# Context in Translation: definition, access, and teamwork

# Appendix 2

## Context in Generative Grammar and in Philosophy

The body of this article mentions functional linguistics, which has been used in the analysis of context both in linguistics and translation studies. This appendix describes the treatment of context in another school of linguistics called Generative Grammar. Generative Grammar has been the dominant approach to linguistic analysis in the United States and many other countries since the 1960s. This appendix also describes the treatment of context in two contrasting approaches to the philosophy of language.

### Generative Grammar and Context

Within Generative Grammar, a prominent figure in 20th century linguistics, Noam Chomsky, excluded context from the formal definition of a language in his landmark book *Syntactic Structures* (Chomsky 1957). This counter-intuitive approach to defining language is not only of historical relevance; it affects current discussions on language. How should context be incorporated into linguistic analysis? Because some may question whether Chomsky actually excluded context when introducing Transformational Grammar, which was later renamed Generative Grammar, an examination of his early work is in order. He wrote:

> "From now on, I will consider a language [L] to be a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements (Chomsky 1957:13)."

Although Chomsky does not use the word "context" in his definition of a language, we can deduce something about his position on context from this definition. It is clear that "set" in his definition is a mathematical set, which is an unordered collection of items (in this case, sentences). Thus, each sentence can stand on its own rather than in the co-text of other sentences in a document. For Chomsky, a sequence of words is a sentence and a member of a set L (a language) if it is judged to be grammatical (i.e. "acceptable" to native speakers of the language in question). This judgment is not based on questions about the meaning of the sentence. "I think we are forced to conclude that grammar [syntax] is autonomous and independent of meaning (Chomsky 1957:17)." For Chomsky, autonomous syntax requires that a decision about whether a sequence of words is a sentence be made strictly on a syntactic basis. Once a sequence is judged to be a sentence, then its meaning or meanings can be computed from the meanings of its individual words (as found in the lexicon of the grammar) and the syntactic relations among them. Again, context is not a factor during interpretation, since there is no attempt to determine which meaning of a

sentence is applicable. Neither chron-text nor rel-text nor non-text nor bi-text is taken into account during the interpretation process. The only co-text is the surrounding words in the sentence. Otherwise, the interpretive semantics component of a generative grammar would not be a formal, self-contained system that forms part of the "competence" of a speaker of language L. Context is relegated to "performance" aspects of language. In his early work, Chomsky does not yet use the term "performance" but refers to language use (Chomsky 1957:103). This approach does not deny the existence of ambiguity, which is certainly context dependent. It simply relegates the resolution of ambiguity (that is, determining which of several possible readings of a sentence is correct) to performance, keeping the competence model free of explicit reference to context.

The basic distinction between a self-contained mathematically pure system (variously called competence and I-language) and the messy, pragmatic world of people actually communicating (called performance or, later, E-language), even though details have changed, has remained a foundational principle of Chomskyan linguistics.

Within early Generative Grammar, a sequence of words was presented without any specified context and was either judged to be a valid sentence of a language L or was starred with an asterisk to indicate that it was not a valid sentence. The problem is that this approach does not exactly work in practice. Generations of students of syntax have been frustrated by the fact that some sequences of words could be starred or not, depending on the context. One approach to dealing with this dilemma is to avoid any unusual contexts, but this restricts syntactic studies to bland sentences and is too high a price to pay for avoiding consideration of context. Another approach is to ignore the principle of strictly autonomous syntax and allow reference to a particular, context-specific meaning. One current textbook (Adger 2003) comments on the syntactically acceptable sentence "The amoeba coughed" and remarks, "The [semantic] acceptability of this sentence depends on the context in which it is uttered." Adger points out that this sentence may be perfectly acceptable in the context of a fantasy novel. This amoeba sentence requires extensive context to make it acceptable, but acceptability is a spectrum, and the acceptability of a sentence often depends on some assumed contextual interpretation. Sometimes, because of the importance of context, a practical departure is made from Chomsky's original definition of a language. Instead of using only a binary distinction between a sequence of words that is deemed to be a sentence (unmarked) and a sequence of words that is deemed not to be a sentence (preceded by an asterisk), a third option is allowed: a question mark before a sentence, indicating that it is or is not an acceptable sentence depending on the context.

Fetzer (2004:18) gives the following example of the use of a question mark:

? John seems to win the prize.

Fetzer notes that native speakers judge this sequence of words as grammatical in a setting where John is on a stage where he is about to be announced as the winner of a prize.

