1 Introduction

Towards a sociocognitive theory of context

In my book *Discourse and Context* it is shown that the concept of "context" is fundamental in the study of language, discourse and cognition. In the present volume my multidisciplinary theory of context is extended to include the social sciences: *social psychology*, *sociology* and *anthropology*. And at the end of the present book I apply the theory in the domain of *politics*, namely the Iraq debate in the British House of Commons, whose first speech, by Tony Blair, serves as example throughout both books.

In order to fully understand the broader, social scientific, framework of the general theory of context developed in the present monograph, it is useful to begin this chapter with a summary of the major results of *Discourse and Context.*[1]

The importance of context

It is generally agreed that in order to fully understand discourse we need to understand it in its "context." Yet, whereas linguistics, discourse studies, conversation analysis, psychology and the social sciences have for decades paid detailed attention to the properties of talk or text (Van Dijk, 1985, 1997), the contexts of language use have usually been ignored, taken for granted or studied as isolated "variables" of the social situation. It is therefore the main aim of this book – as well as of *Discourse and Context* (Van Dijk, 2008a) – to develop a multidisciplinary theory of context as a basis for the theory of discourse, interaction and communication.

The first problem we face in such a theory is that the notion of "context" is notoriously vague and ambiguous. First of all, as used in everyday,

[1] To avoid repetition of a vast number of references in this summarizing chapter, the reader is referred to *Discourse and Context* (Van Dijk, 2008a) for further references. Also for details about the linguistic, sociolinguistic and cognitive aspects of the theory of context, the reader is referred to that book. Although the present volume, as well as *Discourse and Context*, form one comprehensive investigation of context, both books are independent studies and can be read separately.

non-technical discourse, "context" often means geographical, historical or political "situation," "environment" or "background," for instance in the media or in such book titles as *Hunger in the African Context*.

In the study of language and discourse, the concept of "context" is ambiguous in the following way: On the one hand, it may refer to "verbal context," also called "co-text," such as preceding or following words, sentences, speech acts or turns within a discourse or conversation. Such use is typical in those approaches to language that do not take discourse or conversation as the primary unit of their analysis, as is the case, for instance, in much of traditional linguistics. In discourse-based approaches to language use and communication, such a "verbal context" is simply part of the sequential or global structures of text or talk itself.

On the other hand, the term "context" is used to refer to the "social situation" of language use in general, or to the specific situation of a given (fragment of) text or talk. This book is concerned only with this second meaning of the notion of "context": the non-verbal, social and situational aspects of communicative events.

Whereas such a social-situational concept of "context" may seem more or less unproblematic, such contexts are much harder to define and analyze than one would think. Thus, *Discourse and Context* began with the first fragment of a speech by Tony Blair in the British House of Commons in the debate about Iraq in March 2003, just before the beginning of the war in Iraq (I shall come back to that speech below). What exactly is the "context" of that fragment or of that speech? The whole Iraq debate in the Commons? British parliament? The debate about the war in Iraq in Britain? British foreign policy? The international political situation in 2003? No doubt knowledge of all these "contexts" may contribute to a better understanding of Blair's speech. No doubt knowledge by Blair of these different "contexts" may have influenced (the production of) his speech. And if we just take the smallest of these "contextual concentric circles," namely the current session of parliament, what do we include in that immediate context? Obviously, Tony Blair himself, as current speaker and as Prime Minister (and other relevant identities), the Speaker (president) of the House, the other MPs (and their various relevant social and political identities or memberships), and maybe the current spatiotemporal Setting: when and where the debate took place. But what about the further properties of the Setting? Also the benches in parliament? In most studies of language and discourse we usually do not include furniture as part of the context of speech (for instance because such situational or environmental properties do not systematically influence discourse), but then in the British House of Commons we speak of "backbenchers," so these benches and their placement may have a role after all. Next, the knowledge of the MPs needs to be taken into account – Blair does so when presupposing a

massive amount of knowledge about Iraq, wars, troops, dictators, and so on. What about the ideologies of the MPs? Most likely these also should be included, because they obviously play a role in the political stances MPs display in agreeing or disagreeing with Blair, or with armed intervention in Iraq. After all, not all MPs of the Labour Party are pacifists.

