love.

My e-mail address is **Taisochka82@mail.ru**.
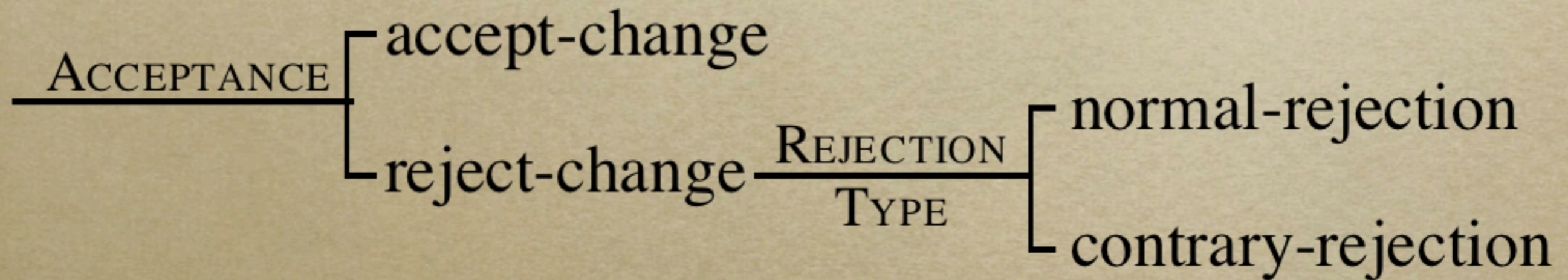
I'm looking forward to your letter.

Taisiya

3. Context is a semiotic system

Responses to an attempt to alter the context

3. Context is a semiotic system

Projected Situation in Writing:

- When we write, there is sometimes an actual intended reader (e.g.,. writing a letter to a friend)

- Most of the time, we do not write for a specific person, so there is no ACTUAL tenor.

- Rather, we write for an abstract reader, we semiotically design the reader (selecting a tenor relationship which matches our conception of who *might* read).

- So, even in writing, the notion of projected context is useful.

Conclusions

- Introduced a core set of concepts to better deal with context as a dynamically changing entity

    - Context changes throughout an interaction

    - Behaviour modifies/maintains context

    - Actors use behaviour as an instrument of contextual negotiation

    - Actor's notion of context is subjective and can differ from each other

Conclusions (ii)

- Actors can project a context by behaving in ways not appropriate to the current context

- Projecting contexts can be used to renegotiate the currently perceived context : offering an alternative context

- The other participant(s) can choose to accept or reject this change.

- Projection of context can also be used for humor, deceit, etc.

Conclusions (ii)

- These concepts are most critical in the area of tenor, as tenor is most subjective (power roles, social distance, knowledge roles) and most open to negotiation.

References

- Hasan, R. (1981), "What's going on: a Dynamic View of Context." Seventh LACUS Forum. Columbia, S.C.: Hornbeam Press 1981.

- Cloran, Carmel (1987), "Negotiating new contexts in conversation". Occasional Papers in Systemic Linguistics, Volume 1, 1985, pp. 85-110.

- O'Donnell, Michael 1999 "Context in Dynamic Modelling". In Mohsen Ghadessy (ed.), Text And Context In Functional Linguistics. Benjamins: Holland. Pp. 63-99.

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