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The limits of spoken words

From meta-narratives to experiences of security

C. Wilkinson

In sociological terms, reconceptualising security as a pragmatic act, rather than solely as a speech act, finally creates space for the issue of the context in which securitizations occur to be considered. This chapter takes as its starting point the premise that when used for empirical investigation, securitization theory results in an account of security that has effectively been decontextualized. I refer to these final, theoretically-compatible accounts as meta-narratives of security, or meta-securitizations, in order to indicate that they are abstractions of accounts of security that conform to the theoretical model offered by securitization theory. As such, security meta-narratives are retrospective and, crucially, selective abstractions of all the different acts and narratives that contributed to a successful securitization, stripped of reference to any internal dynamics and local context that are not directly related to the final securitization. Problematically for empirical studies, meta-narratives often bear little resemblance to people’s experiences of how securitizing moves developed and are understood within a particular context. The Copenhagen School’s prioritisation of theoretical coherence has meant that consideration of local understandings have been largely ignored, despite the fact that such local knowledge offers the analyst a way to situate securitization specifically in relation to local conditions—i.e. as a pragmatic act—rather than in relation to potentially spurious theoretical assumptions.

In relation to context, two of the most problematic aspects of the Copenhagen School’s concept of securitization are the privileging of speech and its outcome-dependent retrospective view of security. In its orthodox theoretical form, the only way to incorporate non-verbal expressions of security is by their subsequent or retrospective incorporation into a security narrative by a securitizing actor. Without this post-event “translation” of actions into words by actors, securitization is unable to accommodate non-verbal performances of “security” concerns such as protests and demonstrations or migration. The analytical consequences of this over-reliance on the medium of speech are considerable even for an orthodox retrospective application of securitization theory. Securitization presents a linear and stepwise dynamic of security construction, starting with a securitizing actor who constructs a referent object and threat narrative. This narrative of existential threat is then either accepted or rejected by an audience, thus determining the outcome of the securitizing move. In practice, however, the process may start at any point, with the component parts of a securitization—securitizing actor, referent object, threat narrative and audience—developing simultaneously and being mutually constitutive (Huysmans 1998; Wilkinson 2007). In addition, instances where physical action either precedes or replaces verbal expressions of security can only be accommodated if and when they are subsequently incorporated into a speech-act, that is, when they are interpreted as meaning “security”. Conforming to this need for speech-act to have chronological precedence is only possible if a certain degree of “editing” is carried out to present a logically and theoretically coherent account of how a situation developed (Wilkinson 2007: 20).

The Copenhagen School’s traditional focus solely on successful, i.e. complete, securitizations is one of the key reasons that “editing” occurs during analysis. In practice the distinction between successful and unsuccessful is far less clear than the theory suggests, as Wagnsson explains:

it is helpful to be cautious when applying the notion of “successfully” securitised. A political leader may, for example, “speak security” primarily with an external audience in mind, with the aim of deterrence or to improve his/her state’s position in a negotiation. If s/he then gains the ear of the public, securitization has been achieved more or less “by mistake”, since the primary intention was not to convince the population that the problem amounted to an existential threat. Alternatively, if a president leads his/her country to war, but is widely criticised by the opposition and eventually ousted from office in a coup d’état, is this a case of successful securitization? In both cases, securitization has been reached, but not necessarily “successfully”.

(2000: 18)

She goes on to suggest that in order to assess whether different actors view an issue in the same way, “we should always begin the analysis by asking to whom a securitizing move is directed and/or in the eyes of whom an issue is securitised” (ibid; italics in the original). Salter extends this point, proposing that the success or failure of a securitizing move be measured “by ranking the degree to which policies, legislation, and opinion accords with the prescriptions of the speech act” (2008: 325). Both of these arguments are important steps towards creating space for the consideration of the processes involved in a securitizing move. Nevertheless, it is still necessary to address the issue of how such moves are constituted in terms of the mediums used in to invoke security. For this, securitization must be understood primarily as a pragmatic act, which necessitates the explicit and reflexive consideration of the context in which it occurs.

The need to pay greater attention to securitization’s context has not gone unnoticed by scholars. Huysmans commented that a “cultural-historical interpretation of the rhetorical structure [of securitization] would reduce a tendency to universalise a specific logic of security” since how security is understood in different locations “is based on specific cultural and historical experiences” (1998: 591). More recently, building primarily upon Balzacq (2005), Stritzel has proposed extending the theoretical framework to elaborate securitization’s “embeddedness”, arguing
that “security articulations need to be related to their broader discursive contexts from which both the securitizing actor and the performative force of the articulated speech act/text gain their power” (2007: 359–60). Salter, meanwhile, offers a methodological solution: the use of dramaturgical analysis to consider the “setting” of a securitization, since the process “reflects the complex constitution of social and political communities and may be successful and unsuccessful to different degrees in different settings within the same issue and across issues” (2008: 324). Yet these proposals, though undoubtedly very welcome developments, have not addressed the charge that securitization universalises a particular “logic of security”, focusing instead on ensuring theoretical coherence.

The consequence is that securitization theory is still far from unproblematic to use for empirical analysis of events, producing accounts that, although theoretically coherent, fail to illuminate local conditions and dynamics in any substantial way. Not only is the securitization framework likely to produce a version of events that has been “edited” to ensure chronological order and a linear and stepwise progression (from actor to speech-act to audience to outcome), but the final analysis is likely to erase the local knowledge that can be generated by fieldwork even if empirical detail is included. The result is an account that is informed not by reflexive consideration of local interpretations and understandings, but by the normative assumptions of the theoretical framework in the form of the so-called Westphalian straitjacket (Buzan and Little 2001: 19–35). Specifically, the Westphalian straitjacket manifests itself in the assumption that the Euro-American model of the state and, perhaps more importantly, the accompanying political culture, is valid globally. Thus the use of words such as “state” and “society” take on a normative dimension, the assumption being that Western understandings – as opposed to local ones – can successfully “travel” to any locale.

This creates a considerable danger of misinterpretation, since local understandings and meanings will often remain unexplored and unarticulated in a securitization analysis: even when the analyst seeks to allow for local conditions and circumstances, in cases where there is significant divergence between theoretical normative expectations (e.g. that socio-political systems all over the world operate in a broadly European way) and empirical evidence, the precedence of theory over sociological insight means that the Copenhagen School’s Westphalian straitjacket acts as an editor: similarities to European models and understandings are highlighted and if necessary interpreted to ensure congruence, while anomalies and specificities are excised or excluded on the grounds of irrelevance or merely cosmetic significance.

