

Culture



What is Context-Sensitive Grammar Sensitive to?

Anthony L. Vanek

Volume 1, Number 2, 1981

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077828ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077828ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA),
formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne
d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Vanek, A. (1981). What is Context-Sensitive Grammar Sensitive to? *Culture*, 1(2),
49–54. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077828ar>

Article abstract

The goal of linguistics as a science should be a dynamic and cross-culturally sophisticated theory of human communication which reflects what people actually do. The integrating notion of such a theory is that of context — the way in which the particular is made meaningful by interactors. Meaning in context leads the linguist of whatever discipline to a new level of explanation for linguistic form itself — as a means to realize communicative intention.

What is Context-Sensitive Grammar Sensitive to?

Anthony L. Vanek
Linguistic Research Inc., Alberta

The goal of linguistics as a science should be a dynamic and cross-culturally sophisticated theory of human communication which reflects what people actually do. The integrating notion of such a theory is that of context — the way in which the particular is made meaningful by interactors. Meaning in context leads the linguist of whatever discipline to a new level of explanation for linguistic form itself — as a means to realize communicative intention.

Le but d'une science du langage se devrait d'être une théorie dynamique et interculturelle de la communication humaine, reflétant ce que les gens font vraiment. Le concept intégrant d'une telle théorie est celui du contexte — la façon dont le particulier acquiert une signification par les interacteurs. La signification en contexte conduit le linguiste de tout type à un nouveau niveau explicatif de la forme linguistique, en tant que moyen de faire aboutir l'intention communicative.

For some years now, I have been claiming that the goal of a science of linguistics must be a dynamic and universally applicable theory of human communication, within which language per se holds an important but not an exclusive place. Such a theory must reflect not only what native speakers know about their languages (and about communicative systems generally) but also how this knowledge is actually applied in human interactions.

Unfortunately, the mainstream of linguistics has long been dedicated to the proposition of a context-free grammar as a theory of language. Within such a model there is little room for serious analytic concern with factors of usage and social context. Moreover, the study of linguistic form has been effectively isolated from the study of communicative behavior as a whole. There is increasing evidence that many linguists now look for a grammar which is context-sensitive. It has become clear that many of the anomalies in the context-free grammar must be explained at the level of what have been variously labelled as extralinguistic variables or pragmatic factors.

However, uncertainty remains regarding the manner by which such social factors are to be incorporated into grammars, and about the amount and kind of social information which may be considered relevant to the explanation of linguistic forms. As a

result, much of the salutary recognition of contextual factors has been obscured by the ad hoc character of social explanation and by the theoretical inconsistencies of applying notions of context. Piecemeal attention to interactional contextualization simply has not produced a theoretically-satisfying model of linguistics as human communication. It is, therefore, necessary to reexamine the meaning of "context" as well as to define its relationship to the statement of a grammar.

Approaches from within linguistics have tended to assume that the potential grammarian may proceed as usual, adding additional constraints to his rules which supposedly account for variations in form and meaning which occur in actual communication. The aims are often laudable, focusing on the need to study the full range of natural language use (at least for our own society). However, the actual analyses tend to remain sentence-bound and context-free.

We may cite, for example, a speculative paper by G. Lakoff (1974) in which he suggested that sentences were not necessarily grammatical or ungrammatical in isolation, but that degree of well-formedness depended on four variables. The first of these was the sentence, long-beloved of non-contextually oriented linguists. Social scientists attacking the question of language use have long realized that the utterance rather than the sentence must be taken as the unit of analysis; language use is a question of discourse and context. Lakoff then associates logical structure with a sentence by a process of derivation. His third variable is context which he defines as a finite set of logical structures, that is, as totally internal to the sentence. Usage is not involved at all. His fourth factor, conveyed meaning, involves the infinite class of possible situations in which the logical structures might be true. Again the concern is internal to the sentence uttered.

Certainly, questions of entailment and implicature are of relevance to linguistic theory. On the other hand, these questions restrict themselves to the coding of a message by a speaker. Conveyed meaning might better be taken as the meaning which is perceived or interpreted by another party or parties to an interaction. And context, of course, depends on the intended audience, the setting, and other variables which are external to the sentence uttered but absolutely crucial to the meaning of the interaction.

