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Title: What about the context?
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A few years ago, I had a student whose answer to every point I was making was, "Well, that depends on the context." You will understand that after a while I became quite fed up with this "argument," so in this paper, I will try to show how the role of context is often overestimated in linguistic (and argumentative) analysis, how utterances create their own (basic) context, and how their "real," "material," or "factual" context hardly influences the interpretation and understanding of those utterances.

The person to be blamed for the invention of this sleazy concept is Bronislav Malinowski. In his 1923 work, "The problem of meaning in primitive languages," he disturbingly claims the following:

> Exactly as in the reality of spoken or written languages, a word without *linguistic context* is a mere figment and stands for nothing by itself, so in the reality of a spoken living tongue, the utterance has no meaning except in the *context of situation*.

Since this unfortunate statement, the concept of context has only expanded, incorporating more and more, and finally reaching the proportions of a (kind of) set that, in principle, incorporates everything, leaving nothing outside. The concept of context is usually divided into "local" and "global" structures of context: local structures of context would cover the "immediate context of situation of an utterance," while the global structures of context would cover "more global context of culture" (Van Dijk, 1997a, 19).

Local structures of context would thus consist of: "setting (time, location, circumstances), participants and their various communicative and social roles (speaker, chairperson, friend, etc.), intentions, goals or purposes," while global structures of context would involve "discourse as constitutive of organizational or institutional actions and procedures (legislation, a trial, teaching, news reporting, etc.), and situations where participants are involved in the interaction as members of social categories, groups or institutions" (ibid.).

The concept of context therefore seems

> ...not as straightforward as its common-sense uses in everyday life might suggest. Intuitively, it seems to imply some kind of environment or circumstances for an event, action or discourse. Something we need to know about in order to properly understand the event, action or

discourse. Something that functions as background, setting, surroundings, conditions or consequences. (Van Dijk 1997b: 11)

And in accordance with the above description, Van Dijk (ibid.) defines context as "... the structure of those properties of the social situation that are systematically (that is, not incidentally) *relevant* for discourse . . . "

And what could be relevant for discourse?

> Gender, age, class, education, social position, ethnicity and profession of participants are often relevant, ...On the other hand, height, weight, eye color or having a driver's license are seldom or never relevant. The same is true for social roles: some roles and social relations are often relevant, such as being friend or foe, powerful or powerless, dominant or dominated, whereas others seem to have less systematic impact on text and talk and its understanding, such as being first or last, moviegoer or theatre lover. (ibid.)

But the proliferation of potential elements of context (i.e., what fits in it, and what doesn't) is not the only problem with context. Contexts are not something fixed or given; they are or at least may be flexible and changing and, as a result of that, may have to be negotiated. Besides

> ...contexts are not objective in the sense that they consist of social facts that are understood and considered relevant in the same way by all participants. They are interpreted or construed, and strategically and continually *made* relevant by and for participants. (ibid.)

Jef Verschueren (1998: 16)[1] agrees with van Dijk that

> ... in spite of the apparent limitlessness of the range of potentially relevant contextual objects of adaptability, 'context' is not a vague notion... A truly pragmatic approach to verbal behavior does not place social variability at the level of idealized groups, but along a range of intersecting dimensions contributing to interlocutors' *social identities*. 'Cultural' dimensions include the contrast between oral and literate societies, rural versus urban patterns of life, or a mainstream versus a sub-cultural environment. Other social dimensions of variability with which linguistic choice-making is inter-adaptable include social class, ethnicity and race, nationality, religion, age, level of education, profession, kinship, gender, sexual preference, and so on and so forth.

But as far as context is concerned, that is not all, because for some languages

> ... the concept of 'social relations' may have to be expanded--in order to explain certain linguistic choices--to relationships not only between

people, but also between people and animals, people and plants, and even people and things, to the extent that certain animals, plants, and things are 'interacted with' as an essential part of people's daily activities . (Verschueren 1998: 17):

And in spite of this long, almost interminable list of what fits--or could fit--into the concept of context, Verschueren claims that introducing context into linguistic analysis is a prerequisite for precision. Why?

> ... contexts *are* generated *in language use*, and thereby restricted in various ways. Though in principle every possible ingredient of a speech event can show up as a contextually relevant element to be taken into account, *not all those ingredients are relevantly mobilized on every occasion*. In other words, out of a virtually infinite range of possibilities, contexts are created by the dynamics of interaction between utterers and interpreters. (ibid. 139)

In other words, an utterer and an interpreter in a given situation would probably know what the context is, and what is going on. A very trivial conclusion. Van Dijk seems more formal and restrictive than Verschueren:

> ...discourse structures *vary* as a *function* of the structures of context, and may at the same time be *explained* in terms of these context structures. And conversely, contexts may themselves be shaped and changed as a function of discourse structures. (Van Dijk, 1997b: 12)

French linguist Oswald Ducrot, whose point of view I'll be adopting in this paper, goes even further. Ducrot is developing a very special theory of argumentation, a theory of 'argumentation in the language-system' (TAL), as he calls it, a theory that explores the argumentative potential of language as a system. TAL tries to show how certain argumentative features are already written into the language-system; how, at least on certain levels, language can argue by and for itself, and how it can impose restrictions on our own (dialogical and interactive) argumentation.

