Discourse, Knowledge, Context

Teun A. van Dijk
Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona

Abstract

Within a broad definition of pragmatics in terms of the structures of discourse controlled by the communicative context, this paper focuses on the crucial role of the knowledge of the speech participants. This knowledge is managed by a special epistemic device that is part of the mental context model of the participants. In order to be able to adapt their text or talk to the knowledge of the recipients, this epistemic device enables language users to engage in various strategies to infer such knowledge.

1. Introduction

The Discipline of Pragmatics
The linguistic (sub) discipline of pragmatics has undergone various definitions of its specific domain, goals, concepts, theories and methods. Morris (1938) and other philosophers located pragmatics within the broad discipline of semiotics, where it should account for the relations between signs and their users. Today, such a broad definition would also apply to sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and cognitive linguistics. Philosophers of language, since the 1960s, proposed a more specific field of study for pragmatics in terms of illocutionary acts or speech acts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) and more generally in terms of basic 'postulates' of conversation (Grice, 1989). Finally, linguists in the 1980s added other typical topics to the field of pragmatics that depend on social identities of, and relations between, speech participants, as is the case for politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and deictic expressions (Akermand, 2017).

Today, the domain of pragmatics features a vast number of phenomena, concepts, theories and methods, as shown in handbooks and congresses of pragmatics, difficult to summarize in one coherent definition (and hence delimitation) of a specific domain of language studies, or more generally within semiotics (among a vast number of books, see, e.g., (Huang, 2017; Verschueren & Östman, 2022).

Communicative Context
One way to order the field of pragmatics is to define it in terms of the *communicative context*. The problem of such a definition or delimitation is that the very notion of 'context' is very general, and hence very vague, and used differently in many disciplines. Generally, contexts are any kind of natural or social structures that have systematic influence on a phenomenon being studied in a discipline (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992; Van Dijk, 2008, 2009).

For the specific study of language and language use, for instance, we may distinguish between social, political, cultural and historical contexts, studied in sociolinguistics and the corresponding disciplines, such as sociology, political science, anthropology, and history. In a broader sense, we may even add personal and social cognition as part of the context, as is the case for language competence, knowledge, attitudes, ideologies, norms and values.

Within such a broad theory of various kinds of overlapping contexts, the *communicative context* plays a special role. As part of various kinds of social context, it consists of the properties of the very *communicative situation* that have *systemic* influence on language use or discourse. This is typically the case for the spatiotemporal coordinates of the communicative situation, as they control the use of deictics of time (*now*, *today*, verb tenses, etc.) and place (*here*, *there* and other place adverbs), the roles and speech participants (as is the case for personal pronouns *I, us, you,* etc) and their relationships, such as those of power or intimacy (as is the case for style, politeness and speech acts). Indeed, also the social or communicative *act* being accomplished by specific structures of language or discourse, is also part of this very communicative situation, and as such also part of the way language users intend and understand a verbal (or more generally a semiotic) utterance.

It should however be stressed that not all social or other properties of the empirically complex social situation are part of the communicative context as it defines the domain of pragmatics. Whereas some properties of language users, such as their age or gender may have systemic influence on language use, they have many properties that don't, as is the case for their height, weight or eye colour, nor the specific clothes they wear, and many other properties that may have social significance, but not systemically codified in text or talk. Hence the communicative context is a special abstraction from the immensely complex, empirical communicative situation.

Language users not only learn the grammar and the rules and strategies of text and talk, but also learn which of the properties of the communicative situation constitute the communicative context and hence need to be taken in consideration when producing or understanding discourse. Indeed, the crucial explanatory function of pragmatics is to define under what conditions an utterance is *appropriate* in the communicative context. Obviously, because of cognitive constraints, communicative contexts can't be too complex, featuring hundreds of social properties, because at each moment language users must be able to analyze or construe the relevant communicative context, sometimes in fractions of seconds, in order to make sure the production or comprehension of text or talk is appropriate,

Context models

We have stressed that the communicative context is an abstraction of a set of specific properties of the 'real' communicative situation, whereas most of the other properties of the communicative situation may be socially relevant, but linguistically irrelevant. For the properties of the communicative context to systemically influence many of the properties of text or talk, language users need to *know* the communicative situation and it is this knowledge that is able, cognitively, to influence the production or comprehension of discourse. According to the theory of the cognitive representation of events or situations in terms of mental models, language users represent this knowledge of the communicative context in terms of specific mental models: context models. These context models are the cognitive structures that ongoingly control the production or comprehension of discourse and thus make sure it is appropriate (for detail, see Van Dijk, 2008)

Analysis of communicative situations (as they influence discourse) as well as theories of mental models of situations in general, suggest that context models consist of Time, Place, Participants (and their Identities, Roles and Relations), Acts (and their goals). We have seen above that these categories of the context model are needed to describe and analyze many of the "pragmatic" aspects of language use, such as deictic expressions, speech acts, politeness and other context-defined aspects of language use.

As indicated above, cognitive constraints require that context models cannot be very complex because they need to be active to control many aspects even of grammar. Context models are also dynamic, because ongoing time is changing, and so may be the identities, roles and relations of the participants and the acts they accomplish.

Different from pragmatic theories that define communicative context in terms of 'real' social properties of situations (and their participants), our definition of the *relevant* communicative context in terms of mental context models is crucial, because only such cognitive structures can influence the cognitive processes of discourse production and comprehension.

Since context models are a special case of the cognitive representation and control of the ongoing everyday experiences of people, it may be that the notion of context model is part of the cognitive aspect of the theoretically daunting problem of consciousness (see also Aerts, Broekaert & Gabora, 2000).