A more adequate perspective toward context and social use appears in theories of pragmatics which focus upon the speech act as the unit of analysis. For example, Stalmaker (1972) suggests that the following factors must be included:

1. syntactic form
2. propositional content

3. semantic presupposition
4. illocutionary force
5. pragmatic presupposition
6. conversational principles
7. socio-cultural context of use

This list is more nearly representative of the actual progress of communication. Syntactic form need not be restricted to the sentence. Propositional content, although not the sum total of the speech act, may be related to the discourse-bound units which actually occur. Pre-supposition is separated between semantics and pragmatics; although this is an arbitrary division, at least both are included. Illocutionary force explicates what participants think is going on in the interaction. But, even here, it is only at the end of the list of components of the speech act that we get serious attention to the presence of an auditor and a context. Maxims of conversation are included because the shared knowledge which enables two or more persons to communicate has emerged as a constraint on whether a message will actually be conveyed; this cannot be ascertained simply on the basis of the message as coded by a speaker. Finally, socio-cultural context of use is allowed as a potential variable, although in practice it is usually specified only if there is some unusual case. Most of the work done on conversation within speech act theory has been done on English or closely related languages. In fact, some of the maxims of conversation will be culture-specific and can no more be taken for granted than the syntactic forms of a particular language.

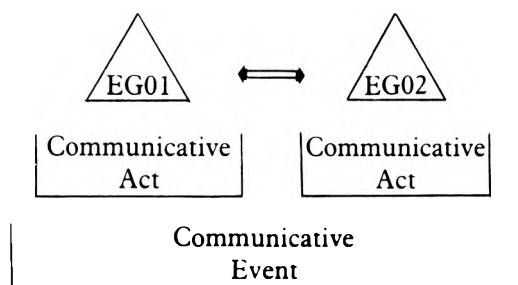
Whatever the relative merits of the various speech act theories, all share a reluctance to move from the verbal utterance to the interactional context. The non-linguistic state of affairs is considered, if at all, only after all factors internal to the utterance have been analyzed. In fact, however, a serious commitment to context implies that the particular social purposes of particular interactants at a particular time and place provide the rationale for the utterance and thus constitute the only possible explanation of its form. The language-internal factors are themselves by-products of such social purpose. The consequence of considering context in this light is that the social usage must be established at the outset, so that all else may follow from it.

A theory which begins with context and usage will not be able to consider language as existing outside of its interactional manifestations. The "deepest" structure amenable to analysis is that of intentionality and effectiveness of communication. A semantic-based theory of this kind is imperative if linguistics is to become a science of human communication. This, of course, requires a considerable redefinition of terms like language (which now

becomes one among the potential communicative modalities available to interactors) and semantic (which must now refer to meaning which is communicated, through whatever modality). Such an extension will certainly increase the amount of data which MAY be relevant to understanding the structure of particular communicative interactions. The analytic gain, however, is one of explanatory power.

Natural language is natural because it is used as a communicative resource. In order to explain the way it is used, only a broadly-based notion of context will be adequate. Such a theory will be psychologically real as well (although, of course, participants will not formalize their knowledge as the analyst does). It is impossible to understand what goes on in an interaction without considering the points of view of all participants. A model which restricts itself to the speaker cannot reflect communicative reality.

The smallest unit of communication is the dyad. (This may include intra-personal communication, in that Ego is separated into two or more personae.) In a context-sensitive grammar, focus is on both the speaker and the hearer, on the dynamics of what is communicated between them, and on the context of the communication. The speech act must be redefined to avoid the implication that communication is solely verbal. A communicative act, then, is the contribution of one interactor to the sequence of an interaction. It is the interaction rather than the speaker's message in isolation which is the concern here. Communicative acts come in sequences which are defined as communicative events. This basic structure is common to interactions generally and permits examination of the details of particular cases. The emphasis on the boundedness of the communicative events sets parameters for consideration of context. The contributions of both participants are recognized as crucial to the progress of the interaction. The process may be represented diagrammatically as follows:



This model varies from the Speech Act theories which derive from Austin and Searle in that it focuses on all modalities of communication rather than merely

on verbal forms. The communicative event involves two or more participants, each of whom is necessary to its completion. The diagram represents one "move" (cf. Goffman, 1976) in an interactional game. Normally, Ego 2 may be expected to respond, taking on the role of initiator. The communication proceeds in a series of role alternations (vis-a-vis the interaction, not necessarily the relative relationship of participants). It is by means of this mutual exchange of acts (only some of them verbal) that communication is established.

Further, evaluation of what goes on in a conversation may be understood from the point of view of each participant. In contrast to the Chomskian abstraction of "an idealized speaker-hearer in a perfectly homogeneous speech community", the communication-oriented theory assumes that speakers and hearers differ because their roles are different. As they exchange positions in order to respond to previous moves, the strategies and interpretation devices employed will also change. There is considerable methodological advantage to considering the same interaction from more than one point of view. It is probably always going to be impossible to get inside the heads of speakers. Self-report data on the part of linguists using their own intuitions does not solve the problem since it usually occurs in isolation from actual interaction and is unavoidably coloured by theoretical considerations outside the communicative context. A speaker (or communicator more generally) can tell the investigator what he thinks he means, but this does not exhaust the meaning of his communication in context. By also considering the point of view of the recipient, it is possible to ascertain what has actually been communicated. Both participants may then assess the effectiveness of their communication (and consistently do so by means of a number of cross-checking procedures for mutual comprehension). Both parts of this process are crucial: Ego 1 may imply, but he does so successfully only if Ego 2 correctly infers his meaning.

