

then is this done? What exactly does it mean to use language appropriate to context? These are questions that will be taken up in the next chapter.

# 3

## Context

### Conditions of language use

We experience language not as something separate but as an intrinsic part of our everyday reality. We do not, in normal circumstances, just display our linguistic knowledge: we put it to use to give shape to our internal thoughts and to give external expression to our communicative purposes. Indeed, we usually find it difficult to display our knowledge in dissociation from these natural conditions of use. So although you might be extremely competent in a particular language, if somebody were to ask you to show your competence by saying something in that language you would in all likelihood be at a loss to know what to say. We only produce language when we have the occasion to use it, and the occasions for use occur in the continuous and changing contexts of our daily life.

### Context and shared knowledge

These contexts can be thought of as **situations** in which we find ourselves, the actual circumstances of time and place, the here and now of the home, the school, the work place, and so on. When people talk to each other, they will naturally make reference to what is present in such situations—present in the sense of both place (here) and time (now):

The chalk is over there.

Pass me the tape measure.

There's a page missing.

I like the look of that.

Is that the time?

In these cases, people make sense of what is said by making a connection between the language and the physical context of utterance. *Over there*—on that table by the window. *The tape measure*—the one you have in your hand. *Is that the time?*—five past two, as shown by the clock on the wall, and so on. The language serves to point out something which is present in the perceived environment, and the listener can only understand what the speaker means by the utterance by making the necessary connection. When such utterances are isolated from this shared situation, they have nothing to point to, and so lose their point: *over there* could be anywhere, *the time* could be any time. But being present in the same physical situation is not a guarantee that listeners will make the required connection: they may still fail to identify just what is being indicated (*Over there* ... where do you mean?, *I like the look of that* ... the look of what?). So the context of an utterance cannot simply be the situation in which it occurs but the features of the situation that are taken as relevant. In other words, context is not an external set of circumstances but a selection of them internally represented in the mind.

Context, then, is an abstract representation of a state of affairs. This may be constructed directly from the immediate concrete situation, as in the examples we have considered. But it need not be. It can be entirely independent of such situational factors. Consider again the utterance overheard in a crowded train. The situation, when and where the utterance was actually produced, has no contextual relevance whatever. The context is the common knowledge of the two people concerned, which will have been established in their previous conversation. And it does not matter whether this were to take place in a train, or bus, or in the street, or in a restaurant or anywhere else. Of course, the situation can be contextually relevant. It would be if our conversationalists were to come out with utterances like:

Terribly crowded tonight.

Excuse me, this is my station.

But the point is that the situation is thus *made* contextually relevant. It has no necessary relevance of its own.

## Text-activated context

Context, then, is not what is *perceived* in a particular situation, but what is *conceived* as relevant, and situational factors may have no relevance at all. This is particularly clear with written communication, of course. Here there is usually no common situation for the participants to share and so none that can be of any contextual significance. There are exceptions: the exchange of notes between members of an audience for example (*This is a terrible play. Agreed. Let's leave at the interval*), but typically where and when a written text is read is quite different from where and when it was actually produced. Although there can be no appeal to a common situation, however, there must be an appeal to a common context of shared knowledge or otherwise no communication can take place at all. Some of this context will be created by means of the text itself. The following, for example, is the opening paragraph of a magazine article:

With 300 million native speakers scattered across 20 countries, Arabic is the world's sixth largest language. Yet British ignorance of and indifference to the Arab world remains startling: of 737 postgraduate students in Islamic or Middle Eastern studies funded by the Economic and Social Research Council last year, 12 were British nationals.

(*'Learn among the chickens'*, Rachel Aspden, *New Statesman*, 27 September 2004)

In the opening sentence, the writer provides information to establish the context of shared knowledge. Notice, however, that she assumes that this will activate knowledge that is not made explicit in the text: that the Arab world is to be identified with Islam and the Middle East, for example. Unless such knowledge is activated, the text makes no sense. The same point can be made about the following opening paragraph:

At the height of the Kosovo crisis in May 1999, Tony Blair was on his way to Bucharest, the Romanian capital, to drum up local support for NATO's high risk confrontation with Serbia. The Prime Minister astonished his advisers by suddenly announcing on the aeroplane that he was going to promise



Romania early membership of the European Union in return for its continued backing.

