

CONTEXT AS A DYNAMIC CONSTRUCT AND THE PROBLEM OF CONTEXT SENSITIVITY

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Abstract. This paper is concerned with different aspects of the concept of context, predominantly from the perspective of contemporary pragmatically-oriented linguistics. As it is frequently claimed that the precise meaning of an utterance may be determined correctly only in context, but, at the same time, no agreement has been reached on how context should be adequately defined, one aim of this study is to focus on different characteristics of this phenomenon and to explain how context may be best understood within a pragmatic approach. This is connected with context sensitivity. Some expressions in natural language are prototypical examples of it, while others are rather controversial. The other aim of this study is to examine context sensitivity from the point of view of several semantic theories and to propose within which systematic linguistic theory it could be best integrated. It turns out that the concept of context should best be treated as a dynamic construct inherently connected with communication. Since it is, at the same time, a multilayered concept, it is almost impossible to produce a widely acceptable theory of context. Regarding a systematic theory within which context sensitivity could be integrated, semantic minimalism seems to be the most appropriate.

1. Introduction

It is commonly claimed in many linguistic studies that language units are “context-dependent” and that their meaning can be correctly determined only “in context” or that some language means are “context-sensitive”. All these claims are indisputably true; however, there is no general agreement within the linguistic community, first, about what a context precisely is, and, second, which expressions are context-sensitive and which are context-insensitive. The concept of context has been described from various perspectives but the outcomes of studies on context have not led to the formulation of any systematic and accurate “theory” of context. Actually, is it necessary and even possible to formulate such a theory? Approaches to context are very diverse and each of them stresses a different aspect of this phenomenon which may be completely overlooked in another approach and not be taken into account at all.

In pragmatically-oriented linguistics focusing on the analysis of language in use, in interactional sociolinguistics and ethnomethodology, context is considered a dynamic construct, formed by discourse participants in communication. As Grice (1975) emphasises, what the speaker means is sometimes not explicitly expressed but only implicated. It is certain that contextual factors may help the addressee infer what the

speaker's intentions are. When attempting to understand and interpret conversational implicatures, interactants may rely on the linguistic as well as the extralinguistic context. In this connection Fetzer points out that the original view of the context as a static concept has been subjected to a major reassessment. Context is no longer regarded "as an external constraint on linguistic performance" (Fetzer 2012:105), but rather, it has been examined as a "product of language use, as socio-cognitively construed, interactionally negotiated and constructed, and as imported and invoked" (Fetzer 2012:105).

The first part of this study briefly summarises recent linguistic approaches to the concept of context with the aim to uncover the most important characteristics of this phenomenon and to find out which factors are decisive in different models of context. The notion of context or, more specifically, the problem of context sensitivity, has been the subject of dispute between minimalists (Borg 2004, Cappelen & Lepore 2005) and contextualists (Carston 2002, Recanati 2011). The second part of this paper focuses on this topic, fiercely debated in current linguistic and philosophical accounts. Since there is a major controversy about how context sensitivity should be best grasped, the aim of the other part of this study is to explain several semantic theories focusing on context sensitivity and to suggest within which systematic linguistic theory the issue of context sensitivity might be best integrated.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 describes the nature of context in general and, at the same time, it is concerned with how context is understood predominantly in pragmatically-oriented linguistics. Section 3 explains various types of context-sensitive expressions, or indexicals. It subsequently clarifies attitudes of several semantic theories dealing with context-sensitive and context-insensitive expressions. One way to explicate semantic context-(in)sensitivity is to test it. For this reason several tests for context sensitivity have been proposed. They are discussed in Section 4, while the most important findings are summarised in the concluding part.

2. Context as a dynamic and multilayered concept

As Duranti & Goodwin maintain, providing a single, precise and an acceptable definition of the term context may be impossible. "At the moment the term means quite different things within alternative research paradigms, and indeed even within particular traditions seems to be defined more by situated practice, by use of the concept to work with particular analytic problems, than by formal definition" (1992:2). Approaches to context are quite diverse and it is not necessary or even possible to give a single definition which would be appreciated by all researchers examining this phenomenon. Instead, it is important to provide a careful analysis of its nature and dimensions, and examine

