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## **Discourse, context and cognition**

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**ABSTRACT** In this article the relevance of a sociocognitive approach to discourse is shown by presenting a new theory of context, defined as subjective participants' constructs of communicative situations, and made explicit in terms of mental models – context models – in Episodic Memory. Through a 'contextual analysis' of a fragment of one of the 'Iraq' speeches by Tony Blair in the British House of Commons, it is shown how such context models control and explain many political aspects of interaction that cannot be accounted for in autonomous approaches to text and talk. Context models thus provide an explicit theory of relevance and the situational appropriateness of discourse, and hence also a basis for theories of style.

**KEY WORDS:** *context, context model, discourse, discourse processing, mental model, social situation*

*Introduction*

On 18 March 2003, Tony Blair, UK Prime Minister, held a speech in the House of Commons that began as follows (according to the hardly precise transcript of the official *Hansard*):

- 1 At the outset, I say that it is right that the House debate this issue and pass judgment. That
- 2 is the democracy that is our right, but that others struggle for in vain. Again, I say that I do
- 3 not disrespect the views in opposition to mine. This is a tough choice indeed, but it is also
- 4 a stark one: to stand British troops down now and turn back, or to hold firm to the course
- 5 that we have set. I believe passionately that we must hold firm to that course. The question
- 6 most often posed is not "Why does it matter?" but "Why does it matter so much?" Here we
- 7 are, the Government, with their most serious test, their majority at risk, the first Cabinet
- 8 resignation over an issue of policy, the main parties internally divided, people who agree
- 9 on everything else?
- 10 [Hon. Members: 'The main parties?']
- 11 Ah, yes, of course. The Liberal Democrats – unified, as ever, in opportunism and error.
- 12 [Interruption]

There are many ways to analyze this discourse fragment, depending on our aims and theoretical paradigms. However, despite their profound differences of theory and method, contemporary discourse and conversation analysts generally agree that such an analysis should at least explicitly attend to the structures or strategies of this speech defined as a communicative event or as an instance of social interaction. We thus might want to examine the grammatical, stylistic, rhetorical, pragmatic, argumentative, interactional or other structures that define the various dimensions or levels of this speech. We might call this the central task of discourse and conversation analysis.

There is less agreement, however, about the importance of the study of the various 'environments' of this speech, for example, of the social, political, institutional or cultural conditions and consequences that are traditionally called its 'context'. In linguistics as well as in many directions of discourse and conversation analysis there has been a strong tendency to uniquely or primarily focus on language, talk or text 'itself'. Such 'autonomous' approaches are reluctant to open the floodgates for the possibly endless or boundless ways such 'contextual' studies may detract from the main task of describing text and talk 'in its own terms'. Thus for many conversation analysts aspects of social structure might be interesting for analysis only if these are relevant for, and 'oriented to' by the participants, that is, when they are 'procedurally consequential' for talk. In this article I shall not provide further details about this debate concerning the relation between context as relevant social structure, on the one hand, and discourse and interaction on the other hand (see the bibliographical note at the end of this article).

Sociolinguists, critical discourse analysts and others, on the other hand, emphasize that to fully account for the formal register, the persuasive rhetoric or the political dimensions of this speech, we not only need to describe these in their own right, but also to describe these in relation to, for instance, the institutional constraints of the British House of Parliament, or the power invested in the Prime Minister of the UK. Especially if we should want to *explain* what goes on in this speech, we need to do so in such broader, contextual terms. Indeed, in Critical Discourse Analysis, especially interested in sociopolitical issues and the study of power abuse, we may not be *primarily* interested in the many details, mentioned above, of this speech in its own right, but for instance in the ways Tony Blair, with this and other discourses, manipulated both MPs and British public opinion so as to be able to legitimate the British participation in the war in Iraq. It is however obvious that such an analysis also involves a detailed study of some of the relevant properties the speech itself.

Even less agreement in discourse and conversation analysis exists about one specific aspect of this 'environment' of talk and text: the *cognitions* of the participants, as these would be studied by cognitive and social psychologists, such as Tony Blair's knowledge, beliefs or intentions, or those of the participant MPs, as well as the mental processes of production or comprehension of this speech.

One argument to reject such an approach in discourse and conversation analysis is empiricist: We have no access to such 'states of mind' – if any, or if relevant at all – and we should limit ourselves to the study of the ways these become manifest in actual conduct. A related argument is that such mental states and processes are 'private' or 'personal' and that a study of discursive social interaction should attend to the 'public' dimensions of text and talk – as is also the case for the recipients.

In this article I shall not detail the many arguments in favor of an integration of a cognitive account in discourse analysis, for instance in order to be able to describe and explain such diverse discourse phenomena as anaphora, metaphors, topics, local and global coherence, abstract schemas, argumentation, speech acts, recipient design, intentions, cooperation, negotiation, and more in general the 'unobservable' properties of meaning and interaction. Among other things, adding cognitive analysis to discourse and conversation analysis also makes explicit many properties of text and talk that are now taken for granted. There is a vast amount of work in linguistics, discourse analysis, psychology and the social sciences that shows the details and the relevance of such a cognitive approach.

