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1 Towards a theory of context

On Tuesday, March 18, 2003, British Prime Minister Tony Blair made a speech in the House of Commons proposing a motion allowing British military action against Iraq “because of its continuing non-compliance with Security Council Resolutions.” After reading the motion, he began his speech as follows:

At the outset, I say that it is right that the House debate this issue and pass judgment. That is the democracy that is our right, but that others struggle for in vain. Again, I say that I do not disrespect the views in opposition to mine. This is a tough choice indeed, but it is also a stark one: to stand British troops down now and turn back, or to hold firm to the course that we have set. I believe passionately that we must hold firm to that course. The question most often posed is not “Why does it matter?” but “Why does it matter so much?” Here we are, the Government, with their most serious test, their majority at risk, the first Cabinet resignation over an issue of policy, the main parties internally divided, people who agree on everything else—

[Hon. Members: “The main parties?”]

Ah, yes, of course. The Liberal Democrats—unified, as ever, in opportunism and error.

[Interruption.]

For the Members of Parliament (MPs) present, and for us readers and analysts, to be able to understand this fragment – as transcribed in the official Hansard record – it is obviously crucial to know English grammar and the rules of discourse. At the same time, such understanding requires large amounts of “knowledge about the world,” e.g., about democracy or British troops, and, implicitly in this fragment, about Iraq. We thus understand, among many other things, that the speaker is defending sending troops to Iraq to bring democracy, and presupposing, again among many other things, that Iraq is not a democracy and that troops (war, etc.) can bring democracy.

This understanding, however, based as it is on grammar, discourse rules and world knowledge, is only part of our comprehension. What the Members of Parliament particularly also understand is that such an intervention is appropriate in this debate and in parliament, and why, what parliament’s

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functions are, and what the speaker, Tony Blair, is now *doing* (as opposed to what he is speaking about, meaning and referring to, e.g., British troops). That is, they not only understand the text of Blair's discourse, but also its *context*. They know that the person speaking is Tony Blair; at the same time they know he is speaking *as* Prime Minister and *as* leader of the current British government; that he is now addressing them as MPs and party members; that he is intending to defend the current Iraq policy of his government; that when referring to "The House" he deictically refers to "this" House of Commons of which they are members and where he is now speaking; that he is mocking the Liberal Democrats for their alleged opportunism; and much more.

By understanding the combined text-in-context of this speech, the MPs – and we as readers of the Hansard report – understand what this speech really is about, namely a specific way of "doing politics" by means of participating in parliamentary debates. Through our knowledge of the political context of this speech, we know that this speech is not only grammatical English and meaningful, but also appropriate in the current situation of a parliamentary debate and understandable as part of the political process of parliamentary decision-making and legislation. In sum, *we understand the political "point" of this speech*.

As analysts we know that the MPs understand Blair's speech (more or less) in this way not only because *we* do so, given our knowledge of politics, parliamentary debates, the UK and current world history, but also because Blair and the MPs variously express, presuppose and signal such "contextual" understandings, both in this and in later parts of this debate (see the analysis in *Society and Discourse*). For instance, in this fragment Blair uses several deictic expressions that explicitly refer to how he understands the current context of his speech, by including the referents of "I," "the House," "this issue," "our right," "I say," "the course we have set," "here we are, the Government," "the main parties," that is, referring to the current situation and himself as speaker, his function as Prime Minister, parliament, British political parties, current policy and so on.

In their later interventions, the MPs also display such contextual understanding, in this fragment for instance by critically questioning Blair's reference to the main parties while "forgetting" the Liberal Democrats. That is, these MPs show that they have a different ongoing definition of the relevant communicative situation, and the ironical reaction of Tony Blair again shows that he understands this alternative construction of the context of the MPs by making it explicit as an afterthought: the presence of the Liberal Democrats as a party in the House – and the debate. In other words, their pragmatic understanding of Blair's speech involves contextualizing it, that is, making inferences about his definition of the communicative situation – a definition with which they may not agree.

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We see that producing and understanding text and talk crucially involves what is traditionally and informally called the “context” of this speech, involving such categories as participant identities and roles, place, time, institution, political actions and political knowledge, among other components.