context in all its aspects. Therefore, Meibauer (2012:11) attempts to categorise context and mentions these dimensions: *intratextual*, *infratextual*, *intertextual*, and *extratextual*. Intratextual context is also called *co-text* and refers to the linguistic environment surrounding a particular expression within a text. Infratextual context is the way a piece of text relates to the text as a whole. Intertextual context denotes the relationship of one text to other texts. Extratextual context means “the relation of a text to aspects of the situation in which the text has been produced or interpreted” (Meibauer 2012:11). This last type of context has also been called *situational context* because it includes, in its broadest sense, the complete non-linguistic background of an utterance, including basic features of a communicative situation, such as discourse participants, setting, time and space relations. In this connection, Hanks (2009) speaks about *communicative context*.

Context is a dynamic and changeable concept since it “undergoes a continuous process of structuring and re-structuring the flow of incoming and out-going information as regards the production and processing of language in context” (Fetzer 2012:108). However, some approaches work with a more static conception of context. They view context as a set of propositions which is taken for granted by discourse participants. In this conception, context is regarded as something external to the utterance (Fetzer 2012:109). As Fetzer points out, even though these static approaches have been rejected in pragmatics, they still have their supporters.

In addition, context is understood as a relational construct, “relating communicative actions and their surroundings, relating communicative actions, relating individual participants and their individual surroundings, and relating the set of individual participants and their communicative actions to their surroundings” (Fetzer 2012:108).

Another feature of context worth mentioning is that it is often regarded as a concept not having clearly defined boundaries and being too indeterminate. Therefore, some scholars proposed restricting the contextual information. As a result of this constraint, Katz (1977:14) introduced the concept of *null context*, an example of which is the *anonymous letter situation*: “The anonymous letter situation is the case where an ideal speaker of a language receives an anonymous letter containing just one sentence of that language, with no clue whatever about the motive, circumstances of transmission, or any other factor relevant to understanding the sentence on the basis of its context of utterance.” This concept has been rejected by some scholars, for instance by Searle, who claims that “for a large class of sentences there is no such thing as the zero or null context for the interpretation of sentences [. . .]. We understand the meaning of such sentences only against a set of background assumptions about the contexts in which the sentence could be appropriately uttered” (1977:117). He explains that it is not possible to

interpret an utterance without any context. In the case of a sentence, we can determine its literal meaning on the basis of the meanings of particular words it is composed of and on the basis of syntactic rules according to which these expressions are put together. Without context we can neither remove potential ambiguities in the literal meaning of sentences nor specify the meaning of vague expressions. Searle further emphasises that the literal meaning of a sentence may differ from what the speaker means when uttering it to perform a speech act, as, for instance, in the case of irony, metaphor, or indirect speech acts. Here again, the context is very important.

Harnish (1982) does not support the notion of null context either. He states that “even when the utterance is univocal, literal, and direct, meaning combines with context to determine use” (1982:168). Moreover, if there were no contextual information, particularly about the speaker’s communicative intentions and beliefs, the recipient would be lost with their interpretation. In short, “an utterance in an informationally impoverished (“null”) context could have no identifiable force” (1982:171).

As mentioned above, the concept of context is rather wide. Therefore, some attempts have been made to distinguish between a narrow and wider context. Bierwisch (1980) introduced a three-level theory of meaning and defined *sentence meaning* (belonging to semantics), *utterance meaning* (part of the conceptual system), and *communicative sense* (part of the interactional system). While the interactional system includes wider aspects of context such as background knowledge, the conceptual system is limited to a narrow context of deictic expressions. However, as Meibauer (2012:13) correctly points out, this model does not count with the dynamic aspects of communication, which is not in accordance with current approaches to context which emphasise the dynamic nature of context.

In ethnographic studies, context is also considered to be dynamic and constructed in and through the conversation. Therefore, it has been characterised as being *flexible* (i.e. constantly reshaped in communication) and *reflexive* (i.e. language contributes crucially to the construction of context). For this reason Gumperz prefers to speak about *contextualization* rather than context. Contextualization is connected with *conversational inference* defined as a “situated and presupposition-bound interpretive process, by which interlocutors assess what they perceive at any one point in a verbal encounter and on which they base their responses” (Gumperz 1996:375). Even though the speaker aims to convey a particular intention, it may be interpreted in many different ways. When communicating, participants rely on signals, both verbal and non-verbal, to indicate the desired interpretation of their message. These are the so-called *contextualization cues*, which were defined by Gumperz as “constellations of surface features of message form . . . by which speakers

signal and listeners interpret what the activity is, how semantic content is to be understood and how each sentence relates to what precedes or follows” (Gumperz 1982a:131). These devices include both linguistic, paralinguistic (e.g. tempo, pitch, intonation), and non-linguistic information (gestures, body posture). The employment and interpretation of contextualization cues depend on the participants’ cultural background. Thus, any misunderstanding in intercultural communication may appear due to different contextualization conventions.

