

1 The notion of context

1.1 Context and co-text

Words do not occur in isolation. The words of a text are surrounded by their linguistic environment, called **co-text**; the text takes place in a broader environment, called **context**. Both co-text and context are of utmost importance in the identification of the meaning of a text.

For example, the word *order* in the following sentence takes its meaning from its co-text, that is to say from the words that follow and precede:

Your order will be processed within 3/4 days after your request is submitted

Items such as *processed*, *request*, and *submitted* contribute to the meaning of *order* that, in this case, refers to a request for a product to be delivered to you. Furthermore, the linguistic co-text of *order* allows us to understand what is going on, that is to say it helps us make inferences on the broader event where the sentence takes place. It can be clearly understood that this sentence has been uttered or written within an event whose topic is a commercial transaction, and where the participants are the customer and the seller. Furthermore, the role language is playing in this speech event can be analysed in terms of medium which, in this case, is written (probably an e-mail or a letter) and in terms of rhetorical function which is descriptive. The topic, the participants and the medium of an event constitute what has been called by Halliday (1985a) context of situation (see section 1.2.3).

A different linguistic co-text of *order* would suggest a different context of situation as in the following example:

Excuse me, can we order, please?

Excuse me, can and *please* suggest that the linguistic event is probably taking place in a restaurant where some customers (the participants) are ordering their meal (the topic) to the waiter (the participant). In this case the medium is spoken. However, there are also cases where the context helps us disambiguate the meaning of a sentence. The sentence *She is a baby* may refer either to a baby or to an adult who looks or acts as a baby. The two contexts and co-texts will help us understand the meaning of the following sentences:

1. *Introduce your child to books when **she is a baby***
2. *She shouldn't have a baby because **she is a baby** herself*

Context and co-text play a key role in the analysis of meaning as we will see later. However, before moving to a more practical description of these two concepts, the following section will provide a brief overview of some traditional theories of context.

1.2 A theoretical overview

A theory of context was first developed by the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1923; 1935). The influence of Malinowski is visible in the theories of many scholars, particularly in those of J.R. Firth, one of his colleagues at London University and of Halliday who follows both Malinowski's and Firth's ideas in the development of his theory on the context of situation.

1.2.1 Malinowski and the theory of context

Bronislaw Malinowski carried out an ethnographic field work in the Tobriand Islands (see Halliday 1985a:5ff). The inhabitants of those islands lived by fishing and gardening and spoke the Kiriwinian language. The first problem he had to face was how to translate the texts in Kiriwinian he had taken down in discussion with the Tobrianders, in order to make them accessible to the British culture. These texts were the product of a culture which was extremely different from the Western culture, for this reason a free translation would have not helped Western people to understand them. He argues (1923:301-2)

Instead of translating, of inserting simply an English word for a native one, we are faced by a long and not altogether simple process of describing wide fields of custom, of special psychology and of tribal organisation which correspond to one term or another. We see that linguistic analysis inevitably leads us into the study of all subjects covered by Ethnographic field-work.

For this reason, he decided to add an extended commentary to the translated text, which “placed the text in its living environment” (Halliday, 1985a:6). Malinowski coined a new term (1923) which identifies the total environment, including the verbal environment and the situation in which the text was produced: the *context of situation*.

As Halliday points out (1985a: 6) Malinowski

(...) understood that a text written by these people into this language could not be understood by any foreigners or by people living outside this society even if translated into their own languages because each message brought more meanings than those expressed through the words, meanings that could only be understood if accompanied by the situation. Thus, Malinowski introduced the notion of context of situation, meaning by this the environment of the text.

In his ethnographic treatise *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski identifies three main aspects of social life that he believed the ethnographer must

fit together into a unified description of a given society (1922:22; see also Langendoen, 1968:12-13):

. . . in every act of tribal life, there is, first, the routine prescribed by custom and tradition, then there is the manner in which it is carried out, and lastly there is the commentary to it, contained in the natives' mind.

The strict relationship between language and culture is well explained by Malinowski in *'The problem of meaning in primitive languages'* (1923), where he argues that language can be explained only by considering the broader context of situation:

Language is essentially rooted in the reality of the culture, the tribal life and customs of the people, and [...] it cannot be explained without constant reference to these broader contexts of verbal utterance. [...] An utterance becomes intelligible when it is placed within its context of situation.

