

Semantics and Pragmatics

Lecture No.19

Study Material

Introduction to Context and Pragmatics

- Pragmatics and Discourse analysis are approaches to studying language's relation to the contextual background features.
- Consider Queen Victoria's example; '*We are not amused*'. Semantics would not consider contextual background features about why the queen said this?
- Contextual background is that Victoria had been in a prolonged depression, caused by the death of her husband Albert.
- The analysis would infer that Queen's intention was to stop them trying to lift her out of the depression.
- Therefore, pragmatics and discourse analysis have much in common: they both study, context, text and function.
- **What is context?**
- Both pragmatics and discourse analysis study the meaning of words in context.
- We analyze the parts of meaning that can be explained by knowledge of the physical and social world, and the socio-psychological factors influencing communication.
- We also interpret meaning by analyzing the knowledge of the time and place in which the words are uttered or written. (Peccei 1999; Yule 1996)
- The speaker constructs the linguistic message and intends or implies a meaning, and the hearer interprets the message and infers the meaning (Brown and Yule 1983; Thomas 1995).
- **Coherence and Relevance**
- Pragmatics and discourse analysis concentrates on how stretches of language and text become meaningful and unified for their users (Cook, 1989)
- The quality of being meaningful and unified is called 'Coherence' in Discourse Analysis while, 'Relevance' in pragmatics.
- **Cohesion** is, how words relate to each other within the text, referring backwards or forwards to other words in the text. For example,

- **Relevance theory** is the study of how the assumption of relevance holds texts together meaningfully.
- **Function** is, the speakers' short-term purposes in speaking, and long-term goals in interacting verbally. In the example of Queen, the purpose was to stop the courtiers trying to make her laugh.
- Units that cover function are called 'Speech Acts' which describe what utterances are intended to do, such as promise, apologize and threaten etc. (End)

Situational Context

- **What is Situational Context?**
- The situational context is the immediate physical copresence, the situation where the interaction is taking place at the moment of speaking. For example,
- Imran Khan uses gestures and expressions in his speech to create situational context for the audience.
- You may have seen people talking on the phone and making gestures with their hands or face. For example, '*Go right John*'. (Indicating to right side)
- What is funny about this?
- The hearer and speaker do not share the situational context, so the gestures do not add meaning to the words.
- Consider an example, in ESL classroom, a lecturer creates an imaginary situation i.e. robbery of a bank.
- The lecturer asks his pupils to write a news story which should contain 'what happened? where and when did the robbery occurred? who did that? why and how it was made possible?' and conclusion at the end.
- Here, physical situation would be classroom, presumably the lecturer and the pupils who are involved in the activity.
- Secondly, an imaginary situation would be 'robbery of a bank'. Each pupil who is going to write a news story will have different selection of words because the situation that he has created in his mind will affect his text.
- Situational Context involves 'Environment' such as people, time, behavior, etc. For example, a girl has to borrow 50\$ from her friend, she will surely look at the situation whether she is happy, or in condition to pay.

- Situational Context also involves ‘setting’ as we see setting of a *talk show, a drama or a movie*. (End)

Background Knowledge Context

- **Background Knowledge Context**

- Background knowledge context is considered second type of context and refers to ‘mutual knowledge’ of a group, community or persons, at the time of speaking.
- It can be further divided into ‘Culture Knowledge’ and ‘Interpersonal Knowledge’.
- **Cultural Knowledge**
 - This is general knowledge that most of the people carry with them in their minds about areas of life, e.g. religion, ethics; good vs bad, manners, etc.
 - For example, the word ‘Help’ is common in every community. If someone asks you to help him, you would not get confused over it.
 - If people living in different societies have the broadly agreed common public goals, special mechanisms for communication and they have a special lexis or vocabulary, Swales (1990) calls it ‘discourse communities’.
 - For example, I say to my friend ‘Let’s go to Masjid’. In a Muslim Community, I surely mean ‘to go for prayer’.
 - Considering ‘discourse community’ we can say that ‘cultural differences’ become communication barriers sometimes.
 - Suppose that, ‘*Let’s go to Mosque*’ is spoken in a non-Muslim community, the hearer may ask about the purpose of going to mosque because he doesn’t have particular cultural knowledge about this.
- **Interpersonal knowledge**
 - Shared interpersonal knowledge is knowledge acquired through previous verbal interactions or joint activities and experiences.
 - It includes privileged personal knowledge about the interlocutor. for example, I ask my friend, ‘Do you have a watch?’
 - In this example, ‘do you have a watch?’ can be interpreted as ‘what’s the time by your watch?’

