

# CONTEXT IN PRAGMATICS

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### Abstract

People carry out almost all social behaviors through language, either spoken or written. The language to be used needs rules and principles; and when it comes to see language from a socio-cultural perspective, and consider the 'worlds of users' incorporating the context or 'human condition', people refer to the pragmatic use of it, which means that Pragmatics is the study of a context-dependent language. People owe their respects to great many linguists and experts in Pragmatics for their various expertises in this field to explain 'how the language operates in force of contextually implied conditions'. With this view, the writer of this paper attempts to learn the important relationship between context and Pragmatics.

### Introduction

The reasons underlying linguists renewed interest in Pragmatics are their concern in the users of language as compared to an earlier focus on language as abstract system; and their belief that users and language are at the core of all things pragmatic as a truly *existential* condition (Mey 2001: 29). In this user context, Mey asserts that speaker-hearer or interlocutors' interaction is demanded of their concerns of the notions of register, such as formality or informality of language use, choice of connotative words, as well as speakers' attitudes and rhetoric skill, such as how to get one's point across, and the like.

In the past, linguists analyzed sentences regardless their context, nowadays, however, linguists consider context in comprehending the meaning of the sentence. In refer to context as an important aspect to interpret

meaning, Fillmore says that: "The task is to determine what we can know about the meaning and context of an utterance given only the knowledge that the utterance has occurred. I find that whenever I notice some sentences in context, I immediately find myself asking what the effect would have been if the context ( who speaks, to whom, what purpose, how a speaker says, when, and where aspects) had been slightly different" (Fillmore 1977:119). The statement explains that context influences meaning, that when a context changes, meaning may change as well. The following sentence: "What time is it?" may have different meanings as it relates to different contexts, as follows. (1) The speaker produces interrogative sentence that asks the time to the hearer. The speakers or interlocutors are probably friends who start leaving for campus; (2) The speaker expresses annoyance to a

hearer, who probably comes late to an appointment; and (3) the speaker remembers that it's time for her/him to go home ( Thomas, 1995: 50).

The sentence makes sense in three different meanings pragmatically, but not semantically. As it is true that Semantics concerns with *dyadic* relationship in which two aspects are involved between linguistic form and its meaning; whereas Pragmatics concerns with *triadic* relationship in which three aspects involved that is linguistic form, its meaning and its context. Related to this, Leech explains that an utterance deals with abstract static entity as a sentence, which operates in Syntax; a proposition operates in Semantics, and verbal acts or performances in particular situation and time operated in Pragmatics (Leech 1983: 14). Pragmatics is distinguished from Semantics in being concerned with meaning in relation to a speech situation where context stands as one among various aspects (Leech 1983: 15).

Then how exactly context plays its role in Pragmatics that the deeper understanding of context may facilitate the interpretation of meaning?

### **Context**

Context is discussed at length by many linguists, philosophers and anthropologists.

Malinowski emphasizes that language is understood in relation to the context of situation and the broader context of culture in which it was used. Malinowski's Phatic Communion concept is referring to primitive language of Trobriand islanders that the meaning of words depends on their context. The words: 'wood', 'paddle', and 'place' for instance, had to be translated in the free interpretation in order to show their real meaning. The meaning of the expression ' We arrive near the village of our destination' literally: ' We paddle in place' is determined only by taking it in the context of the whole utterance (Malinowski in Widdowson 2007:93). The idea shows that the study of any language spoken by people under conditions different from our own and possess a different culture, must be carried out in conjunction with the study of their culture and environment (Widdowson: 2007: 94). The point of Malinowski's context of situation lies in the fact that speech, consisting of technical terms referring directly to environment, varies and changes based on behaviors that is closely related to social relationship.

Closely related to Malinowski's context of situation is the one proposes by Firth. He stated four kinds of context, as follows: (1) Participants or speaker and hearer with their status and roles; (2) Acts or all actions they

perform, verbally and non-verbally; (3) Relevant characteristics including surrounding events having connection with the course of present action; and (4) The impacts the speech acts give on interlocutors or the changes of events as the consequence of speech acts (Firth 1968). In later years, this idea inspires Hymes (1972) to conceptualize the context in speech situation, comprising of eight components acronimally called SPEAKING, they are: (1) S stands for Setting and Scene; (2) P stands for Participants; (3) E stands for Ends; (4) A stands for Act sequences; (5) K stands for Key; (6) I stands for Instrumentalities, (7) N stands for Norms and (8) G stands for Genres.