In order to illustrate the notion of context of situation, Malinowski described a typical Tobriand fishing expedition: after the islanders had gone outside the lagoon into the open sea to fish, they had to navigate a difficult course through the reefs to get back to the lagoon. For this reason, people on the shore shouted instructions to the fishermen and the whole situation became a sort of competition between the different canoes and groups of people. The language used in such situations was full of technical terms, references to surroundings and indications of change, based on types of behaviour well-known to the participants. The linguistic material used was, therefore, inextricably dependent upon the course of the activity in which the utterances were embedded (1923:311-312). It was language in action (see Halliday 1985a: 6) and the message was clear only to those who knew what was going on. For this reason when he accounted for these situations he realised that it was necessary to provide not only a description of what was happening, the situation, but also of the total cultural background, because:

involved in any kind of linguistic interaction, in any kind of conversational exchange, were not only the immediate sights and sounds surrounding the event but also the whole cultural history behind the participants, and behind the kind of practices they were engaging in, determining their significance for the culture, whether practical or ritual. All these played a part in the interpretation of meaning. (Halliday, 1985a:6)

Here, Halliday refers to the notion of the context of culture, which together with the context of situation is necessary for the understanding of the text.

Furthermore, Malinowski (*ibidem*) stresses the importance of the function of words, arguing that their meaning is not given by the physical properties of their referents but by the way they are used in a given situation. Langendoen (1964:22) who has provided a critical analysis of Malinowski's works puts it this way

Malinowski had an important insight into the nature of the meaning of particular words, namely, that their meaning is not given by the physical properties of their referents but rather by their function. He insisted that all words are functionally defined, and not only all words but all possible utterances in a language, and further that the meanings are so learned only by active experience and never by explanation or paraphrase.

Malinowski also accounted for another use of language which was different from the pragmatic one: the narrative use. The islanders used to gather around and to tell stories. In this case there are two contexts of situation: the situation of the moment of narration and the situation created by the stories themselves. Langendoen (1964:23) claims that the meaning of narrative has nothing to do with the context of situation of the moment of narration. On the other hand, what Malinowski wanted to show is that these narrative texts were somehow related to the situation in which they were told. For example, stories about great famines in the past and how people reacted all together to overcome it, were told during that part of the year when food was hardly available. So, the context of situation of the moment of narration was somewhat relevant because of a direct relation between the narrative and the immediate surrounding (Malinowski, 1923:313).

1.2.2 Firth and the context of situation

The influence of Malinowski's view about the context of situation is also visible in the work of J.R. Firth. He adopted Malinowski's notion but in his linguistic theory the context of situation was the whole cultural setting in which the speech act was embedded, more than the context of human activity concurrent with, immediately preceding, and following the speech act (Langendoen, 1964:35).

In Firth's view (1957d:182) the context of situation is best used as a suitable schematic construct to apply to language events and is a group of related categories at a different level from grammatical categories but rather of the same abstract nature. The categories brought into relation by the context of situation are (*ibidem*):

- A. The relevant features of participants: persons, personalities.
 - (i) The verbal action of the participants.
 - (ii) The non-verbal action of the participants.
- B. The relevant objects.
- C. The effect of the verbal action.

Firth's taxonomy has then to be applied to language events and in this way contexts of situation and types of language function can be grouped and classified. The following text taken from Dan Brown's *Digital Fortress* (1998) can be analysed according to Firth's taxonomy:

Susan's Volvo sedan rolled to a stop in the shadow of the ten-foot-high, barbed Cyclone fence. A young guard placed his hand on the roof.

'ID, please,'

Susan obliged and settled in for the usual half-minute wait. The officer ran her card through a computerized scanner. Finally he looked up. 'Thank you, Ms Fletcher.' He gave an imperceptible sign, and the gate swung open.