For our understanding of how language works in interaction, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis have contributed substantially. Both approaches consider face-to-face communication to be “the primordial context for human sociality” (Schegloff 1987:208). Even though they both are concerned with pragmatic and inferential processes, which are the domains of linguists, their interests are different. Conversation analysis has focused on the sequential structure of conversations, rules of turn taking, coherence, conversational repair, etc. In psycholinguistics and cognitive linguistics, context is treated as a mental construct. What these approaches have in common is that “they treat context as a radial structure whose centre point is the spoken utterance. [. . .]. Starting from the perspective of the participant(s) in speech production, they derive context from relevance, mental representation [. . .], and the momentary emergence of the speech situation. From this viewpoint, context is a local concomitant of talk and interaction, ephemeral and centered on the emergent process of speaking” (Hanks 2009:120).

Conversely, a number of approaches to language and discourse have occurred which have taken an opposite perspective and understand context as a “global and durable” phenomenon “with greater social and historical scope than any localized act” (Hanks 2009:120). Such a global approach is represented by the Foucauldian Approach to discourse, which considers neither interaction nor individual parts of spoken or written language to be a context for language, but rather discourse, meaning “large-scale formations of beliefs and categorisations pervaded by power relations and articulated in ‘assemblages’” (Hanks 2009:120). A similar perspective to context and language analysis is adopted by Bourdieu (1993) who takes collective facts as the starting point for the analysis. Individualist approaches, i.e. linguistic, cognitive, and psycholinguistic, emphasise the local settings of the utterance and face-to-face interaction, which are absent from global approaches. On the contrary, the collective facts essential for social definitions of context in large-scale approaches are missing from any individualist perspectives to context. Nevertheless, these two approaches should be seen as complementary, not contradictory.

To summarise, we may say that “the focus on context, as both a constraining factor and a product of discourse, has led to increasingly

fine-grained approaches to speech, since it is primarily in the formation of spoken and written utterances that language and context are articulated” (Hanks 2009:119). Since there are many disciplines, not only linguistic ones, focusing on the description of cognitive processes, linguistic systems, communicative processes, etc., it is not surprising that diverse approaches to the description of context have occurred, complementary to the research and disciplinary interests of researchers.

3. Context sensitivity

3.1. Indexical expressions

A hotly debated issue connected with the phenomenon of context is *context sensitivity* of some linguistic expressions. Such an expression (or a phrase or sentence) may have different semantic interpretations in various contexts, i.e. their reference may change from one context to another. Focusing now on various types of expressions, indexicals and demonstratives are noncontroversial examples of *context-sensitive* (sometimes also termed *context-dependent*) expressions.

As Kaplan (1989:490) puts it, an indexical is an expression whose “referent is dependent on the context of use . . . [whose] meaning provides a rule which determines the referent in terms of certain aspects of the context.” Prototypical examples of indexicals are *I, my, you, she, that, here, today, now*, etc. It is usually maintained that indexicals have two types of meaning, namely linguistic meaning and content. Linguistic meaning is called *character* by Kaplan (1989) and it is a type of meaning determined by linguistic convention. The *content* of an utterance is the proposition expressed by the given utterance. Hence, the utterance of the sentence *I am a doctor* has one character but different contents with regard to different contexts.

Indexicals are usually categorised into various types according to their reference and content in a context. Kaplan (1989) differentiates between *pure indexicals* and *true demonstratives*. A pure indexical is a type of indexical for which “no associated demonstration is required [because] the linguistic rules which govern [its] use fully determine the referent for each context” (Kaplan 1989:491), such as *I, now, today, here, present*, etc. Thus, the pronoun *I* always refers to the speaker, so she does not need to point to herself. In a similar vein, the reference of *today* is always the day on which the utterance of the speaker is produced so that no pointing is required. On the contrary, the true demonstratives, such as *he, she, his, her, or that*, require an associated demonstration since their reference and content in a context partly depend on it and partly are determined by the intention of the speaker to refer to a certain object.

