

THE SCIENCE OF CONTEXT IN LINGUISTIC DISCOURSE

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Abstract

Written discourse represents the writer's intention and his meaning can be determined by analysing the discourse, using functional components of semantic system. Co-text or extra-linguistic environment discloses what texts truly are, and equally facilitates the description of their true implicative meanings. In effect, the true meaning of the text is more important than the intended meaning of the writer. So, meaning is realisable in a specific contextual action of sifting of a text, as part semantic potential which is the determinate meaning.

Keywords: science, context, discourse

Setting

A means by which the discourse value of an item is interpreted, based on the communicative context of an utterance is called linguistic *tactics*. It is the discourse value of utterance is that semantic resource, which the speaker or writer expects his hearer or reader to appropriate (Chiluwa 61-62). So, (Adegbite 37) it allows the interactants in a discourse to consider not only the linguistic context of

discourse, but also the “situational contexts to achieve the required result of matching, utterances with appropriate functions, which the speaker and hearer intend.”

Context and Presupposition

Writers or speakers often employ presuppositions in designing their message on the assumption, that the hearer or the reader has already a degree of the pre-knowledge of discourse being communicated. So, the assumption of the writer on the other hand, inference is already known about the discourse is the presupposition. On the other hands, inference is truly based on the presupposition, because whether inference is right or wrong the reader (or hearer) should act on relevant information about the discourse. As a matter of fact, presuppositions are subtle means, in which the writer (or speakers) is derived; and the writers on their own intentionally allow some certain meaning to be encoded by way of intelligent presupposition (Chiluwa 64).

Context and Conversation Analysis

Grice asserted that a speaker or a hearer is guided by some certain “conversational principles” to make the right references and interpret meaning beyond the linguistics content of an utterance (74). In additions, the conversational or cooperative principles works along with some Maxims, in terms of the assumption that the (Kempson 50) speaker does not say what is false, or irrelevant, or too much or too little.” This principle forms the base; a hearer can deduce other additional information, from an utterance, beyond some “truth conditional content” of a message.” This additional information is called implicature. Conversational implicature actually occurs when the conversational maxims namely quantity, quality, relation (relevance) and manner are seemingly violated,” (Chiluwa 65) therefore, “forcing the hearer to make additional assumptions in order to understand the speaker as conveying something true and relevant” (Kempson 141).

Discursive and Linguistic Context

Discourse analysis determines how people deduce meaning from the language they use, because language, social contexts and situations are tied together. And the interpretations of meanings are essentially based on what language is intended to do “in human affairs,” (Brown and Yule 1). It also accounts for the investigation of how “language users interpret what other language users’ intent to convey” (Yule 3). In addition, it accounts too, “how what is written or spoken makes sense whether or not it is strictly grammatical” (Chiluwa 66). More still, Cook asserts that language-users do not often write or speak incomplete sentences, yet they communicate effectively (3). If this is done, the language-users therefore can inform, influence and achieve social interactions. In fact, this goes beyond the mere study of linguistic forms of analysis of “what language is used for” (Brown and Yule 1). So, it is consonant with the study of discourse, thus the object of analysis is not just only a sentence or a “language above the sentence ... or conversational exchange” (Stubbs 1), but as Cook posits, “anything from a grunt or a simple expletive, through short conversations and scribble notes...” He further asserts that this occurs as a result of “what matters is not its conformity to rule, but the fact that it communicates and is recognized by its receiver as coherent” (7). In the same vein, Labov espouses that “the unit of analysis is not the grammatically defined clause or sentence but a functional unit ...” Therefore, Chiluwa affirms that “the interpretation of meaning is possible because of the relationship, which exists between the units of analysis and the context of situation.

As the study of language is use for communication, Halliday and Hasan declare that discourse analysis does not involve itself in analyzing just cohesive devices (10) that are found in texts, otherwise they would be restricted to text analysis. Cook stresses further that restricting discourse analysis to “the search for what gives discourse coherence” (7) “would amount to ignoring important functional units as grunts, exclamatory signals like “hmm,” “hunh,” “yaa,” which is their own rights can be analysed as discourse” (Chiluwa 67).