In relation to context, these views imply that utterances create their own (basic) contexts, and that these basic contexts ("basic" meaning "sufficient for their understanding and interpretation") can be "deduced" (if I may abuse this concept a bit) from those utterances.

Let me illustrate and substantiate those claims with a few examples (almost all of them deliberately taken from different writings of Ducrot). Suppose someone says to us (an example Ducrot has been using for almost twenty years now),

(1) It is 8 o'clock.

Could this be an argument? And why would anybody be telling us that it is 8

o'clock? The obvious answer is: to let us know what time it is. The context in this case seems clear: we wanted to know what time it was, and (1) is the answer to our request.

It may also be that we wanted to be warned (some time before 8 o'clock) when the clock turned 8, and (1) is the answer to that request.

 So, judging from (1), the context seems transparent: it is 8 o'clock, and (1) is informing us about that fact. Why we wanted to know what time it was, or why we wanted to be warned when the clock turned eight has nothing to do with understanding a local, let alone global, context: if it had, we would be necessarily lost in the context of an (individual) human mind, in chain(s) of intentions and thoughts. And tracing our intentions and thoughts would necessarily make us loose any relevant contextual information.

 But suppose we didn't want to know what time it was, suppose somebody just said (1) to us. Why would anybody want to do that? Obviously, because he or she, by saying (1), wanted to tell us something else. But, what possible follow-up(s), what possible conclusion(s) could such an utterance lead to? Since we don't know (yet) what the exact circumstances are, there are many possibilities:

 (1) It is 8 o'clock > a) Hurry up!

                      b) Take your time!

                      c) Turn on the radio!

                      d) Go brush your teeth!

                      e) I have to go!

                          ....

                          ....

 What do these possible argumentative strings tell us?

1)   that somebody has to hurry up (at least at the time of uttering (1), maybe every time when it is 8 o'clock) when the clock turns eight; implicitly that may indicate that he or she was taking it easy;

2)   that, since it is eight o'clock, somebody can relax (at least at the time of uttering (1), maybe every time when it is 8 o'clock); implicitly that may indicate that he or she was acting as in a hurry;

3)   that in a place P the radio has to be turned on at 8 o'clock (at least at the time of uttering (1), maybe every time when it is 8 o'clock);

4)   that somebody has to brush her or his teeth (at the latest) at 8 o'clock;

(at least at the time of uttering (1), maybe every time when it is 8 o'clock);

5)   that I have to go (at the latest) at 8 o'clock; (at least at the time of uttering (1), maybe every time when it is 8 o'clock).

Now, here we are dealing with whole argumentative strings, with an argument-utterance and a conclusion- utterance, not just with a (possible) question and an answer. Do these argumentative strings tell us anything about their immediate context, or do we have to know why the person in a) has to hurry up, why the person in b) can take her/his time, why the person in c) has to turn on the radio, why the person in d) has to go brush her/his teeth, and why the person in e) has to go?

I don't think we have to know all these (personal) details to be in the position to understand, describe, and interpret the utterance. Let's take a) for example: the person in a) may have to hurry up or he/she will miss the plane. If he/she misses the plane he/she won't be home on time. If he/she won't be home on time, he/she may miss his/her little daughter's birthday. If he/she misses his/her daughter's birthday, she'll be sad. If she is sad, she'll cry. If she cries, … To make a long story short, if we don't understand argumentative strings as giving us a sufficient descriptions of their immediate contexts - sufficient in the sense that we don't need additional information about the context to be able to understand and interpret the utterance - we loose the very notion of context as something that can be (positively) defined and described, and get lost in (some individual's) chains of representations of what is, and could be, a chain that can never end.

Now, let us introduce two modifiers in to (1), first *already* and then *only*:

(1') It is *already* 8 o'clock

and

(1") It is *only* 8 o'clock.

All things being equal, it seems that from (1') we can no longer conclude, 'Take your time' (as we could from (1)), but only, 'Hurry up'; on the other hand, from (1") we can no longer conclude, 'Hurry up', but only, 'Take your time'. Is that supposed to be unusual in any way? Well, yes, because (1), (1'), and (1") all refer to the very same chronological fact, namely, that it is 8 o'clock: while (1) allows a multitude of conclusions, (1') only allows conclusions oriented in the direction of lateness, and (1") the conclusions oriented in the direction of earliness.