It is important to emphasise that the Westphalian straitjacket is not a phenomenon that only affects the Copenhagen School. Rather, the culture of IR (Valbjørn 2004) suggests that although new epistemologies are introduced, the underlying assumptions on which these are built have rarely been questioned, even in recent enterprises such as the CASE Collective’s Manifesto (2006). Without explicitly addressing the normative assumptions of our theories, attempts to refine or extend theoretical frameworks can only go so far. In this chapter, I argue that there are potential benefits to be gained from taking what Kent has called an “anthropological approach to security” that interrogates, amongst other issues, “the inherent ethnocentricity of much security theory” (2006: 346). Such an approach is likely to be of particular utility in non-Western locales, where analysts and readers are unfamiliar with the socio-political culture. Central to this endeavor is going beyond the Copenhagen School’s original framework, which focuses on what security means, to ask the question how security means. In addressing this latter question, we are able to extend the empirical utility of securitization theory, adding an explicitly sociological focus to security analysis. In doing so, it becomes possible to reconceptualise and subvert meta-narratives by explicitly interrogating how people experience and understand securitizing moves and securitizations in practice.

This chapter addresses two main questions: first, I discuss context as a level of analysis and the relationship between the proximate and distal contexts of securitization. I then consider when and in what ways it may be beneficial to focus on the distal context – the broader socio-cultural context – of a securitizing move or securitization, before outlining how an interpretive methodology can be used to explore the distal context. I demonstrate how this methodological approach can be utilised via a case study of a series of mass protests that occurred in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, in October 2005. Collectively, eight days of protests represented a series of interrelated securitizing moves. Yet they culminated in a protest that, despite being the direct result of the preceding protests, was presented as a distinct and separate securitization narrative. Working back from this final meta-securitization, I contextualize the events of the previous seven days, presenting two accounts of the protests. The first focuses on the internal, or proximate, context of the meta-securitization, while the second examines the external, or distal, context, exploring local understandings of what occurred and how this eventually resulted in a meta-securitization.

Via the case study I demonstrate how the retrospective analysis of events risks distorting the dynamics of a securitization by failing to take into account the distal context, resulting in a selective and edited account that has little empirical utility or relevance to how people present locally, experienced the events. Reflecting on the contrasting accounts suggested by examinations of the proximate and distal contexts, I discuss how local interpretations are influenced by conditions such as the availability and perceived credibility of information at the time, illustrating how the consideration of context can affect our understandings of the processes of securitization and generate new insights. I conclude that in some circumstances the analyst’s desire to consider local conditions may limit her to meta-securitization narratives until she can decentre the theoretical framework’s tendency to impose retrospective internal coherence and causality by using experiential knowledge to inform discussion of securitization’s context.

Questions of context: proximate and distal context

Earlier in this volume Balzacq outlined two types of context: proximate context and distal context (2009a: 17). Proximate context refers to the “immediate features of interaction” (Hardy 2004: 417), or the setting of a securitizing move, which “includes the stage on which it is made, the genre in which it is made, the audience...
to which it is pitched, and the reception of the audience” (Salter 2008: 328). In effect, it is the micro-environment of the securitization. In contrast, distal context refers to the macro-environment of the securitizing move; that is, the broader socio-cultural context in which it is embedded: matters of social class and ethnicity, regional and cultural settings, and the sites of discourse, for example (Balzacq 2009a: 17; Neergaard and Ulbricht 2007: 196).

While this distinction is useful, the relationship between the two types of context is not unproblematic. Indeed, Schegloff, with whom the notion of proximate and distal context originated, argues that their relationship “must be taken as problematic for the purposes of disciplined analysis” (1992: 195) since

If there are indefinitely many potentially relevant aspects of context and of personal or categorial identity which could have a bearing on some facet of, or occurrence in, interaction, and if the analyst must be concerned with what is relevant to the parties at the moment at which what is being analyzed occurred, and is procedurally consequential for what is being analyzed, then the search for context properly begins with the talk or other conduct being analyzed. (Emphasis in original. Schegloff 1992: 197)

Thus while analysis begins with the securitization, we must then work out from that point to contextualize it and situate it in relation to other relevant events and actions. Schegloff explains the importance of this undertaking with reference to “modes of enquiry”, including speech-act theory, which

commonly address their targets of inquiry – whether sentences, actions or stories – as if they were intrinsically autonomous objects, that is, objects designed to have integrity and coherence which are entirely “internal” to the object itself. In doing so, they systematically obscure the possibility that their objects of inquiry are designed not for splendid and isolated independence, but for coherence and integrity as part and parcel of the environment or context in which, and for which, they were produced by its participants. In response to such modes of analysis, it has seemed quite important to make clear how different a picture of the object of analysis emerges is one reengages it – sentence, story, gesture, and the like – to its context, and then reconfigures our understanding of its structure and character. (1992: 193–94)

A further aim, therefore, of this chapter is to demonstrate how, utilising an interpretive methodology, we can reengage with the event or situation under investigation by making the focus of our enquiry the context itself as Schegloff proposes, rather than seeing it as “the ‘given’ relative to the object of analysis” (1992: 194). This process leads us through a series of concentric layers: from securitization, to proximate context and then on to distal context.

In contrast to Salter, who focuses solely on the proximate context, both Stritzel and Kent offer approaches to the consideration of distal context as well as proximate context. However, Stritzel’s desire to consider context within an analytical framework around the relatedness of three forces (2007: 371–72), while arguably increasing the comparative analytical potential of securitization theory for empirical studies, limits the depth of insights that can be generated by exploration of context by more precisely defining what is and is not within securitization’s theoretical reach. Anomalies and contradictions are likely to be either ignored or “edited” out of empirical analyses in the quest to ensure universality and comparability. This is particularly likely to affect distal context due to its more diffuse and wide-ranging influence on processes of securitization.

Proximate context is arguably more directly accessible for the analyst due to its focus on the immediate details of a securitizing move: it concerns the questions of who, what, when, where, to whom and with what effect. Distal context, in contrast, is far broader and potentially less accessible, especially in the case of cross-cultural research. At the same time, consideration of the distal context of securitizing moves is vital if we are to avoid simply replicating the normative understandings of security inherent in theoretical approaches and instead uncover local understandings of security and how they are created. This is largely the domain of “local knowledge” that is, in contrast to so-called “expert knowledge”, experimental, context-specific, tacit, everyday and practice-based (Yanow 2004: 310–12; emphasis added). By focusing on such local knowledge, it is possible to explore both words and actions beyond the theoretical framework offered by securitization, revealing dynamics that would usually slip beneath securitization’s radar. The aim is not, as Kent rightly points out, “about challenging scholars to choose between either unthinkingly imposing their theories upon other people or utterly deconstructing them”. Rather, local perspectives facilitate the consideration of “other cultural formulations as a corpus of knowledge and experience that might inform our own” (2006: 347).