I advocate a broad multidisciplinary approach to discourse, which integrates a detailed and explicit study of structures of text and talk with an analysis of their social and cognitive contexts as a basis for problem-oriented critical discourse analysis. In such an approach, the study of relevant knowledge, ideologies and other socially shared beliefs is crucial in describing many of the properties and social functions of discourse. In the same way, both these cognitions and the discourses based on them need to be studied in relation to the relevant structures of institutions, groups, power and other aspects of society and culture. Thus, if we want to account for the role of discourse in the reproduction of racism in society, we obviously need such an integrated approach.

### *Traditional concepts of context*

To illustrate the relevance of such an integrated approach, I shall briefly show how to account for the important notion of *context*. The contextual approaches referred to above generally assume a more or less direct relationship between situational, societal, political or cultural aspects of the 'environment' of text and talk, on the one hand, and the structures of discourse itself, on the other. That is, in the example of Tony Blair's speech, such approaches would hold that at least some of the structures of his speech are conditioned by his position as PM, the rules and traditions of the UK House of Commons, the policies of New Labour, British political culture and many other constraints. Also much work in critical discourse analysis thus relates discourse with its sociopolitical conditions of production.

Although such a direct 'contextual' account of this speech may be quite

relevant and interesting, there are methodological and theoretical reasons why it is unsatisfactory.

First of all, already voiced by those who advocate an 'autonomous' approach to discourse and conversation, a 'free' contextual account has no obvious boundaries. It might include a vast sociological, political and anthropological study of all aspects of parliamentary democracy in general, and the UK House of Commons in particular, of British foreign policy and the role of New Labour, the relationships between the UK and the USA as well as the policies of antiterrorism, and so on. Even for practical reasons of method and feasibility, such a 'free' contextual account would be boundless. So, any sound theory of context should make explicit how such an account can be constrained.

Second, there is an even more problematic aspect of traditional contextualism: *societal, political or cultural constraints as exemplified above do not directly influence discourse at all*. There is no conditional or causal connection between groups, institutions, social positions or power relations, on the one hand, and discourse structures, on the other hand. Societal structures and discourse structures are of a very different nature, and if there are 'contextual' constraints at all, these should somehow be mediated by an interface that is able to act as a conceptual and empirical bridge between social 'reality' and discourse. Tony Blair's position, his international policies, or the rules of the UK House of Commons do not 'cause' or 'determine' the way he speaks as if these were 'objective' conditions. If this would be so, all PMs in the 'same context' would have said the same thing, which is highly unlikely.

This generally is the case for any assumed 'contextual' constraints traditionally studied in sociology under the label of social structure, for example, gender, class, ethnicity, age, position or power, among many others: if these would operate 'objectively' or even 'deterministically' on discourse, all speakers in the 'same situation' would say the same things and in the same way. We know they don't, and hence what I shall call 'naïve contextualism' is theoretically misguided.

If we do want to account for the influence of 'context' anyway, for example, because Tony Blair, the MPs present and we as analysts believe that there are some sociopolitical constraints on his speech, we must do so in other, theoretically more adequate terms, for instance by examining more explicitly the nature of such 'influence' in the first place. Such an account must provide a practical limit to the infinite regress of boundless sociopolitical contextualism, by making explicit what is *relevant* of such contexts.

Also, it must be non-deterministic, and allow speakers in the 'same' situation to speak in different ways, that is, allow individual variation. This means that consequent contextualism not only accounts for social, political or cultural constraints, but also for personal and locally emerging interactional ones, thus accounting for the uniqueness of all discourse. In sum, contextual relevance in this case needs to be further defined in terms of what is now-relevant-for-the-participants.

### *Context as participant construct*

As far as I know there is at present only one coherent, explicit and empirically warranted approach that meets these conditions: a sociocognitive account of context. In line with various earlier proposals, for instance in social psychology and sociology, *I thus propose that contexts are not 'objective' or 'deterministic' constraints of society or culture at all, but subjective participant interpretations, constructions or definitions of such aspects of the social environment.* From what we know about minds, such 'definitions' are mental, and in many situations they are *only* mental, and not expressed or formulated in discourse, although they may influence discourse.

