

Context and Structure in a Theory of Pragmatics

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This paper explores a small but important detail of a theory of pragmatics, the relationship between linguistic structure on the one hand and context on the other. The background is a theory that views language use as a process of interactive meaning generation employing as its tool a set of production and interpretation choices. 'Structure' is here defined as any combination of elements at any layer of linguistic organization or form at which choices can be made. 'Context', then, stands for any combination of ingredients of a communicative event, along any set of parameters of variability, with which linguistic choices are interadaptable. It is argued that structure and context cannot be treated as if they were separate entities. The paper shows that there is an ontological link between the two (forms can change their meaning with a change of context, and contexts can change with changes in linguistic form) as well as an epistemological one (structural resources being used to mark an appeal to contextual phenomena in the interactive dynamics of the activity that interlocutors are engaged in).

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1. Introduction

Linguistic pragmatics has often been defined as the study of meaning in context. Underlying this definition is the assumption that the main distinction to be identified is the one between semantics and pragmatics, seen as two separable components of an overall linguistic theory. This author does not side with that assumption, and many would agree that it is hard, if not impossible, to talk about meaning without taking into account context. Be that as it may,¹ it is impossible to avoid the observation that any study of language use must deal with linguistic structures as well as with aspects of context. Though it may look like a small detail of a theory of pragmatics, the relationship between structure and context is important to consider carefully. It is not as straightforward or unproblematic as it might seem at first sight. That is the issue this paper wants to explore.

In order to do so, I will start with a brief sketch of an overall framework which conceives linguistic pragmatics as the interdisciplinary (i.e. cognitive, social, and cultural)

¹ Such issues are discussed in just about every available textbook of pragmatics, as e.g. Levinson (1983), Mey (1993). An explanation for why insisting on an attempt to contrast pragmatics with semantics may be misguided, is to be found in Verschueren (1999).

science of language use. 'Language use' is viewed as a process of interactive meaning generation employing as its tool a set of production and interpretation choices from a variable and varying range of options, made in a negotiable manner, inter-adapting with communicative needs, and making full use of the reflexivity of the human mind.

In addition to notions such as dynamics and salience, which characterize the core of what language use is all about, such an approach to pragmatics hinges crucially on a clear assessment of the 'nuts and bolts' that are being put to use, namely features of linguistic structure and aspects of context.

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2. A theory of pragmatics

For this author, linguistic pragmatics is the interdisciplinary (cognitive, social, and cultural) science of language use,² where 'language use' is primarily seen as the interactive activity of generating meaning.³ At the simplest level of analysis, this activity consists in the constant making of production and comprehension choices from a varying and variable range of options (thus elevating **VARIABILITY** to the status of a key notion for pragmatics, as will be emphasized again later). These options are either *structural* (situated at any level of linguistic structure, from the smallest phonetic detail to the widest discursive strategy) or *contextual* (pertaining to any ingredient of a speech event). Including context in the realm of objects of choice-making implies that it is not seen as a fixed outside reality, though the existence of some sort of outside reality is not disputed. Aspects of context do not have intrinsic relevance to the verbal communication process; rather,

² For a full account of this specific version of a theory of pragmatics, the reader is referred to Verschueren (1999). The same perspective is represented by the *Handbook of Pragmatics* (Verschueren et al. eds. 1995 ff.) and the International Pragmatics Association (<http://ipra.ua.ac.be>).

³ I use 'generating' rather than 'constructing,' because the latter implies too much emphasis on intentionality. Though intentionality is of course crucial in interactive meaning generation, this process is not entirely defined by it: quite often, meanings also 'emerge' without a direct relation to the interlocutors' intentions.

they derive their relevance from the interlocutors' orientation (as will be explained in more detail later). Both utterer and interpreter are engaged in the dynamics of focusing, defocusing, leaving out, or even inventing. Structure and context—as will be the main tenet of this paper to show—are not independent from each other; for one thing, every utterance becomes part of the context as soon as it has been produced; together, structure and context define the *locus* of meaning-generating processes.

Variability should never be underestimated by a pragmatician. As early as 1974, Dell Hymes already said that “in the study of language as a mode of action, variation is a clue and a key” (Hymes 1974, p. 75). In essence, the notion refers to all the options that are available within a given language system and speech community. But ‘language system’ and ‘speech community’ are abstractions and variability really goes much further.⁴ Just consider a couple of examples.

