Komlósi László Imre

Your life is the context you create

1. Setting the scene

Linguists ought to be biased with fascination for the linguistic system as the manifestation of the Language Faculty, psychologists for narratives as the manifestation of the self and individual and collective memory, educators for discursive behavior as the manifestation of intelligence, human interpersonal relations and meaningful social acts. Professor György Szépe is known as a devoted linguist and a born educator. At the same time, he is also a great story-teller: he permanently creates worlds of culture in a world in which culture is not much appreciated and collective memory tends to be fragmented and, sometimes, deemed dangerous. Professor Szépe opens worlds with his social discourse and accommodates his audience in comfortable worlds, even if only for an ephemeral time span. The narratives he spins of his own self should be secured for his own privacy though. So is equilibrium brought about smoothly between inner speech and manifest speech.

It is the case with most of us that we consider it to be of utmost importance that we develop and acquire expertise in some particular domain of knowledge. After a relatively short while our knowledge becomes compartmentalized: we will find it difficult to follow a piece of academic discourse even if it is in a field of study close to our own. We tend to believe that profound knowledge of language, language use and linguistic behavior can only be obtained through particularly elaborated frameworks. It is almost impossible today not to adhere to some specific paradigm or methodological framework. And we easily announce the frameworks we adhere to as the ones with almost complete world-views on the language phenomena.

György Szépe has always challenged such monopolizations. Not that he would exert any aversion towards formal systems or abstract formulations. On the contrary, he has been keen on modern phonological theories or syntactic theories just as well as on sociolinguistic theories or legal theories of language rights. One thing has always struck me: in any dispute or analysis, he can find "real linguistic material" for arguments or counter-arguments. He has an immense knowledge of languages and their related linguistic systems. I suspect that the secret in his perception of "natural language" is that he can see language as a process and as a product at the same time, in a natural way. He can apply his linguistic expertise as a blend of perceptual knowledge

(what one observes as a concrete, contextualized phenomenon) and as conceptual knowledge (what one acknowledges as a meta-competence of using signs). His expertise on language can integrate symptomatic information and symbolic information simultaneously to make sense of our linguistic competence, pragmatic competence and communicative competence alike.

In the short essay to follow I would like to focus on the creative power of context creation or contextualization. In a vague sense and a slack parlance one could claim that context is ubiquitous and omnipotent, as long as we distinguish situations from contexts. However, I would like to give these terms a more thorough analysis and suggest that a fine-grained analysis of the concept of context should contribute to a better understanding of discursive behavior.

I take as my starting point an influential idea about the "network perspective" on the study of language and communication as adopted in (Fetzer 2004). According to this view

(i)   discourse constituents are produced and generated in a bottom-up manner with the interpretation of constituents' preliminary meanings (defined as linguistically encoded meanings), while

(ii) preliminary meanings are further processed in a top-down manner and acquire refined and enriched meanings assigned to them with regard to their connectedness to relevant discourse topics and sub-topics (defined as linguistically non-encoded meanings).

This bi-directional mechanism is described as the *recontextualization of linguistic context*. Thus, the *network perspective* claims to be capable of elucidating the meaning-creation mechanism according to which it becomes obvious: discursive meaning is not an inherent feature of discourse structure, it is rather an enriched meaning inferred, constructed and computed jointly by the co-participants.

My analysis of context creation sets very similar goals but applies different vehicles. I will show that *dynamic context-creation mechanisms* of a top-down manner have not only epistemological importance but profound ontological consequences for discourse meanings as well. Context creation is an inherent feature of premise-set manipulation which in turn is decisive for our inferencing procedures: presumptions, assumptions, presuppositions and implicatures all serve as input for meaning creation. I will call this mechanism *premise-set recontextualization* that results in constant conclusion revision and reconceptualization.

2. Conceptualizing situations and contexts

The interpretation of linguistically conveyed or mediated and linguistically realized meanings is taken to be the result of complex mental processes that are dynamically interactive on different levels. It is trivial to acknowledge that any act of interpretation is an integral part of cognition, provided we can establish fine-grained distributed models of cognition that include pragmatic indicators of varying degree and strength ranging from contextual cues and deictic parameters to cultural dynamics and inter-subjective meaning negotiations via social normativity.