#### CONTEXT AS INTERFACE BETWEEN SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND DISCOURSE

Contexts defined as participant definitions, that is, as mental constructs, are able to function as the interface between situational and societal structures and discourse structures, because they subjectively 'represent' relevant aspects of situations and society and directly interfere in the mental processes of discourse production and comprehension. If contexts 'control' discourse at all, this is only possible when we conceive of them as cognitive structures of some kind. And only in this way are we able to define the crucial criterion of 'relevance', that is, in terms of a selective focus on, and subjective interpretation of some social constraint as defined by the participants. This also explains why discourse may be influenced by alternative, fictitious or misguided definitions of the social situation, as long as the speaker or writer 'sees' it that way. Thus, it is not 'objective' gender, class, ethnicity or power that control the production or comprehension of text and talk, but whether and how participants interpret, represent and make use of such 'external' constraints, and especially how they do so in situated interaction.

Such an account is consistent with a constructionist approach to discourse and society, but does not reject the cognitive component of the theory. Nor does it reduce such a cognitive component to a discursivist account, according to which all we 'have', have access to, or should study is discourse, and not such intractable things as 'minds'. A mindless approach to discourse, thus, is as reductionist as a cognitive approach without real language users as persons, social actors and group members engaging in communication and interaction in social situations.

As argued above, it is not my intention here to provide arguments for a cognitive approach in general, but to show the relevance of such an approach for an account of context–text relationships. Nor am I able to prove or disprove the 'existence' of minds. I theoretically take their 'existence' for granted in the same way as we do with other 'unobservables' such as society, politics, culture, power, gender and meaning, and worthy and interesting for detailed study.

Similarly, I am unable to directly 'observe' participants' definitions of situations, but – as a variant of a classical sociological definition of 'situation' –

I shall postulate them in order to account for their consequences, for instance in discourse. In this sense an analyst is no different from lay language users who use minds, thoughts or beliefs as conditions of people's conduct in terms of explanations or understandings.

In our example, this means, among other things, that Tony Blair's position as Prime Minister only affects his speech when he at the moment of speaking *knows* that he is the PM and speaking as such, that he *knows* that he is addressing Members of the British Parliament. These MPs also construct themselves as such; they *know* that Blair is speaking now as PM, as leader of government as well as of the Labour Party, and that Blair is now engaging in a parliamentary speech, that is in a political act that aims to get parliamentary permission to send troops to Iraq. Blair also *knows* and presupposes that the MPs have this knowledge, and vice versa. Without such (mutual) knowledge, the participants would not know what to do, what to say or to understand what is going on in the first place. Knowledge is crucial for production and understanding text and talk, and any account of discourse that ignores it is incomplete.

Most of this knowledge, however, remains implicit, only indirectly influences discourse production and understanding, and only occasionally is signaled in discourse itself. Knowledge, by definition, is typically presupposed, taken for granted and expressed only when there is ambiguity, a risk of misunderstanding, or when an element of context needs to be specifically focused upon.

#### CONTEXTS ARE NOT OBSERVABLE – BUT THEIR CONSEQUENCES ARE

Unlike discourse or interaction, contexts are usually not 'observable' at all, whether traditionally defined as situational or societal constraints or as defined as mental constructs. (Incidentally, text and talk are only 'observable' in a very specific sense of 'being public', presupposing shared member's knowledge, because obviously the grammatical and other discursive structures, including those of meaning, cannot be directly 'seen', but are also results of the interpretations of participants.) Contexts only become 'observable' by their consequences on discourse, or vice versa, by the influence of discourse on social situations.

Of course, psychological research may demonstrate the empirical 'reality' of such constructs by many other, independent, methods, such as cerebral scanning, priming experiments, think-aloud protocols, recall tasks, or the analysis of mental disorders such as Alzheimer's disease that lead to impaired context definitions. We may also analyze later interviews with people commenting on their thoughts (aims, concerns, intentions, etc.) during a previous conversation. That is, both in psychology as well as in discourse and conversation analysis there are methods that more or less reliably account for at least some of the (more conscious) thoughts involved in the construction of contexts. It is true that introspection has been shown to be an unreliable method to get at cognitive structures and structures. But we should be aware of the fact that both participants as well as analysts use introspection constantly in order to

understand and participate in discourse. That is, we should not throw away the baby with the bathwater and ignore a very rich source of information about what we 'do' (or 'did') when we are thinking and speaking.

If contexts are subjective participant definitions of the relevant properties of communicative situations they are like any other everyday experience we have, from the moment we wake up until we fall asleep (or lose consciousness). That is, experiences are not 'objective' events or actions, but subjective interpretations of occurrences or conduct. Contexts are only special – and interesting for us as analysts – because they involve language use, text or talk as its constituent or component practical activity. People remember contexts as any other kind of experience of events or actions. They do so all the time when reporting about previous conversations or previous newspaper readings or television viewings.

#### CONTEXTS AND DISCOURSE PLANS

Participants also plan communicative events in the way they plan any other kind of future conduct: they seldom participate in talk-in-interaction without having at least a vague idea about what they are going to talk about, with whom, as what, when and where. Tony Blair and the MPs in the House of Commons most likely did plan and prepare, some of them in great detail, and even in written form, what they were going to say – and also knew beforehand with what goal, and in what function they were going to do so. Although plans are pre-structured contexts, the actual contingencies of the interaction will need to correct, specify or change such earlier plans, but it is important to stress that contexts are seldom construed from scratch, and only at the moment we start to engage in talk or text.