How is that possible if (1), (1') and (1") refer to the same chronological fact, if the basis of (1), (1'), and (1") is the same state of affairs? Well, this 'same state of affairs' is viewed from different angles: in one case, (1'), 8 o'clock is viewed (and represented) as late, in the other, (1"), 8 o'clock is viewed (and represented) as early. What makes this *differentiation* of the *same* state of

affairs possible is simply the introduction of two language particles, in our case, two adverbs. In example (1'), *already* orients our conclusion toward lateness, no matter what time of day follows it; and in (1''), *only* orients our conclusion toward earliness, no matter what time of day it refers to. In other words, the argumentative orientations toward lateness and earliness respectively must be (in a way) inherent to-- *written into*-- those two lexical units of the language-system.

There seems to be a contextual counter-argument against those claims (about argumentative orientation being written into certain lexical units of the language-system). Suppose someone says

(1''') It is ALREADY 8 o'clock. > Take your time!

and/or

(1'''') It is ONLY 8 o'clock. > Hurry up!

both argument-utterances being said with a more or less pronounced emphasis on the particles in question, and followed by the opposite conclusion-utterances as in (1') and (1''). The counter-argument runs as follows: if it was true that argumentative orientation is already written into certain lexical units of the language-system, and if it was true that utterances themselves give their own basic context, then argumentative strings (1''') and (1'''') wouldn't be possible. But they are: if, in example (1'''), it was important to do something at 8 o'clock, and it is now (already) 8 o'clock, then it is quite legitimate to conclude (a bit ironically, maybe), 'Take your time', because the occasion was missed, and the person who missed it now has all the time in the world. And if, in example (1''''), it was important to do something some time after 8 o'clock, and it is now (already) 8 o'clock, it is quite legitimate to conclude, 'Hurry up', if we don't want to miss that thing that is supposed to happen some time after 8 o'clock. Indeed, those two argumentative strings, ((1''') and (1'''')), are possible; what is different about (1') and (1'') on the one hand, and (1''') and (1'''') on the other is the *Weltanschauung* behind them: according to (1') and (1'') it is worth trying (to do, to accomplish something) even if it seems too late According to (1''') and (1''''), when it is (even just a bit) too late it is too late; therefore, one has to be on time (punctual) or let it be. But, if there is a *Weltanschauung* difference about both argumentative strings, they do share the same intuition about *already* being oriented toward lateness, and *only* being oriented toward earliness: if *already* weren't oriented toward lateness it would be impossible to use it in an argumentative string, indicating that it is too late, (1'''), and, *mutatis mutandis*, if *only* weren't oriented toward earliness it would be impossible to use it in an argumentative string, indicating that it is still early, (1''''). Therefore, argumentative orientation toward lateness must be written into *already*, and argumentative orientation toward earliness into *only*.

Let me explain what I mean by using yet another, in a way more subtle,

example.

Suppose we are confronted with an argument such as

(2) John worked.

Toward what conclusion could (2) be oriented: + ('He is going to succeed') or - ('He is not going to succeed')?[2] I am sure that everybody would choose + ('He is going to succeed'). But why exactly these two (possible) conclusions? The word *worked* implies that some effort has been put into something, and if effort has been put into something that means that the person putting in the effort is more likely to succeed than not.

The utterance (2) could, of course, "evolve" into an argumentative string like

(2') John worked. > He is a real hero!

which may sound like a counter-argument to what I was just saying. But it isn't. The argumentative string (2') has roughly two interpretations: a literal one and an ironic one.

The literal interpretation implies that there were some obstacles to John's work: maybe he is disabled, maybe he was ill, maybe the work to be done was too much for just one person, maybe …; there are many other possibilities. But what (2') does tell us about each of these possibilities is that John overcame those obstacles, that he *did* work--and that he is likely to succeed in what he was doing.

The ironic interpretation implies that there were no material obstacles to John's work, but that, in one way or another, he didn't like work very much, and/or didn't work very hard. But (2') does tell us that he overcame that obstacle too, that he did work--and that he is therefore likely to succeed in what he was doing.

The opposite conclusion to, 'He is going to succeed', namely, 'He is not going to succeed', becomes generally acceptable only if we introduce it with *but*, as in

(2'') John worked. *But* he is not going to succeed.