First there is the case of the Jordanian young man taking a driver's test in Belgium. Interpretation in Arabic is offered and accepted. But the interpreter is of Moroccan descent. As it happens, Moroccan Arabic traffic terms are often simply French borrowings; a sidewalk, for instance, is a *trottoir*. Of course, the Jordanian flunks his exam. Later he takes the test again in English, and passes without problems. What is at stake here is a well-known form of intra-language variability, which some institutions fail to take into account. But what is relevant in *the practice of language use* must also be taken into account when constructing *a theory of language use*.

Going yet a bit further, there is the case of the third-generation Argentinian of Italian descent, who was used to speaking Italian with his grandparents. When he went to Italy as an adolescent and tried out his Italian, he soon discovered that what he spoke when he thought he spoke Italian, was what his grandparents spoke when they thought they were speaking Spanish. This is a form of variability that is much harder to take into account and that therefore requires much more talent—or training—for meaning negotiation, as there is interference between mere usage, the metapragmatic placement of the code, and even aspects of identity construction.

In fact, variability goes all the way to the level of idiolects, a phenomenon that is gravely understudied in linguistics (in spite of early and valuable exceptions such as Fillmore et al. (eds.), 1979). Ultimately, everyone speaks a different language, a fact that has become more easily ascertainable with the help of computer tools. In forensic linguistics (e.g. as practiced by Malcolm Coulthard) even a form of textual fingerprinting⁵ is being developed. A by now classical case is the FBI hunt for the Unabomber. The

⁴ In a discussion of this phenomenon, I prefer the term ‘variability’ over ‘diversity’, as the latter still allows for the co-existence of different stable systems, while variability clearly implies the constant potential not only for difference but also for change.

⁵ The metaphor is not entirely appropriate, as this would require a readily available data bank of textual profiles.

name was devised for an American anarchist, later identified as Theodore Kaczynski, who killed three and wounded twenty-three in sixteen separate bombing incidents targeting university professors and airline officials from 1978 to 1995. At a certain moment Kaczynski, in a letter to a number of newspapers, promised to stop the attacks if they would be willing to publish a manifesto. Some newspapers complied. When reading the manifesto, Kaczynski's brother's wife had a hunch that the author must have been her brother-in-law. Kaczynski was arrested, and proof of his authorship was sought mainly in textual points of idiosyncratic or idiolectal comparison between the manifesto and other texts and letters he had written earlier. This is one of the better-known cases, but (often with the help of computer tools) similar comparisons and similar identifications have become more common (see Coulthard 2004).

Variability is not the only key notion to be kept in mind for a theory of pragmatics. Neither production nor comprehension choices are based on fixed or mechanical form-function relationships. On the contrary, they are constantly subject to **NEGOTIABILITY**, which makes the *processes* involved in language use highly *dynamic*. Under such circumstances, successful communicative use of language is only possible thanks to the **ADAPTABILITY** of the human mind,⁶ in relation to which all the processes occupy a specific *status*; this relationship between the meaning-generating processes and the human mind I refer to with the term *salience*, a cover term that allows for various levels of conscious intentionality, automaticity, and reflexivity or metapragmatic awareness.

As an illustration for the dynamics and reflexivity involved, consider the following sentence, spoken by the Chairman of the US Federal Reserve, addressing Congress:

"I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant."

This utterance illustrates the fully reflexive nature of choice-making on the comprehension side, which shows a dynamics that does not stop after an interaction sequence has ceased, and that also plays a role in reflexive after-the-fact auto-comprehension or meta-comprehension on the utterer's side. The communicative dynamics consists of *movement through consecutive and/or overlapping contexts and alternating focus on different levels of structure* (a formulation that already anticipates some of the points to be made in this paper). One might ask whether this is simply an idiosyncrasy of the speech of the Chairman of the US Federal Reserve. But this assumption loses its appeal quickly when we look at other examples of language use, as in the following quotation:

⁶ There are good reasons why James Nairne (1997) gives his psychology textbook the title *The Adaptive Mind*. An in-depth study of the same phenomenon is to be found in Buller (2005). And for the way in which the notion of adaptability functions in relation to language and language use, see Verschueren & Brisard's (2002) *Handbook of Pragmatics* article.