Exploring contexts: an interpretive methodology

Building on Kent’s argument for an “anthropological approach” to security but wishing to keep contact with the framework provided by the Copenhagen School, in this section I outline how an interpretive methodology can be used to extend the Copenhagen School’s empirical utility by facilitating explicit consideration and comparison of the proximate and distal context of securitizations. It could be argued that for the Copenhagen School’s purposes, consideration of the proximate context of securitization is sufficient insofar as their aim is to identify what security is, not how it is constructed. At the same time, as shall be discussed, there are instances in which understanding how security means may result in different analytical conclusions. However, if explorations lead to the re-evaluation of conclusions, this does not detract from previous analyses; rather, as Duranti and Goodwin note in their introduction to Schegloff’s article, “multiple levels of sequential context mutually reinforce each other as they provide alternative types of organisation for the local production of action” (1992: 192).

An interpretive approach requires the analyst to assume a far more participatory role in her investigation, as Yanow explains:
the researcher draws on a basic commonality of human experience and processes of understanding, and that through learning the language of the setting and its customs, the researcher can acquire sufficient familiarity as to be able to understand events that transpire, while at the same time drawing on sufficient “stranger-ness” to make the accepted, unspoken, tacitly known, commonsensical, taken-for-granted, local “rules” of action and inaction stand out as, in some way, different, thereby opening them up for reflection and examination.

(Yanow 2006: 19)

This approach corresponds to the externalist understanding to the context of production described by earlier by Balzacq, whereby “the success of securitisation is contingent upon a perceptive–external–environment pervaded by a sense of criticality” (2009a: 19). Through an interpretive methodology the researcher becomes part of this environment. Drawing on his pre-existing knowledge and experiences, he becomes a situated critical interpreter of events, rather than simply observing how others do things. Central to this stance is that the researcher is attempting initially “to describe in great detail the interrelationships and intricacies of the context being studied” (Erlanson et al. 1993: 33), including multiple possible meanings of language, acts or physical artefacts, by accessing data from different sites and sources (Yanow 2003). The result of this process is the creation of a “thick” description of the research setting that can then be juxtaposed with the account offered by securitization theory to begin the process of loosening the Copenhagen School’s Westphalian straitjacket.

Crucially, this approach is flexible enough to accommodate the inevitable “mess” of the social world, working on the principle that “multiple realities enhance each other’s meanings” rather than being problematic (Erlanson et al. 1993: 14). In addition, it allows for a mixed methods approach that can accommodate both qualitative and quantitative data collection/generation methods such as surveys, various types of interview, discourse and textual analysis, participant observation and ethnographic methods. Regardless of what methods are employed, the aim is to build up a “thick” description of the situation under investigation, in contrast to the “thin” description provided by a basic factual account. While a thin description reports what people did, a thick description contextualizes it by explicitly considering the socio-cultural meaning of the actions as well to create a humanistic, detailed and inferential account. To illustrate the difference, Geertz uses the example of “two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes”. For one boy, the action is “an involuntary twitch”, while for the other it is “a conspiratorial signal to a friend”. While the movement is the same in both cases, “the difference […] between a twitch and a wink is vast, as anyone unfortunate to have had the first taken for the second knows” (1973: 5–6).

Although the Copenhagen School’s original endeavor extended only to identifying what security is in different locations and situations, for empirical studies it is potentially important to consider how security is understood in order to start thinking “outside the Westphalian box” (Acharya and Buzan 2007: 286). I suggest that this is likely to be of particular benefit when undertaking cross-cultural studies of societal security, since it is in these circumstances that the researcher most needs to compare and contrast theoretically-informed interpretations with local understandings of security in order to avoid excluding alternative interpretation(s) that may offer different conclusions to those of securitization theory.

In the case of the Copenhagen School, because of securitization theory’s emphasis on outcome rather than process, the multiple and situated meanings of security are often excluded in favour of producing the definitive (i.e. internally coherent) retrospective meta-narratives described in the previous section of this chapter. Applying an interpretive methodology to the study of the proximate context of the securitization is unlikely to generate insights sufficient to potentially challenge a theory-driven meta-narrative due to the context being internal to the securitization. If, however, the analyst extends her investigation to consider the securitization’s distal context, which may include previous securitizing moves that have relatively shaped the socio-cultural settings, it is possible (although not inevitable) that a more nuanced and multi-faceted understanding of security dynamics in that locale will be developed. In some cases, consideration of the distal context may generate understandings that challenge or even contradict those suggested by the original securitization meta-narrative.

Accessing and exploring the distal context of securitization is therefore of potential utility to reduce the danger that the researcher will find only what can be accommodated by the Copenhagen School’s Westphalian normative assumptions. In fact, in contrast to the broadly neo-positivist ontology of the Copenhagen School, which presupposes an objective, step-wise, linear process of inquiry from hypothesis to testing to conclusions, interpretivism is founded on the “ontological and epistemological presuppositions” of phenomenology and hermeneutics, “which hold that knowledge and the knower are situated, rather than ‘objective’ (in interpretive philosophers’ and researchers’ understandings of the concept) and that researchers must, per force, interpret what they observe” (Schwartz-Shla and Yanow 2002: 461). Yanow explains the implications of interpretivism for fieldwork-based research:

Phenomenology provides a constructionist (or constructivist) ontology centered on the primacy of context; such context-specificity is fundamental to case-based research, and it is completely antithetical to a positivist scientific insistence on universal, generalizable laws or principles. Hermeneutics provides an interpretive epistemology rooted in the potential for multiple possible meanings of language, acts or physical artefacts; also context-specific, such potential multiplicities and their possible incongruences are what lead field researchers to access data from a variety of sites (neighbourhoods, agency divisions, etc.) across a research setting.

(Yanow 2003)

As such, the researcher herself becomes an integral part of the construction of knowledge: using her a priori experience and knowledge — what she already knows
and has experienced—in conjunction with “empathetic understanding” of others to create her findings.

Adopting an explicitly interpretivist approach does not, of course, directly address the shortcomings of securitization and societal security. What it can do, however, is offer the researcher an alternative way to engage with securitization theory. Rather than defining how the researcher should interpret a given phenomenon or situation—in this case protests in Kyrgyzstan—the securitization framework offers one of many possible interpretations. It is therefore a point of comparison, permitting the researcher to test her interpretations and those of others against it. Significantly, interpreting theory in this way creates space to consider the politics of knowledge production both empirically and within disciplines. However, it is important to be aware that interpretivist knowledge claims differ fundamentally from those made by positivist paradigms.