Half a mile ahead Susan repeated the entire procedure at an equally imposing

electrified fence. *Come on, guys ... I've only been through here a million times.*

As she approached the final checkpoint, a stocky sentry with two attack dogs and a machine gun glanced down at her license plate and waved her through. She followed Canine Road for another 250 yards and pulled into Employee Lot C. Unbelievable, she thought. *Twenty-six thousand employees and a twelve-billion-dollar budget; you'd think they could make it through the weekend without me.* Susan gunned the car into her reserved spot and killed the engine.

The relevant features of participants (persons, personalities):

1. Susan Fletcher, NSA (National Security Agency) head cryptographer
2. Young guard
3. Stocky sentry
 - (i) **The verbal action of the participants:** *'ID, please' ... Thank you, Ms Fletcher ...*
 - (ii) **The non-verbal action of the participants:** *Susan's Volvo sedan rolled to a stop ... A young guard placed his hand on the roof ... He gave an imperceptible sign ... a stocky sentry with two attack dogs and a machine gun glanced down at her license plate and waved her through ...*

The relevant objects: ten-foot-high, barbed Cyclone fence ... her card ... equally imposing electrified fence ... final checkpoint ... machine gun

The effect of the verbal action: *Susan obliged and settled in ...*

According to Firth's theories, the meaning of what is going on is clear when all these features are analysed and considered together.

The importance of the context of situation in the identification of meaning is linked to another Firthian tenet, that is to say 'the notions of personality and language'(1957a:183) which are considered by Firth as vectors of the continuity of repetitions in the social process (ibid.). Firth stresses the importance of

studying individuals, and not speaking masses², in their bundles of roles and *personae*. He says (1957a:184)

There is the element of habit, custom, tradition, the element of the past, and the element of innovation, of the moment, in which the future is being born. When you speak you fuse these elements in verbal creation, the outcome of your language and of your personality.

What Firth strongly believes in is that any social person in the multiplicity of roles he/she takes in his/her life and in the multiplicity of contexts of situation he/she finds him/herself in, is not free to say what s/he wants. We behave systematically “since experienced language is universally systemic” (1957a:187). This reinforces the relevance of the context in the identification of the meaning of an utterance: since the linguistic events and the roles we perform in given situations influence the language we use, each utterance has to be considered in the context in which it is produced.

An example of how we change our language according to the role we are performing is provided below. Let us suppose we realize that the overcrowded room we are in would need some fresh air. A friend of us is close to the window. We may verbalize our feeling this way:

- It's so hot in here! Open the window, please.

However, if we suppose we are in a public place (school, university, office, ...) and we want to ask for permission to someone we do not know our request would sound as follows:

- Excuse me, would it be possible to open the window, please? The room would need some fresh air.

² He dismisses the Saussurean dichotomies of *langue* and *parole*.

Similarly, if tomorrow we have to do an exam, we will probably tell a friend *Domani devo fare un esame* but to our teacher we would probably say *Professoressa, domani dovrei sostenere un esame*. The two phrases *fare un esame/sostenere un esame* have two different degrees of formality and are used in different contexts of situation. Furthermore, the use of the conditional form for the verb *sostenere* reinforces the formality of the sentence. These examples show the strong relationship between the language we use and the role we perform in context. The same difference can also be identified in English where *to do an exam*, *to take an exam*, and *to sit an exam* have different levels of formality and, as a consequence, clearly reflect the statuses and roles of the people participating in the verbal action.

This view of language also has important implications in the study of language: if language is systemic, that is to say if a specific situation attracts a range of words and phrases we are very likely to use, the linguist may identify scientifically the features of the repeated linguistic events and classify them (see chapter 3).

1.2.3 Halliday and the context of situation

As previously mentioned, Halliday (1985a) takes up both Malinowski's and Firth's ideas. In order to describe the importance of the context of situation in communication, he makes us think about the way in which we communicate. He says (1985a:9)

What is remarkable is how often people do understand each other despite the noise with which we are continually surrounded. How do we explain the success with which people communicate? The short answer, I shall suggest, is that we know what the other person is going to say. We may be partly surprised; but the surprise will always be within the framework of something that we knew was going to happen.