Discourse and Acceptableness

Most often users of language are inclined to breaking grammatical or ‘coherent discourse’ rules. This has mainly influenced discourse analysis ‘to discourse there

rules and to describe the conversational structures they generate” (Coulthard, 6). Meanwhile, for a worthwhile analysis or interpretation of utterances, Chilwa says that language-users use their knowledge of linguistic forms and structure (67). In addition, Coulthard writes that another area of concern is that discourse analysis shows the relationship that exists between discourse, the speakers and hearers, by and for whom it is produced, however, it is “a concern with how speakers take and relinquish the role of speaker; how social roles affect discourse options in terms of who speaks when and what they talk about; how non-verbal signaling works and how actual form of utterances is conditional by the social relationships between the participants” (11). Moreover, discourse analysis is also concerned itself with the function and the purpose of a unit of linguistic data and how the data is analysed, both by the speaker (writer) and the hearer (reader) (Brown and Yule 4). Lyon takes a pragmatic model in the study of language in use, because he is interested in “investing in the use of language in context by a speaker/writer” and the relationship that exist between the utterance and speaker, in a particular context of language-use (35).

Coulthard sees discourse analysis as being interested in the characterization of speaker’s/writer’s meaning and it is explained, in the context of use. In order to actualize this, he ascribes two functions to discourse analysis, which include portraying “the structure of supra-sentential text of social transaction by imposing some framework upon the data, explicitly or implicitly, and to offer a characterization of how, in the context of negotiation, participants go about the process of interpreting meaning” (8) even if, it is reciprocal as applied in conversation or non-reciprocal as also applied in writing/reading. On this note Chilwa espouses that this “structure-portraying” function is where text analysis and discourse analysis are related. Therefore, in the interpretation-characterizing role, discourse analysis is involved in “the assessment of the communicative function of momentary messages, drawing upon general and specific background knowledge in the process of making inference.” More still, he adds that “the first type of inquiry in discourse analysis is the determination of interactive acts, designed them with some “larger interactional frame” while the objective of the second role is “the capturing of illocutionary force, drawing upon general pragmatic principle, an understanding of contextual expectation in the activity type under discussion, together with knowledge of how information may generally be structured and procedures of natural analogy” (68).

The Interaction, Text and Context

These elements form a procedure base, in critical discourse analysis. Chilwa writes that the description of text helps to show the formal properties of a particular text, which may be identified in vocabulary or in grammar found in the discourse type where the text hinges on. In analysis of these properties or features in the text, he declares that it means taking account of what other choices in the discourse type that could have been used instead.” Furthermore, he maintains that fundamentally features of vocabulary or grammar must have those required discourse value,” such as ‘experiential,’ ‘relational’, or ‘expressive’ (56). Fairclough describes experiential value as ‘a trace of and a cue to the way in which the text producers experience of the natural or social world (knowledge and belief)’ is represented, he further explains that relationships, that are enacted through the text in the discourse and finally that expressive value is also “a trace of and a cue to the producer’s evaluation of the bit of the reality it relates to, specifically with subjects and social identities” (111-112).

“The values of textual features,” Fairclough exerts, “only become real, socially operative, if they are embedded in social interaction, where texts are produced and interpreted against a background of “common sense assumptions,” which give textual features their value” (14). To properly analysis the discourse value of any text, in “terms of how socially operative it is as part of institutional and social processes of struggle (Chilwa 57). He affirms further that Fairclough calls these discourse processes, “interpretation,” that is, the study and its reliance on the society and backgrounds hypotheses, in regard to the critical discourse procedure. More so, in further explanation of this interpretation, he writes that it can be achieved through the synthesis of what is in the text, and what is in the interpreter (taking the interpreter as a member of the society, and the resources that he involves in the interpretation). Four levels of analysis of interpretation are identified, they include, the surface of utterance, that is, how the analyst can change the ‘strings of sounds, word or sentences meaningfully, drawing upon his knowledge of the grammar, phonology or vocabulary or the language”, secondly, meaning of utterance, that is, “how analyst interprets utterance based on his ability to combine the meaning of words and grammatical information to arrive at the meaning of the whole text.” This also helps the interpreter to draw the pragmatic conventions in the utterance that enables him determine how utterance performs actions. Thirdly, local coherence, this enables the analyst to concentrate “on local” coherence relations within a particular part of text, that is, connections

between utterance pairs and sequence of pairs.” Finally, text structure and point, this involves how a whole text hangs together to achieve a “global coherence” (Fairclough as qtd in Chilwa 57).

The analysis or interpretation of situational context is part of the above discussed “interpretation, if considered in respect to the properties of the physical context, the features of participants, that which has been said in the past and finally, the representations of societal and institutional social orders. Situational context has four aspect of interpretation which include, what is happening, that is, topic, purpose, activity secondly, who is involved, thirdly the relationship that are involved and fourthly, the role language plays in what is happening or going on (Chilwa 57, Fairclough 150).

