Context in the Analysis of Discourse and Interaction

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Context is a central concept in the analysis of discourse and interaction in all the major research traditions in applied and sociolinguistics. Early linguistics did not display much sensitivity to it (Scollon, 1998, p. 80) and tended to study utterances in isolation and without reference to context. Today, however, there seems to be a general consensus around the idea that we understand utterances because they fit or make sense within particular situations. Studies of discourse and interaction include some orientation to context, if nothing else because "language is always produced by someone to someone else, at a particular time and place, with a purpose and so forth" (Blommaert, 2005, p. 39).

Beyond general agreement that "context should be taken into account" (Jones, 2004, p. 22), however, researchers often disagree about what should count as context, or how much context should be taken into account in the analysis. It could be argued that the way context is treated is in fact what usually sets apart and distinguishes different approaches and research traditions (Tracy, 1998). Conversation analysts, for example, often described as interested in identifying universal conversational rules, usually advocate limiting the study of context to those elements which are evoked in the sequential unfolding of the text or the interaction. Institutional context, social background, gender of the participants, and so on therefore should only be attended to by the analyst if they show up in the interaction and are made relevant to the ongoing exchange by the participants. For others, such as critical discourse analysts, for example, it is the connection between language and social processes that needs to be explicated, and this requires examining how text and interaction are woven into the fabric of sociopolitical action, social structures, context of cultures, and so forth (Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Fairclough, 1989). These different perspectives, with many others, have given rise to heated debates (Tracy, 1998) and have strongly contributed to giving the field its current shape.

Early Work

Historically, several outstanding researchers have pioneered discussions on context in the study of discourse and interaction. Malinowski (1947, p. 306) is usually credited with being the first scholar to introduce the notion of *context of situation* to examine the "conditions under which a language is spoken." About the same time, in the 1950s, a group of experts around anthropologist Gregory Bateson at Palo Alto (California) began to analyze closely filmed interactions, which led to decisive insights about the organization of face-to-face interaction. Attention to gestures, intonation, facial expressions, and space came to be integrated into the study of exchanges and communication (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992; Scollon & Scollon, 2009).

In the 1970s, Gumperz and Hymes (1972) further proposed that, in order to understand culture, one needed to pay attention to the "speech events" and activities in which speakers were engaged. Meaning was to be found in the social interaction and not just in the grammatical competences of the speakers.

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In various branches of sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, but also of course linguistics, pragmatics, and philosophy, scholars have highlighted context, making salient the importance of looking at "immediate environment in which a text is actually functioning" (Halliday & Hassan, 1985, p. 46) and at the actions participants in this environment are performing with language. In the 1990s, Kendon (1992) introduced the oft-quoted idea that this environment functions as a kind of "(back)ground" against which the text (the "figure") becomes interpreted. While the "figure" is usually clearly identifiable (it is the focal event to which the participants are attending), the background is much fuzzier but contributes nonetheless to the production and interpretation of meaning.

Exploring relations between figure and ground has raised numerous methodological questions for the study of interaction: What are the boundaries between context and the text that it is context to? How can researchers study what is "unattended" or ignored in a situation? How do they know what aspects of the attended context speakers orient to (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992, p. 4)? Three seminal publications in the early 1990s address these questions and others: "Some Context for Context Analysis: A View of the Origins of Structural Studies of Face-to-Face Interaction" (Kendon, 1990), *Rethinking Context: Language as an Interactive Phenomenon* (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992), and *The Contextualization of Language* (Auer & Di Luzio, 1992). These works were the catalyst of much subsequent work on context in discourse and interaction, and they highlight three key concerns. First, they show that in all research traditions "it is a recurring methodological problem to know at what level to define the situation one studies" (Scollon, 1998, p. 79). Second, they underline the fact that what gave rise to an increasingly complex and interactive understanding of context was the fertile interplay between a host of theoretical orientations (including, but not limited to, the ones presented here). Finally, they stress the particularly productive role played by discussions of context in the investigation of the relations between language structure, language use, social organization, and culture (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992, p. 32).

The Problem With Defining Context

The notion of context has been described by many as "notoriously hard to define" (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992, p. 2; Tracy, 1998). Not only does it mean different things in different research paradigms, but more generally the range of contexts in which utterances are considered can also vary widely. Researchers of context thus regularly stress that processes of different magnitude usually operate within a single interaction or event (Blommaert, 2005, p. 40). This makes it possible to study a range of phenomena as part of context, from the more microscopic (e.g., the "intonation contours" that will lead to interpret "oh" sometimes as an expression of surprise, sometimes as an expression of irony) to the more macroscopic phenomena (e.g., the social structures, such as the military, the global economy, the world system which, functioning as a sort of matrix, elicit, permit, or prevent certain kinds of communicative acts). From a practical viewpoint, Blommaert (2005, p. 40) notes that people seem to show remarkable ease in identifying what contextual cues are relevant for interpreting a situation or to convey the meaning which they want to convey (though sometimes they get it wrong). Blommaert thus proposes to define context minimally as "the totality of conditions under which discourse is being produced, circulated and interpreted" (2005, p. 251), and summarizes the question of context by saying that it "addresses the way in which linguistic forms—'text'—become part of, get integrated in, or become constitutive of, larger activities in the social world (see also Scollon 2001)" (p. 39). Jones (2004, p. 25) prefers to talk about context (*Umwelt*) as "an individual's environment of communicative possibilities." Other authors choose more specific definitions of context. Van Dijk (2009) for example takes context to be the mental models and representations speakers use to make their contribution appropriate to the situation in which they find