- Such interpretation can be on the basis of ‘situational context’ as well i.e. I and my friend have been working for several hours and I suddenly asked him time by using, ‘Do you have a watch?’
- Consider another example,
- *Ali: Did you finish the assignment?*
- *Wasim: Not yet, I’m working on it.*
- John did not ask, which assignment Ali is talking about because both class fellows have ‘previous verbal interaction’ or ‘joint experience’ about that particular assignment. (End)

Co-Textual Context

Co-Textual Context

- The context of the text itself is known as co-text. For example, ‘*She is talking to her boss.*’
- We see, in this example ‘*her*’ is pointing back to ‘*She*’.
- The words used in the conversation give enough knowledge about ‘what have been mentioned before? and what is going to be?’
- The co-text of a word is the set of other words used in the same phrase or sentence.
- Co-text limits the range of possible interpretations we might have for a word.
- Consider a complicated example to understand co-textual context. ‘*She met (her) school teacher.*’
- We get two situations here:
- First, ‘*She*’ may have been used for a mother who met school teacher of ‘*her*’ (her daughter).
- Secondly, ‘*She*’ may have been used for a lady who met her own teacher.
- ‘*I met a boy who was very brilliant.*’ In this example, ‘*who*’ is pointing back to ‘the boy whom I met’.
- With the analysis of previous examples, we can say, Co-Textual Context cannot be ignored in pragmatics to interpret the meaning of the text.
- Co-textual context can be in a sentence or within sentences.
- Consider this example, ‘*John is busy with his son. He has just come back from London.*’
- In first sentence, ‘*His*’ is pointing back to ‘*John*’.

- In second sentence, we can't surely say that who has come back from London whether 'John' or 'his son'?
- **Activity:**
- Give some possible interpretations of this discourse.
- *Naeem drove 50 miles to pick his friend up. He was coming back from Karachi.*
- Identify; who was coming back from Karachi? (*End*)

Exploring Context

- **Exploration**
- Exploration in text is not possible until we understand each and every factor separately. Here, we will study some of the factors.
- **Exploring Speech Acts**
- The text usually contains sociolinguistic aspect of speech acts; and affected by the social differences, i.e. gender, class, religion.
- For example, a person with limited social exposure can't understand an elite communication about cars-brands, etc. because he has never heard these names in his community.
- The exploration of text focuses on three points: conversation analysis, international sociolinguistics and social context.
- In conversation analysis, we focus at 'how people speak and interact orally', but not how people write to each other, for example.
- A dialogue between a journalist and a political person can be transcribed on a paper and later analysis would be made possible on the basis of 'interactional sociolinguistics' and 'social context'.
- 'Cooperative Principle', relevance theory and cultural variables are considered very important to explore any kind of script.
- **Consider this text**
- Linda: [hearing Willy outside the bedroom, calls with some trepidation]: Willy!
- Willy: It's all right. I came back.
- Linda: Why? What happened? [slight pause]. Did something happen, Willy?

- Willy: No, nothing happened.
- **Activity**
- In the text, the husband violates maxims, talking to his wife how does she react? Do you feel that this is typical of people who are very close (spouses, sons etc.)?
- Conclusion:
- Context is important to analyse what is said and what is understood.
- This may include
- A. Physical context, the social context and the mental worlds and roles of the people involved in the interaction.
- Social, political and cultural understanding that are relevant to the particular communication.
- Background knowledge context: cultural and interpersonal knowledge
- B. Linguistic context (Co-text)
- Meaning is produced in interaction; jointly accomplished – involves social, psychological and cognitive factors.
- ‘a form of collaborative social action’.