The problem with the question mark in Generative Grammar is that the underlying definition of a language has not been modified to include context, and thus the question mark is an informal add-on with no theoretical support. Context is still not officially taken into account in the competence model of language, and Generative Grammar has discussed the competence/performance distinction but has generally avoided creating formal performance models. Thus, the need for context in deciding whether a sentence is acceptable or not invalidates the Generative Grammar definition of a language (L) as a set of sentences generated (i.e. defined) by a formal, self-contained system that explains linguistic competence.

How does the question of context in linguistic theory apply to context in translation? Perhaps in both cases the use of context by the human mind is so automatic and typically unconscious that it is easy to fall into the trap of assuming that a sentence can be understood and therefore analyzed on the one hand or translated on the other, without providing any context.

## Philosophy and Context

### Ludwig Wittgenstein: Meaning as Use

Chomsky is well known for his *internalized* (his so-called *I-Language*) approach to meaning. The primary advocate of the opposite, *externalized* (*E-Language*) approach to meaning is the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's views are among the (and perhaps *the*) most famous and influential ideas about the nature of meaning in the philosophical world.

To Wittgenstein the meaning of a word (or sentence) consists in its *use*, i.e. in the role that it plays within its linguistic community. Wittgenstein claims that one cannot fully understand any word in isolation; one must know what role a word plays in sentences and the role those sentences play in the whole society of language users (Wittgenstein 2001/1953: 68). When one learns a language one learns a whole *way of life*. Thus, to grasp fully the meaning of a phrase one must understand the language and culture of which it is a part. Wittgenstein put it pithily: "To imagine a language is to imagine a life form" (Wittgenstein 2001/1953: 7).

As an example, take the word "Communion" as used in Catholicism. The meaning of the word is inextricably linked with the whole of Catholic doctrine. To understand fully its meaning one must be well acquainted with many things, including the role of the priest and Catholic notions of transubstantiation, etc.

Wittgenstein once discussed such examples, claiming that notions like the transubstantiation were part of a 'world picture', referring to a religious faith as part of the "inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false" and "the substratum of all my enquiring and asserting" (Monk 1990: 572).

Such is the case not only with religious words, but with language in general. Children learning to speak are not so much *taught* meaning as *trained* in the culturally adept use of words. "To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be a master of a technique" (Wittgenstein 2001/1953: 68).

In a conference presentation on holism in education this author contended that "every word is connected to the whole of language; every truth is attached to a way of life" (Foster 2009). Wittgenstein put it: "An expression only has meaning in the stream of life" (Monk 1990: 556).

Take, as an example in the realm of translation, the Hawaiian word "Aloha." The fact that the word can mean both "goodbye" and "hello" is not a mere ambiguity; it has a richer meaning that either word alone. To translate it simply as one or the other would leave out the full depth of its meaning. The best English word to translate "Aloha" on a given occasion could depend upon the cultural significance of its use at the time.

If what Wittgenstein says is right then effective translators, especially of complex and nuanced material, should be well acquainted with not only the whole language but also the whole *culture* in which the language occurs. The spectrum of non-text elements that go into proper translation appears to have no end! Wittgenstein wrote: "The common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language" (Wittgenstein 2001/1953: 70).

**Davidson vs. Strawson**

More recent philosophers in the E-Language tradition have debated the importance of context for understanding meaning. Two of the most prominent such 20$^{th}$ century philosophers were Donald Davidson and PF Strawson.

Concerning the fundamental question of whether a sentence can be understood or translated without providing context, one would expect it to have been the subject of debate not only in linguistics but also within philosophy. It has, but under studies of meaning, rather than under the heading "context."

Philosophers have held a range of views about the relevance of context in translation. Donald Davidson suggests that many ambiguities in language can themselves be translated from language to language, without need for a prior

contextual untangling of the original. P. F. Strawson, on the other hand, argues for a more robust inclusion of context in understanding the communication-intent of the author.

Donald Davidson's work on the nature of meaning has it that a theory of meaning for a given language (called the object language) provides, in effect, a translation manual for translating sentences of the object language into sentences of the metalanguage, presumably already understood (Davidson 1967). He also suggests that the ideal candidate for such a translation manual would be a Tarskian truth-definition (Tarski 1956/1935). Tarski's approach to truth was intended to be used with formal languages, but Davidson expanded it for use with natural languages.

