Context

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In everyday language use the notion of "context" usually refers to an explanatory environment or background of a phenomenon. Thus, the media may discuss government education policy in the "context" of the economic crisis, and thus imply that such policy in several ways is *influenced* by the crisis. Scientific uses of the notion of "context" make such a relation between phenomena and their environment more explicit, for instance, in terms of a statistical dependency or correlation. In the social sciences, context usually refers to a broader framework of a phenomenon, for instance how the press is currently developing within the more general field of forms of communication, such as social media and the Internet. In epistemology, contextualism is an approach that defines knowledge as beliefs that may be true or false depending on the situation (Preyer & Peter, 2005). Indeed, since many disciplines currently show interest in the role of various kinds of context, we may speak of *contextualism* as a general scientific approach.

Context in the language sciences

In the language sciences, the notion of context is ambiguous in the sense that it may refer to the linguistic context — often called "cotext" — of an expression, for instance, a preceding word or sentence or a whole text or conversation, or to various nonlinguistic aspects of the communicative situation, such as the gender or age of the participants. This article focuses on the nonlinguistic use of the notion of context, namely in terms of the properties of the communicative situation as they are defined to be relevant by the participants. The focal phenomenon for which such a communicative situation is relevant is a property of text or talk that may vary in different communicative situations, for instance, in what communicative situation should *tu* or *Usted* be used in Spanish when addressing someone. Linguistic cotext on the other hand is accounted for in terms of the structures of discourse, and not as an "environment" of isolated words or sentences, as was the case in traditional sentence grammar.

Dell Hymes' SPEAKING grid

Within the framework of what he called the "ethnography of speaking" Dell Hymes (1972) was the first scholar who proposed a theory of context in terms of his famous SPEAKING grid, in which each letter is the first letter of one of eight parameters of the communicative situation:

Setting/Scene: time, place, physical circumstances;
Participants: speakers and hearers of different identities or categories;
Ends: goals and purposes of a communicative event;
Act sequence: format and order of parts of the communicative event;
Key: tone, manner or spirit of a communicative act (e.g., as ironical);
Instrumentalities: forms and styles of speech (e.g., more formal or colloquial);
Norms: social rules or norms governing the event (e.g., who may speak to whom);
Genre: the kind or type of communicative event (e.g., a conversation, a story, or a political debate).

Hymes identified these properties of the communicative situation in order to account for the fact that language users not only need to learn the rules of grammar or discourse, but also need to know in what situation to use text or talk correctly. This approach already suggests that it is not just some objective external social situation that is the context but the way the language users interpret or define the communicative situation as part of their "communicative competence."

Note though that the context parameters identified by Hymes are rather heterogeneous. They may be physical-environmental (such as the Setting), social (such as Participants and Norms categories), cognitive (such as Ends), whereas the others seem to be properties of the discourse itself rather than its communicative situation (as is the case for Key, Act sequence, Instrumentalities and Genre). There are also important categories missing, such as the Knowledge (and maybe Ideologies) of the participants, which are crucial to define many of the appropriateness conditions of communicative acts, for instance, in the use of definite expressions, presuppositions, or evidentials, as we shall see in more detail below.

Context in systemic linguistics

In Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), as founded by Michael Halliday and influenced by J. R. Firth, context is defined in terms of the three notions of *field*, *tenor*, and *mode*, roughly corresponding with Subject Matter, Participants (and their relations and purposes), and the Channel (spoken or written) of discourse and how choices of linguistic forms are influenced (see, e.g., Halliday, 1977). Also in this simplified analysis of context, categories are rather vague and heterogeneous. Thus, the category or identity of Participants is a social category, whereas their Purposes are rather mental—which however is not further developed since SFL is an anticognitivist theory within the broader framework of British empiricism. Similarly, Subject Matter rather seems to be a semantic property of discourse itself, and not part of the communicative situation. SFL further distinguishes between context as situation and context as culture, a distinction between local and global, micro or macro environments, that not only applies to context but more generally to society, and more specifically to discourse and interaction (see van Dijk, 1993 for a critical assessment of the notion of context in SFL).

Context and appropriateness conditions in pragmatics

In the philosophy of language, the theory of speech acts as developed by Austin and Searle, deals with *the pragmatic appropriateness* of speech acts—as complementary

to *well-formedness* conditions as specified by grammar (morphology, syntax), and *meaningfulness* as defined in semantics. These appropriateness conditions also define part of the communicative situation, such as the knowledge of the participants (e.g., in Asserting *p* a speaker assumes that a hearer does not know *p*), their wishes and desires (as in commands), or their social identities and relations (commands can only be appropriately issued by participants in specific roles or power relations) (Searle, 1969). Although pragmatics may be defined in terms of the contextual conditions under which speech acts, and more generally discourse, are appropriate, the theory of speech acts and the philosophy of language did not offer a general theory of context.