Successful interactions are possible because we make predictions based on the context of situation. It provides a lot of information about the meanings that are being exchanged and that are likely to be exchanged. This perspective also

influences the definition of text, being for Halliday (1985a:10) “any instance of living language that is playing some part in a context of situation”. For this reason a text is a product, an output, and a process, “a movement through the network of meaning potential” (ibid.). Halliday (1985a: 11ff) provides a taxonomy through which it is possible to define the context of situation of a text. He puts it this way

The text, we have said, is an instance of the process and product of social meaning in a particular context of situation. Now the context of situation, the context in which the text unfolds, is encapsulated in the text, not in a kind of piecemeal fashion, not at the other extreme in any mechanical way, but through a systematic relationship between the social environment on the one hand, and the functional organisation of language on the other.

In order to show the systematic relationship existing between language and the social environment he provides his own taxonomy of the context of situation, adapted below (1985a:12):

1. **the field of discourse**, that is to say what is going on, the nature of the social action;
2. **the tenor of discourse**, which refers to the participants, their statuses and roles, their permanent and temporary relationships;
3. **the mode of discourse**, that is to say the role language is playing, the symbolic organisation of the text, its status, its function in the context, the channel and the rhetorical mode.

Halliday (*ibidem*) argues that such an analysis of the context allows us to represent the system that lies behind the unconscious process of producing and understanding texts in a context of situation.

The notion of context of situation is also strictly linked to the concept of register. It means that the features of the context of situation somehow constrain the lexis and the expressions that can be used.

In order to understand better the kind of restraints operated by the situation, we can consider the definition of register provided by Halliday (1985a:39):

A register is a semantic concept. It can be defined as a configuration of meanings that are typically associated with a particular situational configuration of field, mode and tenor. But since it is a configuration of meanings, a register must also, of course, include the expressions, the lexico-grammatical and phonological features, that typically accompany or REALISE these meanings.

The identification of the three variables of the context of situation indicated by Halliday (see above) has different implications in language use and consequently, in register.

The variable of the field of discourse, which refers to the topic of the language event, operates a constraint on the lexis and expressions available for use. Ulrych (1992:85) provides the examples of *absolve* and *acquit*. Both mean *assolvere* in Italian. However, the first of these two verbs belongs to the set of lexis and expressions of a religious register and is likely to occur with words such as *confessional, priest, go in peace, let us pray*. Conversely, *acquit* is used in the legal register and will co-occur with items such as *charge, court, I rest my case*.

The word *depression* may co-occur with different items and may have different meanings depending on the register in which it is included. In the language of medicine it co-occurs with *suffer from* whereas in the language of economics it is included in expressions such as *periods of economic depression*, and in the language of meteorology it is qualified by *weather*.

The variable of the tenor of discourse, referring to the participants, constrains the degree of formality of a language event. Levels of formality can be formal, neutral, and informal (Ulrych, 1992:87). As already said above with the example of *to do an exam* and *to sit an exam*, formality depends on the statuses of the participants. *May I borrow your pen* and *give me your pen* clearly exemplify a different relationship between the participants of the two language events. The first example has a more formal style and presupposes that the participants do not know each other (or do not know each other well). In the second example, the use of the imperative form and the absence of expressions such as *please* reveals the high degree of familiarity between the interlocutors.

The variable of the mode of discourse refers to the medium (written, spoken, ...) and the channel (e-mail, article, essay, ...) chosen for the language used. The constraints operated on language by this variable include the differences between spoken and written language and the format that different genres should have. In English, contractions should not be used in written texts and a newspaper article does not include the expression *dear readers* which, conversely, may represent the opening of a letter or of an e-mail.

1.3 Context of situation: some practical examples

In the first section of this chapter, the importance of both context of situation and co-text as a source of meaning have already been described and exemplified. In this section, further examples will be provided in order to show that the identification of the context of culture is at the basis of the comprehension of a text. Two texts will also be analysed according to the three variables of the context of situation, that is to say field, tenor, and mode.

1.3.1 Contexts across cultures and languages

The text which follows is the homepage of the Holmsdale Hotel's website (available at [www. blackpoolhotel.com/holmsdalehotel.html](http://www.blackpoolhotel.com/holmsdalehotel.html)), a hotel based in Blackpool.