“When I told my wife that I was leaving her because I was tired of living her life, she said something very strange. She said it wasn’t really her life. I have been thinking about that in the past two years, and I believe now that what my wife was saying was that her life was as much a series of accidents as I thought mine was. [...] At the time I saw it only as a rebuke and I was in no mood to accept it. I thought she was saying that my life with her had given me strength and spirit and knowledge of the world: these were her gifts to me, and I was now using them to spoil her life. If I had thought she meant what I now believe she did, I would have been very moved, and I might never have left her.” (V.S. Naipaul, 2004, p. 113)

What is happening here is essentially the same, though stretched out over a longer period of time, and though the example looks more like what we might recognize from ordinary forms of interaction.

The resulting structure of a theory of pragmatics is represented in Figure 1.

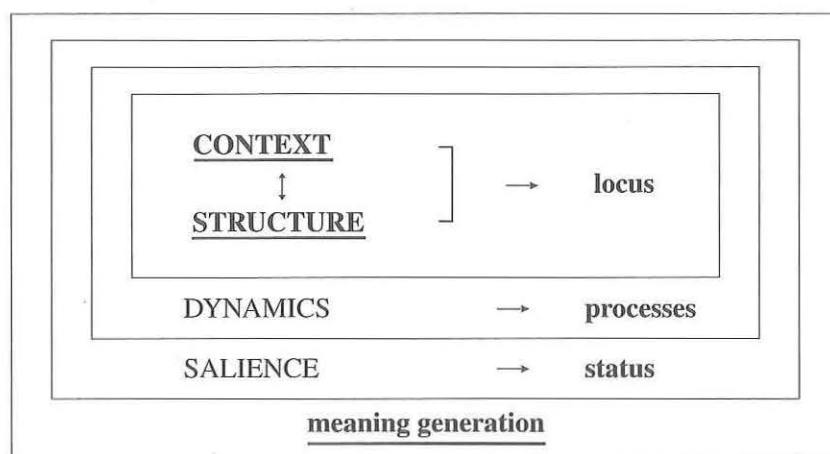


Figure 1. The structure of a pragmatic theory

Referring to Figure 1, we could say that the topic of this paper is the double-pointed arrow between the notions ‘structure’ and ‘context’, or, for that matter, the definition of the ‘locus’ of processes of language use. But first we need to go a bit deeper into the two key notions.

3. Structure and context

Neither ‘structure’ nor ‘context’ can be granted conceptual autonomy. Both have to be related, at least, to the overarching notions in terms of which we try to understand language use, the most general one being the notion of adaptability. That is why I generally prefer the more elaborate phrases ‘structural objects of adaptability’ and ‘contextual correlates of adaptability’. The next step, and this paper’s core contribution, is to relate structure and context to each other. After focusing briefly on one of the traditional

notions linking the two, namely 'appropriateness', sections 4 and 5 will then constitute an attempt to go beyond this customary approach.

Any (combination of) element(s) at any layer or level of linguistic organization or form at which choices can be made, constitutes a structural object of adaptability or, for short, an element of '**structure**'. Thus, languages, codes and styles are objects of adaptability, albeit at a high level of structuring. So are all utterance-building ingredients, from sounds, over morphemes, words, clauses, sentences and propositions all the way to suprasentential units. Also utterances and utterance clusters (from the exclamation "Ouch" to a full conversation or an entire novel) fit in here, as well as utterance-building principles such as coherence, relevance, information structuring, foregrounding/backgrounding, and the like. Usually, choices are not isolated, but rather part of an integrated process of choice-making that interrelates phenomena at different structural levels.⁷

Any (combination of) ingredient(s) of a communicative event, along any (set of) parameter(s) of variability, with which linguistic choices are interadaptable, constitutes (a) contextual correlate(s) of adaptability or, for short, an element of '**context**'. The central entity to which parameters of variability are attached is the language user, located in a physical, social, cultural, and mental world. Not only is the language user central as a 'locus'; he or she is also the agent who defines the context. The language user is not only obliged to make structural choices. Also context is really a matter of choice, both in producing and in interpreting utterances. Without denying the existence and importance of an 'outside reality', every language user creates his or her own 'lines of vision' by focusing on a selection from the range of potentially relevant aspects of a wider 'objective' context. In other words, context is the product of contextualization: 'things' are made into context, in the service of the overall process of meaning generation.⁸

In the pragmatic literature, it has been common practice to relate structure to context by means of the notion of *appropriateness*. Though pragmaticians have for a long time been convinced that objective reality 'out there' either does not exist or is only a not-so-useful and impossible-to-identify point of reference, still there has been a dominant tendency to look at choices of linguistic forms or structures as being based on a prior assessment of contextual factors in order to make those choices 'appropriate'. This unidirectional and often normative view, of which simpler as well as more sophisticated versions exist,⁹ is what this paper wishes to challenge or refine.