More detailed analysis will almost surely require a more refined analysis of this fragment and its context, such as the fact that Blair’s ironical remark about the Liberal Democrats presupposes that they are part of the opposition and not of the government party or parties. This is not a *semantic* presupposition or implication, however, as when supporting troops presupposes that the UK has troops and that the UK is engaging in military action, but rather some kind of pragmatic or contextual presupposition based on political knowledge about the current political interaction in the debate.

We also see that this fragment not only contains a question and a reply, but that the question may be heard as a challenge to Blair and that his response to this challenge may be understood as “doing irony.” Also, although such an interactional analysis of this fragment may and should be refined, it does not provide sufficient insight into what is going on without further analysis of relevant context properties, such as the relation between Tony Blair as Prime Minister and members of the Labour Party and his opinion on and opposition to the Liberal Democrats. Without such a *contextualized understanding* we do not know that the interruption of the MPs is not merely a question, or even a critique, but also a form of political opposition if the speakers are members of the opposition. It is only through such *political understanding* of the relevant context that Blair’s response can be heard as ironical, and hence as a relevant political attack on the Liberal Democrats. In other words, to understand this fragment as an interaction, i.e., to understand what Blair is actually doing, the participant MPs, as well as we as analysts, need to construct an appropriate (political) context for it.

From this example and my brief analytical comments we may also conclude that “contextual” analysis of discourse goes beyond grammatical, “textual” and interactional analysis or understanding. Similarly, this analysis goes beyond the usual “cognitive” analysis. Not only do we need to make explicit the knowledge of the world that sustains semantic understanding of this fragment. We also need the more specific political knowledge required to construct a relevant context for this fragment and hence to understand its *political* meaning as an appropriate contribution to a parliamentary debate and the political process in the UK.

In other words, understanding discourse means understanding text/talk-in-context. Hence, discourse analysis and conversation analysis need to make explicit what contexts are and how exactly the relations between contexts and text or talk are to be analyzed in ways that explain how language users do this.

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What is “context”?

Both in everyday conversation and in scholarly discourse, we frequently use general notions, such as “language,” “discourse,” “action,” “mind,” “knowledge,” “society” or “power,” but we have a hard time defining them more or less satisfactorily. This often means that we are dealing with fundamental notions that need complex theories, if not whole disciplines, to account for their properties. At the same time, we usually have specialized fields of philosophy dealing with such concepts.

The same is true for the notion of “context.” Perhaps seeing it as slightly more formal than related concepts, such as “situation,” “circumstances” or “environment,” we use the notion of “context” whenever we want to indicate that some phenomenon, event, action or discourse needs to be seen or studied in relationship to its environment, that is, its “surrounding” conditions and consequences. We thus not only *describe* but especially also *explain* the occurrence or properties of some focal phenomenon in terms of some aspects of its context.

When informally referring to the “context” of Tony Blair’s speech, we may roughly summarize such a context with the description “the parliamentary debate in the UK House of Commons on March 18, 2003.” Especially much later, however, we might also define the context of Blair’s speech in broader terms, such as the “debates about the war in Iraq” or even “the UK’s foreign policy.” That is, contexts come in different *sizes* or *scopes*, may be more or less *micro* or more or less *macro*, and metaphorically speaking seem to be *concentric circles of influence* or *effect* of some state of affairs, event or discourse.

Also, there seems to be a *mutual* relationship of conditional influence between events and their contexts. The broader context of Blair’s (or more generally British) foreign policy – such as relationships with the USA, or the situation in the Middle East – no doubt explains many aspects of the current parliamentary debate as well as Tony Blair’s speech. And conversely, the current debate and speech in turn contribute to this very foreign policy of the UK. Text and talk not only are *constituents* of (or even produced by) their contexts, but also appear to be *constitutive* of their contexts: by addressing parliament about military action in Iraq, Tony Blair is also setting or defining UK foreign policy.

We see that the notion of “context” is frequently used in order to place or explain things. One puts or sees things in their “proper context,” and we are often urged not to take or describe things “out of context.” This is also why news report schemata in the press typically have a special Context category that places current events in their political, social or historical context (Van Dijk, 1988b).

