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Master Two. Applied Language Studies.

Discourse Analysis.

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Context and Discourse Studies.

1. Introduction

A careful analysis of human communication reveals that connected speech does not arise out of a vacuum but that its production, purpose and effect are deeply embedded in the particular context in which both the speaker and hearer play their distinctive roles. At this point, we should distinguish between two types of context: linguistic and non-linguistic context. Linguistic context refers to the surrounding features of language inside a text, like typography, sounds, words, phrases, and sentences which are relevant to the interpretation of other such linguistic elements.

In fact, context is viewed in the contemporary world as possessing a vital role in interpreting discourse but it was conventionally perceived in the recent past as something chaotic and idiosyncratic and, thus it was eschewed from early discourse studies. However, modern discourse studies consider context to be a new paradigm in the analysis of different fields, among them, pragmatics and discourse analysis. As a result, they have earned a wide popularity in the sense of providing the analyst with hints and insights in order to decipher and unveil the ambiguity of certain spoken utterances or written texts.

Accordingly, an understanding of how language functions in context is central to an understanding of the relationship between what is said and what is understood in spoken and written discourse. The context of situation of what someone says is, therefore, crucial to understanding and interpreting the meaning of what is being said. This includes the physical context, the social context and the mental worlds and roles of the people involved in the interaction. Each of these impact on what we say and how other people interpret what we say in spoken and written discourse. (Bloomsbury, 2012)

On the other hand, the non-linguistic context is a much more complex notion since it may include any number of text-external features influencing the language and style of a text. It is evident that interlocutors are, consciously or not, greatly influenced by a wide variety of contextual factors such as topic, the speakers' expectations of the listeners' knowledge, anxiety or scepticism, creative talents, attitudes, and beliefs. Other elements are equally influential namely inter-textual allusion, the participants' assumptions, the general knowledge of the social functions and stylistic conventions. Indeed, it has

become obvious from this long, but still incomplete, list of non-linguistic contextual factors that any idiosyncratic style or any conscious or unconscious choices of expression are always motivated, inspired, or induced by contextual circumstances in which both speakers and listeners are in various ways involved.

In short, context from a general perspective can represent the clue which sets the precise and intended meaning apart from the other conveyed statements that any discourse may imply. Hence, in the light of the crucial importance of context, the way has become neatly paved for discourse analysts to successfully realize the most pertinent and relevant interpretations.

2. Definitions of Context

Context in discourse studies is viewed as one of the key parameters upon which the analyst of discourse bases his interpretation of either spoken or written language to provide an optimal attempt, which mirrors the content of discourse. Therefore, there are nearly as many definitions of context as the number of scholars who have strived to define it. Nevertheless, one can put forward three major definitions that encompass most of the essential parameters of context, namely the contributions of Teun A. van Dijk, Guy Cook and H. G. Widdowson.

T. A.van Dijk (1977) qualifies context in terms of being a 'dynamic' process. It is not static, and it includes a series of situations which differ from moment to another. He states that context is a 'course of events' with an 'initial state', 'intermediary states' and a 'final state'. Therefore, many variables may influence these states, such as the setting (where and when) in which the common activities of speaker and hearer are realized, "and which satisfy the properties of here and how logically, physically, and cognitively." (p. 192)

Moreover, van Dijk emphasizes the social factors of context which largely determine its objectives and interpretation. He advances that "Context is defined as a theoretical term, within a broader theory of discourse, that must account for the ways discourses are produced and understood as a function of the properties of the communication situation- as they are understood and represented by the participants themselves." (2012: 248)

On the other hand, Cook (1989) defines the notion of context as the knowledge of the world at large. He states that our speech (i.e. text or talk) and our understanding of discourse is determined by other factors, which surpass the sentence facets, such as the non-linguistic factors, situation, and the cultural and social relationships with the participants. Consequently, the interpretation of discourse is tightly related to the different factors found in the world.