⁷ For a more extensive account, see Verschueren (1999: 115–146).

⁸ For a full account, see Verschueren (1999: 75–114).

⁹ An example of a simpler version is this author's much earlier attempt (in Verschueren 1978) to propose the building of an integrated theory of pragmatics on the notion of appropriateness conditions. Much more sophistication is to be found in Fetzer's (2007) edited collection of articles on *Context and Appropriateness*.

4. The ontological link

Though context and structure do not coincide, neither are they separable entities that simply happen to show relationships. They are linked ontologically, 'by nature' as it were. At least two linkage points may be discerned at once.

First, any choice of linguistic channel merges context and structure. Both speaking and writing as linguistic channels are at the same time choices of context and of structure: they have a 'physical' appearance that defines at the same time aspects of how things can be 'said' (structure) and aspects of the possible circumstances (context). The essential nature of the link is most obvious when something 'goes wrong': a pen running out of ink, a computer breaking down, facial paralysis immobilizing part of one's lips, etc. But also when everything works well, the connection cannot be ignored: even a speaker's individual identity is given away by the specificities of the sounds produced by one's speech apparatus, thus imposing contextual constraints on content and form, while content and form cannot be produced without immediately displaying an important contextual parameter.

Second, there is the phenomenon of linguistic context: as soon as an utterance is made, it becomes itself part of the context. This is rendered visible by markers of contextual cohesion (conjunction, anaphora, self-reference, contrasting, comparison, etc.), by traces of intertextuality (allowing us to reconstruct flows of meaning), by sequencing phenomena, and the like.

But there is more. The meaning of forms or structures can be fundamentally affected by a change in context. For instance, when the words *Au bon accueil* (literally 'at the good welcome'—a most inviting formula in French) adorn the front of a hotel or a restaurant in the Swiss Alps, all you see is a hotel or a restaurant that signals its hospitality. The language-context connection is quite ordinary in that case. But put the same words on a nearly destroyed building as in Figure 2, and the change of context will change the significance of the words: as the words become funny, what you get is a different meaning, even though in this case that was clearly not intended by the person putting up the sign in the first place.



Figure 2. Au bon accueil

Conversely, context may be affected by a choice of linguistic forms. One of the ways in which language affects context, for instance, is by switching from one language to another. This is a very dynamic process. But a relatively static example already illustrates the point. One of the neighborhoods in Antwerp is called *Groenenhoek*. This literally means 'green corner'. One of the cafés in this perfectly ordinary Flemish neighborhood, however, is called *Green Corner*, in English. This change of words, a simple translation into English, somehow lifts the neighborhood out of its ordinariness, with a good amount of ironic self-reflection.

These examples show that the relationship between structure and context does not simply boil down to unidirectional (and normative) 'appropriateness'. The connection is much more profound, and at least bidirectional—which justifies reference to interadaptability. Just as the choice of a term of address may be based on an assessment of existing social relationships, the nature of a social relationship may be profoundly affected by the choice of a term of address. A further illustration can be found in the following set of utterances:

- (1) It's disgusting.
- (2) It's irresponsible.
- (3) There are a number of reasons to reconsider.
- (4) People perceive this as inconsiderate, even demagogical.
- (5) The organizational structure has to be changed.

These could be all recontextualizing 'translations' of "I don't agree with the measures that are now being proposed". They clearly show different orientations to context. On the one hand this means that the choices could be made on the basis of specific features of the context, such as the relationship between the speaker and the addressee, where (1) could be addressed to a friend, (2) to a colleague, (3) in a board meeting, (4)—assuming a university context—to the vice-chancellor, and (5) in a 'union' meeting. On the other hand, the choices may also be based on an attempt to construct a context. Thus (1) through (5) could all be addressed to the same person (e.g. the vice-chancellor), but clearly with different effects, both when compared to each other and when compared to the 'regular' usages mentioned.

Emphasizing bidirectionality (or interadaptability) could still lead to the assumption that we are dealing with fundamentally separable, though interconnected, entities. Such an assumption would, however, ignore the fact that in many cases there is no easy answer at all to the question of what is structure and what is context or the question of which comes first, an assessment of contextual parameters or a linguistic choice with contextual effects. What we are confronted with, as already anticipated in section 2, is a communicative dynamics that may consist of movement through consecutive and/or overlapping contexts and alternating focus on different levels of structure.