Thus, the MPs may later remember and speak about this occasion as about any other previous experience, also in terms of things that were never said by any of the participants but obviously understood and taken for granted by all – thus providing post-hoc further evidence of the reality and relevance of contexts as ongoing definitions of the communicative event. Obviously, in the analysis of such post-hoc protocols or stories we need to take into account the usual memory biases and the specific contextual and interactional constraints of these later protocols and stories – like any kind of discourse.

#### CONTEXTS AND DISCOURSE

Contexts – defined as mental constructs of relevant aspects of social situations – influence what people say and especially *how* they do so. Thus, Blair's position of PM is obviously relevant in many ways: as such he is permitted to address the House of Commons, he is allowed to speak first, and hence to order and influence the sequence of the debate, and to use deictic expressions such as 'we' (line 6) referring to the government, among many other properties of this speech. Similarly, the MPs are most likely to understand what he says as addressed to them *as MPs*, that is, as agreeing with him not 'to stand British troops down now', and hence as expecting them to legitimate British military action in Iraq –



as is signaled by the deictic expressions 'debate' and 'pass judgment' referring to the ongoing debate. That Blair knows that he is addressing the MPs as such, and in the House of Commons, also shows in his use of the deictic expressions such as the 'the House'. And that part of his definition of the communicative situation features such a broad contextual property (as subjectively defined by him, but socially shared and taken for granted by most participants) as being a member of parliament and of a democratic society, becomes obvious in the well-known polarization move (*Us* versus *Them*) in line 2.

We see that contexts not only explain what people say, but also how they say it. Lexical choice, syntax, and many other properties of the 'formal' style of this speech are controlled by the parliamentary context as Blair and the MPs define it. Obviously, in a discussion at home, Blair would not say 'I do not disrespect the views in opposition to mine' (although he *could*, e.g. when playing PM in front of his family). Note though that it is not his presence in parliament that 'causes' him to speak that way, but his definition of the situation that provides a *rule* or *reason* to speak appropriately in such a situation.

#### POLITICAL CONTEXT AND INTERACTION

Besides the many other properties of Tony Blair's speech, context as participant construct also controls the more explicitly interactional properties of the debate, as we see in the last lines of this fragment. MPs interrupt him after his reference to some political parties as the 'main parties', by repeating that phrase as a question – a repetition and question that may 'be heard as' an objection, disagreement or criticism (obviously the usual CA descriptive phrase 'be heard as' should be understood as the more explicitly cognitive phrase 'is interpreted as'). That Blair actually does understand it that way is shown by his lightning-fast reaction, 'Oh yes . . .', seemingly agreeing and going to correct himself, but then negatively describing the Liberal Democrats, the major party opposed to military action in Iraq, and hence as 'making a sneer' at them.

To understand what exactly is going on here (for instance, to understand it the way the MPs do – although as analysts we may want to provide much more analytical, or critical, understandings), we not only need general insight into the structures of interaction in general, and into interruptions, forms of (dis)agreement, questioning, sneering, and so on, in particular, but much more. By speaking about and at the same time addressing the Liberal Democrats not only as participant MPs, but also, by name, as members of a political party, he makes parties and party membership relevant. His evaluation of the Liberal Democrats in this case is thus not only conditioned by his (definition of the) role as PM or head of the current government, but also as the leader of Labour – and thus implementing a form of more general inter-party dispute and rivalry, besides commenting on the opposition of the Liberal Democrats against the policies of his government.

That is, in a political context the interruption may be heard (interpreted, represented, modeled) as 'doing opposition', and the same is true for Blair's

reaction to it, namely as attacking the opposition, and hence as defending both his policies as PM, and as leader of Labour. It is only within the framework of this context-controlled production and understanding that an expression such as 'unified, as ever, in opportunism and error' is heard – as the following protests (not transcribed by *Hansard*) suggest – as an ironical *political* attack against the Liberal Democrats. In sum, Blair not only engages in an interactional side-sequence of responding to an interruption or a disagreement, but given his definition of the current political situation, he is engaging in 'doing politics' by taking advantage of the interruption to attack the opposition. Obviously, a 'pure' or 'autonomous' account of interaction that ignores participants' contexts cannot account for this *political* aspect of this fragment of the parliamentary session.