Cultural context recognition is required, despite one's ability to figure out the situated meaning of some words (Hinks 1996 in Widdowson 2007:94). In a research, he reports that in Yucatan, Mayan people in Mexico have their own cultural models of how physical and social space work and are related. A Mayan Shaman named "Don Chabo" is sharing a meal with his daughter-in-law, Margot, and a visiting anthropologist. A young man, named Yuum, approaches from the outside and standing at the window and asks: "Is Don Chabo Seated?" Margot replies, "Go over there. He's drinking. Go over there inside." Margot uses the Mayan word for

'there' that means "maximally distant from speaker", the same word people in Yucatan use for relatives who live outside Yucatan, in other states in the Mexican Republic. She does this despite the fact she is telling Yuum to go into her father-in-law's house, not 10 meters away from hers and within the same compounds that contain several houses. Margot is excluded from her father-in-law's house unless she has a specific reason to be there. Thus she uses the word 'far distant' due to social rather than physical distance. They use the word 'seated' to mean that one is 'at home' and available.

In line with situational and cultural context, Levinson also mentions about the knowledge of socio-cultural and context by stating two almost similar ideas, the first is that Pragmatics discusses the relationship between language and context, that in order to use language, one is required to know the context in which the language is produced, and second, Pragmatics discusses the speaker's ability to produce sentences correspond with context, he called 'the full communicative intention' of a speaker. He states that 'by taking into account, not only the meaning of (an utterance) U, but also the precise mechanisms, such as irony, which may cause a divergence between the the meaning of U and what is communicated by

the utterance of U in a *particular context* (Levinson 1983: 18).

The following conversation offers the context's importance in understanding utterances:

*(A and B are on the telephone, talking over arrangements for the next couple of days)*

A: So can you come over here again right now?

B: Well, I have to go to Edinburgh today sir.

A: Hmm. How about this Thursday?  
(Levinson 1983: 48)

The above exchange operates presuppositions, implicatures, references and other factual and contextual aspects in order to make sense, which probably cannot be explained by Semantics or Syntax. Levinson further states that the time of conversation 'today' is different from 'this Thursday' (this refers to time reference) – otherwise the speaker would probably have said 'tomorrow' or 'the day after tomorrow' (this refers to conversational implicature). Further, the place from which A is speaking is obviously not Edinburgh, but neither is it a place that is too far removed from either Edinburgh or the speaker's location (refers to presupposition). In addition, A (being addressed as 'Sir') seems to be in a position that allows him to give orders to B (this refers to presupposition and implicature).

Levinson's idea of aspects of Pragmatics goes along with Leech's as presented in his book *Principles of Pragmatics* (Leech 1983: 13-17), in that both ideas refer to Pragmatics as the study which relates meaning in relation to speech situation. As context is one aspect of several related aspects in Pragmatics, one must learn context being at work in speech situation. The speech situation calls for aspects of the followings: (1) Addressers and addressees, speakers (writers) and hearers (readers), which these terms do not restrict pragmatics to the spoken language. Addressers are persons produce utterances, and addressees are persons to whom the utterances are addressed; (2) Context of utterance which includes relevant aspects of the physical or social setting of an utterance, which Leech refers to any background knowledge assumed to be shared by speaker and hearer which contributes to interpretation of what speaker means by a given utterance; (3) Goals of utterance, which means function of an utterance which explains the speaker's intention in producing utterance; (4) The utterance as a form of act or activity called a speech act, (Austin 1962:100) refers to illocutionary acts. Leech exemplifies the act of uttering the following sentence. "Would you please be quiet?"; and (5) The utterance as a product of a verbal act. Leech explains that an

utterance refers to 'product' of a verbal act, rather than to the verbal act itself, although there is no distinctive difference between them. He shows the example: 'Would you please be quiet?', when spoken with a polite rising intonation might be described as a sentence, as a question or as a request, depending on a particular situation.