themselves. He takes these mental models to be the mediating link between language and society. Schegloff (1987) prefers a talk-intrinsic definition of context, focusing on speech exchange systems as the context for interaction. Preceding or following utterances, the turn exchange system, or preferred responses become key sites to study even cultural aspects of interaction.

As Scollon (1998, p. 79) reminds us, metaphors of context will always put the spotlight on some aspects of the communicative process while diverting from others. For example, he argues, if we take context to be what "surrounds talk," we might fail to pay attention to what is "in" the communication (the history of experience embodied in the speaker, the linguistic codes or genres she masters, the registers she has access to, etc.). If we focus on what is "in" the communication we might miss all those aspects that are not directly oriented to by the interactants in their discourse, but which might be nonetheless relevant to its production and interpretation.

Key Discussions

Several key discussions have shaped thinking about context. Early on, scholars often approached the problem of context by trying to identify what were ingredients of context, or parameters for it. A well-known example is Hymes's (1972) SPEAKING grid. This acronym was devised as a mnemonic tool to help analysts remember to pay attention to several contextual parameters in the analysis of a speech event: the Setting, the Participants, the Ends and goals of the event, the sequence of Actions, the Key (i.e., the manner and tone of speech), the Instrumentalities (i.e., the channels of communication used), the social and cultural Norms foregrounded in the interaction, and the Genre (or text types) selected. By coming up with lists of this kind, Scollon (1998) notes, scholars were not interested simply in the "journalistic analysis of the five Ws—who, what, where, when, and why—but were concerned with the ways in which any communication must be interpreted against the context of these elements" (pp. 79–80).

Other researchers have conceived of context in terms of "layers." Fetzer (2004), to name just one example (but see also Halliday & Hassan, 1985, p. 12; Fairclough, 1989, p. 25), distinguishes between "linguistic context" (genre, intonation, preceding utterances), "social context" (participants, roles, situations, physical and psychological dispositions), "socio-cultural context" (organizational dimensions, sociohistorically constituted institutions), and "cognitive context" (memory, prior knowledge, mental representations, etc.).

The metaphors of parameters or layers of context have, however, come under criticism. First, thinking in terms of "layers" risks hiding the many connections existing between different levels (Jones, 2004, p. 22). This has led scholars to specifically attempt to explain how, for example, the linguistic context (intonation, indexical meanings) relates to social and sociocultural contexts (roles, group culture or subculture). The seminal work of John Gumperz on contextualization cues (1992) crucially looks into such issues. Second, many earlier views tended to display context as something "already there" and "stable," an "inert container" for actions. Scholarship in interactional sociolinguistics, for example, has shown on the contrary that context is something that speakers build and transform as they go along. This is possible because speakers in an interaction do not bring along the same "contextualization universe." They might come with a different understanding of a situation, different goals and positions within it, have access to different resources and repertoires. This asymmetry might lead them to want to have a specific view of the situation acknowledged, recognized, or accepted (Blommaert, 2005, pp. 43–5), and they might very well attempt to challenge or change the definition of the situation. What this shows is that language is in fact both context-dependent and context-creating. It may serve to "frame"

a situation in a specific way (Goffman, 1974), and it can be used to signal changes in the roles and alignments interactants are taking up toward each other.

In the study of context in interaction and discourse, researchers have sometimes viewed context as the "mechanical frame" placed upon communication (the "container" view), others have seen it as the "conduit through which it occurs," and still others, more recently, have become interested in the "socially constructed nature of these frames and contexts themselves" (Scollon, 1998, p. 83). The study of context has entailed looking at how the properties of discourse (syntactic, semantic, prosodic, argumentative, etc.) are constrained by the situation in which speech occurs, but also at how these properties become resources to organize the interaction (coordinate action, display identities, etc.). It has highlighted the necessity to consider how historical, cultural, or social frames influence the situated conduct and behavior of people but also how this situated conduct is sometimes used by them to evaluate, discuss, or challenge frames presented as already constituted (Filliettaz, 2006).