5. The epistemological link

The biggest mistake in a discussion of context would be to assume that there is such a thing as an objective or stable 'reality-out-there'. This mistake is rarely made these days by pragmatics. What is barely focused on, however, is the observation that such a seemingly comfortable notion would make 'context' utterly useless for analytical purposes. 'Reality-out-there' is by definition without limits, and if we would have to take it into account in its objective and stable form when analyzing a piece of discourse, there could be no end to the analysis.

A more complex notion of context which denies its objectivity and stability corresponds much better with communicative reality, as all language users are positioned subjectively in context and it is this subjective positioning (referred to earlier as 'lines of vision') that determines basic properties of communicative interaction. Paradoxically, the more complex notion is also much easier to handle for purposes of analysis, and hence more useful. The analytical task consists in *tracing* those aspects of context that can be shown to function in the meaning generation process. The question is, then, *how* we can trace them. The answer is to be found in what I refer to as the epistemological link between structure and context: *structural resources are used to mark an appeal to contextual phenomena in the interactive dynamics of the activity the interlocutors are engaged in*. In other words, context and structure really work together (as already pointed out in the previous section as well), and this provides us with the tools we need for analysis.

Thanks to this epistemological link, there is no need for us to speculate about context, as we can observe the way in which contextual phenomena are brought in by language users to generate meanings. An old example (Verschueren 1999: 159-164) still serves the purposes of illustration:

- (6) [Situation: coffee shop in Berkeley, California, in 1981]
- | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| a. Customer [just coming in] to waitress: | <i>Is this non-smoking?</i> |
| b. Waitress: | <i>You can USE it as non-smoking.</i> |
| c. Customer [sitting down]: | <i>Thanks.</i> |

Theoretically, the customer's opening question can either be interpreted as his self-identification as a non-smoker seeking smoke-free space or as a smoker looking for a table where he will not be chased away if he starts smoking. Without going into any of the details of this dynamic, though brief exchange, we can know without any speculation that the first interpretation is the correct one, as the waitress's response is based on it, and as her interpretation is clearly accepted by the customer. In other words, the precise value of this contextual parameter can simply be traced.

There are two helpful notions to support research efforts in this area. The first is the notion of an *activity type*. The term is borrowed from Levinson (1992), but it could as well be substituted with 'genre' (see Briggs & Bauman 1992). It can be used to refer to

any identifiable combination of ingredients from any set of contextual dimensions that is 'meaningful' in the sense that it provides a frame of interpretation for whatever happens in the course of specific tokens of the type. An example would be a 'job interview', or a 'news report', or a 'lecture'. The point is that interpretations are partly based on expectations that follow from normative patterns (reflected in choices of forms) associated with activity types. An activity type, therefore, is a structural phenomenon associated with (or even partly at the level of) patterns of meaning, defined in terms of aspects of context. Defining properties of a job interview, for instance, are certain types of asymmetrical social relationship against an economic background, corresponding with structural properties of a typical question-answer interaction process and involving interpretations based on expectations as to the content of what is said.

A second useful notion in this context is the notion of a *contextualization cue* (as introduced by Gumperz 1982). The term contextualization cue can be applied to any formal or structural marker of the way in which a stretch of discourse derives meaning from its embeddedness in context. Contextualization cues can be situated at highly divergent levels of structure, from prosody and intonation to pauses, backchannel cues (or listener responses), and code switches. But the point is that they lead to specific contextualized inferences or interpretations on the basis of the meaning expectations they are habitually associated with.

Both activity types and contextualization cues provide bridges from the locus of communicative phenomena to processes of meaning generation. One could say that activity types start the construction of the bridge from the vantage point of context, while contextualization cues embody the perspective of elements of structure. Both should be invoked for a proper understanding of what happens in language use.

6. Conclusion

Needless to say that what we refer to as an epistemological link between structure and context is fundamentally based on metapragmatic awareness, which turns every utterance into an essential part of its own context. This observation, of course, re-emphasizes the ontological link that we pointed at before. Be that as it may, the context-structure link must be kept in mind in pragmatic research. Doing so enables us to empirically assess the relevance of elements of context without lapsing into speculation, in spite of the overwhelming dynamics of processes of interactive meaning generation in language use.

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