As previously noted, positivist science is predicated on the idea that the world is knowable via “rigorous, repeatable steps of discovery by a neutral observer making neutral, impartial observations following the rules of the scientific method” to create neutral observations that can be generalized to create universal laws (Yanow 1996: 5). Positivists assess truth claims against criteria of validity (representativity, repeatability, reliability) and objectivity, holding that there is a definite answer to be found. In contrast, the interpretivist paradigm holds that there are multiple realities with no “right” or “wrong” realities, and that there are differences amongst realities “that cannot be resolved through rational processes or increased data” (Erlander et al. 1993: 14). As a result, validity is governed by inquiry being able to “demonstrate its truth value, provide the basis for applying it, and allow for external judgements to be made about the consistency of its procedures and the neutrality of its findings or decisions” (Erlander et al. 1993: 29). All research, regardless of whether it is positivist or interpretivist, must demonstrate that it is rigorous and systematic, or, in other words, that it is trustworthy. However, as Table 5.1 demonstrates, the bases used to assess trustworthiness differ fundamentally between paradigms. Taken together, these criteria provide a way for the reader to evaluate interpretivist inquiry by establishing trustworthiness, and, by extension a reasonable claim to methodological soundness.

In adopting an interpretive approach to studying the October protests discussed in this chapter, rather than starting with the aim of reconstructing securitizations by matching suitable evidence to support the theoretical model, I draw on multiple sources to create a thick narrative account of events that is largely based on emic perspectives as well as my own experiences of “eye-witnessing” the protests and living in Kyrgyzstan at that time. This creates an account of events and processes that can decentre theoretical assumptions, creating securitization theory to become a frame to facilitate one’s exploration rather than as a tool to be directly applied. This process focuses on what doesn’t “fit” with securitization or isn’t accounted for and, most importantly, permits consideration by the researcher of how actions and words mean in addition to what they mean.

The accounts have been compiled using a range of materials and sources in order to ensure that multiple perspectives are considered: local Russian-language newspaper reports, editorials and commentaries, bulletins from a local non-governmental organization’s conflict prevention project, interviews and comments from people to whom I spoke, my own observations and photographs, as well as images published in local print and electronic media. I have not sought to create one single definitive account of events, but rather focus on the disjunctures and contradictions of which I became increasingly aware as I, like many local people, tried to make sense of the protests. I argue that it is necessary to explicate these disjunctures and contradictions and their possible interpretations to better understand the context from which security gains meaning(s). As will be demonstrated, consideration of the distal context is vital in this process.

In the following section, I present a case study of a mass protest held on 29 October 2005 under the slogan “Peaceful Citizens for Kyrgyzstan Without Criminals” in Bishkek, the capital of the former Soviet Central Asian republic of Kyrgyzstan. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Central Asia has frequently been portrayed as a region of instability, high conflict potential, danger and insecurity (MacFarlane and Torjesen 2005). Despite this, and in contrast to the other four republics, Kyrgyzstan initially seemed likely to make a successful transition to a democratic political system and free market economy under President Askar Akaev’s leadership. However, by the early 2000s there was growing discontent with the Kyrgyzstan government, at time sparking mass protests, most notably in Akyr in 2002 when police shot dead six protesters and wounded a further twelve (cf. Kudrin 2003). Nevertheless, Akaev remained in power until 24 March 2005, when he was ousted by protesters storming the main government building in the culmination of three months of mass demonstrations over the conduct of parliamentary elections held in late February-early March of the same year.

Despite the change of political leadership and Kurmanbek Bakiev’s election as President in July 2005, protests subsequently became a common feature of socio-political life in the small mountainous republic as the new government failed to carry out reforms to address socio-economic problems such as land distribution and corruption. Yet it was only in October of that year that protests became institutionally securitized—that is, in Kyrgyzstan at that time protests had become a “metaphorical security reference” in that “security and priority” was implicitly invoked when protests were being talked of and/or staged insofar as they indicated a matter that required urgent resolution (Bozuk, Wever and de Wilde 1998: 27).

In the case of Kyrgyzstan in October 2005, protests came to mean security in two different ways. First, they served as a physical expression by demonstrators of a

| Table 5.1 Establishing trustworthiness: positivist and interpretivist terms |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Criterion               | Positive term | Interpretivist term |
| Truth value             | Internal validity | Credibility |
| Applicability           | External validity | Transferability |
| Consistency             | Reliability     | Dependability |
| Neutrality              | Objectivity     | Confirmability |

a Adapted from Erlander et al. 1993: 133.
The 2005 Akmatbaev protests in Kyrgyzstan

As noted earlier, a protest held in Bishkek on 29 October 2005 marked the institutionalisation of protests as an implicit matter of security, urgency and priority in Kyrgyzstan. Described in securitization terms, the protest's instigators, a group of opposition politicians and civil society leaders, became a securitizing actor. Invoking Kyrgyzstan as a nation and homeland, they presented a narrative that claimed that the government had become criminalised and that President Bakiev's failure to take decisive measures to combat the influence of organised crime threatened Kyrgyzstan's very existence. In order to combat this threat, the protest's leaders demanded that the government take immediate action to crack down on crime, remove politicians with links to organised crime and ensure “order and security” in the republic (Malevanaya 2005b: 9).

Arguably the measures demanded were extraordinary not in themselves but because of the priority that was demanded for them via mass protests. Under other circumstances these measures would be classed as “normal” politics, but due to the urgency accorded to them and the physical way in which this was articulated, they came to represent “crisis” politics and therefore enter the realm of “security” issues and securitization. However, interpretations of how the protests were related to security in Kyrgyzstan varied considerably, as an exploration of the distal context demonstrates.

In order to assist readers unfamiliar with Kyrgyzstani politics in following the case study, before examining the contexts of the “Peaceful Citizens for Kyrgyzstan Without Crime” protest, an overview of the key actors and their roles in securitization dynamics at the two analytical levels (i.e. proximate and distal contexts) is provided in the Table 5.2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analytical level</th>
<th>Actor</th>
<th>Role(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proximate context</strong></td>
<td>Protest leaders &amp; protesters</td>
<td>Securitizing actor presenting Bakiev and organised crime as an existential threat to Kyrgyzstan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>President Bakiev &amp; Prime Minister Kulov</td>
<td>Desecuritizing actor reluting protesters’ securitizing move and denying criminalisation of the government is a threat to Kyrgyzstan. Joint threat referent for protesters. Joint threat referent to Kyrgyzstan for protesters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryspe Akmatbaev/Organised crime groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Distal context</strong></td>
<td>Ryspe Akmatbaev &amp; supporters</td>
<td>Securitizing actor presenting Kulov as a threat to the lives of his family and associates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>President Bakiev (in behalf of Kyrgyzstani government)</td>
<td>Threat referent to Kulov for Ar-Namys and Kulov supporters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prime Minister Kulov</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ar-Namys &amp; Kulov supporters</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local media</td>
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<tr>
<td>International community</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

While the proximate context of the 29 October protest can be described relatively concisely with reference to the interactions of actors—questions of who, what and when—the distal context is far broader and multi-faceted, as suggested in Table 5.2 by the list of actors who were directly involved in events preceding the 29 October protest. Correspondingly, the researcher needs to make a decision about how much context to include. Duranti and Goodwin cite Schegloff’s assertion that an analyst is not free to invoke whatever variables he or she feels appropriate as dimensions of context, no matter how strongly grounded in traditional social theory—e.g. class, gender, etc.—but instead must demonstrate in the events being examined that the participants themselves are organising their behavior in terms of the features being described by the analyst.