As far as Widdowson (2007) is concerned, he focuses on the idea of shared knowledge between the conversationalists. He asserts that context is present when two interlocutors engaged in a conversation are aware of the mutual commonalities between them. Thus, it

will lead to a successful act of communication. Widdowson points out that "Context is the common knowledge of the two people concerned, which will have been established in their previous conversation." (2007: 20)

Additionally, Widdowson demonstrates that: "Context is a psychological construct, a conceptual representation of a state of affairs. In communication, what happens is that a first-person party (a speaker or writer, P1) produces a text which keys the second-person party (listener or reader, P2) into a context assumed to be shared. Once the context is keyed in, then it can be extended, or modified, by means of more text: once a degree of contextual convergence is initiated, it provides the conditions for further convergence." (2007: 22)

In conclusion, context is that mental model and abstract reference that take place when the sender of the message and the receiver understand the context shared between the two. It is, then, possible for the communication to be adjusted or developed in terms of encoding more information or providing illustrations since there will be less chance of any breakdown in the act of communication.

3. Structure of Context

A significant task of the discourse analyst would be to 'place' word clusters in a situation and formulate the conditions stipulating which utterances are successful in which situations. That is, we need a characterization of this 'situation of speech interaction'. The technical term we use for such situation will be that of context. Similarly, we need a specific term in order to denote the systematic successfulness of an utterance: the aspects of success are grammatical, psychological, sociological, and pragmatic. This term is simply Appropriateness (of the context).

The notion of context has already been introduced, if somewhat informally, in the general introduction. However, it will be recalled that we distinguished two kinds of context: an internal linguistic context built up by the language patterns inside the text, and an external non-linguistic context drawing up to ideas and experiences in the world outside the text. The latter is a very complex notion because it may include any number of text-external features influencing the interpretation of a discourse. Perhaps we can make the notion more manageable by specifying the following components (obviously the list is by no means complete:

  a. The text type or genre (for example a sermon, a political speech, an election poster, a recipe).
  b. Its topic, purpose, and function.
  c. The immediate temporary and physical setting of the text.
  d. The text's wider social, cultural, and historical setting.
  e. The identities, knowledge, emotions, abilities, beliefs, and assumptions of the speaker (writer) or hearer (reader).

f. The relationships holding between the interlocutors.
g. The associations with other similar or related text (or discourse) types or Intertextuality.

4. Components of Context
a. Teun A. van Dijk.

The necessary components in context may help (sometimes not sufficient) to completely define conditions of appropriateness. In fact, complications will especially appear in the complexity of speech acts and communicative interaction as analysed below:

-   A set of possible contexts: the context is dynamic because of the action of various elements such as shift from the initial topic, new participants, changing of location.
-   A set of time points: it is closely connected to time changing and time reference.
-   A set of places: the 'here-and-now' pair defining the state of the actual context.
-   A set of persons: the actual participants and the possible agents.
-   A set of utterance types: the actual utterances (content sequences) and the utterances token serving as preliminaries or small-scale substitute such as interjections, starters, or onomatopoeias.
-   A set of communicative acts: sequences display an infinite number of speech acts (a speaking function and a hearing function).
-   Several sets of actual relevant knowledge, beliefs, wants, wishes, intentions.
-   The set of communicative conventions of the speech community.

b. Dell. Hymes.

Hymes categorizes the speech situations in terms of eight constituents which we may summarize in the following:

-   Form and content of text: the itself forms part of the speech situation.
-   Setting: it can take the form of open-space surrounding or specific locations.
-   Participants: active and passive interlocutors.
-   Ends: the intentions and effects of speech.
-   Key: non-verbal communication or 'body language' such as facial expressions, head or eye movements, hand signals or body postures.
-   Medium: as far as speech record is concerned we can mention oral interviews, telephone conversations, video-conferences, or chat-rooms.
-   Genre: the style or category of speech of the oral record and the literary genres like poetry, drama, novel of the written record.
-   Interactional norms: all the socio-cultural conventions that govern human oral and written communication.

5. Features of Context
a. Dynamism.

A first property of context to be emphasized is its dynamic character. A context is not just one possible world-state, but at least a sequence of world-states. Moreover, these situations do not remain identical in time, but change.

b. Course of Events.

A context is a course of events which has an initial state, intermediary states, and a final state. We must know what conditions a possible world (setting) must satisfy in order to qualify as initial or final state of context. A number of kinds of association between mechanism and realization can be identified as follows:

Mechanism.   **Realization.**

Opening----------------------------Hello there, Hi, How are you? How's things?

Taking a turn------------------------Yer but, Well yes but, Surely…

Holding a turn-----------------------er, um, anyway, you know, I mean, sort of…

Passing a turn------------------------What do you think? Tag-questions.