One may thus go on and ask the same question about many other properties of the setting, the participants, the political actions engaged in, as well as their social and political conditions and consequences. In a more or less loose sense all this may be taken as the "context" of Blair's speech. Many of these situational characteristics may influence both Blair and his audience, that is, both the production and the understanding of his speech. If such properties have an influence on the speaker, this will often become manifest in talk itself, as we shall see in more detail below. However, such influence may well exist but remain implicit in the discourse, and hence it may not be noticeable to the analyst, although it may very well be noticed by the recipients and how they understand what Blair says. Indeed, because of some contextual influence (say a phone call from US President George W. Bush) Tony Blair may decide *not* to talk on specific topics, and as analysts we may have no idea about such an obvious form of relevant political influence on Blair's speech.

On the other hand, there may be personal, social and political influences that do influence Blair's speech, but he may not currently be aware of them, such as his class and regional background and their influence on his pronunciation or other aspects of discursive variation and style – easily detectable by his recipients and sociolinguistic observers alike.

In sum, contexts classically defined as "the relevant environment of language use" may feature many types of properties of social situations, at various levels, which may influence the production, the structures and the comprehension of discourse, whether or not the participants are always aware of them, or we as analysts are able to observe or detect them.

The definition (delimitation) of "context"

From these brief comments on the example of Tony Blair's speech it becomes obvious that in order to develop a more or less explicit theory we need to define (delimit) the notion of "context," lest the theory becomes a Theory of Everything. This is also why so far there have been so few explicit studies, and no monographs, on this specific notion of context. The term "context" is being used in the titles and contents of many thousands of books and articles in the social sciences when referring to different kinds of conditions of some focal event or phenomenon. Also in studies of language and discourse it is either taken for granted, or taken into account in a more or less commonsense way, namely as those properties of the communicative situation that have an

influence on discourse production and comprehension. In that more restricted sense, context is a selection of the discursively *relevant* properties of the communicative situation. Thus, that Tony Blair is Prime Minister and that some MPs are members of the Conservative Party would typically be relevant for at least some parts of his speech and its understanding.

On the other hand, whereas political group membership will typically be relevant for most of the parliamentary debate, the color of a participant's shirt or skirt is hardly a relevant part of the communicative context, in the sense that it would control the selection and variation of, for instance, topics, lexicon, syntax or pronouns. That is, usually our clothes are seldom *discursively* relevant, although they may often be *socially* relevant, for instance in order to "flag" aspects of our current social identity ("doing feminine"), or to adapt (as does our discourse) to formal vs. informal social events. Politicians are very conscious about their "image" and no doubt their clothes (ties, etc.) are consciously selected and adapted to the occasion in which politicians are going to speak. This also suggests that besides discourse there are other (semiotic) aspects of interaction and communication that may have their own contextual constraints. These, however, shall not be the main focus in this book.

Thus, as a first step, we limit the concept of "context" to those properties of the *communicative* situation that are *relevant* for discourse, and we further stipulate that this is so either for speakers, and hence for the *production* of discourse, and/or for recipients, and hence for the *understanding* of discourse.

The second step is crucial and forms the basis of the theory of this book. I have shown in *Discourse and Context*, and shall further detail in this book, that *contexts – defined as the relevant properties of social situations – do not influence discourse at all*. There is no *direct* relationship between aspects of the social situation (such as Blair's role as Prime Minister, etc.) and discourse. This is a widespread determinist fallacy, also prevalent in sociolinguistics when it assumes that gender, race, age or status influence the way we speak. *There is no such direct influence, simply because* ***social*** *properties of the situation are not directly involved in the* ***cognitive*** *processes of discourse production and understanding*. These are phenomena of a different kind, of different levels of analysis and description. Only cognitive phenomena can directly influence cognitive processes. Moreover, if such a direct influence between social situations and discourse were to exist, all people in the same social situation would probably speak in the same way, which they obviously don't. Whatever the social influence of the "context," there are always (also) personal differences: each discourse is always unique.

How then do we relate social situations and discourse? How do we account for the uniqueness and the personal variation of text and talk? How do we escape the determinism of social or political forces, but at the same time

combine the undoubted influence of social and political conditions on Blair's speech with the fact that this *specific* speech is personal and unique?