(1992: 192)

The researcher is therefore looking for behavior or actions that are relevant to the event being investigated. Initially this is likely to be immediately prior events that are directly linked, but the recursive nature of context means that the range of “relevant” factors could expand almost infinitely, depending on how deeply one wanted to trace processes. Obviously this is neither desirable nor practical in many cases, not least due to the challenge of managing the vast amounts of data generated and presenting an accessible analysis of the context.
In contrast to the Copenhagen School’s intention to produce an internally coherent account of the event within the securitization framework, Schegloff’s principle of relevance to the participants points to the importance of experiential knowledge. In other words, the guiding principle for exploring the distal context is how the participants interpreted the event at the time, rather than how the analyst interprets it retrospectively with the benefit of hindsight—the latter process giving a potentially more comprehensive view. The extent to which this is possible in practice is largely dependent upon the researcher and makes an interpretive approach particularly suitable for fieldwork-based studies where the researcher has been physically present and in the process has been able to develop her own “local” knowledge via her engagement with the locale. Thus, for example, my initial experiences of Kyrgyzstan were as an undergraduate student who had gone to Bishkek to study Russian for a year. Five years later, when I returned to carry out fieldwork for my doctoral thesis, my previous experience, combined with a high degree of competency in Russian, were invaluable as a basis on which to build up my interpretations of what was happening in circumstances of rapid and at times unpredictable change.

For the purposes of this chapter, I have by necessity imposed more stringent bounds on the scope of the proximate context than would be generally be the case for an analysis utilising thick description. In effect, the thickness of the account has been lessened by reducing the number of layers of context included; in contrast to the accounts presented in my thesis, I have sought to summarise rather than include quotations from specific sources where possible and have excluded visual materials entirely. While this may seem contradictory given that the supposed aim of an interpretive approach is often to build up as thick a description as possible, it highlights the fact that description should be as thick as necessary—a criterion determined by the aim of the investigation as well as the audience for whom one is writing. The aim in this chapter is primarily to demonstrate how an interpretive methodology can be deployed in order to access the distal context of a securitization, an exercise that can arguably be achieved with a lesser level of empirical detail than would be demanded by scholars focusing on the Central Asian region.

Consequently, when exploring both the proximate and then distal context in the following subsections, I have taken as my starting point the event that triggered the start of the protests that eventually led to the “Peaceful Citizens for Kyrgyzstan Without Crime” demonstration eight days later to provide a chronological limit. As such, there is minimal reference to the broader socio-political situation in Kyrgyzstan beyond the introduction provided at the start of this section. Within this timeframe, I have then focused on the protests, limiting my accounts to what is relevant to understanding the dynamics involved at both analytical levels. While the proximate context account provides a comprehensive overview of the settings involved (i.e. the who, what, and when of events), my exploration of the distal context considers factors that operate recursively, such as the public’s perceptions of the actors involved, the impact of the media and the availability of information at the time.

The proximate context: who, what, when?

As previously noted, the proximate context concerns the setting or genre of the event or episode. It is about the internal structure of the event; “the sorts of sequences of talk or courses of conduct in which particular events may occur” (Schegloff 1992: 195). A description of this level of context, therefore, is looking to trace or map who did or said what when in relation to the securitization. In the case of the Akmatbaev protests, the event that marked the beginning of the episode was the murder of parliamentary deputy Tynychbek Akmatbaev during a visit to a prison colony near to Bishkek on 20 October 2005. Coverage in the government newspaper Slovo Kyrgyzstan began the following day with a short article about the murders. It was reported that upon receiving news of the murders, Prime Minister, Feliks Kulov and other officials had travelled to the prison camp and that prisoners had asked to negotiate with Kulov, but no further details were given (Slovo Kyrgyzstan SK 106 [21867]: 2).

The day after the shooting, 21 October, Jorgorku Kenesh deputies held a working meeting about the incident at which they heard information from “Prime Minister F. Kulov and representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the General Procurator’s Office and the Special Procurator’s Office” (Slishcheva 2005a: 3). Again, no further details were provided, nor was any comment made regarding how the government was intending to deal with the situation.

October 22 saw the start of a protest led by the deceased deputy’s brother, Ryspe Akmatbaev, calling for the immediate resignation of the Prime Minister, who they claimed was responsible for the murders. The protesters initially congregated and set up yurts on Ala-Too Square, but moved to the old square opposite the parliament by 18.00. The same day Feliks Kulov held a press conference and gave his evaluation of events and claimed that he had been instructed by President Bakiev to take personal control of the situation (Turkmenev 2005: 2). Meanwhile Moya stolitsa novosti reported that “by the time of the press conference, 15.00 on Saturday [the 22nd], Bakiev had already discussed the situation three times with the Prime Minister and had held a session with the law enforcement agencies” (Orlova 2005a: 2).

A first attempt to hold an extraordinary session of parliament was held on 23 October, but was postponed due to quorum not being met. Ryspe Akmatbaev and his supporters remained in the old square, continuing to call for Kulov’s resignation. A second attempt to hold an extraordinary session of parliament was made the following day, but once more quorum in the chamber was not reached, not least because around 500 protesters blocked entrances to the building. Deputy Speaker, Bolot Shitmoykov, “spoke with protesters for a long time” before entering the building (Slishcheva 2005a: 4–5). Rather than attend the extraordinary session, President Bakiev held a working meeting with high-ranking officials, including Prime Minister Kulov. Slovo Kyrgyzstan reported that “the head of the state demanded that all those present take measures to ensure public order. The President also demanded that the public and the media received information about the measures taken by the authorities on time” (SK 107: 1).
Also on 24 October, the Secretary of the State Security Council held a press conference for journalists, “where he gave his evaluation of the situation that had formed in the capital, talked about the measures taken by the authorities to diffuse and stabilise the situation” (Shepelevko 2005: 3); Feliks Kulov signed a government resolution, “On immediate measures for the stabilisation of the socio-political situation in the capital of the Kyrgyz Republic, the city of Bishkek”. Tuesday 25 October, 2005 finally saw a parliamentary session to discuss the events take place, with 53 deputies attending. Proceedings were transmitted onto screens so that Akmatbaev’s supporters could watch. Prior to the session, Speaker Omurbek Tekebaev met with an initiative group of protestors and reported their demands to deputies (Slascheva 2005b: 6). President Bakiev also held a meeting with parliamentarians and government officials, including Prime Minister Kulov, that day. The President noted that he had not expressed any view about the murders, but did not say any more on the matter. He did, however, say that he would meet with a delegation of Akmatbaev’s supporters on 27 October (SK 108 [21869]: 2).