There is another sense in which Ego 1 and Ego 2 are not identical: they come into an interaction with different personae. There is no such thing as a fully symmetrical interaction. Differences in status or role may be constant for the duration of an interaction or may be renegotiated within it. For example, two interactors with basically similar sociological characteristics may differ in their knowledge of the topic being discussed, such that one will direct the progress of the interaction even when he does not have the floor. This may be referred to as Interactional Control and may be manifested through various strategies. Control may, in fact, be residual to the individual who speaks least but whose interests direct what happens.

This inequality of interactional participants leads naturally to the question of shared knowledge. The idealized speaker-hearer is assumed to be in possession of the same basic knowledge or set of presuppositions as his interactional partner(s). Real actors, whether in the role of speaker or of hearer, differ in their knowledge and point of view. If they did not, there would be little point in their communication. Successful communication requires overlap rather than identity of cognitive structures. It is often the case that interactions are judged to be successful when participants have quite different ideas of what has happened and what has been intended. This is inherent in human communication, which is always to some extent partial and inferential. There is no single meaning to an utterance in context, and meaning is always to some extent negotiated in the progress of interaction.

The degree of shared knowledge is, however, one of the most important constituents of interactional context. Individuals who are similar in language and culture share certain things and make concomitant assumptions about what they need to say or do to make a particular message clear. Individuals who have similar backgrounds and experience can take more for granted. Individuals who are personally acquainted work out idiosyncratic ways of communicating which may be far from explicit to the outside observer. But they do so in ways which are part of the general human interactional strategy. Their behavior is, therefore, rule-governed.

Social scientists have been dealing with the study of interactional context for much longer than have linguists. In fact, language as actually used cannot be understood as context-free. Language use is always embedded in an environment, which is itself both a factor in the communication and a feature invoked by participants in that interaction. Even the sentences cited as context-free examples by linguists appear in a context: "...the sentences used by linguists take at least some of their meaning from the institutionalization of this kind of illustrative process" (Goffman, 1976: 277). On hearing a sentence like "The king of France is bald" the average linguist will recall a theoretical argument rather than wonder if someone thinks that France has a king. As Goffman also notes, however, students of interaction commit the same fallacy when they abstract pieces of interaction for analysis and divorce them from their original context in time and place (1976: 277).

Many linguists have given up trying to specify context in any detailed kind of way because the variety of possible contexts for the same utterance makes it difficult to assume that the utterance always has the same meaning. It is not, however, necessary to make

this assumption. If context is part of meaning, then it is predictable that the same utterance in different contexts is not really the same utterance. Certainly, there will be related usages and semantic overlap among them in many cases. But the "meaning" of any utterance is its meaning in use, not some abstraction. Even the consensual or intuitively obvious meaning of a sentence in isolation has a context; it is simply that this context is easily guessed at.

A science of linguistics which is adequate to represent the nature of human communication cannot continue to relegate context to an undifferentiated residual category, to be invoked only when what is said is not what is meant. Meaning is always inferred from what is said, even in the context which is normal for that utterance. Following this line of reasoning, Goffman (1976: 305) has posed the more significant questions of what makes contexts determine the significance of utterances, and what classes of contexts are there. A starting point is to be found in Austin's claim that a speech act is to be evaluated by its effect on the illocutionary force of the statement; context in this sense determines what is being done by the use of an utterance. For example, a request may be disguised within the syntactic form of a question; the meaning is request although the same form might in another context be a question. The force or contextual meaning may also, of course, be communicated non-verbally, underscoring the importance of starting from the communicative event rather than from the speech event in isolation.

Sensitivity to context, with its consequent greater reflection of social reality, is probably today desirable to the majority of linguists. Unfortunately, this does not mean that linguists are in fact writing context-sensitive grammars. The term itself has been used in a multitude of senses which obscure fundamental differences in what is being attended to and for what reasons. In a review of child language studies, Keller-Cohen (1978: 454) defines context as the verbal and non-verbal behavior accompanying an utterance plus the social properties of associated people, objects and events. It is interesting to note that students of child interaction seem more willing to accept the need to examine all of interaction, not merely the verbal.