A similar division of indexicals has been proposed by Perry (1997), who distinguishes between *automatic* and *discretionary indexicals*.

Automatic indexicals (e.g. *I, tomorrow*) are independent of the speaker's intention. Their reference is determined by their linguistic meaning. On the other hand, discretionary indexicals (e.g. *he, she, that*), are dependent on the speaker's intentions. The latter type correlates with the group of indexicals which Kaplan calls true demonstratives.

Nevertheless, other linguistic expressions are not that straightforward and noncontroversial as indexicals when it comes to context sensitivity. There are two semantic theories focusing on linguistic expressions and their context-(in)sensitivity. "A semantic theory that says that an expression is context-sensitive, or is an indexical expression, is a *contextualist* theory of that expression. A theory that says that an expression is context-insensitive is an *invariantist* theory" (Braun 2017, italics in original).

After having discussed context sensitivity of some linguistic expressions, now let us move on to another important question, which is, how context sensitivity may be explained in a coherent linguistic theory.

3.2. Contextualist theories

Contextualist theories have been suggested most frequently for gradable adjectives, nouns and adjectives optionally taking complements, and for quantifier phrases. Typical representatives of gradable adjectives are *tall, heavy, old, fast, rich*, etc. The variation in content of these adjectives may be seen in the utterances of sentences such as:

- (1) Lynn was 25 yesterday. She is not old.
- (2) Lynn was 25 yesterday. She is old.

In (1), the speaker says that Lynn celebrated her 25th birthday, so she is not old; she is still young. In (2), it might have been the same speaker who pronounced the utterance but it must have been on a different occasion. Here, the context has changed and the speaker might have meant, for example, that Lynn is "too old" to become a professional gymnast at the age of 25. Thus, according to contextualists, gradable adjectives are context-dependent.

Examples of adjectives optionally taking complements are *ready, late, relevant, local*, etc. A speaker uttering (3) below usually means that Paul is late for an activity, means of transport, or an event. Accordingly, in one context, (3) may mean that Paul is late for school, while on another occasion it may mean that he is late for the train. Again, this variation is an important proof for contextualists to claim that this type of adjectives is context-sensitive.

- (3) Paul is late.

Quantifier phrases consist of a quantifier and a noun phrase or a common noun, such as *all blue cars, some books, every woman*. When a speaker utters:

(4) All the cups are broken.

She does not mean that all the cups in the world are broken but the quantifier phrase *all the cups* refers to the cups in her cupboard, box, or other contextually relevant domain. One and the same sentence uttered in different contexts has different truth-conditional values since the area of quantification varies. Stanley & Szabo (2000) call this phenomenon *quantifier-domain restriction*. They treat it as a special case of context dependence since in order to solve this problem, it is necessary to “explain how context, together with permanent linguistic features of quantified sentences, helps determine the proposition conveyed by an utterance of such a sentence, a proposition in which the domains of the quantifier expressions are suitably restricted (Stanley & Szabo 2000:220). They describe “three basic roles of context” (grammatical, semantic, pragmatic) and decide that the quantifier domain restriction is a matter of semantics and integrate this phenomenon into a semantic theory. Accordingly, the role of context is to provide semantic values rather than to provide expressions. This is different from Kaplan’s conception, who emphasises an expression-based approach since different utterances occur in different contexts.

Contextualist theories have also been proposed for tense markers (King 2003), modals (Kratzer 2012), conditionals (Kratzer 2012), perspectival expressions (e.g. *left, right, come, go*) (Lewis 1979), weather predicates (e.g. *rain, hot*) (Sennett 2008), propositional attitude verbs (e.g. *believe*) (Richard 1990), and vague expressions (Soames 1999, Fara 2000). As Braun (2017) correctly points out, if the above-mentioned expressions are considered to be indexicals, in that case their contents partly depend on the speaker’s intentions (a viewpoint shared also by Bach 2005).