In addition to the continuing protest led by Ryspek Akmatbaev on the Old Square opposite the Jogorku Kenesh on 25 October, an estimated 600 people joined a protest on the central Ala-Too Square until early afternoon led by the political party Ar-Namys in support of Feliks Kulov. The day’s final development was the appearance of two open letters to the President and Prime Minister from civil society and political figures, calling for immediate action to “ensure the preservation of civil order and the safety/security of citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic” (MSN 129[314]: 1).

The two protests continued in the same vein on 26 October. President Bakiev, meanwhile, finally held a press briefing, at which he noted that his duty as president was to uphold the Constitution and rule of law, and that a decision regarding Kulov’s resignation would only be taken on the basis of the conclusions of the commission that had been founded to investigate. He assured journalists that “an adequate decision would be taken in relation to any person holding office, regardless of his position” (Vladimirova 2005: 3). The next morning, 27 October, Bakiev met with representatives of Akmatbaev’s protestors, following which the anti-Kulov protest was “suspended until the completion of the investigation” and Akmatbaev’s supporters dispersed.

Despite the situation seeming to have been resolved, one further protest — and securitization — took place on 29 October. Why this happened is not immediately clear from the above factual account. However, a closer examination of the distal context can provide insights into why events developed in this way.

**The distal context: how, why?**

The day following Tynychebek Akmatbaev’s murder, newspaper coverage focused mainly on the circumstances of his death. *Vechernii Bishkek* led with the headline “Deputy Akmatbaev shot by prisoners”, and recounted dramatically how two of the newspaper’s journalists had accompanied the commission headed by Akmatbaev to three strict regime colonies (Klokhlova and Koksteva 2005: 1). However, the initial reaction of the print media was muted, most probably due to the lack of information available at the time of going to press; for journalists and the public alike, it was simply too early to see how things would develop. Deputy Erkinbek Aylmytorov was an exception, his initial reaction quoted in Friday’s *Vechernii Bishkek*: “If we carry on like this then we will lose sovereignty and the country” (Temir 2005: 1).

Opinion about the danger posed by the incident gained resonance over the weekend as Ryspek and his supporters began protesting on Ala-Too Square. While none of the newspapers publish over the weekend, but Gazeta.kg provided extensive coverage for those with internet access. The site reported that 800 to 1,000 protestors had gathered on Ala-Too Square in front of the White House (Gazeta.kg 2005a). For many hearing such reports, or seeing the crowd for themselves on the Square, it is likely to have recalled the events of 24 March, leading to fears that “criminals” were about to attempt a direct seizure of power. A subsequent report that Akmatbaev “had declared jihad on Feliks Kulov” (Gazeta.kg 2005b) further heightened fears of impending disorder and insecurity due the implied extremism.

The weekend provided time for rumours both about what had happened and about Ryspek, who was widely acknowledged to be the leader of an organised criminal group or an *аварий* (VB 204: 1), to be discussed, and for Bishkek’s residents to experience the inconvenience and sense of uncertainty engendered by the protest. Ryspek’s reputation meant that he was assumed to be capable of mobilising significant resources, both human and financial, to support his cause. As such, the potential threat that he was perceived to pose to the beleaguered Kyrgyzstani government was considered particularly grave. However, on Monday, 24 October *Vechernii Bishkek* observed that despite considerable TV coverage, there was uncertainty about the purpose of the protest (Klokhlova 2005: 1). What was known was that Ryspek claimed that Kulov was responsible for his brother’s murder and was demanding his immediate resignation, promising to continue his protest until this was achieved.

On Tuesday, 25 October a pro-Kulov protest began on Ala-Too Square as the anti-Kulov protest led by Ryspek Akmatbaev continued on the Old Square. I decided to go and have a closer look at the protests. On Ala-Too Square banners had been erected and around one hundred people were milling around. The crowd was mixed by age, ethnicity and gender, and judging by their clothes and appearance I concluded that they were mainly from Bishkek. Shortly afterwards, a minibus bearing the logo of the Ar-Namys party pulled up and people congregated around it. The atmosphere seemed relaxed, though people were keen to take the microphone and speak support of Kulov, as well as ensuring that the media and those present could see their slogans as clearly as possible.

I fell into conversation with a student who had also come to see what was happening. She echoed my sense that the pro-Kulov protest was safe for bystanders, but felt that the atmosphere at the anti-Kulov protest could be less welcoming, adding that she had heard reports that weapons had been seen. Nevertheless, we were curious and decided to go and observe. Three things were immediately noticeable as we approached: there was a far greater police presence, although their behaviour
suggested that they had little intention of interfering with the protest; the proportion of men and ethnic Kyrgyz was far greater than at the pro-Kulov protest and most of the protesters were not local – this last fact being unsurprising given that Tilechbek Akmatbaev was the deputy for the Balykchy electoral district some 110 miles east of Bishkek – and the atmosphere did indeed seem far tenser and hostile. The protesters had set up several yurts and portaloos and there was evidence of food being prepared. Some protesters stood on the steps of the parliament building, scattered around a TV that had been set up.

Most of Ryspev’s supporters, however, sat in long rows opposite the parliament, flanked by groups of men dressed almost without exception in leather jackets or tracksuits – often called “sportsmen” collectively by locals with the implication that they are “heavies”. The slogans displayed also appeared less temperate: for example, “Shame on Kulov, Kulov, you’re guilty of Akmatbaev’s death!” “Better death than the Kulov-Chechen mafia!” “Kulov + Batukaev = murderers” and “Kulov to resign!” It would have been quite an intimidating sight even without the rumours of people being armed and Ryspev’s reputation, as it was, people’s growing sense of concern and frustration with the apparent lack of government response to these “criminals” holding an unsanctioned protest appeared to be very understandable: why weren’t the police doing anything!