To answer these and other questions, I have taken a rather obvious theoretical decision: contexts are not "objective," but "subjective." They are not a relevant selection of "objective" social properties of the situation, but a *subjective definition* of such a situation. This is perfectly compatible with the notion of *relevance*, because this notion is also inherently *relative*: something is (ir)relevant *for* someone. In other words, *a context is what is defined to be relevant in the social situation by the participants themselves*.

This is exactly how we want to have it. Undoubtedly, in the parliamentary debate his current identity of Prime Minister is relevant to Tony Blair as well as to his recipients, and such a situational property will hence be part of their "definition of the situation." Most likely, this is also the case for his being British, and maybe even, at least for some recipients, that he is male. Once such dimensions of the social situation become part of the context-as-defined they may influence the way people act, speak or understand. In this book, I shall examine in detail how participants engage in such *definitions of the situation* – a notion well known in the history of phenomenological sociology – as the crucial mediating interface between a society and situations, on the one hand, and discourse production and comprehension, on the other hand.

The fundamental theoretical and empirical advantage of this approach is that participants' subjective "definitions of the situation" are *cognitive* objects, for instance a mental representation. It is *this* representation, and *not* the "objective" social situation, that influences the cognitive process of discourse production and comprehension. That is, traditional conceptions of context fail to account for a crucial missing link: the way participants *understand* and *represent* the social situation. We shall see in this book that non-mentalist or even antimentalist conceptions of interaction, discourse and context remain dominant in the social sciences to the present day. On the other hand, that social situations are able to influence discourse only indirectly, namely through their subjective interpretations of the participants, is trivial for most psychologists and cognitive scientists as it was for phenomenological sociologists, as we shall see in Chapter 3.

Mental models

If contexts are subjective definitions, we still need to be more specific as to the nature of such mental representations. Fortunately, since the 1980s we have had a powerful theoretical notion in psychology that meets the requirement of such a concept, namely that of a *mental model* (Johnson-Laird, 1983; called "situation model" by Van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983).

A model is a subjective representation of an episode, and as such it is stored in episodic memory (part of long-term memory) where people's autobiographical personal experiences are accumulated. Living an experience or being aware of a situation means that we are construing or updating a mental model of such an episode.

Since there are many scholarly notions of model, mental models as subjective representations of *specific* episodes should not be confused with the notion of a "cultural model" as a form of *general*, socially shared knowledge, for instance as it is used in cognitive anthropology (Holland and Quinn, 1987; Shore, 1996).

Subjective mental models of episodes account for the fact that people form their own personal representations of an event, with their own perspective, interests, evaluation, emotions, and other elements based on their unique personal history or their current subjective experience. This is not only – pragmatically – true for the communicative situations in which people are ongoingly participating, but also – semantically – for the events they observe and talk *about*. This explains why people (e.g., journalists, witnesses in court) who participated in, or witnessed, the "same" event, each produce a different "version" of the event. In other words, *models subjectively represent or construct situations, both those we talk* ***about*** *as well as those* ***in which*** *we talk.*

It is important to stress that even unique, subjective models of specific events are not *entirely* personal. They also have important *social*, *intersubjective* dimensions. Because of earlier interaction and communication, and more generally due to their socialization, language users have acquired various kinds of shared *knowledge and other beliefs*. After generalization and abstraction, such shared *general* and *social* beliefs influence the construction of new models whose intersubjective dimensions enable interaction and mutual understanding in the first place. This link between personal and social cognition in model building and language use is crucial, also, in order to reject the common misrepresentation that a cognitive approach to discourse and context implies individualist reductionism in a theory of discourse. Hence, models constitute the unique interface that combines the personal and the unique, on the one hand, with the social and the shared, on the other hand. And what is true for mental models is also true for the discourses that are controlled by them: both are unique and personal, as well as social and intersubjective.

Context models

This notion of mental model perfectly fits the requirements of the theory of context: contexts are also mental models. They are subjective, they represent personal experiences, namely the experience of the current communicative

episode, and they also feature instantiations of sociocultural knowledge we share about social and communicative situations and their participants. Models are the mental representations we call the *definition of the situation*. I call such mental models of communicative episodes *context models*, or simply *contexts*.