The social psychology of situations

If contexts are subjective definitions of communicative situations, it makes sense to inquire into the social psychological approach to social situations. There are many topics in social psychology that offer interesting proposals for the analysis of how people define self, categorize other people and their roles and identities, interaction and knowledge, or how social situations influence "behavior." Ross and Nisbett (1991) take social situations as one of the major objects of research in social psychology and there have been several readers on the topic (Argyle, Furnham, & Graham, 1981). Pervin (1978) defines social situations in terms of place, time, people, and activities, and thus identifies some crucial categories also discussed in Hymes' system. Argyle (1978) in an analysis of situations as games includes behavior, goals, rules, roles, setting, salient cognitive concepts, and skills.

The most detailed contribution, also related to language, is proposed by Brown and Fraser (1979), for example, in order to explain sociolinguistic variation. Their hierarchical schema defines social situations fundamentally in terms of participants in a setting (with place and time, but also bystanders), but strangely locates purpose not as a (cognitive) property of participants but as part of the setting, as is the case for activity type and subject matter. The participant category is then further analyzed in terms of individuals and their features (such as appearance and personality as well as moods), individuals as group members (and hence their social class, "sex," and age), and personal and social relations between individuals. Besides the rather strange organization of the schema, missing is also knowledge belonging to the participants, although a cognitive category of goals is mentioned as part of the setting. Determining what aspects of communicative situations need to be considered to understand what makes a situated instance of discourse appropriate is complicated.

Toward a comprehensive, sociocognitive theory of context

In the language sciences, including anthropology, linguistics, and the philosophy of language, as well as in social psychology, the notion of context has been variously defined in terms of properties of communicative events or situations that influence the variable use of language and the appropriateness of speech acts or discourse. Although some of

the properties of communicative situations such as setting and participants are often used, these various approaches do not offer a general, comprehensive theory of context and the relations between text and context.

In the remainder of this article, a summary of such a theory will be given, based on earlier studies of context and within a broader multidisciplinary framework of discourse studies that combines discursive, social, and cognitive dimensions (for detail, see van Dijk, 1993, 2009).

Common to most approaches to context in the language sciences is the idea that language use or discourse should not only be grammatically or discursively well formed, and meaningful, but also *correct* or *appropriate* in the communicative situation. This pragmatic aspect of discourse reflects a more fundamental aspect of human interaction, namely that it is optimally adapted to the environment, and especially the social environment, a crucial condition of human cooperation and survival even before the evolutionary acquisition of language.

Context as the definition of the communicative situation

Such adaptation of action to the (social) environment presupposes that human beings are able to understand and *analyze* the properties of the environment that, in each situation, are relevant for their action. Obviously the same is true for uniquely communicative human (inter)action, that is, for language use and discourse. Hence, in order to speak or write appropriately, language users (first) need to analyze and know the relevant environment, and more specifically the social and communicative situation, and then adapt the properties of text or talk to that situation.

This means that it is not the "objective" social environment itself that influences the appropriateness of discourse, but the subjective ways language users construe, that is, analyze, understand, and represent the ongoing relevant properties of this environment. In other words, the interface between discourse and the communicative situation is necessarily cognitive. There is no direct relation between social or other structures of the environment and discourse structures, which are structures of a very different nature. Context, thus, is how language users dynamically *define* the communicative situation—and as such also experience it as real (see also the classical reference in sociology to the definition of the situation provided by W. I. Thomas). Recall that this is not only the case for appropriate language use or discourse, but for all social action: Human beings dynamically and continually analyze their social environment in order to be able to act appropriately in each social situation.

The definition of the communicative situation is *dynamic* and takes place *on line*: At each moment of text or talk the definition of the situation may change (e.g., the knowledge of the recipients) and discourse hence needs to be adapted to this changed situation.

Note though that the definition of the communicative situation not *only* takes place on line, during discourse production. Very often language users already have a hypothetical partial definition of the communicative situation before they engage in speaking or writing. For instance, as is the case for many forms of institutional interaction, before entering a classroom, both students and professors already have a general idea of the

relevant parameters of the communicative situation, such as the setting, participants, goals, and communicative interaction. This means that the definition of the communicative situation is part of the hypothetical nature of strategic discourse processing (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983).

