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978-0-521-51690-7 - Society and Discourse: How Social Contexts Influence Text and Talk

Teun A. van Dijk

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Society and Discourse

Van Dijk presents a new theory of context that explains how text and talk are adapted to their social environment. He argues that instead of the usual direct relationship being established between society and discourse, this influence is indirect and depends on how language users themselves define the communicative situation. The new concept van Dijk introduces for such definitions is that of context models. These models control all language production and understanding and explain how discourse is made appropriate in each situation. They are the missing link between language and society so far ignored in pragmatics and sociolinguistics. In this interdisciplinary book, the new theory of context is developed by examining the analysis of the structure of social situations in social psychology and sociology and their cultural variation in anthropology. The theory is applied to the domain of politics, including the debate about the war in Iraq, where political leaders' speeches serve as a case study for detailed contextual analysis. In another book published by Cambridge University Press, *Discourse and Context*, Teun A. van Dijk presents the (socio)linguistic and cognitive foundations of this multidisciplinary theory of context and the way context influences language use and discourse.

TEUN A. VAN DIJK is Professor of Discourse Studies in the Department of Translation and Philology at Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona. He has edited *Discourse Studies* (2007) and *Racism at the Top* (co-edited with Ruth Wodak, 2000) and is the author of *Racism and Discourse in Spain and Latin America* (2005) and *Ideology* (1998).

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Preface

Together with my other book published by Cambridge University Press, *Discourse and Context* (2008), this monograph offers a new theory of context. Whereas that other book focuses on the linguistic, sociolinguistic and cognitive aspects of the theory, the present study systematically explores the social psychological, sociological and anthropological contributions to such a multidisciplinary theory. These social sciences have analyzed, each in their own theoretical frameworks, many of the properties of interactional episodes, social situations and cultures that are classically assumed to be the “contexts” of language use.

If contexts of such *situated* text and talk are informally defined as the *set of relevant properties of the communicative situations* of verbal interaction, then it seems obvious that a systematic analysis of these situations is crucial for the development of an explicit theory of context and of how contexts control language use. However, it is a widespread misconception, for instance in traditional sociolinguistics, that social situations and their properties (such as class, gender or age of language users) exercise *direct* and unmediated influence on language use. In such correlational studies the very nature of contextual influence usually remains theoretically unexplored.

Against such a conception of the relation between discourse and society this book continues to argue in great detail that *there is no direct link between situational or social structures and discourse structures* – which are structures of very different kinds. Moreover, if such a link were causal, and hence explanatory and not just superficially correlational, all language users in the same social situation would say or write the same things and in the same way.

The new theory of context further explored in this book emphasizes that the relation between society and discourse is indirect, and mediated by the *socially based but subjective definitions of the communicative situation as they are construed and dynamically updated by the participants*. These

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definitions are made explicit in sociocognitive terms, namely as *context models* stored in the episodic (“autobiographical”) memory of the participants, just like any other social experience. The mediating interface constituted by these context models – construing and ongoingly monitoring the relevant properties of communicative situations – accounts for a vast number of properties of discourse.

Context models explain how and why language use is socially, personally and situationally variable. They offer an explicit framework for the theory of pragmatics by accounting for the ability of language users to adapt their text and talk to the for-them-now-relevant properties of each moment of the communicative situation. In other words, context models define the *dynamic appropriateness conditions* of text and talk.

We shall see in this book that such a “mental” interface between discourse and society is not very popular in much of the social sciences today. The contemporary focus on mindless interaction seems to forget that a long and respectable phenomenological tradition in sociology had no quarrel at all with such fundamental cognitive and subjective notions as “defining the situation,” and with the old insight that social actors can only act in social situations as they understand them.

The contemporary gap between the cognitive and social sciences is the result of a regrettable reductionist ideology: interactionism (as we shall call it). This ideology shares with behaviorism the positivist fallacy of “observability” according to which talk or action are observable or socially available, but not the allegedly “individualistic” minds of language users. However, if we agree that we use and analyze discourse in terms of structures and meanings – which are obviously non-observable, but known, construed or handled by the minds of language users – then there is no reason to reject that, very fundamentally, talk or text without “thought” is literally meaningless.