Context in abstract situation is interpreted by Halliday dan Hasan, in which there are three concepts of area as follows: (1) Field which means the total events where text and speaker activities take place and given a topic; (2) Mode which refers to type of genres or channels by which utterances are produced; and (3) Tenor which concerns with types of relevant social relations and interaction between interlocutors. The latter of which is known as Register (Halliday dan Hasan 1976:22). Register prerequisites context of situation. As also agreed by Mey (2001: 13-42), once context of situation is obtained, it becomes easy for a hearer to know what linguistic form a speaker uses. The same concern on selection of linguistic form is put forward by Harmer (2007:78) who underlines that register is the choice of words depending on topic, and tone whether formal or informal. The dynamic context (not the static one) provides changing environment allowing smooth interaction between

interlocutors to take place. This similar dynamic state, according to Huang (2007: 13) refers to any relevant features as setting or environment in which a linguistic unit is systematically used, comprising three sources, as follows:

(1) Physical context, or spatio-temporal location: *He's not the chief executive, he is. He's the managing director.*

(2) Linguistic context or surrounding utterances in the same discourse, that the previous proposition helps understand elliptical construction:

John: Who gave the waiter a large tip?

Mary: Helen

(3) General knowledge context. In real-world knowledge, there is a forbidden city in Beijing, while there is no such a tourist attraction in Paris:

a. I went to Beijing last month. The forbidden city was magnificent.

b. ? I went to Paris last month. The forbidden city was magnificent.

Leech's context is applicable to comprehend written language, and this is in line with Nunan (1993: 117-118) and Richards et al (1992: 82). Nunan mentions two kinds of context: linguistic and experiential, where linguistic means words and sentences in a text; and experiential means the real-world a

text exists. Many systemic functional linguists say that context and purpose or intention decide rules or grammar of discourse. Richards states that context works around words, phrase or longer utterance, and text that helps interpret meaning. Context might be in the forms of larger social situation presented in linguistic forms. Besides that context is related to contextual meaning as the meaning of linguistic form in a context, or the meaning of sentence in a particular paragraph.

Van Dijk (1977:191-192) mentions context as situation of speech interaction, characterized by two properties: (1) Context, in which it is dynamic. Context is not a world state, but a chain of events of world course of events, real happenings, activities between interlocutors here, now, logically, physically and cognitively. As such, context undergoes initial state, intermedial state and final state; (2) Relation and Perception. Utterances need object, that is speaker and hearer as actual participants. Besides that, speaker and hearer carry important functions of speaking and listening. The values of function differ between different groups. In relation to differences in user-orientation, one can notice varieties of English. The status of English as one language is challenged by the many different "Englishes" being used around the

world (Harmer 2007:79). Southern Englanders may say: "It's really warm in here". Northern Englanders may say: "It's right warm in here", in which 'right' is pronounced as 'reet'. Australians may say: "Bloody warm in here, mate". As with Americans, they may pronounce 'warm' in which they sound /r/ clearly audible, unlike Englanders who pronounce /r/ without audible sound.

Another user-orientation difference is reported as a result of a research on utterance denoting 'prohibition function' between Batakese and Javanese (Gunarwan 1998 in Gunarwan 2004). The results show that Batakese uses 43.17% of strategy of bald-on record utterance; whereas Javanese uses only 19.64%. This means that Batak culture shapes Batakese people to use direct prohibition utterance. In other words, Batakese people's speech behaviour is influenced by their prevailing cultural values.

### **Context in Realization**

Context is realized in implicatures, references and presuppositions. In the case of implicature, an utterance can implicate proposition not as part of related utterance. The implied proposition is called implicature (Grice 1975). As implicature does not always come from the utterance, the relationship between implicature and utterance is not a

direct consequence of each other. An utterance produced by a hearer in response to the speaker's utterance is based on context. As there is no semantic relation between an utterance and the one being implicated, an utterance may elicit a large number of implicatures, depending on context or mutual background understanding between the speaker and the hearer. The sentence: "Whose motorcycle is this?", may elicit different implicatures depending on various different contexts. In a situation where the motorcycle gets in the way of other's, or being parked in front of other motorcycle, the implicature might be "Move your motorcycle". In a context where someone looks at it thoroughly as if shows admiration, the implicature could be "Oh, no, that motorcycle hasn't been new for a long time". In a situation where a friend seems to expect a ride, the implicature could be "Oke, you can go with me".