It goes without saying that besides the contextual definition of the current political situation, and hence of what goes on not only interactionally but also politically, the participants also need vast amounts of (social and political) *knowledge*, for instance about the looming war in Iraq, British military preparations, the government problems Blair refers to in his speech (a demission of a minister), as well as the position of the Conservative Party, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats about Iraq, and so on. Again, all this knowledge is presupposed, and only manifested occasionally and indirectly, and hence must be part of the context as defined by the participants: Blair must know the now relevant things the MPs know, and hence not only must represent his own and their roles, positions, memberships or identities, but also his own knowledge and that of his recipients. Only then is he able to distinguish between the knowledge or beliefs he is (re)stating in his speech, and those that are presupposed and taken for granted.

It may of course be argued that this contextual or 'political' analysis of this speech is uninteresting, irrelevant, arbitrary or otherwise uncalled for in detailed discourse and conversation analysis. This surely is also a matter of taste and interest, but it would be emphasizing the limitations of an 'autonomous' approach really too much if we would deny that what goes on in this speech, communicative event and parliamentary debate and interaction, *also* has to do with politics and that the actions and talk engaged in are primarily produced and understood as *political*, and that for an adequate description of this fragment, this 'political' dimension should be part of the analysis. That is, with a mere interactional approach, without an account of context, we would not be able to understand Blair's speech as addressing the House of Commons (and not as any other 'House' he may refer to) and as trying to legitimate his Iraq policy by getting parliamentary approval, and finally as understanding an interruption as a form of political opposition and reacting to it again as a form of political (counter) attack against such opposition. In other words, a context-free account of this speech would seriously under-analyze the data, and most likely would involve errors of analysis. This also means that the shared members' knowledge of analysts in the context-free analysis of institutional talk should be made explicit – also as a resource for the participants.

This, and much more, can be done and understood, both by the participants and analysts, only when we postulate that the participants construct definitions of the ongoing situation as a political situation, with political roles, party identities, relations, power, and so on. The same is true for the 'national' identities presupposed by the reference to 'British' troops and the polarized evaluation of democratic *Us* and undemocratic *Them*.

There are many other discursive and interactional properties of this speech fragment that need such a 'contextual' analysis. Thus, when Blair emphasizes in formal terms (e.g. by a double negation) that he respects the views of his opponents such a statement has various contextual meanings. According to prevailing values, people who respect the views of others are positively evaluated, and hence Blair's statement may be interpreted as a strategic move of impression formation, that is, as a form of positive self-presentation.

Again, a first, basic analysis may be limited to this general level of interaction (though within a culture that positively values respect), but the specific position and formulation of this statement at the beginning of the debate has broader discursive and contextual functions. When Blair says so as PM, and while addressing the House of Commons, such positive self-presentation also emphasizes his positive qualities as a *democratic* leader – an interpretation specifically relevant in a discourse fragment in which 'our' democracy is highlighted and thus made relevant. Again, this shared understanding of Blair's statement, presupposes the activation of participants' constructs of the political situation of the parliamentary debate. Elsewhere I have called such a context-based inference a *political implicature* of such parliamentary speeches.

In sum, we see that besides the study of the very general structures and strategies of talk as interaction, we need a more specific, and in many respects more interesting and relevant, analysis of how Blair is 'doing politics' in this speech. And for such an analysis we need to make explicit the contextual definitions of the participants.

### *Mental models*

So far I have formulated some ideas on the nature of 'contexts' and some observations on the contextual properties of a political speech. Obviously, this is not yet a *theory*. In the same way we formulate explicit grammars on the verbal structures of text or talk, or explicit conversation theories on their interactional characteristics, we also need a more explicit theory of contexts as mental 'constructs'. In linguistics, discourse analysis and conversation analysis, we often leave such notions undefined, or treat them as theoretical primitives or abstractions. However, mental 'constructs' need further theoretical analysis, also in their own right, and we hence need further cognitive theory in order to understand their nature and how they are able to 'influence' or 'control' talk and text.

Contemporary cognitive psychology provides a theoretical notion that is uniquely suitable to account for what we have called 'subjective constructs or

definitions of communicative situations', namely *mental models*. Although the theory of mental models, which is now over 20 years old, is still far from complete and explicit, it has yielded a large amount of descriptions and explanations of many phenomena of human understanding. Indeed, the notion of a mental model has been crucial in the theory of discourse production and understanding (see bibliographical note).

To summarize a complex theory of strategic discourse processing, it has first of all been assumed that the production and understanding of discourse prominently involve the formation, activation or actualization of a mental model as a representation in Episodic Memory (part of Long Term Memory). This mental model is a subjective representation of the events or situation that discourse is *about*. That is, understanding text or talk not only involves constructing a mental representation of its (intensional) 'meaning', but also and ultimately, a mental representation of its (extensional) 'referent' as the participants subjectively define it by constructing a mental model for it. This cognitive theory of discourse understanding, incidentally, is quite consistent with a formal model theory as the (extensional) semantics of formal languages.

Mental models represent people's experiences, and people's episodic memory is thus populated by mental models. These are subjective, and possibly biased representations of 'reality', and may also feature evaluations of events or situations (opinions), as well as emotions associated with such events – as is typically the case by the dramatic or traumatic events of our lives.