The reportage in 25 October’s newspapers reflected the sense of unease felt about the anti-Kulov protest. M&V reported Akmatbaev’s demands and that his supporters were armed, concluding that “[t]he criminal world has declared war on the Prime Minister” (Malevanaya 2005a: 1). Another journalist echoed the sense of threat, suggesting that the danger posed was greater than many of Bishkek’s residents, used to protests, thought (Orlova 2005a: 2). Meanwhile in reference to the absence of an official response from President Bakiev, Vechernii Bishkek’s headline asked the uncomfortable question “Will Bakiev back down to Akmatbaev?” and wrote bluntly that “Residents of Bishkek are concerned about a new wave of looting and outbreak of criminality”. The sense of alarm and danger was added to by the publication of statements from NGO representatives and politicians addressed to the President and Prime Minister asserting that events “could lead to conflict in society” (MSN 123[314]:1).

The overall impression was that not only was the government being unacceptably slow to respond to the situation, it was perhaps unable to. Reports of heated exchanges during the second failed attempt to hold an extraordinary session of the parliament on 24 September and the unusual refusal by deputies to comment to the press did nothing to dispel this impression (Skorodumova 2005a: 4). Faced with the visible evidence of the ongoing protests and inactivity on the part of the police, reports in the same articles of the governmental meetings that had taken place in response to the murder compounded the impression of weak and indecisive leadership rather than demonstrate how seriously the situation was being taken. Media opinion was already massing behind Feliks Kulov, who in contrast to the President, was seen to have reacted satisfactorily to the incident (Orlova 2005a: 2). Yet despite the article’s heading – “Criminals will not dictate conditions to the President” – the only mention of Bakiev was a single sentence.

Wednesday 26 October saw the media’s coverage focus on the danger of a “handful revolution” and the ongoing crisis (Byaliyev 2005: 1). Even positive news was interpreted negatively. Delo No reported that contrary to public fears of an increase in crime, there had been a reduction. While officials attributed this to the intensified work of the police, popular opinion concurred with Meerim Beishenova’s opinion that it was “due to the fact that they [criminals – one supposes] are protesting on the square” (Beishenova 2005: 3). In light of perceptions of the anti-Kulov protesters as “criminals”, or at least being connected to organised crime, it was unsurprising that reports of Bakiev’s intention to meet with a delegation of Ryspev’s supporters was met with strong disapproval by many, further adding to opinions of Bakiev as a weak and inept head of state.

Support for Feliks Kulov was expressed strongly in the newspapers, including reports that the parliament had declined to consider his resignation (Avdeeva 2005: 1; Mukashev 2005: 1). At the same time, some commentators began to wonder whether the crisis was not being manipulated to the advantage of certain politicians and civil society leaders (Karimov and Sabyekov 2005: 4). Yet others felt that the threat unleashed by Akmatbaev’s murder and the resulting protests could not be underestimated, concluding that “there is a direct threat to both the state’s security, to peace and order, and to the President’s personal security” from “the corrupted elite” (Kojomskul 2005: 7).

I returned to Ala-Too Square later that day and found fewer but evidently better organised pro-Kulov protesters. Most striking when surveying the scene was the increased prominence of a large yellow banner proclaiming “We’re against civil war”. Regardless of whether or not one felt that such slogans were overly dramatic – and I found myself undecided, on the one hand feeling that the level of threat was being exaggerated by the media and others with their own agenda, on the other aware that it was only a few months earlier that protests had led to the storming of the White House and two nights of widespread looting in Bishkek – it was difficult to feel sanguine about the state of affairs; like much of the public, I was waiting to see what happened next, fear of the unknown exacerbating my fears.

While nothing changed noticeably on the two squares on 27 October, dissatisfaction with President Bakiev was now voiced more stridently. He was increasingly being portrayed as a threat to the stability of the country and as a weak and prevarication-prone leader. One open letter described how, Bakiev’s speech on 25 October had “shocked the entire people of Kyrgyzstan”, explaining that:

The public expected from you a clear and unambiguous position. You should have said that you will not permit the criminal world to dictate terms to the state. You should have said that peaceful citizens can feel safe. You should have said that you firmly support the Government and its head, F. Sh. Kulov.

Instead of this, you said that you were waiting for the results of the investigation. You said that there is nothing awful about armed people, who are wanted for arrest, having gathered on the square.

(Lita 2005: 1)
The strong condemnation of Bakiev could not be countered by the limited number of articles published about what actions the government and President were taking. *Deto* reported in a single column article that “[t]he powers are starting to act”, citing Kulov signing into force a decree on measures to stabilise the situation, and there were several other brief reports to be found on various pages—if people were actively looking for them, as I was. Many people did not feel inclined to give the government the benefit of the doubt once more, nor had time to comb through newspapers to find information that they instinctively disbelieved: Bakiev’s assurance that Kulov had his complete support rang hollow to people already convinced by media accounts of discord between them.

Bakiev met with a delegation of Ryspek’s supporters on the morning of the 27 October. Ryspek was not part of delegation, which subsequently halted their protest. Reactions to the curtailment were mixed: “Nothing’s been solved yet. Things will get a lot worse” commented one *Gazeta. kg* reader. “The latest postponement of a solution to the conflict” concluded another. Coverage in Friday 28 October’s newspapers echoed these sentiments: “Ryspekovites leave. But for how long?” asked *MSN* (Malevanaya 2005c: 2). The effect of such coverage, as well as commentary criticising the government and voicing fears that further conflict could threaten Kyrgyzstan’s existence, was that even though the protest had ended, people felt more fearful about their future than ever: the speed at which Ryspek and his supporters left the Old Square following their private meeting with President Bakiev left many wondering if it was already too late to talk of the possible criminalisation of politics. The threat seemed more serious than ever, lending weight to a call for the public to unite: “Our ancestors always united and halted their infighting when a universal threat appeared. This time has come” (Skorodumova 2005b: 2). Two days later, people acted on this move, joining the “Peaceful Citizens for Kyrgyzstan Without Crime” demonstration on Ala-Too Square.

**Conclusion: securitization in context(s)**

Over eight days of protests, a series of securitizing and counter-securitizing moves were made that were closely intertwined and mutually constitutive. They were subsequently distilled into a distinct meta-securitization that was performed as a protest on 29 October 2005. Civil society, represented by the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society and KelKel, acted as the securitization’s initiator. Edil Baisalov, spoke explicitly of their motivation at the protest:

> We have gathered here because our civic conscience demanded it! We say ‘no’ to the criminals and bandits who are holding the whole country in a state of fear and threatening the first figures of the state. We are not just for the Bakiev-Kulov tandem; we are for order and security.  

(Malevanaya 2005b: 9)

They were also keen to highlight the damage done to Kyrgyzstan’s reputation by Akmatbaev’s protests at home and abroad. Their position built on the open letters and appeals issued by various NGOs earlier in the week calling for decisive action from the government. Organising a protest, rather than simply repeating their calls, strengthened their credibility considerably, since it demonstrated that they were able to act as well as speak—a distinction to which Kyrgyzstan had become extremely sensitive in light of perceptions of government inaction and indecisiveness.

