Discourse and Context

How do social situations influence language use and discourse? This book is the first monograph to present a multidisciplinary theory of *context*. Traditionally, context was defined as "objective" social variables (such as gender or class of speakers). Teun A. van Dijk argues that it is not the social situation itself that influences the structures of text and talk, but rather the *definition* of the relevant properties of the communicative situation by the discourse participants. The new theoretical notion developed to account for these subjective mental constructs is that of *context models*, which play a crucial role in interaction and in the production and comprehension of discourse. They dynamically control how language use and discourse are adapted to their situational environment, and hence define under what conditions they are appropriate. Context models are the missing link between discourse, communicative situation and society, and hence are also part of the foundation of pragmatics. In this book, context models are studied especially from a (socio) linguistic and cognitive perspective. In another book published by Cambridge University Press, *Society and Discourse* Teun A. van Dijk develops the social psychological, sociological and anthropological dimensions of the theory of context.

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A sociocognitive approach

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Preface

Thirty years ago I wrote a book called *Text and Context*. That book deals extensively, and quite formally, with text, but much less with context – a notion that is of crucial importance in understanding how discourse is embedded in society. In my later work in Critical Discourse Studies, for instance on racism, ideology and discourse, context is extensively dealt with as a social background for discourse, but analyzed theoretically hardly at all.

Traditionally, in the study of language and discourse, context is conceived of in terms of independent social variables, such as gender, class, ethnicity, age or identity, or as social conditions of text and talk.

Both formal and ethnographic studies of *indexicality* define contexts rather in *semantic* terms, for instance as referents for deictic expressions, but most of such work is limited to spatial or temporal orientations of participants.

Speech act theories have formally accounted for some of the properties of Speakers and Hearers, such as their knowledge, wishes or status, so as to formulate appropriateness conditions, but have not further pursued a systematic analysis of such contextual conditions.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is crucially interested in the social conditions of discourse, and specifically in questions of power and power abuse, but has also failed to develop more explicit theories of context as a foundation for its own critical enterprise. Obviously, power is not shown just in some of the aspects of "powerful speech," and we need insight into the whole, complex context in order to know how power is related to text and talk, and more generally how discourse reproduces social structure.

Both the *cognitive psychology* of discourse and *artificial intelligence* have advanced much in the last decades in discovering the processes and representations involved in discourse production and comprehension. They have contributed insights into the fundamental role of mental models and knowledge regarding discourse processing and use. However, these models were also semantic rather than pragmatic. Apart from some experimental studies of individual differences or different goals, little systematic empirical work has been done on the influence of context on discourse processing.

Social psychology is among the few disciplines that have developed ideas about the structures of situations and episodes that might be used as proposals for the basis of a theory of context, but these were not intended as a theory of context for discourse. Indeed, except in *discursive psychology*, the study of discourse in mainstream social psychology is still quite marginal.

If any discipline should provide insight into the nature of contexts and their influence on discourse, it is *sociology*. But, rather ironically, the major influence of sociology in discourse analysis has been the *analysis of conversation*, which, at least initially, was even more context-free than much discourse analysis – while focusing more on the structures of interaction than on settings, actors and their properties. Note though that in earlier decades there were occasional attempts to define social situations in sociology, culminating especially in the work of Erving Goffman, who may be the sociologist who has contributed most to our understanding of how interaction and talk are situated.

Anthropology and, especially, the *ethnography of speaking* and *linguistic anthropology* are the only directions of research that have now for a period of decades been paying explicit attention to the study of context as an obvious component of "communicative events," beginning with the well-known SPEAKING grid by Dell Hymes in the 1960s. Related are the ethnographic studies by John Gumperz and others in *interactional sociolinguistics* on what they called "contextualization." Until today these are also the few approaches that have produced (edited) books on context and contextualization.

We may conclude from this very brief summary that in most of the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences there is growing but as yet unfocused interest in the study of context.