In discourse processing, these mental models of situations-talked-about have many important functions. First of all, in discourse production they serve as the starting point of discourse: we know something (new) about an event or situation, or have an opinion or emotion about it, and such a representation serves as the 'basis' of for instance storytelling, news reports or a letter to the editor. Conversely, in discourse understanding, mental models are the goal of understanding: we understand a discourse when we are able to construct a mental model for it. The traditional but vague notion of 'making sense' of text or talk involves the production or actualization of a mental model.

Mental models have culturally based (and hence variable) schematic structures, although some of their properties may be very general if not universal. That is, people do not understand discourses and the events they are about in arbitrary and infinitely variable ways, but use handy schemas, moves and strategies so as to facilitate their task to understand potentially infinitely variable discourses and situations. Mental models do just that, and they take a schematic form of some basic categories that can be applied in the many thousands of 'understandings' in our everyday lives. For instance, we may find such well-known categories as Setting (Time, Location), Participants and their roles, ongoing events and actions, and so on. Not surprisingly, many of these categories we also find in the semantic structures of sentences (as we know them from case grammars or functional grammars) as well as in the structures of stories – since these are among the many ways mental models may be (partly)

expressed in discourse, typically so in storytelling. Obviously, these stories not only manifest the subjective mental models of experiences, but also the constraints of the context of the interaction in which they are told.

Models are always much more detailed than the discourses based on them. They feature large amounts of personal and instantiated sociocultural knowledge, as is the case when Tony Blair speaks about Iraq, troops, and so on. And conversely, sociocultural knowledge may be acquired or modified by the generalization and abstractions of mental models. Most of the knowledge of a mental model, however, remains implicit, because – depending on the context – speakers know that such knowledge is irrelevant or already known or inferable by the recipient. This – and much more – is the basis of a cognitive-semantic account of discourse production and understanding.

Note finally that mental models are not only relevant for discourse production and understanding, but also for any other kind of meaningful interaction and understanding. Hence, they cannot be reduced to text or talk. In discourse processing they explain understanding, as well as a host of other properties of discourse, such as anaphora, local and global coherence, topics, presuppositions, and so on. They also explain how we may falsely ‘recall’ information from discourse that was never explicitly mentioned in such discourse at all, or how we may remember some event but do not remember whether we have read about, heard about it or seen it as images on television. In sum, mental models are a very powerful theoretical construct, and experiments that differentiate between model structures and text structures have shown that they ‘exist’ independently of the discourses in which they are expressed or presupposed.

### *Context models*

From this brief informal characterization of mental models we may already conclude that they are also ideally suited to represent the mental ‘constructs’ we called ‘contexts’. That is, also contexts are subjective definitions of events or situations, but in this case not of the situation we talk *about* but the situation *in which* we now participate when we engage in talk or text. That is, contexts are the participants’ mental models of communicative situations. They have the same general properties as other mental models: They are representations in Episodic Memory (and hence may be used for later recall and storytelling just like other experiences); and they are subjective, and organized by a handy schema that allows language users to quickly understand the vast amount of possible communicative situations in their everyday lives.

Context models are the basis of our ‘pragmatic’ understanding of discourse. First of all, their initial design provide the *plans* that precede all discourse, as is the case for the plan Tony Blair had before addressing the House of Commons: for example, to give a speech requesting parliamentary support for his war against Iraq.

Second, context models are the goal of discourse understanding and

interaction: understanding 'what is going on' in communication and interaction is obviously more than just understanding the (semantic) meaning of discourse, as we have seen for the speech of Tony Blair. Some of our informal 'political' interpretations provided earlier are based on our (analysts') context model of what Blair is doing, politically speaking.

Third, and most crucially, context models ongoingly control discourse production and understanding. That is, they are not fixed, but flexible and dynamic and ongoingly adapt themselves to the situation, to what has been said before, to changes of plan, and so on. This also means that context models need not be consistent, nor the discourses produced under their control. Contexts as dynamically updated and adapted models of the now-relevant aspects of the communicative situation thus control the appropriateness of each state of the developing discourse.

#### CONTEXT AND THE CONTROL OF DISCOURSE

Contextual control over discourse production and understanding affects all levels and dimension of text and talk, such as the conditions of speech acts, the selection of ('appropriate') topics or the change of topics, levels of semantic description (general versus specific), the distribution of knowledge in assertions and presuppositions, lexicalization, syntactic structure and intonation, among many other 'stylistic' aspects of discourse. In this sense, context models control 'ways of speaking'. They adapt the discursive expression of (semantic) mental models – content, information, etc. – to the ongoing communicative situation. That is, they define appropriateness as well as relevance.