Closing-------------------------------Right, Well anyway, So, Ok then…

Pre-sequence------------------------Listen, Did I tell you about? Oh, I wanted to ask you…

Repair: Self----------------------------What I really meant was…

        Other's----------------------Sorry, I don't quite get what you mean…

Up-shot: Own------------------------What I'm getting at is… (i.e. the result in the end)

        Other's---------------------What are you getting at?

c. Actuality.

The actual context is defined by the period of time and place where the common activities of speaker and hearer are realized, and which satisfy the properties of 'here-and-now' logically (ability to argue and convince, reason), physically, and cognitively.

d. Normality (or Normalcy).

A normal context satisfies the basic postulates of communicative events (axiomatic: clear and evident without proof). A context may be possible, imaginable but not normal, in such contexts the basic principles of communication are transgressed.

6.Types of Context

The classification of context changes from one scholar to another due to the different criteria upon which the analyst categorizes context. Consequently, one can solely concentrate on three principal types of context as it is suggested by Song (2010) and other scholars as follows:

a. The Linguistic Context.

It is generally defined in terms of the linguistic surrounding in a discourse (e.g. the words, phrases or sentences which precede or follow a given discourse). Hence, the linguistic context indicates the marginalization of the external factors which are usually found within any discourse, such as social, psychological and cultural criteria that hold a notable significance in the analysis. Indeed, Song (2010: 876) asserts that: "Linguistic context refers to the context within the discourse, that is, the relationship between the words, phrases, sentences and even paragraphs. Take the word 'bachelor' as an example. We can't understand the exact meaning of the sentence 'He is a bachelor', without the linguistic context to make clear the exact meaning of this word." In other terms, a segment of utterance or text cannot be fully understood unless the hearer or the reader is aware of what has been said before or what has been written before. As such, logical links are established to understand the linguistic context.

b. The Situational Context.

Song (2010: 877) states that: "Context of situation refers to the environment, time and place, etc. in which the discourse occurs, and also the relationship between the participants. This theory is traditionally approached through the concept of register." That is, situational context mainly indicates the setting (time and place), and entourage which are highly influential in communication. Moving from one situation to another requires a different type of communication (e.g. change in the formality level). Therefore, the linguistic choices can be determined by the situational context.

c. The Cultural Context.

The notion of culture is intrinsically related to other elements which constitute its concept such as, traditions, customs, religious rituals, gender, social status, etc. These cultural components have inevitably a salient impact on the way people interact as well as on the interpretation of the discourse. While convergence among cultures facilitates the act of communication among people, divergence makes from communication a difficult task to be fulfilled. As such, the cultural context is classified into 'high cultural context'

and 'low cultural context'. Within this perspective, Hall (as cited in Neuliep, 1996, p.62) argues that: "A high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or is internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of information is vested in the explicit code."

A comprehensive representation of high cultural context is that it refers to the communication where the participants are highly aware of the miscellaneous shared cultural features (i.e. conversationalists belong to the same cultural community). Therefore, less verbal efforts are enough for a successful communication. Nonetheless, low cultural context is about the use of more verbal information to ensure the continuity of the act of communication since the participants belong to different cultural backgrounds, which higher the probability of communication failure if the verbal discourse is not made clear.

Additionally, an important stage in genre analysis is an examination of the social and cultural context in which the genre is used, i.e. the social and cultural context of genres. In the case of a written text, factors that might be considered include:

- The setting of the text.
- The focus and perspective of the text.
- The purpose(s) of the text.
- The intended audience for the text, their role and purpose in reading the text.
- The relationship between writers and readers of the text.
- Expectations, conventions and requirements for the text.
- The background knowledge, values and understandings it is assumed the writer shares with their readers, including what is important to the reader and what is not.
- The relationship the text has with other texts. (B. Paltridge, 2012)

7.Contextual Macro-Functions

a. The Emotive Function.

Communicating the inner states and emotion of the addresser. E.g. Fantastic! Oh no!

b.The Directive Function.

Seeking to affect the behaviour of the addressee. E.g. Please, help me! I'm warning you!

c.The Phatic Function.

Opening the channel or checking: for social reasons. e.g. Hello, lovely weather. Do you come here often?   for practical reasons. e.g. Can you hear me? Can you see the blackboard from the back?

d.The Poetic Function.

The particular form chosen is the essence of the message.

E.g. Beanz Meanz Heinz! Publicity: Buy beans…. Naturally Heinz.

'A Short Term Pain against a Long Term Gain.' Proverb.

e.The Referential Function.