2. Knowledge

The Crucial Role of Knowledge in Language Use and Discourse

Whereas most of the properties of the communicative context mentioned above have been studied in a vast number of books and articles, there is one crucial property that has often been ignored or less studied: *knowledge*.

Of course, this property of the communicative situation is not unknown in studies of pragmatics and other fields of linguistics, such as semantic. For instance, to define the very appropriateness conditions of the speech acts of assertions and questions, we need to specify that a speaker knows something a recipient doesn't know, or vice versa. And to define presuppositions we also need to formulate a rule that says that speakers know about the knowledge of the recipients, as is also the case for an account of such common grammatical structures as definite articles on the one hand, as well as information-based structures of those of the Topic and Comment structures of sentences. In other words, many aspects of language or discourse need to be accounted for in terms of (shared) knowledge of language users, often formulated in terms of *common ground* (Clark, 1996).

Beyond grammar and speech acts, knowledge also plays a role in other structures of text and talk (Van Dijk, 2014). Indeed, an interesting line of research in Conversation Analysis, has shown that there are rules for speakers to communicate knowledge to recipients, e.g., depending on their specific expertise (Heritage, 2011).

Discourse genres may be defined and structured in terms of the (assumed) knowledge of the speakers/authors or recipients. As is the case for many genres, the very definition of news presupposes that the recipients don't know (all) about the events reported. The many genres of textbook similarly presuppose students don't know (all) about the topics of the textbook. But both for news reports and for textbooks large parts of the text is (pre)supposed to be known to the recipients, Indeed, most new knowledge in most discourse genres is defined or introduced in terms of (presupposed) knowledge already shared by the recipients, if only as members of the epistemic community associated with the linguistic community.

Knowledge in Context

Knowledge is a property of language users, and given its fundamental role in text and talk, it must be included in the communicative context as represented in context models. It contributes to the dynamics of context models, because during the interpretation of text or talk the knowledge of the recipients is systematically changed with at least the information conveyed by discourse and other (multimodal) aspects of the ongoing interaction. The same is true for the knowledge of the speaker about the changing

knowledge of the recipients. Failure to update one's knowledge in conversation may be sanctioned by reminders or criticism such as "As I just told you" and "I told you so!".

Epistemic Strategies

One of the theoretical and empirical problems of discourse and interaction is how language users know about the knowledge of recipients, and how they have access to such knowledge in fractions of seconds while needed in the online production of grammatical and other structures of text and talk.

Our hypothesis is that language users have acquired and use the following specific epistemic strategies to infer relevant knowledge at each moment of the ongoing production of discourse:

 (a) **Generic Knowledge of the Epistemic Community**. Language users are not only members of a linguistic community but also of a social epistemic community. Hence, language users share such sociocultural knowledge with the recipients. This knowledge and many of its inferences may therefore be presupposed in discourse, as is routinely the case in all public discourse, such as news. Obviously, all this knowledge is not part of the context model, which only serves to active ate relevant part of generic knowledge of social cognition (see the vast psychological literature on the role of knowledge in discourse processing, references in Van Dijk, 2014).

(b) **Knowledge of Previous Communicative Events**. Both in public discourse such as news and in everyday conversations, language users may presuppose that recipients remember at least part of the knowledge conveyed in previous communicative events. They may remind recipients with such formula as "As we informed yesterday", or "this... I told you about".

(c) **Ongoing Situation**. Especially in ongoing interaction, as in conversation, language users presuppose recipients share knowledge about the current situation, including the presence of objects, people and their properties, possibly signalled by deictic expressions, pointing or gaze.

(d) **Ongoing discourse**: **Co-text.** Obviously, much knowledge acquired by the very ongoing discourse may be supposed to be known to the recipients. But lack of attention of memory may require speakers to repeat such knowledge with different formulas, such as "As I just said..."

The application of these strategies in actual discourse production does not need other assumptions about knowing what is in the mind of others, as is the case for the Theory

of Mind (TOM) based on specific mirror neurons, crucial in the account of all interaction and cooperation (see, e.g., Goldman, 2006; Hyslop, 1995). A variant of such theory is of course relevant for other aspects of talk-in-interaction, such as knowing about the emotions of recipients as a condition of the multimodal, embodied expression of empathy.

3. Conclusions

Within the huge field of contemporary pragmatics defined as the study of the ways the structures of text and talk depend on aspects of the communicative context, we need to go beyond the study of speech acts, politeness, indexicality and other structures defined in terms of the properties of Space-Time, Participants (and their Identities, Roles and Relations), Acts and Goals. Many aspects of text and talk also depend on shared knowledge of participants in interaction and communication, as is the case for definite expressions, topic-comment structure, and all knowledge needed to construe coherent interpretations of discourse. It is assumed that in order for language users to be able to produce contextually appropriate discourse, they need to have a mental model of the relevant properties of the empirically complex communicative situation in the form of a communicative context: a context model. Given the fundamental role of knowledge for meaningful and appropriate discourse, it must therefore be assume that this context model also features a knowledge device. At each moment of ongoing discourse production this knowledge device needs to 'calculate' what recipients know in order to be able to understand such discourse. It is assumed that this device applies various fast strategies to infer the probable knowledge of recipients from (a) generic sociocultural knowledge of the epistemic community, (b) previous communicative events, (c) the ongoing situation, and (d) ongoing discourse: co-text. More generally it is recommended that pragmatics more generally pays attention to the role of knowledge in the theories of language use, discourse and interaction and as a condition of the pragmatic appropriateness of discourse.

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