In order for context models to be able to have this role, and to facilitate understanding, interaction or communication, they should feature a relatively small number of basic categories, such as the ones mentioned above: Setting, Participants and Actions. Similarly, the main (relevant) social properties of the participants (e.g. gender, age, political party, etc.) may be represented in the model, as well as their current knowledge and opinions. Indeed, intentions or goals are prominent components of context models and they define the overall, strategic goal-directedness of discourse, or the ways people understand it. This also means that, both for participants and analysts, understanding talk as (inter) action involves attributing intentions to the actors.

Comparative cultural analysis of speech situations will be needed to find out which of these categories are general or universal, and which ones are rather culturally variable. Thus, it is likely that many cultures represent gender, age or power as relevant in the definition of the communicative situation, and not, for instance hair color or other usually less 'relevant' properties of participants.

Undoubtedly universal is the *knowledge component* of context models: no communication, interaction or discourse is possible without postulating that participants share knowledge, and mutually monitor such knowledge and its changes – if only based on what has been said in the previous part of the conversation. Indeed, we postulate that the context model is construed around a

special knowledge-device or K-device that ongoingly examines which knowledge may or should be expressed in discourse (or not, for instance because it is irrelevant, uninteresting or already known). In other words, context models not only make the usual appropriateness conditions of speech acts explicit in terms of discourse processing, but also the Gricean conversational maxims.

It is beyond the scope of this article to present a detailed process model in which context models have the role informally described above. We already have assumed that they may be partially constructed before the actual communicative event, especially in institutional interaction, for instance as 'plans'. Second, we have assumed that they are dynamic and ongoingly adapted to changing circumstances, current interpretations and especially previous actions of previous speakers. Third, they are strategic, that is efficient and fast, but not perfect or complete: they provide interpretations of situations that are relevant for all practical purposes, but people make mistakes, and thus construe 'wrong' models, which in turn may lead to communication conflicts or negotiations. Fourth, they exercise their influence in all stages and at all levels of discourse production, from the overall choice of global topics or macro speech acts, on the one hand, to the actual actualization of talk in sound structures or graphics, on the other hand.

More specifically, context models control what may situationally *vary* in discourse, for example, style, rhetoric, etc. For instance, we may have the 'same' mental model of a robbery when we talk to the police or friends, but the different context models of these different speech events – a conversational story or a report – control *how* we talk about the robbery: what information is now attended to, what information to include or not, what information to emphasize or not, which words to choose to describe it, and so on.

We have seen in our example that there are many properties of Tony Blair's speech that are not as such occasioned by his knowledge about Iraq or the current political situation in the world or in the UK, but rather by his current definition of the political situation at the moment he addresses the MPs. It is this context model that controls the formal (lexical and syntactic) style of his speech, the move of positive self-presentation and impression management, the way he reacts to an interruption, and so on. In all these cases such a context model, as well as that of the MPs, defines what they are doing politically speaking.

Although context models – like all mental models – are subjective and unique, they not only feature personal beliefs or knowledge, but embody large amounts of (instantiated) socially shared knowledge and other beliefs. Blair makes himself understood also because he knows that much of his context model overlaps with that of the recipient MP, for instance because they share the knowledge about the rules and norms of parliament and debates, because they share political knowledge and because they share more general interactional and linguistic knowledge as well as sociocultural knowledge of the world.

Indeed, we may assume that the more situations are formal, normative and institutional, the more the context models of participants will be similar and

overlapping, whereas those in informal situations may be much more idiosyncratic. But in the latter case, especially in conversations among couples, friends or colleagues, such idiosyncrasy is compensated by greater mutual knowledge, and hence shared presuppositions, known goals, and so on. Conversely, conversations among people of different cultures, and without much prior experience with intercultural communication, may involve context models that are quite different, and hence may cause misunderstanding and conflict.

### *Open problems*

There is still much about context models we do not know. First of all, we need much more empirical and comparative research to find out what are the context model categories in different cultures. Thus, if specific kinship relations require speakers to use different pronouns in some culture, then we may assume that such a kinship relation is systematically part of context models in such a culture.

Second, we need to know much more about the schematic structures of context models – which categories are more or less important, and so on. How complex may context models be? If they need to be formed in fractions of seconds, as in some encounters, they obviously cannot consist of thousands or even hundreds of situation characteristics. Even if they are partly planned ahead, they need to be (re)activated and dynamically updated permanently in interaction, and this also requires that context models must be relatively simple.

Third, we need to get evidence on the acquisition of context model schemas by children – at what age they learn that for instance age or gender may be relevant category in order to adapt their discourses accordingly.

Fourth, we need to know in more (cognitive) detail how context models ongoingly control discourse production and comprehension, for example, the selection of topics, pronouns, intonation or conversational openings and closings, among a host of other discourse properties. For instance, what – if any – information of context models is held in Short Term (working) memory or other memory types that store control information (as is also the case for ongoing topics of discourse).

