

Reseñas/Book Reviews



Discourse in Context: Contemporary Applied Linguistics. Volume 3.

John Flowerdew (ed).

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Context and discourse are both core concepts to Applied Linguistics, and the debate on their meaning has given rise to a wide array of approaches, fields of research and to an extremely interesting interdisciplinary debate. *Discourse in Context* positions itself at the centre of this debate, bringing together scholars from various academic backgrounds, such as corpus linguistics, systemic functional linguistics, critical discourse analysis, conversation analysis, multimodal discourse analysis, discourse historical analysis, or taking a mixed approach to discourse and context, combining linguistics with sociology, ethnology and other fields of research.

In the Introduction, FLOWERDEW addresses the notion of context, preparing the ground for the following chapters. He introduces the models identifying units of analysis for the notion of context, and offers an overview of the approaches to the notion of contextualization, highlighting its nature as a process. Interestingly, the introduction includes a ‘chapter template’ breaking down the structure of each chapter, thus providing the reader with a navigation tool that will assist and encourage activities such as comparing, contrasting and debating different approaches and theories.

BAKER investigates the construction of sexual identity in the media, by means of a textual analysis of a newspaper article. He combines feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis. He argues for the importance of the selection operated by the researcher in determining which contexts are relevant to the ends of the analysis, thus pointing the spotlight on the role of the researcher themselves.

BEDNAREK focuses on the use of wh-questions in American TV-series. She advocates for the relevance of television language to the investigation of popular culture, due to its impact on identities, societies, attitudes, beliefs

and, of course, discourse. Central to her notion of communicative context is the conceptualization of the relationship between texts and audiences in mediated discourse. She highlights that the communicative context of TV dialogue includes the audience as overhearers, and as the target the dialogue is designed for.

COTTERRILL approaches the dynamics of trial-by-jury in the British courtrooms in terms of its nature as a “power-asymmetric institutional context” (page 71). The study underlines the power-asymmetry in the communication, the role of the audience, i.e. the jury (cfr. Bednarek, this volume, on the notion of “overhearers”) and points out how the power dynamics of courtroom interaction are often exploited by lawyers in order to construct the identity of the witnesses as reliable or unreliable sources of information.

GUNNARSSON explores professional discourse and identity construction looking at the way multinational companies construct – discursively – an attractive workplace culture by means of their websites. She outlines her multi-layered approach to context, breaking it down to a set of societal framework systems: the technical-economic framework, related to the use of the Web for the dissemination of the companies’ image; the sociocultural framework, linked to the emphasis companies put on values such as diversity and respect; the legal-political framework, as all companies show a concern for issues such as corporate social responsibility, diversity and inclusion. Interestingly, she notices, the linguistic framework does not address the issue of language, in spite of the emphasis put on diversity.

Focussing on a bridge design meeting, HANDFORD analyses spoken professional discourse. The study combines corpus linguistics and genre analysis methodologies to highlight the differences and similarities between the professional context considered and other professional contexts. A difference emerges between the meeting investigated and previous studies on the topic of business meeting communication, as it presents a higher frequency of evaluative language and a low frequency of items such as vagueness, hedges and back channels, commonly associated with practices of negotiations typical of such contexts. Nonetheless, the author notes, a similar behaviour emerged from previous studies on international construction communication.

HARRIS and RAMPTON investigate everyday interactional life in a multi-ethnic urban setting, drawing upon linguistic ethnography. The study has showed

that a statement that would have been interpreted as racist was actually way less menacing, as it was embedded in a multi-layered context of everyday interaction. Such context is described as contributing to keep the racial commentary in check by means of much more pressing concerns. While challenging “the adequacy of the standard social science interview as a means of assessing the significance of race and ethnicity” (page 154), the authors advocate for the validity of their methodology, pointing out that contextual knowledge is central to the “understanding of the utterance under investigation [...]” (page 154).

