

### Lecture Three: Context of Situation

#### 1. Context

The term context refers to any information be it verbal or non-verbal that helps in the understanding and interpretation of any utterance or text. It is related to when, where, who communicates, to whom, what is being communicated i.e the words or language (verbal or non-verbal) comprising the utterance and also some shared knowledge about social background of the participants.

Moreover, for any speakers or hearers to ensure that any conversation they maintain must be comprehensible, they need to develop knowledge about their communicators' background knowledge regarding the topic being discussed.

It will be argued that contexts, defined as mental models, need a special knowledge component that represents the relevant beliefs of speakers or hearers about the knowledge of their interlocutors. In other words, language users not only need to have general "knowledge of the world", and not only knowledge about the current communicative situation, but of course also mutual knowledge about each others' knowledge. van Dijk (2005: 72)

There are different kinds of context. One kind is described as **linguistic context**, also known as **co-text**. The co-text of a word is the set of other words used in the same phrase or sentence. The surrounding co-text has a strong effect on what we think the word probably means. In the **last chapter**, we identified the word bank as a homonym, a single form with more than one meaning. How do we usually know which meaning is intended in a particular sentence? We normally do so on the basis of **linguistic context**.

If the word bank is used in a sentence together with words like steep or overgrown, we have no problem deciding which type of bank is meant. Or, if we hear someone say that she has to get to the bank to withdraw some cash, we know from this linguistic context which type of bank is intended.

More generally, we know how to interpret words on the basis of **physical context**. If we see the word BANK on the wall of a building in a city, the physical location will influence our interpretation. While this may seem rather obvious, we should keep in mind that it is not the

actual physical situation “out there” that constitutes “the context” for interpreting words or sentences. The relevant context is our mental representation of those aspects of what is physically out there that we use in arriving at an interpretation. Our understanding of much of what we read and hear is tied to this processing of aspects of the physical context, particularly the time and place, in which we encounter linguistic expressions. (Yule 2010 p. 129-130)

In summary, the discourse analyst treats his data as the record (text) of a dynamic process in which language was used as an instrument of communication in a context by a speaker / writer to express meanings and achieve intentions (discourse). Working from this data, the analyst seeks to describe regularities in the linguistic realisations used by people to communicate those meanings and intentions. (Brown and Yule 1983 p. 26)

There are, however, other ways in which the discourse analyst's approach to linguistic data differs from that of the formal linguist and leads to a specialised use of certain terms. Because the analyst is investigating the use of language in context by a speaker / writer, he is more concerned with the relationship between the speaker and the utterance, on the particular occasion of use, than with the potential relationship of one sentence to another, regardless of their use. That is, in using terms such as reference, presupposition, implicature and inference, the discourse analyst is describing what speakers and hearers are doing, and not the relationship which exists between one sentence or proposition and another. (Brown and Yule 1983 p. 27)

## **2. The Context of Situation**

Since the beginning of the 1970's linguists have become increasingly aware of the importance of context in the interpretation of sentences. The implications of taking context into account are well expressed by Sadock (1978: 281):

There is, then, a serious methodological problem that confronts the advocate of linguistic pragmatics. Given some aspects of what a sentence conveys in a particular context, is that aspect part of what the sentence conveys in virtue of its meaning . . . or should it be 'worked out' on the basis of Gricean principles from the rest of the meaning of the sentence and relevant facts of the context of utterance?

If we are to begin to consider the second part of this question seriously we need to be able to specify what are the 'relevant facts of the context of utterance'. The same problem is raised by Fillmore (1977: 119) when he advocates a methodology to which a discourse analyst may often wish to appeal:

The task is to determine what we can know about the meaning and context of an utterance given only the knowledge that the utterance has occurred . . . I find that whenever I notice some sentence in context, I immediately find myself asking what the effect would have been if the context had been slightly different.

In order to make appeal to this methodology, which is very commonly used in linguistic and philosophical discussion, we need to know what it would mean for the context to be 'slightly different'. (Brown and Yule 1983 p. 35)

### 3. Context Categories

As mentioned earlier in this lecture: The **context** relevant for a given act of utterance is a composite of the surrounding co-text, the domain of discourse at issue, the genre of speech event in progress, the situation of utterance, the discourse already constructed upstream and, more generally, the socio-cultural environment which the text presupposes—including mutual personal knowledge on the part of the speech participants as well as more general encyclopedic and cultural knowledge.<sup>3</sup> The various aspects of this context are in constant development: the discourse derived via the text both depends on them and at the same time changes them as this is constructed on line (cf. also Roberts 2004; Unger 2006; Connolly 2007).” (Cornish, 2009)

“Okada (2007:186) presents a compilation of various authors’ conceptions of context:

□ **Physical context** comprises the actual setting or environment in which the interaction takes place, such as a house-warming party or a hospital.

(Note that the words setting or scene (Hymes 1972 p. 60) can also be used to refer to physical context)

□ **Personal context** comprises the social and personal relationships amongst the interactants, for instance the relationships between intimate friends or between employer and employees.

□ **Cognitive context** comprises the shared and background knowledge held by participants in the interaction, including social and cultural knowledge. It is sometimes referred to [as] schemata. For example, knowledge about how an interview, a wedding or a lecture is conducted.

□ **Textual context** comprises the world which the text constructs, that is the textual world (...) (Okada 2007:186).” (Okada, 2009).

The textual world here refers to what has earlier been referred to as “co-text”.

- *Some parts of this lecture are excerpts from a book entitled Discourse Analysis by Brown and Yule 1983*