

How linguistic is linguistic context?

Marta Ghio¹ & Nicola Spotorno²; Arbiters: Valentina Bambini¹ & Claudia Bianchi³

¹Laboratory of Linguistics, Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa, Italy; Laboratory L2C2, Institute of Cognitive Science, Lyon, France; Faculty of Philosophy, University Vita-Salute San Raffaele, Milan, Italy.

In daily-life, words are not understood in isolation, but rather in discourse, i.e., in linguistic co(n)texts. In traditional pragmatics, linguistic context is defined as “what has been said so far” (Verschueren, 1987). When presented with a text like “*Ann went to the library. She returned the book*”, it is the linguistic context that lets us know that the referent of “*she*” is Ann. Consider now a case such as “*The footballer wanted to play in the match*”. Subjects’ reading times are longer when the continuation is “*SHE had been training very hard*” than when the continuation is “*HE had been training very hard*”. “*She*” provides a mismatch with the stereotypical gender of the footballer activated by the subjects while reading the first sentence (Carreiras, 1996). The interesting point here is that this mismatch is generated not by the linguistic material per se, but by the background knowledge prompted by the linguistic units, i.e., the knowledge that footballers are usually male.

This observation suggests that linguistic context is more than merely “linguistic”. How is the linguistic context represented? What does it capitalize upon? How is it accessed and modified during discourse processing? Such questions bear directly on central arguments in pragmatic theory, such as whether the linguistic context activates a set of abstract structures for computing speaker’s meaning (cognitive schemas as frames or scripts, Recanati, 2004) or whether it merely consists of non-structured inputs for inferential processes (Carston, 2007). To our view, the Recanati/Carston opposition can be clarified by using the notion of Situation Model, defined in cognitive psychology as a complex cognitive representation of the state of affairs described in a text (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983; Zwaan et al., 1995). In line with the adversarial collaboration, this project brings together the previous mentioned different theoretical points of view recasted in Situation Model terms:

Position (1): in light of Recanati’s proposal, Situation Models should be structured schemas and automatically activated by linguistic units in discourse processing independently of what has been said in the previous context.

Position (2): in light of Carston’s observations, the Situation Model should not be viewed as a structured schema stored in background knowledge but possibly as dynamically constructed and on-line updated during the comprehension process.

The plan is to investigate a specific dimension of Situation Models with behavioral and ERP experimental paradigms that will be capable of discriminating between the two accounts of linguistic context described above (structured and fixed vs. non-structured and dynamically constructed). The final aim is to find new experimental evidence clarifying the delicate interplay among linguistic meaning, linguistic context and what is prompted by linguistic context.

References

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