We use *but* to reverse the expectation, and the argumentative orientation of what is expected to follow, based upon what has been said previous to *but*. For example, in

(3) I am very busy, *but* I am going to accept that offer,

the expected conclusion form, 'I am very busy', would be oriented in the direction of, 'I can take no more work', or in

(4) Paul is an engineer, *but* a bad one,

The expected conclusion form, 'Paul is an engineer', could be oriented in the direction of, 'He knows/He can do certain things'.

What *but* tells us in (2''), therefore, is precisely that not succeeding is not the normal (usual) flow of events if one has worked. Now, consider (5),

(5) John worked little,

and

(5') Mark worked a little.

Experience shows (Ducrot: 1996) that there is a rather general agreement about how much John and Mark worked (not much); nevertheless, native speakers of English would probably agree (all my informants did) that, judging from (5) and (5'), Mark worked a bit more (say, two hours) than John (who only worked for, say, one hour). On the other hand, it is practically impossible to determine--in an objective and unambiguous way--how much more than John has Mark really worked, or, to put it differently, how much less than *a little* is *little*. Still, (5) and (5') allow for conclusions that are (argumentatively) oriented in opposite directions, namely

(5)   John has worked little. > He isn't going to succeed

(5') John has worked a little. > He is going to succeed.

From the informative point of view--from the point of view of 'facts', of how things are in the world--it is important that language represents *little* and *a little* as both describing a small quantity of something: there may be some quantitative difference between *little* and *a little*, but both still describe a small amount of something. But from the argumentative point of view, language puts *little* on the same argumentative scale as *nothing, not at all*, and *a little* on the same argumentative scale as *a lot* (lower but still on the same scale). Namely, we can always paraphrase or reinforce *little* with *nothing, not at all*, as in

(6) John worked little, even not at all. > He isn't going to succeed,

and *a little* with *a lot,*

(6') Mark worked a little, even a lot. > He is going to succeed.

Now, let's modify *work*--i.e. *work* as viewed by the language--in yet another way. In what direction could the following argument be oriented?

(7) John worked for an hour.

Unless we know the circumstances -- for example, how much work is needed for a certain task -- both conclusions are possible, the negative and the positive one,

(7) John worked for an hour. > He is going to succeed.

He is not going to succeed.

But if we are confronted with an argumentative string such as

(7') John worked for an hour. > *But* he is not going to succeed,

regardless of the circumstances or any kind of 'empirical data', we know immediately from the use of the particle *but* that usually, in the 'normal flow of events', one hour of work is enough for success in this particular case. What *but* tells us is that we are not dealing with the 'normal flow of events', that things have changed somehow or that additional criteria apply. And that is quite a sufficient context for the understanding and the interpretation of (7').

Let us modify *work* some more. If (7) was, in a way, a neutral example, allowing conclusions that go in opposite directions, what can we say about (8) and (9),

(8) John worked *only* for an hour

(9) John worked *almost* for an hour?

We are still dealing with the same material, extra-linguistic, 'facts' (an hour of work), but language, via its particles *only* and *almost*, is representing these 'facts' as, in one case, not sufficient for success,

(8) John worked *only* for an hour. > He is not going to succeed,

and in the other as sufficient for success,

(9) John worked *almost* for an hour. > He is going to succeed.

I would like to stress once more that it is not the quantity of work that supports the conclusions in (8) and (9); it is how language *represents* that quantity, using special language devices. To put it more strongly: John could have worked for four or eight hours (which, in the 'normal' flow of events, may be sufficient for the kind of work he was performing), but if the argument had been formulated by the particle *only,* introducing the quantity of work, the conclusion could only have been negative ('He is not going to succeed') in all cases. Even if we interpret *only* ironically, as in,

(10) John worked ONLY for eight hours,

over-emphasizing *only* in order to show the contrast in relation to the quantity *only* is introducing, we can succeed with our strategy precisely because language sees *only* as introducing (and describing) small quantities. *Almost*, on the other hand, orients the conclusion in the positive direction, regardless of the 'facts'. Even more: 'almost X', from the informative, factual point of view, means 'not yet X', 'not quite X yet'; it therefore describes a quantity that is even *smaller* than 'only X' (which is simply just X). And yet, this factually smaller quantity, 'almost an hour', is represented by language as more work than a factually bigger quantity, 'only an hour'.

A perfect example to show that 'material', 'factual', 'objective' or 'extra-linguistic' context has only limited value. If some extra-linguistic circumstances have to be put into words -- and they have to be, otherwise we can't use them as arguments -- -it is the language that determines what is context, and how it behaves, not the extra-linguistic circumstances.

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Endnotes

[1] I am limiting my introductory remarks only to the latest pragmatic literature.

[2] The exact wording is a matter of argument reconstruction. In other words, it is not and cannot be "exact."

[3] Again, the exact wording, which can vary from one person to another, is not important; the argumentative orientation is.