Context may also been seen as having various aspects, all of which are part of a larger whole but which may not be analyzable in the same manner. Keller-Cohen (1978: 458) recognizes the following distinguishable parameters of context:

1. **Situational Context:** properties of actions rather than of talk per se, e.g. gesture. Ideally, the student of human communication would combine such studies with those of speech to form an integrated picture of purposeful social interaction.

2. Physical Context: perceptual properties of people and objects. For the most part, these may be stated at the start of an interaction and will remain constant throughout. In fact, however, the emergent character of physical context continues to be a possibility.

3. Social Context: rules of communication; components of a speech event, including setting, addressee and interaction. The greatest number of studies of context fall into this category. Most such studies, however, are not seriously concerned with the writing of grammars. Social context has usually been clearly separated from language structure.

4. Linguistic Context: immediately prior discourse within particular interactions. The notion of linguistic context is divorced from usage and from prior knowledge which is not made explicit in the immediate interaction. There is no consideration of interaction. This restricted notion of context is the one which has received most attention from linguists.

Context, then, is a complex and many faceted thing. In many cases, it simply refers to a set of social givens which form some framework for the interaction. These may be specified as prior to and consistent throughout the interaction. A component such as setting, e.g. a church, need not be restated at every point in a communicative event remaining totally within the setting. The code, e.g. English, or channel, e.g. verbal, also tend to behave in fairly straightforward ways. Genre is also usually constant for the interaction.

More interesting, however, from the point of view of actual interaction, are the components whose character emerges in the course of the communication. The sequence of actions constituting the communication cannot be predicted in advance. Interactional and interpretive norms are applied in ways which depend on consensus between interactors. Goals and purposes are negotiated by participants, whose social characteristics in relation to one another also change during the course of interaction. The tone of the interaction is a delicate and continuously modified balance. (This list of components is loosely adapted from the mnemonic SPEAKING as proposed in various places by Hymes).

If, then, the emphasis is on communicative interaction, it is essential to consider the components of the interaction as fluid, flexible and processual. It is no longer a question of stating the context; rather, it is necessary to define the context in terms of its emergence from the interaction of two or more egos. The dynamic character of what Gumperz calls "contextualization cues" results from the open-endedness and negotiability of social relationships in interaction. Parties to a communication must work out amongst themselves the nature of their relationship. This process of creating a context for their interaction is the

social context which most accurately mirrors social reality.

It is now possible to return to the original question, that of the meaning of a context-sensitive grammar. In spite of various attempts from within linguistics to escape the limitations of the context-free grammar, formulations have been largely tied to existing conventions about what constitutes a grammar. Social information is carefully separated from linguistic information or is introduced only to explain supposedly minor anomalies in analysis. Speech act theory has moved toward consideration of actual interaction, but has been limited in its effectiveness by the separation of linguistic behavior from other kinds of communicative behavior. Speech acts continue to be understood in terms of the speaker rather than of the interaction between two or more persons. Speakers and hearers are still treated as though they were interchangeable in their roles and mutual understandings. The assumption seems to be that communication is always effective. All of these limitations restrict the social and contextual adequacy of the theory.

A similar dichotomization is generally practiced by sociolinguists, who tend to claim that social context has a valid structure of its own. As a result, social context is described in terms which are not part of the grammar of the language, which is usually left to linguists. Sociologists find such material interesting and clearly perceive the relationship between language and other kinds of behavior. Linguists see no direct way of incorporating the insights of students of interaction and social context with the task of writing a grammar.

The result, at the present stage of development of linguistics, appears to be something of an impasse. Yet in everyday interactions, social context and linguistic (and communicative more generally) form are both aspects of communication. The great need, then, is for context-sensitive grammars which begin with the social interaction and proceed to the communicative output, no longer relegating context to the lowest level of analysis, after everything else has been completed. Attention to context cannot and should not coexist with a rigid separation of pragmatics from the rest of linguistics. Language use is pragmatic and, along with other forms of communication, functions only in context. The overall structure of both the social and the linguistic is communicative, and the goal of linguistics must be to represent the complex reality of human communication.

REFERENCES

- GOFFMAN, Erving.
1976 Replies and Responses, *Language in Society* 5 (3): 257-313.
- KELLER-COHEN, Deborah.
1978 Context in Child Language, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 7: 453-482.
- LAKOFF, George.
1974 Interview with Herman Paret, *Berkeley Studies in Syntax and Semantics* 1: 1-44.
- STALNAKER, R.
1974 Pragmatics. In D. Davidson and G. Harmon (eds), *Semantics for Natural Language*, Dordrecht, D. Reidel: 380-398.
- VANEK, Anthony L. and Regna DARNELL.
Semantic Structures: Toward a Holistic Theory of Human Communication. (In preparation)