British people will find reading and interpreting what is written in this text quite easy. However, Italians may get a little bit confused, particularly reading those parts of the text where the presence of children is questioned. The habit of not allowing children in some restaurants and pubs is quite common in the UK and it is culturally accepted (see Tognini Bonelli and Manca 2002). In Italy and in other European countries children are always accepted in these public places and parents do not usually go out without their children. The text can, therefore, be interpreted only if its context of culture is considered.

The Holmsdale Hotel

Sorry - for the benefit of our regular guests this hotel is a Child Free Zone - we will only accept young adults of 14 years and over.

Book Online

The Holmsdale is a select, quiet hotel privately owned and run and offering guests quality accommodation in relaxing, informal surroundings with en-suite rooms and lifts to all floors.

Every effort is made to make our guests' stay as pleasurable as possible, with friendly personal service at all times and attention to every detail. Twin, double and single rooms are available but no family rooms so the hotel cannot cater for children.

Conversely, the following Italian text³ may sound bizarre to English people who do not understand the need to add a detailed description of how a fine may be increased if the offence is carried out in the presence of pregnant women, babies and children up to 12 years.

³ This notice has been downloaded from the website www.usl3.toscana.it accessed in October 2010.

VIETATO FUMARE



Ai sensi della L. n. 3/2003 art. 51 e s. m. i.: *“Tutela della salute dei non fumatori”* e della L. R. T. n. 25/2005: *“Norme in materia di tutela della salute contro i danni derivanti da fumo”*

i trasgressori alle predette disposizioni sono soggetti alla sanzione amministrativa di una somma:

da Euro 27,50 a Euro 275,00

La misura della sanzione è raddoppiata qualora la violazione sia commessa in presenza di una donna in evidente stato di gravidanza o in presenza di lattanti o bambini fino a dodici anni.⁴

La vigilanza sul divieto di fumo spetta ai seguenti nominativi:

.....

L'accertamento dell'infrazione spetta al personale dei Corpi di Polizia Amministrativa locale, agli Agenti ed Ufficiali di Polizia Giudiziaria

⁴ My emphasis

The British equivalent of this notice does not include any detailed description of further increases in the fine due to the presence of certain categories of people, as visible in the notice provided below⁵:



Different cultures produce different texts which should be interpreted accordingly. This confirms Malinowski's theories according to which language cannot be explained without constant reference to the broader contexts of verbal utterance.

⁵ This notice has been downloaded from the website of the North Lanarkshire council available at www.northlan.gov.uk, accessed in October 2010.

1.3.2 Contexts across the same language

Examples of Halliday's context of situation and the notion of register are provided in the analysis of the two texts reported below. As said above, the basic assumption is that the language used in texts is strictly correlated to the features of the three variables (field, tenor, and mode).

Both texts chosen as examples talk about fractures, that is to say they have the same field of discourse, the same topic. However, they are characterised by differences at the level of tenor and mode.

Text 1 is an abstract of a scientific article published on a specialized journal and Text 2 is a message posted to an open forum⁶. Let us have a look at the examples:

Text 1

***Subtrochanteric femur fractures* by Bedi A; Toan Le T⁷**

Abstract:

*Subtrochanteric femur fractures have demanded special consideration in orthopaedic traumatology, given the high rate of complications associated with their management. The intense concentration of **compression, tensile, and torsional stresses** and **decreased vascularity** of the region has challenged orthopaedists with problems of **malunion, delayed union, and nonunion** resulting from **loss of fixation, implant failure, and iatrogenic devascularization** of the **operative exposure**. Only recently has a better understanding of **fracture biology, reduction techniques, and biomechanically improved implants** allowed for **subtrochanteric fractures** to be addressed with consistent success.*

Text 2

Topic: Your worst injury

*I've had an interesting life when it comes to **broken bones**. It seems like I can't go 5-6 years without breaking something.*

⁶Ars Technica Openforum: <http://episteme.arstechnica.com> posted on July 31, 2004

⁷ Published in *Orthopedic Clinics of North America* ISSN: 0030-5898, 01-OCT-2004; 35(4): 473-83