Relevance

The social environment of interaction and communication may be very complex. Due to memory and time limitations during speaking and writing language users are unable to analyze all aspects of the social situation. So they must reduce this complexity and selectively focus only on those properties of the social situation that are usually or *systematically relevant* or *consequential* for ongoing text or talk (for a more philosophical approach to relevance, see Sperber & Wilson, 1995).

Thus, we know from studies of sociolinguistic variation, that gender, age, ethnicity, or status of the participants is often *discursively* relevant. On the other hand there are social or other aspects of the social situation, such the height, weight, or clothes of language users that have little or no systematic influence on the structures of discourse—whatever their possibly *social* relevance. Indeed, it is very unlikely that there are languages that have different pronouns or politeness markers for addressing thin or fat interlocutors—whatever the cultural differences between languages and context definitions.

A cognitive approach to discourse understanding: Mental models

A fundamental of language and discourse, as well as of our beliefs, is that they are "intentional" in the sense that they *represent* something or *are about* something (Searle, 1983). In order for language users to talk about events or situations they need to represent such situations in memory—a representation they may want to communicate to other language users. Indeed, such would be part of the very definition of communication. In contemporary cognitive psychology, these mental representations of situations are called *mental models* (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). Mental models are stored in episodic memory (part of long-term memory) where people represent their experiences and they are the cognitive basis of people's stories about past events. They are *multimodal*, as are our daily experiences of social situations, including visual, auditory, sensorimotor, and emotional dimensions (Barsalou, 2008).

Understanding discourse involves the construction of a mental model by the language users. These models are typically more complex than discourse meanings and also feature inferences, for instance, those needed to establish local and global coherence of discourse. Speakers need not express all this information in their discourse, because they know that recipients are able to derive these inferences from their shared sociocultural knowledge or old models and are thus able to construe or update a more complete model of the situation the discourse is about. In that sense, discourse is like a cognitive iceberg of which only part of the information is observably expressed.

Context models

Since contexts are also subjective definitions of situations, *in which* we communicate, contexts are a specific type of mental model: *context models* (van Dijk, 1993, 2009). Context models in this sense represent the *communicative experiences* of our everyday life. Discourse production thus involves two kinds of models, which we also may call *semantic* and *pragmatic*, respectively. These may sometimes partially overlap, for instance, when we are referring to, or talking about, categories of the current communicative situation, for instance, with deictic expressions such as *I*, *you*, *here*, and *now*. What at this moment is a context model controlling ongoing discourse may later be a (semantic) model of a communicative situation that a story is told about. Indeed, much of everyday discourse is about what we told others or what others told us.

Thus, speakers may have a semantic model of a situation, for instance, an experience of a theft, and use this as the information partly expressed in a text or talk. But it depends on the definition of the communicative situation, as represented in their pragmatic context model, *how* they speak or write about such an experience, for example, when telling a story to friends or making a declaration for the police or the insurance company. A conversational story told to friends may be more informal and focus on emotional aspects of the experience (anger, fear) that would be irrelevant in a formal declaration for the police.

This means that the context models at the same time play a role in the *style* and *genre* of discourse, and what information of the semantic situation model (the actual experience) to include or not in the discourse. It is in this way that context models control the appropriateness of discourse in each communicative situation.

As suggested above, definitions of the communicative situation are *dynamic*, and so are the context models that represent them in memory: During communicative interaction, not only time changes, but also the knowledge of the participants, and sometimes also their identities and relations, intentions, and goals.

In order to be able to control discourse production on line, context models should be *relatively simple* and feature only relevant categories of the communicative situation, as explained earlier. This is the case for all human experience of events and situations (see, e.g., Zacks, Tversky, & Iyer, 2001) and we may therefore assume also that context models consist of well-organized and well-learned *schema* of relevant categories of the communicative situation. After all, we have experienced many of these communicative situations hundreds or thousands of times during our lives, for example, everyday conversations, service encounters, and many workplace communicative situations. Only seldom are we confronted with new communicative situations, for instance, when we make a declaration for the police or in court, but even these may be partially similar to well-known communicative situations.

Since all variable aspects of discourse (see later) are controlled by context models, these relatively simple, schematically organized, context models remain constantly activated in memory, whether in working memory itself, or using some kind of directly accessible memory system that controls language use and discourse production. This aspect of the cognitive psychology of context models still needs further theoretical and experimental development.