New Contexts of Scholarship and New Issues

Today, changes in the context of studying interaction and discourse are raising new issues, inviting scholars to investigate hitherto "forgotten contexts" (Blommaert, 2005, pp. 55–66). Social changes such as increased mobility of people and a more globalized economy suggest the need to "open up the circumference of analysis" (Scollon & Scollon, 2004) in several directions. Researchers are, for example, questioning views of language and context grounded in the Anglo-American or Western worldview (Makoni, 2005), and the kind of "ethnocentrism" it often entails. Blommaert (2005, p. 48) thus considers that many of the traditional assumptions about interaction (for example, that there are shared meanings and common ground among participants, or a symmetric contribution to the interaction) might well reflect Western context and bias. There is a great variety of sociolinguistic contexts that differ from this broad Western view. Mobility of speakers also makes particularly salient that a lot of what is going on in interaction is linked to other situations, traditions, and experiences that are in fact "recontextualized" in the situation. While interactions are always local, there are elements that transcend the moment in which they are produced (Blommaert, 2005, p. 45).

This recognition also suggests the need to probe not just the context of the researched, but also that of the researcher and the research process. Two kinds of questions can be asked here (Blommaert, 2005, pp. 59–65). The first one is: What is the context that the researcher takes for granted? For example, critical discourse analysis works from the assumption that many encounters are characterized by a power imbalance (e.g., doctors are more powerful than their patients because of status, knowledge, etc.) that is the unquestioned context for much of the research. This fails to acknowledge that there are cases of doctor–patient interaction which run otherwise. So the context of power imbalance itself could turn into an object of investigation. The second question has to do with what Blommaert terms "data history" (2005, pp. 64–6). Some research is very much time-bound. To carry out ethnographic research about Hong Kong's handover to China (Scollon, 1997), for example, a specific set of economic, social, political, and personal circumstances needed to co-occur to make it possible to gather the specific data the researcher needed. This highlights the need to reflect on these circumstances and to make clear what is specific about them.

The development of new technologies of communication also challenges some of the assumptions that were made about context when sociolinguistics was overwhelmingly dominated by the study of face-to-face interaction. With face-to-face interaction, the focus was on situations of copresence and mutual monitoring. In computer-mediated

communication, notions of setting, participation, or attention shift. Jones (2004) shows that, in digital surroundings, attention is often polyfocal (there are several foci of attention between the physical world and the virtual world), and participation can be manipulated (conversational partners can be turned on and off the screen). Multiple figures are attended to against the backdrop of multiple grounds.

More widely, there are many linguists today challenging traditional orthodoxies about the nature of language (Scollon, 2001). They question the idea that there is such a thing as "a language," conceived as "a priori ontological system" (Le Nevez, 2008). Rather than taking language to be a fixed mode, they view it as a repertoire of practices. Meaning and communication emerge from social interaction. This body of research pays less attention to text, and more to the ways in which texts "fit into the web of places, practices and communities that humans inhabit" (Jones, 2004, p. 31). For others, understanding communicative practices necessitates knowing more about the ways in which text interacts with other modes of meaning making (Jewitt, 2009). With these views of discourse, the traditional "figure" of language dissolves. It is no longer a repertoire of stable meanings, "there for use." And with this shift comes the necessity of revisiting the traditional "background" of "context" with new tools and theories, and the need to question anew the idea of "text."

In the 1990s, there was a clear move away from static conceptions of context, and toward more complex, dynamic, active, and interactive views of contextualization. This trend still continues. What sets apart discussions of context then and now is probably that "local talk-in-interaction" is no longer the sole unit of analysis and that new lines of inquiry are opening up.

We find several trends. One could be qualified as a "historical" trend. We now find researchers interested in tracing what happens to discourse not just in single speech events but across time and place. They develop a "polycontextual" view of discourse and interaction (Leander, 2002), and seek to understand not just the situation itself, but the chain of events that has led to an interaction or which emanates from it (Scollon & Scollon, 2004) and the relations between speech events. There is also an expansion in the range of phenomena that are taken into account. Scholars are going beyond previous studies of nonverbal communication to include not just gaze, gestures, and body movements but also the built environment, logos, graffiti, and so on to think about how spatial surrounding affects what it is possible to mean and say (Pennycook, 2007). They are also rethinking previous notions of "layers of context" by becoming interested in the issue of "timescaling" of events (Scollon & Scollon, 2009). In interaction, processes belonging to different "timescales" come together. The reframing and negotiation of context are usually easier to carry out when dealing with processes on smaller timescales (for example, negotiating the role one will take up in a situation) than when dealing with large-scale societal structures (e.g., negotiating a school reform). Researchers thus become interested in studying the weight and impact of some contexts over others (Kell, 2009; Hult, 2010). Through these studies, scholars have often begun to question the usefulness of the very idea of context, proposing to replace it with other units of analysis.

Schegloff's words, "rethinking context is the omnipresent job of analysis" (1992, p. 215), are as relevant now as ever, whether in helping to make the breakthroughs that still await in the scholarship on context in discourse and interaction, or in helping to decide whether to abandon the notion of context altogether.

SEE ALSO: Anthropological Linguistics; Conversation Analysis and Interactional Linguistics; Critical Discourse Analysis; Hymes, Dell; Interactional Sociolinguistics as a Research Perspective; Language, Culture, and Context; Multimodal Discourse Analysis; Pragmatics: Overview

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