The narrative presented was already familiar to the public and the anecdotal evidence most prominently Bakiev’s meeting with a delegation of Akmatbaev’s supporters—was extremely convincing to many who already felt that corruption was a major hindrance to their chances of living normally. The claim that the government was becoming criminalised and that if allowed to continue it would lead to the demise of Kyrgyzstan did not seem far fetched to many, especially six months after the “revolution” had started with no sign of life improving. To add insult to injury, the government’s leaders—the tandem of Bakiev and Kulov—appeared oblivious to the seriousness of the situation and dismissive of people’s fears. As Edil Baisalov argued:

> They say that we’re all very emotional, we’re scared, and we’re started demanding harsh measures. [. . .] They [the government] don’t understand that as a result of the events of these two or three days there’s been an irreparable blow to our international reputation. The authorities have been humiliated, sovereignty has been if not broken then severely shaken, and the people’s spirits have fallen.  

(Orlova 2005c: 7)

The potency of the narrative was highlighted by the fact that the securitization’s third element—audience acceptance—was assured at the outset of the protest, i.e. when the securitizing move was launched. Moreover, people’s endorsement of the threat narrative was not only expressed physically, by attending the protest, but also in word-based forms such as holding banners and placards, as well as shouting slogans. Many, if not the majority, of those who attended were already in agreement with the securitizing narrative presented and wished to demonstrate this; there was little need to try and convince them, making the progression from securitizing move to successful securitization seamless and almost instantaneous. The result was a meta-narrative that differed in key ways from the securitizing moves preceding it. Most crucially, criticism of President Bakiev was replaced with loud declarations of support for the Bakiev–Kulov tandem (Malevanaya 2005b: 9).

I have argued that in order to understand the significance of these protests as expressions of security it is not enough to focus on process instead of outcome. While this change of focus is necessary and does to a certain extent increase securitization’s utility for empirical studies, it is still insufficient, for it does not necessarily challenge the normative assumptions inherent in the Copenhagen School’s conceptualization of security, nor permit the inclusion of non-verbal forms of expression. In order to address these shortcomings, I have extended the notion of implied security to directly include physical actions as well as verbal expressions, and argued
that the researcher should seek to actively decentre securitization’s normative assumptions by explicitly considering multiple interpretations, both enic and etic, of the situation via consideration of the proximate and then distal contexts. In this way it is possible to look beyond, or perhaps more accurately, beneath, the meta-narratives that an orthodox application of securitization creates and explore specific local meanings and understandings that are inherently situated and often experiential.

As previously noted, in contrast to the first account of events (the proximate context), the public appeared to be unaware that the government had in fact responded to Akmatbaev’s protest. This is likely to be partly because of the relative lack of popularity Slovo Kyrgyzstan, the government newspaper in which the decrees and orders were published, due to its perceived pro-government bias. As a result, few people would have read the decrees and simply not know that they have been issued, contributing to the perception of government inaction. This perception was exacerbated by articles in independently-owned newspapers that made frequent reference to Bakiev’s failure to publicly condemn the protests. Similarly, the high levels of coverage given to Rysekov Akmatbaev in the media increased public anxiety about the threat (Orlova 2005b).

These two distal factors – the portrayal of events in the media and Rysekov’s reputation – played a significant role in creating the threat narrative then fuelled the protests, yet there is little room for their explicit consideration within an orthodox application of securitization theory. In effect, the analyst remains at least one step removed from the contradictions and subjectivity of etic interpretations, striving for “balance” even as local perceptions reject it based on their local knowledge: which newspapers are to be trusted, who possesses social capital, what actions are deemed necessary? Truth, balance or objectivity are of limited relevance for those living and experiencing the events in question, as Slovo Kyrgyzstan concluded: “even if the truth is not spoken completely [about events], the enlightened, the observant powers of the public forces it to draw conclusions itself, to compare details, statements, actions” (K.A. 2005).

Crucially, however, people’s conclusions and perceptions of events and their meanings alter over time. We see this in the development of competing narratives over the course of the nine days of protests, particularly in relation to the pro-Kulov and then anti-crime protests; at the start the protests were concerned primarily with expressing support for Feliks Kulov and calling upon President Bakiev to express his personal support for his tandem partner (threat narrative 1). As the protests continued, this theme was incorporated into consecutive wider narratives; first, dissatisfaction with the government’s handling of the protests and especially Bakiev’s public silence (threat narrative 2), and subsequently demands for immediate action to counter the perceived criminalisation of the government (threat narrative 3), which was seen as posing an existential threat to Kyrgyzstan’s future not only as a state, but more importantly as a people and homeland.

Securitization theory is in principle capable of analysing this final meta-narrative of threat, but in doing so it provides at best a largely decontextualized “snap-shot” of the dominant public narrative at that point in time. Even if the analyst seeks to “embed” this narrative in its local context via more explicit consideration of facilitating conditions, as Stützel proposes, or by analysing setting or the proximate context as Salter does, undertaking this task retrospectively is in danger of creating an account that bears little relation to how people experienced events as they took place due to the presumption that events are understood in the same way and have the same meaning in (for example) Kyrgyzstan and Copenhagen. Thus, in the case of the protests, it is possible to create a “comprehensive” chronological account that included government actions alongside with protests. That these actions and measures took place is not in question, yet the analyst’s reading of the situation could be very different from the locally situated and experientially-based interpretation of the situation that is formed when the distal context in particular is explored in depth. Such differences of interpretation alter the apparent “security-ness” of a situation. In the case of Kyrgyzstan the events marked the start of a meta-securitization narrative of Kyrgyzstan in crisis that has proved extremely persistent to the detriment of alternative perspectives on the socio-political situation in the republic.

Schegloff observes that “at its worst, ‘context’ is deployed as a merely polemical, critical tool. In this usage, it is roughly equivalent to ‘what I noticed about your topic that you didn’t write about’” (Schegloff 1992: 214–15). However, when engaged with reflexively on the part of the researcher with the aim of generating insights that can complement and check theory-led approaches to securitization, the consideration of contexts is vital for the situating of security as a pragmatic act.

Notes
1 The “Westphalian straitjacket” phenomenon in IR is described as “the strong tendency to assume that the model established in seventeenth century Europe should define what the international system is for all times and places” (Buzan and Little 2001: 25).
2 Echoing Eriksson’s (1999a) accusation that the Copenhagen School put the analyst in a position of “observing how others advocate” without acknowledging his own role in securitization.
3 For a fuller account of interpretive philosophy, see Yanow (2006).
5 Central Asia here refers to the five former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.
6 Rysekov Akmatbaev was himself murdered in the village of Kok-Jar, Almalyk region, Chui oblast, on 10 May 2006.