Context categories

If context models are organized by a relatively simple schema of relevant categories of communicative situations, the crucial question for a theory of context is what these categories are. Examples of such categories can be found in Hymes's SPEAKING schema and in the schemas proposed in social psychology, include setting and participants as necessary and typical categories in context models. Crucial to the definition process is that each of these categories should be systematically relevant or consequential for the variable structures of discourse, that is, contribute to their appropriateness.

Setting

Most theories of context include setting as a typical category and it is therefore a plausible category in context models. This means that speakers must at least be aware of, and mentally represent, the *spatiotemporal* dimensions of the communicative situation: where they are, and more or less what time (day, month, year) it is. This is not only crucial for language use and communication, but also for all daily interaction and conduct.

Such information of the context model is first of all relevant for the appropriate use of *deictic expressions*, such as *here*, *now*, *yesterday*, *soon*, or *modern*, among many others, when speakers refer to specific communicative situations. In this case semantic and pragmatic models overlap.

Similarly, spatial information about the location of speakers and recipients is also necessary for the appropriate use of many verbs, such as *to take* or *to bring*.

Temporal information, in the context model, is also relevant for the appropriate use of greetings such as *good morning* or *good afternoon*.

Setting may also include *institutional environments*, for example, the classroom, courtroom, or boardroom, each associated with specific discourse genres, styles, ways and rules of address, politeness, and many other aspects of discourse. Additionally institutional environments include other categories, such as specific participant roles and identities, goals and types of communicative acts, and therefore might not represent a setting category, but a class of contexts. This invokes a typical problem of theory: As a type of place an institution is a typical setting category, but as complete institutions they could be considered as types of situations.

Participants. Also relevant in the communicative situation are the interlocutors themselves, as well as their variable communicative roles (speaker, hearer, etc.), current social role (student, teacher), social identity (gender, ethnicity, nationality), or relationships (friend, boss, servant). These participant categories control many aspects of discourse: who may or must speak, accuse, command, interrupt, open meetings, distribute turns, write news reports in the press, and so on. Notice that whereas social identities may be more or less context-independent, context models are ad hoc and hence include the currently active, dominant, or "performed" identity of the participants.

Context models are subjective and hence literally *self-centered*. The central participant is always self, and the various participant roles (e.g., as current speaker, writer, listener, or reader) are related to self, as is the case of all our personal experiences as represented in episodic memory.

Acts. While speaking or writing, language users not only engage in speech acts, but also in many types of other social acts that control what to say and how to say it, such as teaching, governing, or informing the public, often associated with specific participant roles (teachers, politicians, or journalists). At the same time such social acts define *genres* such as lessons, laws, or news reports, each with their conventional meanings, organization, and style.

If context models represent communicative situations and if talk or text is part of such situations then language users also reflexively represent and monitor such discourse, and not only as language use, but also as communicative and social action. This would imply that the very mental representation of discourse is part of the context model, where analytically text and context are distinct and where context (without text) influences text. We here meet one of the more complex theoretical (and terminological) problems of a theory of context.

Acts themselves are complex, and consist of, at a minimum, an observable mode of conduct ("behavior"), an *intention* (to engage in such conduct), and a *goal* (a state of affairs to be accomplished by the act). Although intentions and goals may be included as independent, cognitive dimensions of the context, they are inherent in the very social act to be accomplished.

Knowledge. We saw that in the Dell Hymes's theory, as well as other proposals of contexts and social situations, knowledge was not mentioned. Yet knowledge of the participants is a crucial contextual condition for the appropriateness of discourse. As shared common ground (Clark, 1996), various types of knowledge, such as sociocultural knowledge of an epistemic community, knowledge about the current situation, about what has been said before, and so on, control what information of semantic situation models may or should (not) be included in discourse, and hence what may be presupposed or implied.

Knowledge controls many other aspects of text or talk, such as, (i) differences of intonation (new information usually received heavier stress); (ii) syntactic structure (new information is typically expressed in later focus parts of sentences, and given, known or derivable information in the initial topic part) — (in) definite expressions, modalities (what language users are more or less sure about), and evidentials (indicating sources of knowledge); and (iii) semantic discourse structures such as definitions (linking new conceptual knowledge with old knowledge), argumentation, and proof (demonstrating the truth of an assertion or conclusions of arguments). Thus, a crucial epistemic rule based on context is that language users need not, or should not, assert what they believe the recipients to know already, except in special rhetorical or didactic discourse genres. In conversation, there are similarly subtle rules for who may express what kind of knowledge to what kind of recipients, depending on who has or had primary access, rights, duties, responsibility, and many other social aspects of the communication of knowledge.