Discourse interpretation based on discourse representation focuses not only on linguistic forms such as underlined words and underlined sentences, or, for that matter, constructions and formulaic expressions, but also on subtle cues exploiting indexicality, discourse and pragmatic markers, underlined prosody, underlined register, deictic relations, pragmatic and cultural parameters all of which are bound to signal *contextual underlined presupposition*. Such *underlined contextualization cues* have been studied by interactive sociolinguistics mostly, and are considered to be culturally specific and usually unconscious in processing. As a side-effect, it has become widely accepted by today in intercultural communications studies that participants in a conversation coming from highly disparate cultural backgrounds may not recognize these subtle cues in one another's speech, which often leads to misunderstandings or cross-cultural miscommunication.

I am lucky to have worked together with professor György Szépe on some questions of culturally specified and contextually identifiable language use. Our joint project on multilingualism and language communities climaxed in a joint presentation at the Regional Conference on Minority Languages and the European Year of Languages held in Pécs in November 2001. The titles of our two talks were "European dimensions of regional language policy" and "Inter-cultural and multi-cultural aspects of language use in modern societies". The project generated a series of papers, probably due to the special political and linguistic context and increased expectations shortly before Hungary's accession to the European Union in 2004. Unfortunately, the linguistic situation and the multi-lingual context have not changed much for the better since our early hopes were raised (cf. Komlósi and Knipf 2001a, 2001b, 2002; Komlósi–Szépe 2002; Komlósi 2002a, 2002b).

In addition to my interest in inter-cultural communication with cross-cultural miscommunication, I am also interested in the general features of successful communication to be seen as a coherent system of meaningful acts guided by the faculty of *social cognition*. For that purpose, I intend to extend the notions of contextualization, contextualization cues and contextual presupposition by offering an analysis of context building involving a delicate interaction between the ontological and epistemological status of certain mental constructs (such as mental schemes, mental

images, cognitive models or mental spaces) which are seen as building blocks in the *process of constructing contexts for interpretation*. Therefore, in addition to *pragmatic inferences* (based on situated pragmatic knowledge) my analysis will adopt *intentional inferences* (based on contextual information extracted via the intentional stance between interlocutors) to fully encompass the domain of contextual presuppositions crucial for *context-supported interpretations*. My analysis emphasizes the integrating role of *contextual observations* which is based on the presumption that pragmatic and intentional inferences cannot be operative without recourse to contextual observations where the notion of *context* simultaneously exerts both its strong epistemological nature and its decisive ontological status. In other words, I will explore the Janus-face of the notion *context* which is to be conceived of as an *epistemic construct* (a result of plausible reasoning with possible worlds) on the one hand, and an *ontological entity* (an apparent result of purposefully constructed virtual realities) imposing on and revitalizing texts as primary objects in a linguistic environment, on the other.

Thus, I will propose a systemic *categorization of contexts* relevant to the ontology-epistemology dichotomy in line with the conditions of discourse and language use. The ultimate aim of the present analysis is the conceptual articulation of a perspective on language and language use according to which the linguistic system facilitating verbal behavior is seen as a dynamic instrument of coordination for joint and distributed action and cognition in the speech community where *context construction* plays a pivotal role as a prerequisite for performing acts of meaning.

It is crucial to delineate what we depict as a *situation* and what we create as a *mental context* for meaningful interpretation. Both situations (as physical entities) and contexts (as mental constructs) get represented in the mind. However, the two entail different ontologies. A situation is perceived and, consequently, conceived of as a state of affairs in the world that is best represented by a proposition or a set of propositions. This is how, for example, an event structure can be represented in language: a series of propositions (i.e. true or false assertions) will function as a description of an event. A context, on the other hand, consists of *selected properties* that create a plausible background for evaluating the meaningfulness of particular arrangements in linguistic structure. (Hence the success of the term *contextual appropriateness* as witnessed in the literature.) Linguistic structure in itself is not sufficient to determine contextual meaning. I will make an attempt at exploring the *conditions of contextual interpretation*, with special attention paid to the techniques of meaning creation and the nature of inter-subjective meanings manifest in our discourse practices.