From what has been explained above, one might infer that the vast majority of expressions in natural language are context-sensitive. In addition, the aforementioned overview of discretionary indexicals may give the impression that any statement containing them has different truth values in different contexts. Hence every expression in a sentence is context-sensitive and no sentence in natural language, from the semantic point of view, expresses full propositions but only propositional fragments. This attitude is called *radical contextualism*, whose proponents are, for example, Searle (1980), Recanati (2004), Travis (2008), or Carston (2012).

An opposing view is called *semantic minimalism* denying context sensitivity in natural languages, with the exception of uncontroversial, prototypical examples of personal pronouns (*I, you, he, my, his, etc.*), demonstratives (*this, that, these, those*), adverbs such as *now, today, tomorrow, here*, or adjectives (*present*). The minimalist approach has been supported by Borg (2012) or Cappelen & Lepore (2005). They claim

that there is a “minimal proposition” semantically expressed by an utterance. This minimal proposition is “obtained through the grammar, syntax and linguistic meaning of the expression contained in the uttered sentence and the intervention of context *only* when it is grammatically [...] triggered” (Ezcurdia 2006:2). Thus indexicals and tense indicators trigger the context but quantifiers or adverbs such as *late* or *ready* do not.

Between these two positions there are the so-called *moderate contextualists* (Sperber & Wilson 1986, Carston 2002, Ezcurdia 2006). According to them, utterances semantically express a proposition (a view shared with semantic minimalism), but the role of context is not restricted to indexical expressions and tense indicators only. They regard other expressions such as quantifier expressions as context-dependent. However, the main difference between semantic minimalism and moderate contextualism (MC) is not a number of context-sensitive expressions, but the view that “according to MC contextual dependence of a proposition semantically expressed need not be lexically or morphemically triggered. For on MC [...] uttered sentences such as ‘It is raining’ require context in order to express a full truth-evaluable proposition” (Ezcurdia 2006:2). In such an utterance context provides the time via the tense utilised and it also provides the location. This location may or may not be expressed by a “hidden” syntactic constituent.

3.3. *Invariantist theories with hidden indexicals*

Other semantic theories working with context-(in)sensitivity are invariantist theories that hypothesise *hidden indexicals*. According to these theories, “the expression itself is context in-sensitive, but its occurrences are (often) accompanied by occurrences of an unpronounced expression that is context-sensitive” (Braun 2017). Thus, according to a hidden indexical theory the utterances (5) and (6) contain an occurrence of an indexical expression (i.e. context-sensitive) which is present in the syntax but is not pronounced.

(5) It’s raining.

(6) I’ve had lunch.

Utterances such as (5) and (6) are underdetermined because the proposition expressed is incomplete. Other constituents necessary for conveying the complete meaning are not uttered and must be specified pragmatically and with respect to the context of the utterance. A hidden indexical in (5) is a reference to a location. For a correct interpretation of (6), according to a hidden indexical theory, it is important to distinguish whether the speaker has had lunch on the day of utterance of this

sentence or whether she has had lunch ever (even though this distinction may seem absurd). Or, when someone utters:

(7) Susan is tall,

according to the hidden indexical theory, the content of the adjective *tall* is a binary relation, something like *tall for*, holding between a person and an activity. In some sentences, the predicate *tall* has two arguments, such as in *Susan is tall for a basketball player*. However, in utterances like (7), there is no pronounced argument. There is a concealed, unpronounced appearance of a context-sensitive expression associated with the adjective *tall* referring to a comparison class. The so-called hidden indexicals may refer, apart from comparison classes, to a mode of presentation (the use of propositional attitude verbs) or to a domain restriction.