There are many thousands of books, in many disciplines, that feature the word "context" in their titles, but the vast majority of these studies use the word "context" informally, as social, political, geographical, or economic "environment," "situation," "conditions" or "background," and hardly ever in the specific sense of "context of text or talk".

There are a few books in linguistics, discourse studies, and the social sciences that use the notion of context in terms of constraints and consequences of discourse, but most of these studies focus on discourse itself, and not on the complex nature of its contexts. This is of course not surprising, because the very notion of "context" implies that it is defined relative to "text," and that in that case the "text" (or talk) is the focal phenomenon. That is, contexts are generally only considered to better understand or analyze discourse. If not, a "context" study would be pure psychology, sociology or anthropology of settings, social actors and their properties, as well as their cognitions, activities, interactions, social practices or organizations.

The time has come to take contexts seriously, and to develop explicit theories of contexts and the ways they are assumed to be related to discourse and communication. This book, as well as *Society and Discourse* (van Dijk, 2008), in which I explore the study of context in the social sciences, is an attempt to develop just such a theory. It will do so by examining the (use of the) notion of context and its possible components in linguistics, socio-linguistics and cognitive psychology. *Society and Discourse* extends this theoretical exploration for social psychology, sociology and anthropology, studies that will often be referred to in the current volume. Although closely related as one comprehensive study of context, both books can be read as independent studies – this one largely directed at readers in (socio)linguistics and cognitive psychology, and the other monograph at readers in social psychology, sociology, anthropology and political science. Of course, I may hope that readers of this volume will also read the other study on context in the social sciences, given the obvious relationships between social contexts of discourse and the study of communicative situations and interactions in the social sciences.

This book is the first monograph dedicated entirely to the notion of context, and therefore should be seen as exploratory. It is a theoretical study, inspired by ideas, notions and developments in linguistics, sociolinguistics and cognitive psychology. Although I review a large number of empirical studies, I have no new ethnographic context studies or experiments to report. Instead, throughout the book I shall illustrate the theory with the example of one of the most influential discourses of recent years: the debate on Iraq in the British House of Commons. In his speech in this debate Tony Blair presented and defended a motion intended to legitimate war against Iraq – a war of which we all know the dire consequences.

This speech and subsequent ones by other Members of Parliament offer many examples that demonstrate that a context-free approach to the study of discourse and conversation is constrained and leads to superficial, formalistic, and sometimes trivial descriptions that seriously under-analyze discourse, as it is deeply embedded in social and political life.

Since intuitively nearly anything may become relevant for discourse – if only the topics we talk about, or the myriad of situations in which we may talk, write, listen or read – a theory of context risks becoming a Theory of Everything. It is therefore crucial to literally "define," that is, delimit, what may otherwise extend to large part of society. Indeed, it is hardly an exaggeration to hold that Tony Blair's speech needs to be understood not only as that of a Prime Minister addressing MPs (and the nation, and the world) in the context of a parliamentary debate in the British House of Commons on March 18, 2003, but also as part of UK foreign policy, the relationships with the USA and the EU, the Middle East question, and so on.

Unless we want to get lost in endless contexts, we must conclude that not everything that can somehow be understood as "background" to discourse is necessarily part of its "context" when that is defined in more restrictive, theoretical terms. Context draws on, but is not the same as, knowledge of the world. Developing a theory of context, thus, means first of all selecting those elements of a communicative situation that are systematically relevant for talk and text. This means that we need to examine how in linguistics, sociolinguistics, cognitive and social psychology, sociology and anthropology such situations are being defined in the first place – and then devise criteria of what to include and what not to in the theory of context.

This book is not only exploratory and a review of much earlier work. It also presents and defends a theoretical thesis that may be obvious (at least for psychologists and some old phenomenological sociologists) but is not apparent in much of the current social sciences and the various approaches to discourse and communication. This thesis is very simple, but it is crucial to an understanding of what context is and how it relates to discourse:

It is not the social situation that influences (or is influenced by) discourse, but the way the participants *define* such a situation.