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We may conclude from this informal characterization of the notion of “context” that we do not properly understand complex phenomena without understanding their context. This is also true for parliamentary speeches. We would hardly understand large parts and especially the political “point” of Blair’s speech if we did not know that he was defending his Iraq policy in the British House of Commons. Much of the “content” of this speech on Iraq could be (and has been) debated by other speakers on other occasions, also outside of parliament, but obviously with very different functions while uttered in different situations. In this situation of the parliamentary debate, only Blair as Prime Minister – as well as some others allowed by the rules and the Speaker of the House – may open the debate, present motions, and do other political things. And conversely: *what* Blair says, and *how* he says it, may not always be appropriate in other situations. Indeed, it is not likely that during a family dispute at home Tony Blair will say something like “I do not disrespect the views in opposition to mine.” Apparently, contexts also control discourse *style*, such as this formal use of the rhetorical negated antonym (litotes) and his choice of lexical items (e.g., “in opposition to mine” instead of “opposed” or “dissident”). In other words, since Blair knows the specific contextual constraints of the parliamentary debates in the UK, he is able to formulate the content and style of his speech in accordance with such constraints.

“Context” in the humanities and social sciences

Literature, semiotics and the arts

In the study of literature and the arts, at various moments of history, scholars were urged to study works of art and their structures “in their own right,” and to ignore the social context or psychological conditions of the author. Eventually, such “isolationist” or “autonomous” positions (*l’art pour l’art*, formalism, New Criticism, close reading, etc., Bell-Villada, 1996; Gibbons, 1979; Erlich, 1965) were rejected in favor of a more “contextual” approach that accounts for many properties of works of art in terms of psychological, social, cultural or historical “circumstances.” This does not mean that we should be less precise and systematic in describing the structures of a poem or a novel, but our understanding is surely more complete when we are able to describe and also explain many more properties of such literary texts in terms of their various contexts. Contextualization is a fundamental part of our understanding of human conduct, in general, and of literature and other texts and talk, in particular. Indeed, *con-texts* are called that way, because etymologically they come *with* “texts.”

Similar observations may be made for the emergence of the new cross-discipline of semiotics in the 1960s, one of the paradigms of the structuralist

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movement in the humanities (see, among a vast number of other introductions, Eco, 1978). Largely based on abstract concepts of “signs” as applied to other forms of discourse and communication, e.g., in literature, narrative, film, dance, the arts or design, and inspired by the structuralist linguistic ideas of Saussure, Jakobson, Hjelmslev, Martinet, Barthes, Greimas, and others, few semiotic studies paid attention to social or cultural contexts. However, towards the 1990s, with the emergence of more explicit social semiotics and the critical analysis of multimodal messages semiotics took a more social direction of research (see, for instance, Hodge and Kress, 1988; Van Leeuwen, 2005).

Linguistics

The same is true, as we shall see in more detail later (see Chapters 2 and 4), for the study of language. One does not need much historical knowledge of linguistics to know that the discipline for decades was limited to a “formalist,” “structuralist” or “transformational” study of signs, sounds, words, sentences, meanings or speech acts (see, e.g., the chapters in Aronoff, 2003). In such studies lip service tends to be paid, if at all, and typically in introductory chapters only, to the fact that language and language use are of course social phenomena, and need to be studied in their social and cultural contexts. Few linguistic schools, originally interested only in grammar, have explored the role of context, except systemic and other functional approaches, to which we shall turn in Chapter 2 – see, for instance, the work of Givón (see, e.g., Givón, 2005).

We have to wait until the late 1960s to witness the emergence of new interdisciplines, such as pragmatics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and the ethnography of speaking, that began to provide some insight into the cognitive, and especially the social and cultural “contexts” of language and language use (see references in later chapters and especially also in *Society and Discourse*).

Thus, at the boundary of linguistics and philosophy, the study of speech acts, implicatures and conversational postulates (Austin, 1962; Grice, 1975; Searle, 1969) for the first time not only emphasized the role of social action in language use, but also accounted for the (formal) contextual conditions of the *appropriateness* of utterances, as one of the characteristics of the new cross-discipline of *pragmatics*. It is also in this framework that the notion of “context” received analysis in its own right (see, e.g., Stalnaker, 1999; Horn and Ward, 2004).

Susan Ervin-Tripp, one of the pioneers of *sociolinguistics*, has been among those linguists who most emphatically advocated the explicit study of context, while criticizing the lack of context analysis in earlier studies:

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The omission of context from linguistic accounts has occurred because some linguists have considered contextual structure to be too chaotic, too idiosyncratic, to be characterized systematically. When linguists began to identify variable rules (Labov, 1969, 1–44), the separation of the variable from the obligatory or categorial was obvious and unavoidable. Variationists have gradually introduced context into their analyses. What we are now beginning to do is use contrasts in linguistic features, including those that are variable, as our guideposts for identifying both the structure of conversation and the structure of context, indeed the immediate social structure for speakers. Linguistic features can tell us what are natural human categories for context. Such an approach can at last systematize the domain of context (Ervin-Tripp, 1996: 35).