This approach has been criticised by Cappelen & Lepore (2002), who reject the concept of hidden linguistic expressions. Instead, they propose two constraints on indexicals: anaphora and *a priori* truths. From the syntactic point of view, anaphora is a constraint since hidden indexicals, as other indexicals, should have the ability to enter into anaphoric relationships. Cappelen & Lepore (2002:6-7) give this example: *That's a table but it is not a book*. In this sentence, the antecedent of *it* is the indexical *that*. They contrast it with the sentence *Many students failed* containing, according to Stanley and Szabo (2000), proponents of the hidden indexicals theory, an unpronounced reference to a restricted quantifier domain. However, this sentence does not make any sense with the anaphoric *it*: **Many students failed, and it is a big domain* (Cappelen & Lepore (2002:7). For Cappelen & Lepore, this is a proof that the sentence *Many students failed* does not contain any indexical. From the semantic viewpoint, the linguistic meaning of hidden indexicals should bring about certain kinds of *a priori* truths, which is the second constraint on indexicals. Cappelen & Lepore maintain that “certain sentences are such that no utterance of them is false, even though these truths are contingent” (2002:9). Taking the sentence *I am the person who utters this sentence* as an example, they explain that no utterance of this sentence is false. “Anyone who understands ‘I’ [...] will recognise this, that is, it constitutes *a priori* knowledge” (2002:9, italics in original). Nevertheless, considering the sentences *Everyone is in the contextually salient domain* and *Some ducks are only in non-salient domains*, Cappelen & Lepore claim that not every utterance of the first sentence is true and not every utterance of the latter sentence is false. “Hence, no one has any such *a priori* knowledge” (Cappelen & Lepore 2002:9). According to Cappelen & Lepore, hidden linguistic expressions do not only fulfil these two conditions. In addition, they also fail other tests (e.g. the so-called weak cross violations). Therefore, the hidden indexical theory has been rejected by them (for more on their reasons see Cappelen & Lepore 2002).

3.4. *Invariantist theory with unarticulated constituents*

Another semantic theory which must be briefly mentioned in this context is an *invariantist theory with unarticulated constituents*. Unarticulated constituents can be characterised as “propositional elements, not presented in the surface form of a sentence, nor explicitly represented at the level of its logical form, yet which must be interpreted in order to grasp the (proper) meaning of that sentence or expression” (Borg 2005:237). In other words, a propositional constituent is added but not triggered by any syntactic component in the given proposition. It is not present at the linguistic level but at the conceptual level, as Bach (2005) puts it. Thus, it may seem that the utterance

(8) It is raining

expresses an incomplete proposition since there is no place specification, i.e. some part of what is uttered is not represented by any syntactic element of the proposition, so it is “unarticulated”, as Perry (1986) claims. This theory understands certain propositions as context-sensitive; however, it does not regard any phonetically realised or unrealised element occurring in that proposition as the source of context sensitivity.

The difference between the hidden indexical theory mentioned above and the unarticulated constituents theory is that the hidden indexical approach counts with an element (indexical expression) to be present at the syntactic level of a proposition, yet it is not realised phonetically. This element is then associated with expressions that are pronounced. On the other hand, the unarticulated constituents approach denies the existence of such an element.

The invariantist theory with unarticulated constituents has been rejected, for instance, by Borg (2005), who claims that there is “no need for syntactically unarticulated but semantically relevant constituents” (2005:256), and that we should consider them to be “part of a broader theory of thought, independent of language” (2005:241).

As we have seen, context sensitivity in natural language is a hotly debated phenomenon. The continuum of expressions from those which are uncontroversially context-sensitive to those which are controversial cases of context sensitivity, or even regarded as context-insensitive by some scholars, is quite diverse. This is the reason why tests for context sensitivity have been suggested to provide a systematic way of determining context-sensitive and context-insensitive expressions. In the next section we will discuss some of them.

4. Tests for semantic context sensitivity

As we have seen, there is wide disagreement among linguists and philosophers of language regarding context sensitivity of various linguistic expressions, which has yet to be solved. What could help systematically

determine which expressions are context-sensitive and which are not are tests for semantic context sensitivity. For this purpose, Cappelen & Lepore (2005) have proposed several tests, which will be described in this chapter.

The first test, the so-called *Disquotational Indirect Quotation* test, shows that context-sensitive expressions behave differently from context-insensitive expressions in attitude ascriptions. Semantically context-sensitive expressions block inter-contextual disquotational indirect reports, as Cappelen and Lepore suggest (2005:88). Let us consider the following examples:

- (9) (*uttered on 20 September*) John: “I wasn’t at home yesterday.”
(*uttered on 22 September*) Mary: “John said that I wasn’t at home yesterday.”
- (10) Sam: “Lucy is American.”

In (9), Mary’s report is false because the personal pronoun *I* and the adverb *yesterday* she has used both refer to a different person and a different day than in John’s reference even though he utilised the same words. Example (10) is best reported with:

- (11) Sam said that Lucy is American.

However, if Lucy says *I’m American*, the indirect quotation in (13) does not report her.