It is within the framework of such a sociocognitive model theory that we are now able to confirm that *contexts are not some (part of a) social situation, but a subjective mental model of such a situation*. It is this context model that plays a central role in the mental processes involved in the production and reception of discourse. Models explain why discourses in the "same" social situation not only show similarities based on shared sociocultural knowledge, but also are personal and unique. For each communicative situation, participant models precisely define what of the situation is now *relevant* for each participant. Thus, context models are the missing link between situational and social structures, on the one hand, and discourse structures and their production and understanding, on the other hand. If we find that traditional social "variables" such as class, gender, ethnicity or age influence language use this takes place (and hence should be analyzed) by means of their – more or less conscious, and more or less subjective – representation of social identities in context models.

The crucial function of context models is to produce discourse in such a way that it is optimally *appropriate* in the social situation. This also means that this theory of context provides the basis for an *empirical pragmatics* of discourse (Van Dijk, 1981), accounting for the way discourse adapts its structures to communicative situations. At the same time the theory accounts for the conditions of discourse variation, that is, for discourse style defined as the variable and unique way text and talk adapt to its context.

Context models must be designed so as to be able to fulfill this important function in a reliable way, dozens or hundreds of times a day. This means, first of all, that they cannot be too complex, because otherwise they are too unwieldy in the daily task of ongoing discourse monitoring. A definition of the situation with hundreds of categories, each with their variable contents, would hardly be a viable context model. So, context models, like other mental models, consist of a relatively small number of relevant schematic categories, such as spatiotemporal Setting, the ongoing social Activity, Participants in different roles and mutual relationships, as well as the goals, intentions and the knowledge of the participants. Such context model *schemas* need to be applicable to the majority of routine interaction and communication situations in our everyday lives, but may be adapted to new situations – for instance when Tony Blair had to address the Commons for the first time at the beginning of his parliamentary career.

Members of a culture learn from their parents, caregivers, peers, teachers, the mass media and the internet how to understand the world they live in. In the same way, they learn, informally as well as by explicit instruction, how to understand communicative situations, and how such "definitions" influence how to speak. For instance, what pronouns of address or politeness formulas to use when speaking to whom, what style to use when writing an official letter, giving a public address, or when telling a story to friends, among a host of other communicative practices or "genres."

Cultural members thus learn that categories such as gender, age, ethnicity, status, kinship, intimacy or power are often relevant for the appropriate production or understanding of text or talk – more often so than, for instance, hair color, height, ear size or shirt color of the participants, the material of the wall in a communicative setting, the presence of trees or whether a bird is flying overhead, among a vast number of other, socially possibly relevant but communicatively less relevant or irrelevant, aspects of social situation in which people communicate.

Crucial for interaction and discourse is not only that people form mental models of the communicative situation, but that as part of these models they also represent the other participants and the relevant parts of *their* models. That is, context models embody naïve theories of Other Minds. They need to be partly mutual and feature the Common Ground of relevant sociocultural, situational and interpersonal *knowledge*, as well as other relevant beliefs, such as the ideologies of the recipients – as is obviously the case for Tony Blair in the House of Commons.

Fundamental for such mutual understanding is also that the language users understand each other's *intentions* – and thus are able to infer from observed conduct what the others are "doing," thus making their conduct meaningful. We need to know what our co-participants want to obtain with their ongoing talk and other actions, and thus need to make strategic, practical hypotheses about their goals.

In sum, discourse and interaction presuppose that language users have learned how to build situationally relevant context models that are mutually tuned to each other. It is only in this way that language users are able to express their knowledge and opinions about their experiences, and also know how to do so appropriately by adapting their talk and their non-verbal conduct (gestures, body position, etc.) to the (assumed) knowledge, interests, intentions, goals and social properties of the recipients.

As representations of communicative experiences, context models are not static, but *dynamic*. They ongoingly adapt themselves to (perceived, interpreted) changes in the communicative situation, primarily those changes that are due to what has been said before – if only the knowledge inferred from previous talk – and of course the inherent change of time: All that precedes

each *Now* of the dynamic context model is defined as the Past (and the Known), and each following moment as the Future (and the partly still Unknown).