Discourse studies

The emerging discourse studies of the 1960s brought important new ideas to the study of language and communication (Van Dijk, 1985, 1997). However, many of its first contributions were rather structuralist and formal. Early *text grammars* often emulated generative sentence grammars (Van Dijk, 1972), although with attempts to incorporate a formal account of context as part of a pragmatic component (Van Dijk, 1977). Early *genre studies* (e.g. of narrative and argumentation) generally followed a formal paradigm, and seldom used more contextual approaches. The *cognitive psychology* of text processing later offered insight into what could be called the “cognitive context” of discourse, but – with some exceptions – would do so itself in terms of a socially isolated mind (Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983).

These first discourse analyses made one step forward in the direction of an account of context, but mostly limited such a context to the *verbal context* or *co-text* (Petöfi, 1971) for units of language or language use. Many studies of “context,” both in linguistics as well as in other more formal approaches, still limit this notion to the “verbal context” of previous (and sometimes following) words, sentences, propositions, utterances or turns of conversation.

We had to wait until the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s before discourse structures were more systematically studied in their social, historical and cultural contexts – something already done in part in sociolinguistics (Labov, 1972a, 1972b) and in the ethnography of speaking (Bauman and Sherzer, 1974; see below, and for greater detail *Society and Discourse*).

Critical Discourse Analysis

A more critical and sociopolitical approach to language use, discourse and power was initiated at the end of the 1970s by a team of researchers, led by Roger Fowler, advocating the study of “critical linguistics” (Fowler, Hodge, Kress and Trew, 1979). During the 1980s and 1990s this “critical” approach

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soon grew out to an international movement of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), under the initial influence of European scholars (Fairclough, 1995; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Jäger, 1993b; Van Dijk, 1993b, 2001; Wodak and Meyer, 2001).

More than sociolinguistics, the ethnography of communication or other approaches to the social and cultural aspects of language use, this movement was specifically interested in the discursive reproduction of social power (Fairclough, 1989; Wodak, 1989), the critical study of political discourse (Chilton, 1985), ideology (Van Dijk, 1998) and the study of fundamental social problems, such as racism (Jäger, 1993a, 1998; Reisigl and Wodak, 2000; Van Dijk, 1984, 1987, 1993a; Wodak and Van Dijk, 2000). This critical movement developed in parallel with, and inspired by, the feminist movement and the critical study of gender, language and discourse (of a vast number of studies, see Eckert and McDonnell-Ginet, 2003; Holmes and Meyerhoff, 2003; Lazar, 2005b; Wodak, 1997; see many further references in Chapter 4).

Despite this extensive study of the social and political dimensions of discourse, however, CDA did not develop its own theory of context and of context–discourse relations (see also the critique by Blommaert, 2001, on the limited contextualism of CDA). Indeed, many of its studies presupposed various forms of social determinism, according to which discourse is directly (or “in last instance”) controlled by social forces.

Sociology

In sociology too the end of the 1960s brought renewal by adding an important qualitative and microsociological dimension to the study of society by focusing on the details of situated interaction in general, and of conversation in particular (see, e.g., Button, 1991; Ten Have, 1999). However, these early “ethnomethodological” studies in many ways followed the same pattern as linguistics, by initially focusing more on the formal structures of interaction and conversation, such as the rules of turn-taking, than on their social “situatedness” (Sacks, et al., 1974). Later, the methodological strictures of conversation analysis were somewhat loosened (or simply ignored) in order to place the structures and strategies of conversation and interaction more explicitly in their societal, institutional or cultural “context” (for an early collection in this new direction of conversation analysis, see, e.g., Boden and Zimmerman, 1991; and many other references in *Society and Discourse*). From the late 1990s we thus find increasing attention to context in conversation analysis as well and related approaches to the study of language use and interaction (see also the special issue edited by Karen Tracy, 1998).

