Teun A. van Dijk. *Discourse and context: A sociocognitive approach.* Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. (xii, 267)

Since all discourse takes place in a situation, and each instance of discourse includes its specific participants and their purposes, background, and influences of greater or lesser directness, it is noteworthy, as the author points out, that *context* has not, in itself, been the subject of theoretical study, independent of the various specific constructs said to be embedded in it, but text and discourse have generally been taken as a central object of study (foreground), with *context* as ground (or situation) (24). This monogram, along with its companion, *Society and Context* (2009, Cambridge; reviewed in this Number), focuses directly on the anatomy of context, drawing from social and cognitive psychology, linguistics, and sociolinguistics, and sets forth a theory of context, its formation and composition, that "draws on, but is not the same as, knowledge of the world" (x).

The crucial point of departure for the foundation of this theory is that it reflects elements that are "systematically relevant for talk and text" (x). Thus whatever can possibly be construed as 'background' is not necessarily part 'context', as the thesis is put here: "It is not the social situation that influences (or is influenced by) discourse, but the way the participants *define* such a situation." Contexts here are described not as objective conditions, "but rather (inter)subjective constructs designed and ongoingly updated in interaction" (*ibid*.). This book and its companion text are intended to be read independently, and in either sequence;` this review will discuss only *Discourse and Context*.

Context as a concept is encountered in numerous disciplines, often with different meanings and implications. "Contextualism" departs from knowledge that is "context-free, abstract, structuralist, formalist," etc., but implies that phenomena must be "studied in relation to

a situation or an environment" (11). This theory contributes the principle that it is "participant representations of communicative situations," not the situations themselves, which comprise the "relevant aspects" (22). Among the salient properties enumerated for contexts is that they are the products of an ongoing "subjective interpretation," as opposed to situations, which are given, objective facts of the world. Here a term is introduced, 'context model', "defined … as a specific mental model" (24). It is these representations which intervene between the social facts of communicative situations and individual instances of discourse (49).

A primary assumption about context models is that they are "crucially *egocentric*." What categories of experience are included, and how they are constructed, is the product of the "Self … the central organizing category." Thus, it is argued, context models form the "basis of the production of *deictic expressions*" (77). This attribution of contexts to "subjective interpretation" defines them as "dynamic participant constructs" (46).

The theory in linguistics that heretofore has focused most on context is Systemic Functional Linguistics (28). The essentially subjective, "mental" characterization of the theory of context offered here casts it in sharp contrast to the conceptions of context offered by the main proponents of SFL. Chapter 2 of the present book explicates those distinctions in its critique of context as represented in SFL.

The notion of context developed in this text has great application to the field of pragmatics and pragmatics deficits. The mental properties of context models include elements that in speech pragmatics constitute Theory of Mind (80), which is a primary theoretical construct for autism related disorders. In addition, they are central to capturing meaning by drawing inferences, the fundamental phenomenon of linguistic pragmatics. Likewise, the principle of charity, a tool for inferring missing premises, requires that interlocutors not only

model relevant properties of discourse context, but imagine those properties which control discourse in others.

Context models are said to "control" discourse. In this theory *control* is constructed as intermediate between "influence" and "causation or determination." As van Dijk puts it, "We may say that A 'controls' B when A is a *necessary condition* of B" (127). It is pointed out that discourse cannot occur in the absence of shared knowledge of interlocutors. "Cognitively," therefore, "knowledge is a necessary *component* in the *process* of discourse production and comprehension" (128). It is recognized that "depending on the kind of context structures, control may take a weaker form," which involves conditions that are "probable or "possible," yet still "sufficient" for "discourse variation" (*ibid*.). Since variation in pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax, even topic and specific discourse content is possible in all but the most formally prescribed discourse situations, a choice among distinct options is presupposed (145). In any case, however, the availability of variants and a choice among them involves consciousness of context elements.

A great many social and cultural elements can figure into contexts. It must be borne in mind that many recent studies of social constructs such as sex, race, and age are carried out in Europe, America, Australia, and New Zealand, "thus [their findings] are relative to contemporary gender identities and relations in these cultures and societies (207); furthermore, as is numerously observed, such elements seldom appear in isolation (e.g., 133). And this, too, must, under the theory, be focused on subjective interpretation in forming a context model.

A good portion of the long Chapter 4 (111 – 217) is given to an extensive and seemingly uncritical review of many studies that report findings with regard to these constructs; only at the very end are we reminded, "any adequate way of accounting for such complex social conditions of talk and text will need to be in terms of the complex interplay of such conditions in the

mediated structures and strategies of context models" (216). For this reader, at least, this review went on too long and digressed too far from, and was brought back to little to, the primary focus of the work — the theory of context. Along with this, assumptions that categories like sex or age may participate in context models more than height and weight raise the question of why that should be the case, depending on what any individual speaker or hearer finds relevant in the situation, e.g., when I was talking to an overweight colleague who I know to be self-conscious about her weight, I refrained from talking about my holiday meals.

The suggestion that speakers do not create a new mental model each time, but access "learned categories of experience" (65) seems a good one. Memory at some level is certainly involved in that process, but habituation, which arguably does not involve memory as we typically understand it, is also likely to be involved, e.g., a young man habituated to a "yes sir, no sir" environment inclines by habit to include those elements of social relations in his context models. But the appeal to recallable models held in memory (86) raises intriguing possibilities. If it is the case that context models, like the mental models discussed in cognitive psychology that are involved in neuroses and personality disorders, are stored and can be recalled whole, they may give us a vector to approach communicative disorders that is intermediate between clinical pragmatics and psychotherapy. For such relatively fixed mental models, enjoined by pain, force, and stress, in for example child abuse or violence situations, would contain as well elements of communicative context, which may be involuntarily recalled (or activated) and applied in later communicative situations.

I agree with the author that discourse may "be said to *express* or *manifest* context, if contexts … are described as something that "underlies" discourse (131). But when accounting for this view with the remark that "indexes," as pointers "suggest a semantic (referring, etc.)

relationship rather than a pragmatic one" (*ibid*.), he gets it wrong. Indices "point" by reason of occurring in a relation of "existential contiguity" with their referent, which must be "worked out" by a hearer / beholder, a relation that is precisely pragmatic, in contrast to linguistic signs whose conventional meanings are decoded. Thus the symptoms of any disease condition exist in an indexical relation with the disease condition, and the symptoms point to the disease. If the disease condition in question involves a mental pathology, it well might form part of the context, and be *expressed* in speech.

One point remains unclear. The discussion of "contextual constraint for topics" (135) does not seem to comport with the declaration, "topics are not properties of context itself … but a property of text or talk" (187). It is too easy for this reader, and likely any reader, to find instances where context, as construed in this text, does constrain, even control as defined here, topic selection. In any case, this is an area for future publication to explore.

This text makes a significant contribution to what we know about discourse and the conditions that surround how we participate in and understand it. In discourse analysis, conversation analysis, and stylistics we have focused, with great insight, on analyzing topic, text, and situation from many points of view. This book offers a comparably sophisticated theory of context to complement that knowledge.

Robert D. Angus
California State University, Fullerton