(‘Europe’s very own Puerto Rico’, Tom Gallagher, *New Statesman*, 6 September 2004)

Here the writer is apparently unsure that the location of Bucharest is common knowledge, and so helpfully provides the information that it is in Romania. He is more confident that his readers will know who Tony Blair is, so that on the basis of that knowledge will be able to infer that *the Prime Minister* refers to the same person. In the first case, the contextual link is explicitly signalled in the text, and in the second it is not. But there is a good deal more that is assumed to be shared knowledge and so left unsaid: the nature of the Kosovo crisis, for example, and of NATO’s confrontation with Serbia, and what these have to do with each other anyway.

The important point to note is that text does not in itself establish context but serves to activate it in the reader’s mind. And once activated, it can be extended by inference. Thus in the first of our texts here, it may not be part of a reader’s contextual knowledge that the Arab world is to be equated with Islam and the Middle East, but it becomes so by the inference of a connection across two parts of the text. Similarly, when a reader of the second text comes to the expression *on the aeroplane*, the definite article signals that this is something that is assumed to be shared knowledge, so the reader ratifies this assumption by inferring a connection with what has already been said and so infers that Tony Blair was on his way to Bucharest by air, and not, for example, by train.

To summarize the story so far. Context is a psychological construct, a conceptual representation of a state of affairs. In communication, what happens is that a first-person party (a speaker or writer, **P1**) produces a text which keys the second-person party (the listener or reader, **P2**) into a context assumed to be shared. Once the context is keyed in, then it can be extended, or modified, by means of more text: once a degree of contextual convergence is initiated, it provides the conditions for further convergence.

## Unshared contexts: illustration from a battlefield

It may be, of course, that the first-person party’s assumption of shared context is mistaken, in which case communication falters or breaks down altogether. In spoken interaction, there is usually the possibility of repair whereby the two parties can negotiate the required contextual convergence. This, as we saw earlier, happens when features of the situation are identified as contextually relevant (*Over there ... Where? On the shelf ... Which shelf? ... The bottom one ... Ah yes, got it*). But there can be occasions when a mistaken assumption of shared context cannot be so readily rectified. A particularly striking example of this is provided by an event in British military history.

In October 1854, British and Russian armies met at the battle of Balaclava. During the battle, the British general, Lord Raglan, had positioned himself conveniently on high ground at some distance from the action, and was sending his orders by messengers on horseback to his commanders in the valley below. From this vantage point, he observed a contingent of Russian soldiers retreating with artillery they had captured earlier in the day, and sent an order for his cavalry to intervene. The actual text (written by the general’s *aide de camp*) reads as follows:

Lord Raglan wishes the cavalry to advance rapidly to the front, follow the enemy and try to prevent the enemy carrying away the guns—Troop horse artillery may accompany. French cavalry is on your left. Immediate. R. Airey

The assumption of shared context is very clearly signalled in this text by the use of definite articles: *the cavalry, the front, the enemy, the guns*. What Lord Raglan does not take into account is that his situation up on the heights is different from that of his cavalry commanders down in the valley. They are incapable of seeing what Raglan intends to refer to. Not sharing the same situational vantage point, they are in no position to infer the relevant context that Raglan is presupposing as common knowledge. The only front they can see is one at the end of the valley where the main Russian army is securely entrenched behind their heavy guns. For them, the front is *this* front, the enemy *this* enemy, the guns *these* guns. So they attack in the wrong direction, with disastrous consequences.



The problem with Lord Raglan's text is that it fails as reference. But as was pointed out in the preceding chapter, what writers mean by their texts is not only a matter of what they intend to refer to but also what illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect they intend to achieve. So when Lord Raglan dictates his message, he not only refers to the front and the enemy but in so doing he issues an order. The wording of the text does not make this explicit: *Lord Raglan wishes the cavalry ...* But familiar as they are with the conventions of military life, the cavalry commanders know full well that their general is not just expressing a wish but that his message has the force of an order which they cannot choose but to obey promptly, particularly in the context of the battlefield. As to the effect of the message, the result that Lord Raglan intended was to engage his cavalry in a relatively minor action. The effect of its interpretation, however, was quite different and the result was a catastrophe.

In the case of this calamity, communication breaks down because the second-person parties, the cavalry commanders down in the valley, are quite literally not in a position, situationally, to key into the context presupposed by the first person, the general up on the heights. More commonly, however, difficulties occur when the first person presupposes preconceived knowledge of the world that the second person does not share. Thus our understanding of the text extract cited earlier about Tony Blair and Romania depends on our knowing about the Kosovo crisis. The article from which it is taken appears in a current affairs magazine and its writer assumes, reasonably enough, that its readers will be informed about the world events the magazine is, of its nature, concerned with. The point to be noted here is that generally speaking all texts are recipient-designed in one way or another so that if you are not the recipient who is, so to speak, designated, you are likely to have problems keying into the context that the text producer presupposes. This is obvious enough when we encounter texts dealing in specialist subjects we are unfamiliar with—in genetics, for example (in my own particular case), animal husbandry, nuclear physics. But it is important to note that all texts, whether deemed to be specialist or not, are designed with preconceived ideas about what can be counted on as common insider knowledge in the particular

groups of recipients they are produced for. If you are an outsider, you are obviously likely to have difficulties making the necessary contextual connections.