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“Context” in the humanities and social sciences

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Ethnography and anthropology

If there is one discipline that by definition should be an exception to this general trend of the humanities and the social sciences to focus on formal properties first and deal with situations, context or environmental factors later, it is anthropology. In a way this was true as long as it dealt with the general, broader study of culture, and it is obviously also true for most ethnographic studies of discourse, which by definition are not limited to an account of discourse alone.

However, remarkably paralleling the other disciplines mentioned above, and in fact often preceding and influencing them, modern anthropology has also been going through important structuralist and formalist phases. In the 1960s, thus, the systematic study of folktales and myths in anthropology (e.g., by Lévi-Strauss; see Lévi-Strauss, 1963) in many ways became the paradigm for the structuralism in the new discipline of semiotics and related studies, first in Europe and later in the USA and elsewhere.

At the same time, ethnography in the USA made an original contribution in the 1960s by focusing on the detailed study of “communicative events” and the “communicative competence” of the members of a community (Bauman and Sherzer, 1974; Saville-Troike, 2002). In this paradigm Dell Hymes, its founder, formulated his well-known SPEAKING grid as a summary of the contextual factors of communicative events (Hymes, 1972), one of the earliest more explicit accounts of the structures of context. Although this formulation was quite programmatic for the ethnography of speaking, it hardly led to a systematic exploration of the contextual factors of language use and discourse.

These developments in anthropology were initially closely related to those in linguistics and other social sciences. As is also the case in the disciplines mentioned above, we had to wait a decade for these ethnographic studies to take a more “contextual” turn, introducing notions such as “recontextualization” (Bernstein, 1971), on the one hand, for instance in the work of Gumperz and others (Gumperz, 1982a, 1982b), and dimensions such as identity, power, social structure or ethnic relationships, on the other hand (see, e.g., the contributions in Duranti, 2001). As we see in more detail in *Society and Discourse*, linguistic anthropology thus became (again) one of the leading disciplines, this time because of several scholars – such as Hymes, Gumperz, Duranti and Hanks among others – and studies explicitly dealing with context.

Psychology

Psychology traditionally focused on people’s individual “behavior” and later on their “minds,” and much less on “context” beyond the experimental conditions

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of the laboratory – in which “context” factors appear mostly as independent variables, such as the gender, age or knowledge of the experimental subjects. Again, this was true for much of behaviorist and then cognitive psychology until the 1980s, and remains true for much mainstream psychology today, even in “social” psychology. As always, there are notable exceptions, such as the work of F. C. Bartlett and Herbert Clark, to which we shall turn in Chapter 3.

In the last decades interest in the role of context in discourse processing has been growing rapidly in cognitive psychology, but just as the social approaches to discourse have largely ignored the cognitive nature of context understanding, most cognitive psychologists have paid little attention to the sociolinguistic approaches to contextualization. Even those interested in discourse generally focused on discourse structures, meaning and the nature of their interpretation in “situation models” in memory, rather than on the role of context (and its memory representation) in production and understanding.

The study of “social cognition” in modern social psychology seemed to provide the necessary social context to the study of cognition, but was generally limited to the study of formalist mental schemata and laboratory experiments that were hardly different from those in individual psychology (Augoustinos and Walker, 1995). Indeed, until recently it was hard to find a reference to a book on society or culture in mainstream social psychology. Only since the 1980s do we witness the development towards a broader, “societal” and “critical” orientation to the study of minds, knowledge, persons, groups or attitudes on the one hand, and a more discursive, interactionist approach to social psychology on the other (of many studies, see, e.g., Resnick, Levine and Teasley, 1991; and further references in *Society and Discourse*).

Computer science and Artificial Intelligence

Interestingly, there is more work on context in formal approaches in computer science, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the area of Natural Language Processing than in psychology (see, e.g., Hovy 1988; 1990). These approaches aim to account in formal terms for discourse interpretation, e.g., of pronouns, deictic expressions, verb tenses, presuppositions, knowledge accumulation, and many other properties of discourse that need context modeling (see, e.g., Akman, Bouquet, Thomason and Young, 2001; Iwańska and Zadrozny, 1997). This work is related to work in formal grammar, logic and philosophy, originally inspired by Montague (1974), and Hans Kamp (see Kamp and Partee, 2004; Kamp and Reyle, 1993). Although often called formal pragmatics, most of this work focuses on semantics, that is, on how to *interpret* discourse expressions in terms of (formally represented) contexts, rather than on their appropriateness. This formal approach to context is also the only direction of research that represents context as models, as I shall also do, but then not as