Since the dynamic control of shared knowledge as common ground is so crucial for contextual appropriateness, we more specifically assume that the knowledge category of context models is an epistemic device that strategically "calculates" at each moment (of word or clause production) what recipients already know or can infer (from generic sociocultural knowledge, old semantic models, the current communicative

situation, previous communicative situations or the current discourse and previous sentences).

The empirical plausibility of context models

The context model consists of four main categories, each with several subcategories, in which language users at each moment represent when and where they are speaking, as what and to whom, what they are socially accomplishing and why they do so, and what knowledge they suppose their recipients have.

Such a simple schema in principle meets the cognitive criteria of simplicity as imposed by memory limitations. Obviously, language users, when engaged in the already very complex task of construing grammatical and discourse structures at several levels, are unable to construe and keep track of a communicative situation of dozens, let alone, hundreds of social, cognitive, biological, or physical categories.

This does not mean that language users as social actors are unable to analyze very complex social structures, but for these to be relevant in communication they need to be reduced to categories of the context model. For instance, on the basis of their size, appearance, clothes, jewelry, and so on, language users may only need to know that they are speaking to a man, woman, or child—as relevant *context* categories. Similarly, skin color and other aspects of appearance may be interpreted as a relevant contextual category of ethnic identity, and wearing a uniform as an indicator of a relevant social role, for example, as judge or police officer. In other words, context models do not represent complete social analysis or understanding, but only a *control structure* of text or talk. In each social situation, also a communicative situation, social actors may focus on and analyze any aspect of the setting, participants, and actions, and indeed talk *about* such aspects, and hence include them in their (semantic) situation models. However, this does not mean that these aspects of the situation control the pragmatic appropriateness of discourse and hence need to be included in the context model.

Speaker context models and recipient context models

All participants of communicative interaction have their own (self-centered) context model, each representing the communicative situation from their own perspective (setting, participant identity, intentions, goals, and knowledge). This explains, first of all, why and how communication may go wrong, not only because of different semantic interpretations but also because of different or unclear pragmatic interpretations (as in questions such as "Are you threatening me?").

Consistent with current neuropsychological research on mirror neurons, intentions, simulation and related studies on language use, and communication and interaction, the theory of context models also assumes that participants strategically include the (hypothetical) context models of the other participants. This is crucial for appropriate and efficient interaction, for example, in turn-taking, empathy, and in general the strategic adaptation to what (speakers believe) recipients expect, hope, want, like, and are likely to think about or react to. One interesting example is the use of disclaimers in

racist talk, when speakers begin a negative discourse fragment on minorities or immigrants by saying "I am not a racist, but … ," in which a possibly negative reaction of the recipient is anticipated with a classical denial of racism. One of the many other aspects of simulating recipient reactions is the arguing against recipient's anticipated counter-arguments (van Dijk, 1993).

Cultural variation of context models

No doubt some aspects of context and context models are universals of communication and interaction, as is the case for the general categories previously mentioned. Thus, all speakers need to be aware of their spatiotemporal orientation, have intentions and goals of speaking, accomplish social acts, and need to know about the knowledge of the recipients. However, the subcategories may vary, such as specific discursive constraints on speaking on special moments of the day, days of the week, months of the year, or special religious days, as is the case for special places and institutions. Cultural variation is especially important for the roles, identities, and relations of participants, as we know from studies of politeness, hierarchies, and power in different societies, as well as cultural variations of gender and class: who can say what (and how) to whom in what situation (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992). Indeed, many intercultural conflicts in discourse are due to different context models of participants.

Conclusion

Contexts are the controlling structures of social phenomena in general, and of language use and discourse in particular. They represent what is relevant in the environment of social action and discourse so that language users as social actors are able to adapt their text and talk to each environment. Hence, context represents the conditions that define the pragmatic appropriateness of discourse. Recently most humanities and social sciences have made proposals for the analysis of contexts in terms of such categories as setting, participants, and action in addition to further subcategories. This article discussed and integrated these and other categories, such as knowledge, in a new multi-disciplinary, sociocognitive theory of context in terms of a special type of mental model: context models that represent the subjective definitions of the relevant categories of the communicative situation consistent with contemporary cognitive theories of discourse processing.

SEE ALSO: Ethnography of Communication; Genre Analysis; Speech Act Theory; Systemic Functional Linguistics

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