Teun A. van Dijk. *Society and discourse: How social context influence text and talk*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. (x, 287)

This text is the companion to *Discourse and context: A sociocognitive approach*, (2008, Cambridge; reviewed in this Number), in which a dynamic, participant-relevant theory of context is developed. I agree with the author that the two books may be read in either sequence, as the central features of the theory are presented in each text, while in the present text the theory is explicated in relation to broader social interactions. It is well known that factors that can influence understandings thus and discourse can be open ended; an aim here is to delimit the theory, "lest [it] become a Theory of Everything" (3).

Two very common conceptions of *context* recognize the elements of text that precede and follow a given discourse turn or sample, and the aspects of the social and physical surroundings that can influence discourse. This theory selects "those properties of the communicative situation that are r*elevant* for discourse" (4; all emphasis in this review is the author's). Thus, the theory recognizes that crucial for an understanding of context is "the way participants *understand* and *represent* the social situation" (5). It is this subjective representation, not the "'objective' social situation" itself (5), that influences "the cognitive processes of discourse production and comprehension" (4). Context is a participant's "*subjective definition* of the situation" (5). As defined here, "*a context is what is defined to be relevant to the social situation by the participants themselves*" (ibid.).

The theory borrows from cognitive psychology the notion of mental models, dynamically constructed by participants. A model is defined here as "*a subjective representation of an episode*" (7). Models are taken to represent "*specific* episodes," as distinguished from shared, general cultural knowledge (6). From the preceding definitions and specifications, it follows that

while such knowledge may figure in to the context of any given communicative situation, mental models as conceived in this theory are constructions of specific episodes. Such models under the theory are held in long term memory (ibid.), as representations of "episodic memory" (81). The dynamic view of context models sees them as representations of "variable levels or stages of awareness … backgrounding and foregrounding … at different moments." These are reasoned to be "largely automatized," so that cognitive resources are not overloaded (79).

An extensive taxonomy of categories for representation in context models is available, as is demonstrated in the page-long table at p. 57, both in what is represented there and what could be added. Roles and identities have a prominent role in context construction, seen here not as "macro" but as "local, interactional" constructs (136). In the basic formulation of context models it is asserted "that they cannot be too complex," or else "they are too unwieldy" to be "viable" (6). But to reduce the number of categories represented, how far must we parse the elements involved? Do roles and identities constitute two categories or distinct fields of one? Are sex and gender (in the sense of biological sex as distinguished from associated attitudinal and behavioral properties) One category or two? And the broad social elements that include role, identity, SES, and social superiority or inferiority, equality or inequality, and distance, and the many kinds of social situations available in human interaction — readers of British fiction may recall, for example, the classic confrontation between Miss Havisham and Joe Gargery in *Great Expectations*, with its strong foregrounding of variegated social relationships and participant goals, especially for Joe — make it difficult to satisfactorily quantify the categories involved. It certainly seems to be the case, as recognized in the discussion of a textual sample from British Parliamentary debate, that "we make explicit a large number of contextual categories, rules and inferences" (232).

Among the genuine insights contributed by this theory is that in conversation, the interplay of turns constitutes one track of experience, while an "implicit cognitive" track also proceeds; conversational turns are occasioned by events in both tracks, and both tracks are influenced by the contents of turns. It does seem to be the case that *universals of context* can be found (155), as we are, after all, discussing human interaction, and the categorical situations represented in individual models of communicative episodes would appear to be common properties of human societies.

In the post-Marxism world where neo-materialism has informed much social criticism, the distinction made between communities and groups is very useful. Communities are seen here aggregates such as a nationality with "taken-for-granted knowledge and beliefs," while groups appear as collectives with an ideology, i.e., values and interests, in common, with shared goals, common projects, shared interests (142 – 3). CDA takes social masses (genders, races, classes) as given and postulates their influence *a priori* on speakers in situations. We are reminded (e.g., 112) that in a communicative situation it is what is relevant for the participants that is constructed as context.

It is hard to see the usefulness of the section that discusses notions of context in other, i.e., non Western, cultures (162 f). It is observably the case that in the Greek and Latin tradition discourse about discourse quite early moved to the foreground of intellectual inquiry in a way that did not occur elsewhere, and that scholars representing non Western societies took their studies in language and discourse in Western schools. As a consequence, it should be not at all surprising that the concept of context we encounter in Chinese, for example, simply calques a common definition, i.e., *shang xia wen* 'previous [and] following text' (Erratum: it is not *xiang*, as it appears in the text, but *shang*). The appearance of Western concepts in a language via loan

translation tell us nothing about the state of the contents of the traditional indigenous language philosophy.

In addition to the theory of context as developed in *Discourse and context*, being presented, the space in this text is used to apply the theory of context and the definition of context models to broader social categories of experience, with a considerable amount of focus placed on more formal social situations (parliamentary debate) and written discourse (news and publishing). In this text further insights from the theory of context are developed, and a broad path has been marked for further research.

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