Carrying information.

E.g. "It's not the years in your life that count, but your life in the years that counts." Abraham Lincoln.

"If you do what you like, you'll never work one day in your life!" Saying.

"I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand." Chinese proverb.

f.The Metalinguistic Function.

Focusing upon the code itself, to clarify or renegotiate it.

E.g. What does this word here mean? The bone is known as the femur.

g.The Contextual Function.

Creating a particular kind of communication.

E.g. Right, let's start the lecture. It's just a game! Teacher Talk.

8. Role of Context in Discourse Analysis

  Contextual influence on the interpretation and analysis of text and talk is quite remarkable. Song (2010) and other scholars distinguish three major roles of context:

   a. **Eliminating Ambiguity:** In simple terms, absence of clarity and even misunderstanding can be encountered when we deracinate an utterance or a text from its context, however, the problem is often solved when we refer back to the context in which a given discourse is issued. Song suggests two types of ambiguities: 'lexical ambiguity' and 'structural ambiguity'. Whereas lexical ambiguity is caused by 'homonymy' or 'polysemy', structural ambiguity arises from the grammatical analysis of a sentence or a phrase (p. 877). Hence, in both cases it is the context which indicates the most relevant meaning of a given discourse.
   b. **Indicating Referents:** The use of different pronouns, models, auxiliaries or prepositions to avoid repetition can be misleading without the presence of context. Thus, it is hard if not challenging to decipher the topic in some conversation; for

example, to recognize the participants and their objectives. As a matter of fact, context is regarded as the pillar on which the analyst stands to present a comprehensive and complete study.

c. **Detecting Conversational Implicature:** As it was displayed by Widdowson (2007), conversational implicature occurs when there is a flouting in one of the maxims (quantity, quality, relation, and manner) which belong to the cooperative principle that was coined by the philosopher Paul Grice. The quantity maxim is related to the amount of information provided in a conversation, therefore, saying more or less of what is needed is considered to be a violation of this maxim and, thus it leads to an implicature in meaning. The quality maxim is linked to how true one's utterance is, consequently, providing false information violates the quality maxim. As for the maxim of relation, it is about relevance, hence, irrelevance in communication means the denial of this particular maxim. Finally, the maxim of manner signifies how a certain utterance is being said or expressed; it usually indicates clarity and avoidance of ambiguity (to be succinct). On the other hand, implicature refers to what the speaker truly means by his utterance, therefore, what the speaker intends to say is independent from the literal meaning of the words he uses. Usually natives tend to violate tacitly one or more of the maxims which can result with the creation of implicature or the understated meaning. As in the following example: 'My bag weighs a ton' Widdowson (2007: 60), here the quality maxim is violated because the bag does not exactly weigh a ton, but this expression was ironically used to express how heavy the bag is (implied meaning). Lastly, it is evident that context can be of a great importance when it is question of interpreting implicatures.

9. Parameters of Contextual Analysis

A theory of context presupposes a broader sociological theory of human collectivity that provides an explicit definition and description of different types of communities, for instance in terms of the presence or absence of such characteristics as:

- Location, space, buildings.
- Time, permanence, temporality.
- Size, number of members.
- Membership, access, inclusion, initiation and exclusion.
- Shared knowledge.
- Shared language and other communication systems.
- Shared goals.
- Shared norms, values, attitudes or ideologies.
- Type of actions of members.
- Type of interaction among members.
- Type of organization (hierarchy, power, leaders).
- Reference groups (us vs them).

- Resources (for reproduction or realization of goals).

10. Discourse Analysis Tools of Inquiry

Essentially a discourse analysis involves asking questions about how language, at a given time and place, is used to engage in seven building tasks. The tools of inquiry are meant to constitute six areas where the analyst can ask such questions.

a. Significance: tasks are used to build relevance or significance for things or people in context.
b. Practices (Activities): tasks are used to enact a practice (activity) or practices in context.
c. Identities: tasks are used to enact and depict identities (socially significant kinds of people).
d. Relationships: tasks are used to build and sustain (or change or destroy) social relationships.
e. Politics: tasks are used to create, distribute, or withhold social goods or to construe particular distributions of social goods as 'good' or 'acceptable' or not.
f. Connections: tasks are used to make things and people connected or relevant to each other or irrelevant to or disconnected from each other.
g. Sign, Systems and Knowledge: tasks are used to privilege or dis-privilege different sign systems (language, social languages, or other sorts of symbol systems) and ways of knowing. (J.P. Gee, 2013)