- (12) Lucy: “I’m American.”
- (13) Lucy said that I’m American.

From the above-mentioned examples it follows that “disquotation can fail when the subject of the ascription utters a context-sensitive sentence” (Braun 2007). In other words, if it is easy to report an utterance of a sentence disquotationally, notwithstanding the indifference about its context of use, it is unlikely that its elements are context-sensitive (Cappelen & Lepore 2005:89-90). Only ordinary context-sensitive expressions such as *I*, *now*, *today* pass this test, but controversial expressions such as *tall*, *good*, *know*, or *believe* do not pass it.

The second test of semantic context sensitivity of linguistic expressions is the collectivity test, or *Collective Descriptions*. In general, when reporting utterances of a sentence collectively, the truth is usually preserved. Expressions which are context-dependent block collective descriptions. Thus, the utterance in (14) below can collectively be reported as *Mary and John said that Prague is the capital of the Czech Republic*.

- (14) Mary and John: “Prague is the capital of the Czech Republic.”

A problem appears when the utterance contains a context-sensitive expression. In case a verb phrase *v* changes its semantic value in a different

context, i.e. in case it is context-sensitive, “then on the basis of merely knowing that there are two contexts of utterance in which ‘A *v-s*’ and ‘B *v-s*’ are true respectively, we *cannot* automatically infer that there is a context in which ‘*v*’ can be used to describe what A and B have both done” (Cappelen & Lepore 2005:99, italics in original). Hence, even if there are contexts of utterance in which “A *v-s*” and “B *v-s*” are true, it does not necessarily mean that “A and B both *v*” is true. The reason is that the “semantic value of ‘*v*’ in the previous sentence is determined in one context, and we have no guarantee that that semantic value [...] ‘captures’ [...] the semantic values of “*v*” in those contexts of utterance where they were used solo” (Cappelen & Lepore 2005:99). To illustrate: supposing we know that Mary and John each pronounced utterances in (15).

- (15) John: “Lucy came today.”
 Mary: “Lucy came today.”

It is not possible to report these utterances collectively correctly with:

- (16) *John and Mary both said that Lucy came today. (Unless we know that both John and Mary spoke today.)

In this case it is the adverb *today* that blocks collection. Therefore, generally, context-sensitive expressions are resistant to collective descriptions, whereas the controversial cases do not block these collective descriptions. Cappelen & Lepore add that a necessary requirement in both tests (i.e. in the disquotation and the collectivity test) is that precise reporting demands reporter and reportees to be expressing the same proposition when the utterance of the reportees allows the possibility of a disquotational or collective indirect report without any problems.

When applying the Disquotational Indirect Quotation test and Collectivity tests to controversial expressions like *heavy*, *tall*, *left*, *It’s raining*, etc., they reveal that these expressions are not context-sensitive. An utterance of (17) below may be reported with (18), independently of the environment of the reporter and of the original context of the utterance. The same applies to collective reporting. In case Mary and John each say (17), they can be reported collectively with (19) in different contexts, regardless of Mary’s and John’s original contexts of utterance (cf. Donaldson & Lepore 2012:122–123).

- (17) The bag is heavy.
 (18) Peter said that the bag is heavy.
 (19) Mary and John said that the bag is heavy.

Now the question arises: how is it possible that expressions like these above behave in this manner if they are context-sensitive? Some scholars

claim that the Disquotational Indirect Quotation test and Collectivity test are not reliable when it comes to determining context sensitivity. Instead, Cappelen & Hawthorne (2009) suggest using a third type of tests for assessing context sensitivity of linguistic expressions, the so-called *Agreement tests*. They have introduced Agree-1 and Agree-2 as tests appropriate for identifying this phenomenon. Agree-1 test may be summarised as follows:

Agree-1: If A utters S, B utters its negation, and they are not easily reported as disagreeing, say, with "A and B disagree whether S", then S is semantically context-sensitive (Donaldson and Lepore 2012:123).

Thus, for example, when A utters *I am ready* and B utters *I am not ready*, it is not possible to report them with "A and B disagree". The reason is that the pronoun *I* is context-sensitive.

Agree-2: If A and B both utter S and can be reported as agreeing, say, with 'A and B agree that S', then that is evidence S is semantically invariant across its distinct utterances. If, on the contrary, distinct utterances cannot be so reported, this is evidence S is not semantically invariant across its distinct context of utterance (Cappelen & Hawthorne 2009:54–55).