*When I was in kindergarten/first grade, I was pushed off the top of a slide that was probably 10-15 feet up... when I hit the ground, my leg hit the support arm of the slide and **it broke my thigh bone in half**. I was **in the hospital** for a month. A few years later I **broke my left arm** playing tag of all things... not too bad... when I was in 9th grade, I wrecked my 3-wheeler and **shattered my ankle**. I had **4 screws installed** and 2 weeks of the hospital. My last major injury was in Dec 1999 when I **ruptured my Achilles tendon** in my right ankle playing basketball and then I **RERUPTURED it** again in March 2000 on vacation in Mexico... Besides those 4 major accident's, I've had stitches in various places for different accidents. I even had a skill saw accident when my parents were building their home. [...]*

The two texts have the same topic (they both deal with fractures) but they show a number of differences in terms of lexical density, tone, level of interaction, use of contracted forms, shared knowledge.

Text one is about fractures and, being a scientific text, the tenor is constituted by the author and his/her audience (mainly colleagues and experts). The mode, which, as already said, describes the way language is being used in the speech interaction, including the medium (spoken, written, written to be spoken, etc.), the channel (e-mail, letter, article, essay, ...) as well as the rhetorical mode (expository, instructive, persuasive, etc.) is expressed through the written channel and its rhetorical mode is mainly instructive.

Similarly, text two is about fractures, but being a message posted to an open forum, the tenor is constituted by the author and his/her audience constituted by the forum community and webservers. The language is written and the rhetorical mode is expository.

The important difference between the two texts lies in the tenor: the different statuses and roles of the participants imply different levels of formalities and consequently a different use of language (see section 1.2.3).

Text one is highly formal: a scientific article published in a scientific journal is addressed to an expert audience. Text two is highly informal: a message posted to

an open forum addressed to a big and highly heterogeneous community. The expert-to-expert and non-expert-to-non-expert interactions are visible in the linguistic choices. A table will help us to identify the main differences in terms of lexical choice and tone:

TEXT ONE (high degree of formality)	TEXT TWO (casual and informal tone)
<i>in orthopaedic traumatology</i>	<i>when it comes to broken bones</i>
<i>fractures</i>	<i>broken bones</i>
<i>femur</i>	<i>thigh bone</i>
<i>biomechanically improved implants</i>	<i>I had 4 screws installed</i>
<i>compression, tensile, and torsional stresses</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>shattered my ankle</i> • <i>I broke my left arm</i> • <i>I ruptured my Achilles tendon</i>

Further differences are in the mode of the two texts such as the use of contractions (*I've had an interesting life; I can't go 5-6 years*) which are absent in Text one; the use of the first person pronoun (*I was in kindergarten; I wrecked my 3-wheeler; I've had stitches*) which is very rare in scientific English where far more preferred choices are the third person pronoun, the passive form, and a construction of the sentence which depersonalize the voice of the author by positing the object of the sentence in subject position (*Subtrochanteric femur fractures have demanded; The intense concentration ...has challenged; Only recently has a better understanding ... allowed ...*).

1.4 Conclusion

This chapter has described how the meaning of a text arises from its context of culture, its context of situation, and from its co-text. This explains why texts, in order to be properly interpreted, should be placed in their verbal and social living environment. The crucial relationship between text and context is visible when the

notion of register is considered. Each context of situation has its own set of words and expressions available for use. These words do not acquire their meaning from the physical properties of their referents but from their function in context, that is to say from the way they are used in social and language events.

Context of culture, context of situation and co-text play a fundamental role in the process of translation. Some concepts may exist in one culture but not in another. As shown above, the *Child free zone* advertised by the British hotel would not have meaning in an Italian context of culture where the linguistic equivalent *Area libera dai bambini* would not sound so positive and meaningful. Baker (1992:33) provides the example of *Cream Tea*, which is not a *the alla crema*, as some Italian students may think, but a British traditional afternoon meal consisting of tea and scones. This concept has no equivalent in the Italian culture and translators should adapt it according to the new context of culture and the context of situation.

In Chapter 3, the focus will be on co-text, collocation and phraseology. However, before moving to the analysis of meaning by collocation, the next chapter will explore corpora (that is to say collections of texts electronically stored) and the software which allow linguists to analyse language systematically and classify repeated patterns of language.