Dynamic context models as ongoing communicative experiences are mentally *discrete* – and hence define different discourses – by a *change* of time, place, participants, participant roles, goals and/or intentions/actions. We thus practically distinguish between a conversation with a friend, and the following consultation with a doctor, or giving a lecture or reading the newspaper, among a vast number of other daily discourse practices. Note though that our everyday experience is a continuous *durée*, between the moment we wake up until we fall asleep or lose consciousness. Models of everyday experience divide this stream of consciousness into separate, meaningful episodes that we may plan in advance and remember as such afterwards. The same is true for context models, which only differ from other models of experience because the focal event is a communicative action.

Context models are not construed from scratch at each moment we interact with others. First of all, we already have culturally acquired their conventional, schematic structures. Secondly, also, their contents are largely derived from sociocultural knowledge. Tony Blair already knows a lot about parliament, political parties, MPs, and speeches, when he starts to address parliament. All this general cultural and more specific social group knowledge will be used to design context models as far ahead as necessary. Obviously, Tony Blair did not improvise this crucial speech on the spur of the moment in parliament, but planned it, that is, designed a provisional, fragmentary context model for it. Depending on the situation, context models are partly prefabricated and new relevant information about the context will be added ongoingly to construe each fragment of the dynamic model – most typically the knowledge of what has just been said and done by the other participants. Again we see that contexts uniquely combine old and new information, social and personal knowledge, expected and unexpected moments, planned and spontaneous dimensions – and it is thus that it also influences talk and text.

The converse is also true. If we say that discourse influences the social situation, for instance the relations between the participants, then this is only true indirectly, that is, through the context models of the recipients. In the same way speakers model the mind of the recipients, the latter ongoingly model the mind (intentions, goals, knowledge, opinions, ideologies, etc.) of the speaker. They do so by strategic understanding and inferences from previous and current talk and other conduct, as well as from previous knowledge of the speaker or similar communicative situations and more general sociocultural knowledge.

It is in this way that communicative interaction is controlled by the mutually tuned context models of the participants, which on the one hand

adapt text and talk to the recipients (and their models) as well as other aspects of the communicative situation, and on the other hand shape the relevant understandings of the recipients – which in turn condition the next actions of recipients as next speakers.

From this sociocognitive approach to discourse we must conclude that the usual account of conversation and interaction analysis – according to which turns at talk influence next turns – is a theoretical shortcut ignoring the mental interface of participants' semantic and pragmatic mental models. There is no such "objective" influence among turns in a sequence, but only an indirect relationship based on the subjective mental models of recipients as next speakers. If speakers adapt what they say and do to what they expect recipients will think, do and say next, as we know from the principles of "recipient design," then such design should be made explicit as part of the context model of speakers. We shall see later in this book how many aspects of social accounts of talk-in-interaction have crucial but ignored cognitive interfaces.

Context models of recipients are based not only on shared sociocultural knowledge (about language and interaction) but also on ad hoc situational, personal properties of participants, such as goals, interests, beliefs and inferences. This means that they account not only for the very possibility of social interaction, but also for misunderstandings and other "problems," and how these are dealt with ongoingly. Similarly, each false start, repair or other typical aspect of spontaneous talk thus signals – and should also be accounted for – in terms of fast changes of context models and the ways these control actual talk. In short, nothing is being said, done and understood without previous and parallel mental control in terms of the current "state" of the dynamic models of the ongoing communicative situation.

This is, in short, the theory that will be presupposed in the rest of this book, and that needs to be complemented by social psychological, sociological and anthropological accounts of contexts and their dimensions.

An example: Tony Blair's Iraq speech in the UK parliament

Discourse and Context started with the following fragment of a speech made by Tony Blair in the UK House of Commons on March 18, 2003:

1. At the outset, I say that it is right that the House debate this issue and
2. pass judgment. That is the democracy that is our right, but that others
3. struggle for in vain. Again, I say that I do not disrespect the views in
4. opposition to mine. This is a tough choice indeed, but it is also a stark
5. one: to stand British troops down now and turn back, or to hold firm to
6. the course that we have set. I believe passionately that we must hold
7. firm to that course. The question most often posed is not "Why does it