It is Davidson's view that if such a truth definition can be supplied that preserves as much as possible the truth-conditions of the object language sentences and explains how the meanings of whole sentences are constructed systematically out of the meanings of their parts then that definition would be a theory of meaning for that object language.

He considers as an objection to the possibility of such a translation manual that natural languages are fraught with ambiguity and therefore not uniformly translatable. His suggested approach to translation despite ambiguity is to translate the ambiguities themselves, ambiguity for ambiguity, into the metalanguage, saying that "a truth definition will not tell us any lies" (Davidson 1967:121).

There are cases where ambiguities may be translated from one language to another, but there are too many in which ambiguities simply do not translate. In order to translate accurately in most cases one must take into account the context of the original statement. For example, in the sentence "this food is hot" a simple cross-linguistic translation of "hot" into Spanish will fail to capture the two possibilities. The translator must decide between "picante" and "caliente" and so must have access to context to know which meaning is intended. The same is true for perhaps the majority of ambiguous words.

Just how deleterious this fact is to a Davidsonian theory of meaning is open to further discussion. Perhaps a Davidsonian would want to relativize the translation manual to specific utterances or to "ordered triples of sentences, times, and persons," as Davidson suggests in relation to translating sentences containing demonstratives. However, even such relativizations will have to take into account extra-linguistic items when translating most ambiguous words, like the temperature of the food the speaker was eating at the time of utterance.

Furthermore, even if translation of ambiguity could happen perfectly, ambiguity for ambiguity, from one language to another, we must note that the translation *itself* (the construction of the truth-definition) must be done by metalinguists who

take into account the context of the object-language speakers' situations. Quine's example of the interpretation of "Gavagai!", for example, involves interpreters viewing the context of utterance as central to beginning to interpret the meaning of the uttered sentence (Quine 1964/1960).

It appears that a truth-definition (or any kind of translation manual) that focuses on the languages alone will fail to resolve ambiguity. Philosophers must pay more attention to the systematic relevance of *context* (in its many aspects, as discussed in the body of the paper to which this is an appendix) in order to understand the process of accurate translation. To the extent that a formal-semantic theory of language fails to do so, it will result in impoverished translations.

An important philosopher who takes issue with Davidson's formal-semantics approach to meaning and focuses more on the intentions of the speaker in the given context is P. F. Strawson. Strawson argues that any attempt to explain the nature of meaning must ultimately focus on the communication-intentions of the speakers. Such focus on communication-intention will then bring out what beliefs the speaker wants listeners to attribute to him/her. Such an approach demands attention, not merely to the speaker's word choice, but to the full context of the speaker's utterance to determine what the speaker wishes to convey (Strawson 2004/1969).

Relevant information to the speaker's communication-intention is not limited to the person's words and the language used. It can include all kinds of information about the speaker's surroundings, background beliefs, tone of voice, cultural context, etc.

Strawson makes the distinction between a *sentence* and the *use* of a sentence. It is not a sentence that can be properly said to be true or false, but the *use* of the sentence, in a particular context, that is true or false. To give the *meaning* of a sentence, for Strawson, is to give "*general directions* for its use in making true or false assertions" (emphasis Strawson's). The assertion made varies according to the particular use of the sentence in a particular context (Strawson 2004/1950). Similarly with naming, the words used in the expression "the man" have a *meaning* that gives general instructions for their *use* to refer to a particular person at a time, but their specific reference is always given within the *context* of their use.

With, for example, "John is a rat", the assertion made, and hence the accurate translation, could depend upon many things not given by merely knowing the object language, including the speaker's feelings about John and about what he is doing at the time.

We have seen from the examples of the important linguistic philosophers Davidson and Strawson that failure to take context into account can result in

translation failures, while adequate consideration of context in a philosophical theory, although making interpretation more complicated, will result in a richer and more accurate understanding of meaning.

## Conclusion

This brief discussion of context in linguistics and philosophy is not intended to demonstrate which linguistic theory or school of philosophy is correct. We have only wanted to point out that questions about the nature and role of context are unresolved. A future study might examine whether Translation Studies can shed light on limitations that might be inherent in any linguistic or philosophical approach to language that does not include all five aspects of context discussed in this article.

In light of the on-going debate within philosophy about the nature of meaning and the relevance of various aspects of context to the interpretation of a sentence, there is little wonder that people simply trying to get things done in the real world are prone to neglect context in the context of translation.

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