In other words, discourse and actions are not immediately observable at all, but interpreted conduct attributed to social actors, for instance in terms of meanings, intentions and goals. New developments in the cognitive and neurosciences have shown that such interpretations of conduct as social action are part of our ability to “read” other minds as a mirror of our own.

A detailed analysis of interaction has significantly contributed to our insights into discourse and language use. However, what is observably done or said is only the tip of the iceberg of a communicative event. Language users do not mindlessly participate in such events as if they were blank slates. They come with vast amounts of socioculturally shared knowledge, with

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personal experiences, with plans, goals, opinions and emotions, all of which may influence what they say and how they say it. They not only interpret what is observably said or shown, but by “reading” the minds of interlocutors they are able to understand subtleties of text and talk far beyond the socially based implications or implicatures. Hence, eliminating the mind from talk-in-interaction necessarily under-analyzes the data at hand. And there are many other methods to study what is going on in discourse and communication than mere interaction analysis of “observable” talk.

Critical approaches to discourse have emphasized that the same is obviously true when we take participants as mere talkers and not as social actors that bring social identities, roles or power relations with them to the communicative event. The theory of context developed in this book agrees with this criticism of socially context-free interactionism. However, it stresses that social structure, properties of social situations and hence the social properties of participants do not objectively or causally influence text and talk, but that such influence is mediated by the subjective models of the participants. Even those scholars who reject cognitivist theorizing in terms of mental models will agree that social properties of situations and participants need to be analyzed only when they are ongoingly “made relevant” by the participants themselves.

The theory of context models accounts for the representations and processes involved in this “making relevant” of the cognitive and social properties of social situations. In this sense, the theory is not incompatible with the interactional approaches in much of the social sciences today. It integrates them by making explicit what is usually being taken for granted or formulated in vague descriptions. At the same time it extends current context-free approaches to text and talk by articulating a multidisciplinary framework that provides the much needed missing link between discourse, cognition and society.

In order to be able to do so, we have selectively explored *social psychology* and its studies of the structures of social episodes and situations, as well as the socially shared representations, such as knowledge and ideologies, that language users apply in the construction of their context models. One of the recurrent questions we’ll try to answer in these literature reviews and the formation of new theory is which of the potentially vast number of properties of social situations are systematically construed as relevant for discourse. Indeed, why is the gender or status of participants often construed as *discursively* relevant and therefore indexed, and not their height or the color of their eyes, although the latter may be *socially* relevant.

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Similarly, we also review the concept of situation in the history of *sociology* in order to highlight which insights remain relevant today in a sociologically based theory of context models. It is also here that we critically examine conversation analysis and its context-free tendencies in analyzing talk-in-interaction. At the same time, we need to account for the fact that participants model not only face-to-face “micro” situations, but also more complex, social “macro” structures, such as groups, organizations or abstract social structures such as social inequality. Such an analysis will need us to examine the well-known structure–agency relationship, for which again a sociocognitive model theory offers the missing interface.

Such a social theory of “local” situations and “global” social structures as modeled by language users during the production and understanding of text and talk also needs to account for the important cultural variations in the construction and uses of context models. What may be defined a relevant situational property in one society or subculture need not be so in another. Hence we need to examine the study of communicative events in the tradition of the ethnography of speaking and contemporary approaches in linguistic *anthropology* that have a long tradition of accounting for the specific cultural conditions of discourse.

Finally, after first analyses in *Discourse and Context*, this book continues the contextual study of the Iraq debate in the British House of Commons, and of Tony Blair’s speech that opens this debate. We hope to show that a *critical analysis* of such political discourse must go beyond the usual accounts of grammatical, argumentative or rhetorical structures, among many others, and be based on an explicit theory of context that is able to relate such discourse to the political situation, as construed by the participants.

Obviously, a fully fledged review of all studies and developments in the social sciences that may contribute to the theory of context is far beyond the scope of a single book. But I hope that even our very selective discussion of some possible contributions of the social sciences may stimulate further research into the nature of context as the interface between language and discourse, on the one hand, and social situations, society, politics and culture on the other hand.

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