Let us examine the possible uses of the term *context*. The linguistic environment, i.e. the *linguistic context*, is the basis for any language-based and text-based interpretation. However, language provides us with verbal descriptions that need to be

confronted and compared with conceptual structures residing in the mind. Linguistic structure and the architecture of the mental lexicon jointly have to be aligned with the conceptual structures underlying any linguistic interpretation process. As I stated above, situations are represented as descriptions of states of affairs in the world and event representations as composite descriptions with the help of variably selected sets of propositions. It goes without saying that *a description itself is a mental construct* of a cognizing agent, who is free to apply selection, construal, perspectivization, choice of particular frames of reference and different types of projections in constructing a linguistic context. Such descriptions are based on perceived states of affairs and can justly claim to represent those states of affairs in a faithful way. However, for the interlocutors, it is not the states of affairs that get perceived, it is the descriptions thereof (i.e. texts created out of linguistic structures). Thus, we have to acknowledge that *linguistic structure* is the vehicle and the medium with the help of which *blueprints for interpretation* are secured. My analysis assumes that texts as verbal constructs constitute and exert a decisive ontological commitment in the process of meaning creation.

Based on the fact that situations get described by propositions and event representations by variably selected sets of propositions, we are justified to posit *event-ontology* as the solid basis for situative knowledge supporting *descriptions by language*, thus creating linguistic context. With the help of linguistic contexts, however, we bring about *new realities* that acknowledge *language-ontology* in turn. This is a meta-level of realities. Linguistic contexts exert both an epistemological character and an ontological status. Further, linguistic structure has to be matched with conceptual structure which is fed and enriched both by pragmatic context (licensing pragmatic inferences) and intentional context (licensing intentional inferences). What we are to observe here is that we have brought about a meta-meta-level of realities: a conceptual context is based on *context-ontology*. Thus, from an ontological point of view, we can talk about three types of contexts. One is *situational context* in which we engage in faithful representations and descriptions of states of affairs. The next one is *linguistic context* serving as a medium in representing and describing states of affairs, and the third one is *mental context* that is constructed by the interlocutors to facilitate meaning creation and interpretation. The first type is based on observing situation or event structures, the second one constitutes an interface between the perceived world and linguistic structure, and the third type constitutes an interface between linguistic structure and conceptual structure, the latter being mental contents contextualized. It is the latter type of context that is subject to bi-directional, reciprocal adaptation in view of the linguistic structure presented and the mental states of the interpreters engaged in a given discourse. A *mental context* is constructed out of selected properties of mental contents, thus serving as background for evaluating the

meaningfulness of particular arrangements in linguistic structure. Linguistic structure in itself is not sufficient to determine contextual meaning. A mental context yields added value with which linguistic meaning is to be complemented.

From the direction of conceptual structure, we can observe the plasticity and the flexibility of the human mind which (i) sees things through mental schemes and cognitive models, (ii) can switch between frames of reference, (iii) can change perspectives on indexing (e.g. deictic, modal and counter-factual relations), (iv) constructs mental contexts to accommodate data and (v) modifies data by semantic shift and meaning extension to accommodate perceived situations and constructed contexts. (For a more detailed discussion on constructed contexts see Komlósi (2011).) In (iv-v) we see a mechanism which utilizes reciprocal effects: in (iv) epistemology is serving ontology, while in (v) ontology is serving epistemology.

With the help of a ready-made categorization, I intend to show the obvious difference between *situation* and *context*. At the same time, I will make an attempt to highlight the reciprocity of epistemological content and ontological status: for any mental context to be applicable in interpretation, a new ontological status has to be acquired by being grounded in a particular situational context. I will call this procedure *situated language use*. I plan to delineate the difference as follows:

–   whereas a *situation* (any identifiable physical arrangement) remains *local and concrete*
     [cf. extensional meaning of physical constellations]
–   and a *linguistic context* (to be constructed as linguistic structure) remains *generic but concrete*
     [cf. extensional meaning of linguistic arrangements]
–   a *mental context* (to be constructed as conceptual structure) will be *generic and abstract*
     [cf. intensional meaning of linguistic arrangements]

Space building is a quick response to novel contexts created by speech participants to build justifiable and plausible contexts to fit particular situations. Space building is experimentation with mental space dynamics involving partial projections between mental spaces. The next anecdote provides a pregnant example for incongruity resolution problems in jokes exploiting representational ambiguities for situations, linguistic contexts and mental contexts.