Contexts are thus not some kind of objective condition or direct cause, but rather (inter)subjective constructs designed and ongoingly updated in interaction by participants as members of groups and communities. If contexts were objective social conditions or constraints, all people in the same social situation would speak in the same way. So the theory must avoid social positivism, realism and determinism at the same time: contexts are participant constructs. This is also the reason why the main hypothesis of the theory of context is a sociocognitive one, and this book may be defined as a sociocognitive perspective on the study of context within a broader multidisciplinary approach.

The thesis that contexts are subjective participant constructs also accounts for the uniqueness of each text or talk (or its fragments), as well as for the common ground and shared social representations of participants as they are being applied in their definition of the situation we call context.

We shall see that psychology has a very useful theoretical notion that places the theory on a solid cognitive foundation, namely that of *mental model*. That is, as subjective interpretations of communicative situations, contexts will be defined as *context models*. Here is what such context models (must) do:

- They control how participants produce and understand discourse.
- They enable participants to adapt discourse or its interpretations to the communicative situation as it is relevant to them at each moment of the interaction or communication.

- They provide the crucial missing link in the cognitive theory of text processing between mental models of events talked about (reference) and the way discourse is actually formulated.
- They define the conditions of appropriateness of discourse, and hence are the basis of a theory of pragmatics.
- They are the basis of a theory of style, genre, register and in general of all discourse variation.
- They are the missing link between discourse and society, between the personal and the social, and between agency and structure, and hence confirm that the well-known micro–macro problem can (also) be formulated in these terms, at least for the fundamental domain of language and communication.
- For linguistics and (formal) grammars, context models may be (and partially have been) formalized in ways that go beyond the referential semantics of deictics.
- Context models will allow sociolinguistic inquiry to continue more explicitly its development beyond the study of correlations with social variables, and at the same time focus more on the social influence on discourse structures.
- Context models make explicit old but still relevant notions of sociology, such as *definition of the situation*, also to be applied in interaction and conversation analyses.
- They show how context also may control aspects of text and talk that are relevant for the participants but are not observable.
- They reformulate earlier frameworks in anthropology for the study of communicative events.
- Finally, as also the contextual and critical analysis of Tony Blair's speech as well as the other interventions in the Iraq debate will show, a more systematic account of context is part of the foundation of Critical Discourse Studies as much as it is for all more socio-political approaches to discourse.

Since the theory is only fragmentary, this book is also intended as a stimulus for further research. It deals with numerous issues that need further theoretical development, psychological experiments, ethnographic description and detailed discourse analysis. The influence of context is often subtle, indirect, complex, confused and contradictory, with results far from the main effects of independent social variables.

Contexts are like other human experiences – at each moment and in each situation such experiences define how we see the current situation and how we act in it. It is a fundamental task for the humanities and social sciences in general, and for discourse studies in particular, to show how exactly our text and talk depends on – and influences – such contexts.

More than any of my other books, the writing of my two books on context has been a tremendous effort of several years. Although developing theory (and analyzing interesting examples) can be fun, one may sometimes despair because of the complexity of the questions involved. When devising a general theory of context and its relation to discourse, we cannot limit ourselves to a more focused study of, say, pronouns, turn-taking or metaphor (each already an enormous area of study). On the one hand nearly all aspects of social situations need to be considered, and on the other all the variable structures of language use and discourse. No wonder it took years before I got a grip of the major problems involved! No wonder that this study, despite the severe limitations I imposed upon myself, steadily grew to its present size of two independent, but closely related, monographs! And I still have the nagging feeling that I have only scratched the surface – the same feeling I had about my understanding of discourse when I wrote *Text and Context* three decades ago.

I hope therefore that despite the obvious imperfections and incompleteness of my books, others will take up the challenge and further develop the field of *context studies* as one of the major areas of discourse studies in all disciplines of the humanities and social sciences.

Critical comments and suggestions are as always most welcome.

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