Next, we may want to know what discourse disorders may be caused by incomplete, deficient or neurologically damaged context models, for instance as a consequence of Alzheimer's, aphasia, accidents, drug abuse, and so on. Episodic memories are often easily erased or made inaccessible in such disorders, and in serious cases this may mean that people are unable to form, ongoingly update or maintain a current situation definition, and thus produce incoherent, repetitive or otherwise anomalous discourse.

And finally – and perhaps most importantly for discourse and conversation analysts – we want to know in much more detail which discourse structures are effectively controlled by context models. This may be obvious for deictic pronouns, politeness formulas, lexical variation or speech acts, but we may also want to know more about the contextual control of topics, local semantics,



rhetorical devices, and so on. Is writing about personal topics in a news report contextually inappropriate (and hence sanctioned by editors, etc.), or should we deal with this in a semantic account of genre meanings? Is opening a lecture without greetings or thanks to the organizers socially and contextually inappropriate, or simply a 'free', personal, variation of more or less polite language users? In other words, we need to be able to delimit what 'contextual' analysis should and could describe and explain, and what should be taken care of by other theories of discourse.

### *Concluding remark*

It is presupposed in this article that a cognitive account of discourse production and understanding is a relevant and important task of an integrated theory of text and talk. This relevance has been demonstrated by an account of context in terms of subjective participants' constructs of the relevant properties of communicative events.

Since these constructs are mental, we need an explicit cognitive theory to describe and analyze their structures and functions. Mental models are the ideal psychological notion to account for such subjective definitions of situations. They account for personal variation in discourse production and comprehension, for style, for interactional conflicts, and especially for the ways discourse is appropriate in given social, political or cultural situations. That is, context models are the missing link between text and talk and their environment. They describe aspects of discourse that cannot be described in the 'autonomous' terms of discourse or interaction structures alone, and at the same time provide frameworks for the explanation of such structures – both of participants as well as of analysts.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

A more or less adequate referential backup of what has been proposed in this article would fill many more pages, so I shall limit myself to only a few of the most relevant references. Although briefly referred to in several of my publications since my *Text and Context* (1977), the first published versions of my theory of context as cognitive context models was published in van Dijk (1999), where many further references are given. Other aspects of the theory – such as the relations between context and knowledge and context and ideology – have been discussed in van Dijk (2001, 2004, 2005). For details, see my book, now in preparation, on context. Despite the relevance of the notion, there are as yet no monographs on context. For collections of earlier articles, see, for example, Auer and Di Luzio (1992) and Duranti and Goodwin (1992). For contextualization, see, for example, Gumperz (1982) and Fetzer (2004). In linguistics, most work on context has been carried out in the Systemic Functional Paradigm (see e.g. Leckie-Tarry, 1995; Ghadessy, 1999) – an approach to context critically


analyzed in van Dijk (2004) and in my forthcoming book on context. Systematic situation and context descriptions, after earlier work by Hymes (1962) on the components of the well-known SPEAKING grid, have been provided in social psychology – see, for example, the papers in Scherer and Giles (1979), especially Brown and Fraser (1979). See also Giles and Coupland (1991). As far as I know it is in this work that contexts are first defined in terms of interpretations of social situations (for the analysis of situations, see also Forgas, 1979, 1985; Argyle et al., 1981; Furnham and Argyle, 1981). In sociology, at least since W.I. Thomas (1966/1928), the classical accounts of ‘social situations’ in terms of definitions or interpretations of what is relevant in the social environment are an informal but important example of the relevance of ‘mental’ notions in history of the discipline (for further discussion, see, e.g. Perinbanayagam, 1974). For a more recent discussion about ‘context’ in conversation analysis, and more in general about the relations between social structure and talk, see Schegloff (1991) and the other papers in Boden and Zimmerman (1991), among many other, more recent books on institutional talk. For a recent collection of papers showing the (usually negative) attitudes in CA on the relevance of cognitive analysis of talk, see Te Molder and Potter (2005) – and the other articles in this issue.

Cognitive mental model theory was first introduced by Johnson-Laird (1983) and van Dijk and Kintsch (1983). For recent collections of work on mental models, see Oakhill and Garnham (1996) and Van Oostendorp and Goldman (1998). For the obvious link of my theory with a cognitive theory of relevance, see Sperber and Wilson (1995). There is no space here to refer to the many links with the cognitive theory of text processing, the theory of episodic and autobiographical memory, event understanding, etc. in psychology; the work on socially conditioned language variation in sociolinguistics; the study of cultural variations of contextual conditions in the ethnography of speaking, and many other obvious references. Nor do I refer here to my own earlier and current work on news, racism, ideology and context in which some of the notions presented here are elaborated and applied (for details and bibliography see my publication list and papers on my website: [www.discourse-in-society.org](http://www.discourse-in-society.org)).

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