An English bishop received the following note from the vicar of a village in his diocese:
        "Milord, I regret to inform you of my wife's death.
         Can you possibly send me a substitute for the weekend?"

It is almost trivial that the linguistic context yielding the actual text-meaning does not suffice to resolve the linguistic-referential ambiguity for "substitute". One has to build alternative spaces based on world knowledge about a village vicar's life circumstances. Once the alternative spaces are available, a particular mixture or selection from among relevant properties has to be created in order to bring about a plausible blended space for a final interpretation. Thus, I propose the following sequence of space building and space blending:

First input space: a vicar whose wife has died sends a note to the bishop asking for a clergyman to replace him in his church service while he needs to see to responsibilities involved in a situation of a deceased spouse.

Second input space: a vicar who, after the death of his wife, sends a note to the bishop asking for a replacement of his dead wife. (For example, a possible, though quite extreme scenario could be a context in which the vicar sends the note with an ironical intent to the bishop whom he might hold responsible directly or indirectly – as a representative of the church – for the death of his wife.)

Blended space: due to selective projections from the two input spaces, we find a vicar asking for a clergyman to replace him and/or a replacement of his dead wife. The blend develops *emergent content* of its own, which results from the juxtaposition of elements from the inputs: it contains the intent of the vicar advanced in the first input and the interpretation of the note in the second input. This tension between intended message and erroneous (or ironical) interpretation is not contained in any of the input spaces, it is a consequence of blending the input mental spaces.

My previous example is meant to show that mental space building is far from being a deterministic procedure. Space building is a *quick response to novel parameters of situations perceived.* Space building is experimentation with mental space dynamics involving partial projections between the mental spaces.

On the basis of my research in pragmatics, I would like to survey some relevant domains of linguistic pragmatics in which the conceptualization of situations and contexts play a decisive role in natural language processing and language use.

A. The context of linguistic meaning. The linguistic environment is the basis for any language-based and text-based interpretation. Language provides us with verbal descriptions that need to be confronted and compared with conceptual structures residing in the mind. Linguistic structure and the architecture of the mental lexicon jointly have to be aligned with the conceptual structures underlying any linguistic

interpretation process. Linguistic structure is the vehicle and the medium with the help of which blueprints for interpretation are secured. Texts as verbal constructs constitute and exert a decisive ontological commitment in the process of meaning creation.

B. *The context of co-text, context of situations and context of culture.* A distinction is drawn between the linguistic environment (co-text), the immediate physical, temporal, spatial, social environment in which verbal exchanges take place, the totality of extra-linguistic features having relevance to a communicative act (context of situation) and the totality of social relations having relevance to a communicative act (context of culture).

C. *The context of interactional socio-linguistics*: Interactional sociolinguistics studies how language users create meaning via interaction while involving cross-cultural miscommunication, politeness, and framing. Contextualization is a central notion denoting the process of assigning meaning, either linguistic or as a means of interpreting the environment within which an expression or action is executed. Contextualization broadens the understanding of culture to include social, political, and economic phenomena. Culture is understood in a dynamic and flexible way and is seen not as closed and self-contained, but as open and able to be enriched by an encounter with other cultures and movements.

D. *The context of the self in cognition and culture:* social information processing is strongly influenced by the person either primarily defining his or her self as an autonomous entity (independent self-construal) or as related to other people (interdependent self-construal). The notion of social cognition is examined in which the encoding, storage, retrieval and processing of information relating to conspecifics or members of the same species take place. Social cognition has its roots in social psychology which attempts to understand and explain how the thoughts, feelings, and behavior of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others. It studies the individual within a social or cultural context and focuses on how people perceive and interpret information they generate themselves (intrapersonal aspect) and information from others (interpersonal aspect). Further, cognitive dissonance-theory, self-perception theory, face-work theory, mental-state attribution theory (intentionality) are brought to bear the understanding of the pragmatics of the self.