To fully appreciate an utterance, the individual and situations view point have to be based of the interpretation. So, this implies that language occurs all the time within the meanings that are usually expressed in words. According to Fairclough, discourse is social practice and therefore utterances are determined by social conditions. This therefore brings texts, interaction and context “in an inextricable relationship in every communicative encounter,” (Chilwa 69, Fairclough 156). Language-user use language as a medium for self-definition and cultural identification, so discourse takes place in cognitive context or social context of cultural context (Schiffrin 88). Participants are involved in language and discourse, with some degrees of shared meaning or co-operative principle. The moods, traits, attitudes and relations of such users form the indispensable part of the context. (Chilwa 69-70). Meanwhile, according to Firth, a language or an utterance is considered to be nonsense, if it fails to have a coherent relationship with a generalized context of situation (63). However, even if the language may be grammatically acceptable, yet it fails to account for the ‘implication of utterance in some cultural acceptable and interpretable situation’ it will not be seen as being meaningful at the level of semantic interpretation (Chilwa 70). Moreover, for meaning to be seen as a social-oriented communicative business, either at the grammatical, paralinguistic or phonological level, it must be contextualized. (Chilwa 70).

Competence and Context

Communicative competence is somewhat the summary of what has been said about the knowledge needed by a speaker or hearer, on how to use linguistic forms appropriately, it is more broadly-based than linguistic competence. This

brings it “closer to functional text grammars, particularly the systemic model, and virtually removes the gap ... between theory and practice with linguistic competence and grammatical competence” (Adejare 159-160). He asserts that “language-use in normal situation is not only recognized as an important element of competence, it receives a higher ranking than linguistic competence or grammatical competence” (16). So, Campbell and Wales define it as the capability or ability to produce and understand utterances which are not so much grammatical but appropriate in the context in which they are used (241). In addition, Williams refers to it “as the ability to use language in its socio cultural, interpersonal aspects, beyond the sentence, that is, the discourse level” (16).

This concept or model is the brainchild of Hymes in his bid to emphasize that language competence comprises more than just being able to “form grammatically correct sentences but also to know when and where to use these sentences and to whom” (Schmitt 6). He espouses that this development helped to change the focus from language “correctness” (accuracy) to suitability of any language for a given context (appropriateness) (6).

Three main strands were developed in communicative competence, by Canale and Swain, namely grammatical competence – it is the knowledge of syntactic rules (sentence formation) of a given language. This knowledge alone cannot provide the user the ability to produce and interpreted utterances or language appropriately. Secondly, sociolinguistic competence – it enables the user to know when to say, where to say and to whom. This is the ability to produce and understand utterances, which are appropriate to the context in which they are used. Finally, strategic competency – it is the knowledge of using verbal and non-verbal strategic to communicate effectively. These strategies are categorized as the paraphrase of approximation, borrowing or inventing words, gestures, asking for feedback and reduction.

Hymes and Communicative Competence

His ethnographic-functional model focused on the knowledge, which a communicator or user needs to communicate effectively and thereby, achieving communicative competence, which enables the user to use language in the appropriate context; that is, how language functions in discourse situation. Though he does not entirely rejected Chomsky’s approach, he broadens it, and gives greater or much emphasis to sociolinguistics and pragmatic factors (the skill that enables the user of language to know when to speak, when not to speak and

as to what to talk about with whom, when in what manner). So, Hymes theorizes that the goal of every language user should be:

to account for the fact that a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatically, but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not and as to what to talk about with when, where, in what manner. In short, a child becomes able to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to evaluate their accomplishment by others. This competence, moreover, is integral with attitudes, values and motivations concerning language, its features and uses, and integral with competence for, and attitude toward, the interrelation of language with the other code of communicative conduct (23).

So, it takes a functional standpoint, which adopts pragmatic view of language study and further combines speech acts and interactional medium within a broader framework of inquiry. Communicative competence is embedded in the ethnographic framework of language, that analyses language as organized social behaviour, and therefore it is important to the proper use of language in context towards discovering the functional roles of discourse in social life. “For example, it includes knowing how to formulate a yes/no question” (Operator-NP-VP?) and knowing that only certain types (for example, could you VP?) function as polite requests and knowing how to use them appropriate” (Schmit 22).

Conclusion

The primary advantage of the model forged, so far, is that it is context-oriented which forms its premise on the functional use of language, regardless of its well-formedness or “correctness”. The deployment of the systemic-functional approach enables the researcher to incorporate some insights developed by other related areas of study, which include, communicative competence, pragmatics, discourse analysis. So, to achieve a workable framework for this study, concepts like inference, implicature, background/shared knowledge and presupposition will be subsumed under the textual and contextual function of language. It is important in this study, because its situational components help to study language beyond mere abstraction or beyond grammatical analysis. It equally helps the researcher to analyse language from the view point of the language user and the context or situation of its use

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