Gee's Tools for Contextual Discourse Analysis:

a. **The Deictic Tool:** for any communication, ask how deictic are being used to tie what is said to context and to make assumptions about what listeners already know or can figure out. Consider uses of the definite article in the same way. Also ask what deictic like properties any regular words are taking on in context, that is, what aspects of their specific meanings need to be filled in from context.
b. **The Fill in Tool:** for any communication ask: based on what was said and the context in which it was said, what needs to be filled in here to achieve clarity? What is not being said overtly, but is still assumed to be known or inferable? What knowledge, assumptions, and inferences do listeners have to bring to bear in order for this communication to be clear and understandable and received in the way the speaker intended it.
c. **The Making Strange Tool:** for any communication, try to act as if you are an 'outsider'. Ask yourself: What would someone find strange here (unclear, confusing, worth questioning) if that person did not share the knowledge and assumptions and make the inferences that render the communication so natural and taken-for-granted by insiders?

11. Context and Foreign Language Learning

a. Authenticity.

Authenticity of context is neatly a relational concept- that is, a characteristic of the context in all its dimensions. Therefore, one needs to reassess the common usage of the term authentic context which implies at least four meanings:

- It can be in accordance with socially established usage or tradition (i.e. from a duly authorized source).
- It can be entitled to acceptance or belief in relationship to fact (i.e. real, trustworthy).
- It can be the result of a recognizable communication intention (i.e. sincere, not specious).
- It can be compatible with an identifiable, undisputed source or origin (i.e. original, genuine).

Authentic context enables the foreign language learner to be aware of three major parameters:

- **Representative Usages:** it should be clearly determined that context reflects socially established usages or traditions which are representative of the foreign language speech community.
- **Cultural Competence:** authentic context offers opportunities in acquiring cultural competence which does not necessarily imply the obligation to behave solely in connection with the social conventions of a given speech community, but, necessarily increases cultural awareness of the foreign language.
- **Critical Understanding:** authentic context eliminates students' uncritical insider's experience of the foreign language but rather encourages learners to develop the tools for a critical understanding of the target culture and its social conventions.

b.Contextual Classroom Activities.

 Foreign language teaching has witnessed a great deal of development with regard to contextualized classroom activities. A large variety of teaching materials display some very interesting and effective teaching activities that take into account the socio-cultural background of the FL. Here is a non-exhaustive presentation of some topics that are handled within the contextualized perspective of foreign language teaching:

- **Politics:** learners explore the symbolism used by political groups to identify themselves and to communicate their core values and beliefs. For example, describing symbols, logos and slogans, politicians' body language, political debate.
- **Religion:** learners research and describe key features of different kinds of religion, familiar and possibly unfamiliar. The main objective is to complete an 'association chart' that compares the significant characteristics across religious

groupings. The essential focus is on the basic language of ritual and belief; generalisations and qualifications. For instance, cultural associations, rituals of acceptance into a religion, religious services.

- **Food:** learners identify a national dish that they associate with their home culture and research the national dishes of other cultures. They are required to describe food, ingredients and associations. For example, they practise some classroom activities in connection with regional and ethnic cuisine, international food, food idioms, shopping lists, supermarket psychology.

Conclusion

In summary, communicative competence can be defined in interactional terms as the knowledge of linguistic and related communicative conventions that speakers must have to create and sustain conversational cooperation and, thus involves both grammar and contextualization. While the ability to produce grammatical sentences is common to all who counts as speakers of a language or dialect, knowledge of contextualization convention varies along different dimensions. The knowledge is of a kind that cannot be easily acquired through reading or formal schooling. Face to face contact in situations which allow for maximum feedback is necessary. In real life situations, learning of contextualized discourse strategies is most successful when outside conditions exist which force interlocutors to disregard breakdowns and stay in contact. On the whole, incorporating context in discourse studies and foreign language instruction and assigning to it a remarkable importance, has facilitated the task of equally discourse analysts and foreign language learners in the complex process of interpreting talk and text. An additional perspective is that EFL learners who strive towards learning the fundamentals of discourse analysis are required to understand the concept of context and its constituents as being a part and partial of this area of study. Furthermore, one should pay a great attention to context specificities that can be broader, deeper, and more complicated because of its various and intertwined components.

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