E. *The context of Web experience*: what makes our online experiences truly meaningful?

The Semantic Web has raised high hopes by aspiring to have a computational power of NLP that approximates human language in searching and finding results with syntactic exactness. The intelligent personal agents, however, are not only able to process structured data but can make them fully actualized during on-line processing. With the rise of the social Web (also referred to as the pragmatic Web), meaningful and relevant experiences are realized with the help of the context of our identities and social graph. This web-created context has become the pragmatics of our online identities. The pragmatic Web is a highly relevant and individualized Web experience based on the ubiquity of our identity data, which impacts individual user experience and opens up entirely new opportunities by transforming information value to economic value. The vision of the pragmatic Web is to bring it about that my Web experience becomes more meaningful and relevant to me through layered contextual social data based on my identity. We need to empower individuals to access and control their identity across any site or service, through standards that enable data portability and open Web inter-operability. The social Web experience ultimately is a highly personalized, dynamic, relevant and re-mixable Web experience, yielding greater access to information through discovery, communication and collaboration in a virtual social net.

3. Conclusions

As a summary of my essay, I can conclude that much of the information about situations, events, acts, social relations, etc. will be conceptualized (type meanings) and contextualized (token meanings) in the individual minds. It is hypothesized that intrapersonal and interpersonal information is kept separate on the basis of ontological hierarchies concerning contexts and contextualizations.

There is one more thing about contexts that motivated my essay for professor György Szépe. The result of my analysis is that mental contexts are complex constructs involving the intricate interplay of epistemic and ontological states. Mental contexts provide for the ultimate conditions of dynamic interpretations. Mental contexts, thus, must be the result of synergetic processes. Contexts are synergisms as they are emergent phenomena in dynamic and adaptive interpretations. Synergy is a dynamic state in which combined action is favored over the difference of individual component actions. Synergy is a particular behavior of whole systems unpredicted by the behavior of their parts taken separately, known as emergent behavior. In the context of organizational behavior, following the view that a cohesive group is more than the sum of its parts, synergy is the ability of a group to outperform even its best individual member. The value added by the system as a whole, beyond that contrib-

uted independently by the parts, is primarily created by the relationship among the parts. In essence, a synergetic system constitutes a set of interrelated components working together with a common objective to fulfill some designated need.

In our university context, the designated need to be fulfilled comes from the deeply engrained instincts of an educator: nobody else has been as consistent as professor Szépe in bringing about the synergetic contexts in education and research at the university by creating the system-level relationship between the individual participants of the game called higher education.

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Az ember élete az általa szőtt kontextusokban fogalmazódik meg

A tanulmány a kontextus-értelmezés változatainak elemzéséből indul ki, melynek során a szituációk leírásának ontológiájától eljuthatunk a nyelvhasználat pragmatikai kontextusainak ontológiáján keresztül a mentális modellek és mentális terek ontológiájáig, amely végső soron minden értelmezés (interpretáció) alapjául szolgál. Elkerülhetetlen ebben a folyamatban, hogy megkülönböztessük a nyelvi jelentést a diszkurzív jelentéstől, hiszen az utóbbi nem közvetlen módon alakul ki a nyelvi struktúrákból: a beszédhelyzet résztvevői inferenciák és konstruált, valamint kialkudott kontextusok alapján tudják érvényesíteni a társas-jelentéseket.

Az elemzés összeveti a nyelvi kontextusok rekontextualizálásának eljárását a premissza-halmazok rekontextualizálásával és megállapítja: a két technika komplementer. Míg az első technika a nyelvi kontextusok pragmatikai érvényesülését biztosítja, a második a konceptuális struktúráknak a nyelvi megnyilvánulásokkal történő dinamikus egyeztetéséért felelős. A tanulmány végső konklúziója az, hogy a kontextus-építés és a mentális terek segítségével történő fogalmi integráció célirányos, nem-determinisztikus folyamatok szintéziseként jön létre, amelyben a társas-cselekvések értelme szinergetikus értelmezési folyamatoknak köszönhető. A mi akadémiai környezetünkben *hic et nunc* megvalósítható társas-értelem-aktusok szinergetikus eredőjében Szépe György professzor elhivatott, célirányos és fáradhatatlan nyelvtudósi tevékenysége lépte-nyomon tetten érhető.