Therefore, when A and B say *Paul has sold the house*, they can be correctly reported with *A and B agree that Paul has sold the house*. It is because *house* is context-insensitive. In other words, in case speakers in different contexts both utter S and these utterances can be reported as agreeing, then S is semantically context-insensitive. In case one speaker utters S whereas the other speaker utters its negation, then that utterance S is context-sensitive "only if they needn't disagree" (Donaldson & Lepore 2012:123). Donaldson and Lepore further explain that the preference for agreement tests over indirect reporting is clear: agreement tests do not allow distributive readings whereas indirect reporting may. Also, "agreement and disagreement require co-ordination on a single proposition, while indirect reporting does not" (*ibid.*).

5. Conclusion

It is widely accepted that much of the language production depends on context and, at the same time, that there is not only one definition of what types of context are necessary for the description of language. Thus, we cannot expect that there will be one single model for analysing context appropriate for all research areas.

The first part of this study focused on a comparison of different understandings of the phenomenon of context. From this part it follows that even though approaches to context are diverse, most of them emphasise that context is a dynamic and multilayered concept, a view supported also by the author of this study. Furthermore, context is inherently connected with communication, which is important in forming

context and it also depends on context. Hence, we can say that context is organised within interaction and depends on language use. It cannot be an independent or objective concept since it is influenced by different aspects, such as speaker's intentions, discourse setting, discourse participants, language expressions employed by participants, etc. All these gradually develop during interaction, and so does the context.

Various approaches to context, not only the pragmatically-oriented ones mentioned in this study, emphasise different features of it so that it is virtually impossible to produce a widely acceptable theory of context. It must be emphasised that it is not anything alarming. As Cummings argues, "such a theory [of context] is unintelligible by virtue of the fact that it leaves us with no prior rational concepts with which to make sense of or understand a theory of context" (2012:55).

What is closely related with the phenomenon of context is semantic context sensitivity of linguistic expressions, a topic hotly debated in pragmatics, semantics, and the philosophy of language. As addressed in the second part of this paper, it is maintained that there is a group of linguistic items such as *I, this, now, today*, etc. which are uncontroversially context-dependent. However, what is controversial is to what extent context sensitivity goes beyond this basic set of expressions. The issue of context sensitivity has been discussed from various perspectives.

At one end of the continuum, there are semantic minimalists claiming that the propositional content of sentences depends on contextual factors in a very limited way. From their perspective, the only instances of context sensitivity in natural language are expressions in the basic set, i.e. those uncontroversial expressions such as personal pronouns, demonstratives, some adjectives (*present, current,...*), some adverbs (*today, here, now,...*), or expressions that pass certain tests for context sensitivity. At the other end, there are radical contextualists arguing that context sensitivity is an omnipresent phenomenon and that all expressions in natural language are context-sensitive. Somewhere in-between there are moderate contextualists who extend the basic set of expressions to expressions such as *ready, tall, rich*, etc.

For determining whether a given expression is context-dependent or not, several tests for semantic context sensitivity have been proposed. They have proven that radical contextualism is inherently inconsistent. In addition, the radical contextualist perspective would make any interaction impossible since discourse participants could not share any contents. They would have to discuss numerous facts about the context when processing the conversation and, as a result, communication would not be economical.

Context-sensitive, or indexical, expressions to have and retain their communicative function, they must be clearly context-sensitive. To make communication effective, interactants cannot constantly discuss whether a given expression is context-sensitive or not since their communication

takes place in real time. It must be made clear which expressions are context-dependent and which features of the context these expressions require the interactants to discuss.

As demonstrated above, radical contextualism is not consistent regarding context sensitivity. A more appropriate and coherent semantic theory for assessing whether a given expression is context-sensitive or not seems to be semantic minimalism. Borg, one of the proponents of semantic minimalism, suggests an effective solution which consists in treating richer propositions with additional contextual information as forms of implicature, for two reasons: “first, since interlocutors do recognise a distinction between literal and speaker meaning [. . .], second, because facts about reported speech seem to tell only indirectly on facts about semantic content” (Borg 2005:256). From this point of view we may thus deduce that contextual information could be seen as part of a theory of speech acts.

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