In the case of reference, reference means the knowledge about what utterance refers to, in order to prevent ambiguity (Mey 2001: 53).

The sentence: "The service left much to be desired", may give incomplete meaning, as the word 'service' has several semantic meanings, such as religious ceremony, public assistance, set of crocery and so on. Which of them is pragmatically appropriate in this text.

We lack a frame of reference. But if the sentence is modified a little into: "The service last Sunday left much to be desired", we would tend to interpret the word as a *Church Service*, because in our familiar world such services are customarily held on Sundays. And once the church service is understood, we would anticipate that what follows would fit into that reference: "The service last Sunday left much to be desired. The hymns were badly chosen, the prayers inappropriate, and the sermon too long. And what is more, the organ was too loud".

Presupposition refers to the truth or falsity of an utterance, in which the utterance is defined to hold something true, even if the sentence containing the presupposition is false.

The sentence: "The cat is on the mat" regardless of whether it is true or false (that is, whether or not there is a certain cat on a certain mat), presupposes that there is some cat, and some mat: namely the cat and the mat that the sentence refers to (Mey 2001: 185).

In its realization, context exists along with texts and discourse, that their differences to each other can not be drawn distinctly. On the contrary, their relationship is even prevailing. A text is defined as a unity of meaning, not a unity of form. The text may function only when

context is clear, such as who writes the text, to whom it is addressed, what intention the text has, where and when the text is produced and the like.

The public notice “No Smoking” in the form of a drawing of a cigarette and a slanting line on it, functions as a text. When the drawing is kept inside the warehouse and left unnoticed, it has no function as such. When the drawing is attached and put on the wall of a hospital, the functions of the text is clear. For example: For a doctor it means “Smoking is very dangerous for your health”. For a hospital staff it means “Smoking litters and fills rooms with smoke.” For parents it may mean “Prevent your children from smoking.” And for passive smokers it could mean “Don’t smoke near me”, and others. These interpretations are drawn through dynamic contexts or different contexts depending on whose perspectives the text is read. The discourse of the text is “An appeal to the public not to smoke in the vicinity of hospital”.

The three Educational Philosophy formulated by Ki Hajar Dewantara known as

*Ing Ngarso Sung Tulodho*

*Ing MadyoMangun Karso*

*Tut Wuri Handayani*

is a text, and it functions when it is put on the wall of classrooms, and offices. The

interpretation of the above text can be done through understanding context or background knowledge related to who writes the text, to whom the text is written, what the purpose of writing it, when and where the text is written, and the like. Having knowledge of all of the above will help readers to interpret the meanings of the text. The context is that Ki Hajar Dewantara is the leader and teacher of *Taman Siswa Teachers Institute* in the early twentieth century. The Three Educational Philosophy he wrote was intended to live up the spirit of teachers as leaders to be good role models, as teachers in general to motivate students, and as supervisors to facilitate students to do their best in their school. The context of time when it was written was clear that it wants to appeal to teachers to do their job to educate Indonesian youths. Teachers are the most important factors to develop the best quality generation. It is demanded of teachers to perform their best of their profession to increase the highest level of educated Indonesian youths to fight for Indonesian independence from the Dutch colonization. However, the text in present day can function as political philosophy for political leaders, governmental officers and executives low and high ranks alike, to appeal to their devotion and noble service for their country, save it from collapse politically, socially and



financially. The original discourse of the text is “An appeal to teachers to devote their expertise to educate Indonesian students.”

### Conclusion

Context and Pragmatics are two influentially interrelated concepts, that context is required to realize language use in pragmatic perspective. Context, as a dynamic environment enables interlocutors to interact in accordance to both persons' socio-cultural background. In addition, context helps understand factors in producing, and interpreting speech oriented in users. In other words, the relationship of context and Pragmatics is analogically between species and genus.

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