## Context and shared values

Context can be thought of as knowledge of the world that a text is used to refer to, but of the world as it is known by particular groups of people. And this has not only to do with what these different groups know about as matters of fact (and others do not), but also with their distinctive way of thinking about these things. In the extract we considered earlier, for example, the writer does not only take it for granted that the reader will know about the connection between the Arab world and Islam, which is a matter of fact, but also that the reader will share his point of view about the state of affairs that he describes and so accept the force of what he is saying. Thus, the expression *British ignorance of and indifference to the Arab world remains startling* is not a statement of objective fact but the assertion of opinion, and one that the writer assumes the reader will accept. Appeal is made here not to shared knowledge but to shared values. The same point can be made about features of the second extract about Tony Blair: *drum up* (rather than *get* or *obtain* or *canvass*), *local support*, *high-risk confrontation* are expressions which seem to suggest disapproval, and again the reader is invited to adopt the same attitude, to share the same **position** or point of view, and so to ratify these remarks not as the statement of objective information, but as critical comment. Consider another text from the same source:

After stealing the Tories' policies, New Labour has inevitably gone on to steal the Tories' wives. But that the wife should be Kimberly Fortier, publisher of the *Spectator*, seems surprising. Isn't that magazine the enemy of those who undermine the family? Alas, no: it may get its politics from the *Telegraph*, but it now gets its morals from the *Daily Sport* ...  
(*New Statesman*, 23 August 2004)

Here it is assumed that the reader is already in the know about what is mentioned here: not only about the particular recent



events involving wife-stealing and Kimberly Fortier, but more generally about the more permanent background against which these events take place: the politics of the Tories and New Labour, and the nature of the three publications that are mentioned. But it is also assumed that the reader will accept the subjective way these events and their background have been represented here, recognize that this text is intended to have the force of ridicule and the effect of amused contempt.

## Conclusion

The contexts that texts, whether spoken or written, are designed to key into are constructs of reality as conceived by particular groups of people, representations of what they know of the world and how they think about it. Although, as we have seen, some of the knowledge that the text producer assumes to be shared is of particular things, events, persons, either within the immediate situation of utterance or not, these particulars are typically related to more general schematic structures of knowledge. Thus it is assumed in the text we have just been considering that the particular mention of wife-stealing and Kimberly Fortier will be related to the more general **schema** of British politics, and the mention of Tony Blair and his astonishing announcement in the text cited earlier will be related to the more general schemata of the Kosovo crisis and of the European Union and its affairs. If readers cannot ratify these assumptions, they will be at a loss to know what discourse the writers intend to mean by their texts in terms of their reference, force, and effect.

Of course, even if the receivers of texts are contextually in the know and *are* in a position to ratify the intentions of the text producers, they may fail to engage this knowledge for one reason or another. Communication is not simply a matter of bringing kinds of knowledge into correspondence, but of bringing them into a degree of convergence, and this may call for quite complex negotiation. We will take up what this involves in Chapter 6. But meanwhile, we need to take a closer look at how kinds of contextual knowledge are conventionally structured. We need to explore the concept of the schema.

# 4

## Schematic conventions

### Context and situation

As we have seen in the previous chapter, language use is a matter of constructing and construing texts by keying them into contexts so as to realize discourse meaning, that is to say, the message in the mind as intended by the text producer on the one hand, and as interpreted by the text receiver on the other.

As was pointed out earlier, context is an abstract representation, a mental construct. It may be abstracted from the immediate situation of utterance, as when reference is made to something that is directly perceptible by both parties in an interaction. So if somebody asks me to close the door, for example, I can readily infer that what is being referred to is a particular door in the room we are in. This is a case of what is called **deixis**—the pointing out of something immediately and perceptibly present in the situation of utterance: that door there, this door here.

But context is obviously not confined to what is situationally present in the here and now. The language we produce or receive in the process of communication does not come unexpectedly out of the blue. It is part of the continuity of our individual and social lives, and so always related to the context in our heads of what we know and believe. This context in the head is what was referred to in the preceding chapter as schematic structures of knowledge, and it is this that we engage to make sense of language, when we realize discourse from the text.