HART explores the conceptualization of violence in British media discourse on political protests, focussing on the reports of violence between police and students on the occasion of the raise of the student fees in 2010. In the chapter the author describes his cognitive linguistic approach to critical discourse analysis, and claims that grammar is a locus of ideology and that the role of grammar is to both encode and enact ideology, as patterning evokes mental models that change when the patterning changes. Contexts are thus described as being constructed by grammar.

IEDEMA and CARROLL investigate health care communication by means of a methodology they define as “video reflexive ethnography” (page 186). Their approach challenges discourse analytical conventions and calls for an “entanglement” of the researcher in the contexts where discourse is produced. Videotaping of medical practice and the showing of such tapes to the practitioners in the video (“visualization of practice”) are meant as a way to break a taken-for-granted situation, and to encourage clinicians to re-engage with their “here and now”. By means of this activity, called “reflexive video”, practices, meanings and feelings can emerge in new and unexpected ways.

LOU takes a geosemiotic approach to context, combining this framework with critical discourse analysis. The analysis focuses on an advertising campaign aimed at legitimizing the process of gentrification occurring in the neighbourhood of Chinatown (Washington D.C.). The author claims that an analysis of the spatial context of language could shed light on the process that reinforces a particular ideology of place (intended as subjective experience of space, featuring a set of contingent socio-cultural meanings). Importantly, the study shows the relevance of space and place in the process of context shaping, but also that language has a role as a mediator between space and place.

MAURANEN discusses the use of English as a lingua franca in the context of academia. She underlines how lingua francas are “sites of complex language contact” (page 227) and how the academic environment adds to this inherent complexity by means of a set of traditions, expectations and hierarchies. Her study reveals that the complexity of the academic environment raises concerns in the participants that are prioritized in interaction. ELF speakers are thus led to prioritize their academic goals over their language struggles, in order to respond to the demands of the academic (social and interactional) context.

O’HALLORAN, TAN and E take a multimodal approach to the investigation of the semiotic resources used in business news videos on the Internet. They advocate for the need of such a methodology in that “discourse analysis based on language alone is insufficient for interpreting how meaning is created and negotiated today.” (page 248). An interdisciplinary methodology of investigation is useful in order to understand the complexity of our world that needs to be explored as a “unified conception” (Halliday, 1978: 12).

ROSE and MARTIN discuss the effectiveness of genre-based literacy pedagogy in Australian schools, drawing upon the SFL model of text-in-context and Bernstein’s model of pedagogic contexts. Discussing the outcomes of different approaches to teaching, they argue that describing context in terms of field-tenor-mode is not sufficient to understand and intervene on literacy skills in pedagogic contexts. Rather, only a combination of Bernstein’s sociological interpretation and linguistics methodologies can provide an analytic tool offering a much-needed broader view on social contexts.

WARING investigates teacher practices aimed at encouraging student participation in adult ESL classroom, drawing upon conversation analysis. The analysis sees context as being at the same time institutional and sequential, and as being mainly governed by a set of turn-taking rules that are sometimes broken by the silence of a less confident student. Only a comprehensive understanding of this twofold nature of classroom context can provide an insight on the pedagogical mechanisms that see the teacher charged with the responsibility of selecting (or not selecting) a responder in classroom conversation, in order to encourage shyer students while keeping at bay the too eager ones.

WODAK approaches political discourse from a discourse-historical perspective, integrating the approach by means of various social theories. In the study, context is conceptualised as being a multi-layered object of

analysis. The author introduces the notion of “ritualized performance”, and claims that there is no clear-cut boundary between backstage and frontstage politics, as politicians fall in the habit of performing their role. They do, nonetheless, respond and adapt to their audience, be it one of insiders or a public one.

I strongly recommend this volume, as it offers its readers the opportunity to cross their disciplinary border and get insights provided by colleagues with a different expertise and working with different methodologies. Moreover, it provides a solid stepping-stone for further study to any scholar interested in the issue.

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