

THE OMNIFICENCE OF CONTEXT IN LINGUISTICS AND LITERATURE

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Abstract

Every instance of language use is context-bound so that hardly can meaning be accounted for without making recourse to the background where the language is used. This paper examines the role of context in language and literature. With insights from Halliday, Short, and Hymes, the study explores how context could be a strong factor in accounting for the multi-valuable nature of language use. The important role of context in language use is explored and it is concluded that context is useful not only in pragmatics, but also in semantics and grammar. Any account of language use should, therefore, take cognizance of the context if a proper reckoning is to be done. Not accounting for it will not only make the submission inadequate, but also defective.

Keywords: context, grammar, semantics, pragmatics, novel, play, poetry

Introduction

Language is primarily used among humans for the purpose of sharing information of whatever kinds in different contexts. Different contexts require different kinds of vocabulary or expressions that are suitable to them (Armstrong and Ferguson 486). It is the context of language use that provides the foundation for meaning sharing. The phenomenon is, thus, a key to understanding the events in language use as well as in a literary text. If language users ignore context, they

may overlook a critical aspect of their message. In the same vein, readers would be unable to successfully appreciate the message of a literary work without relying on its context. Context helps readers understand the cultural, social, philosophical, and political ideas and movements prevalent in society at the time of the writing. In this paper, an exploration of the role of context in linguistics and literature shall be conducted.

Context and Communicative Event

According to Teun van Dijk (1), in everyday language use, the notion of “context” usually refers to an explanatory environment or background of a phenomenon. Thus, the media may discuss a government’s education policy in the “context” of the economic crisis, and thus implies that such a policy in several ways is *influenced* by the crisis. From a technical perspective, it could be a reference to the co-text or linguistic context of language use. By this, it is the relationship between lexical items of an expression that constitutes the context of the expression.

In the language sciences, including anthropology, linguistics, and the philosophy of language, as well as in social psychology, the notion of context has been variously defined in terms of properties of communicative events or situations that influence the variable use of language and the appropriateness of speech acts or discourse. According to Hudson (91), ‘the semantic system of a language is linked to the culture of its speakers’. Context could be seen as the communicative situation. An adaptation of action to the (social) environment presupposes that human beings are able to understand and analyse the properties of the environment that, in each situation, are relevant for their action. Obviously the same is true for uniquely communicative human (inter)action, that is, for language use and discourse. Hence, in order to speak or write appropriately, language

users (first) need to analyse and know the relevant environment, and more specifically the social and communicative situation, which will allow them to select linguistic features characteristic of the speech or writing situation. Context, thus, is how language users dynamically define the communicative situation—and as such also experience it as real.

Context may also be seen as relevance. This is because the social environment of interaction and communication may be very complex. Due to memory and time limitations during speaking and writing, language users are unable to analyse all aspects of the social situation. So they must reduce this complexity and selectively focus only on those properties of the social situation that are usually or systematically relevant or consequential for ongoing text or talk. It is this that underlies the formulation of Relevance Theory by Sperber and Wilson. In that case, variation in language use, such as a switch from different registers and dialects in a dramatic text, must be contextually relevant.

In a face-to-face communication, several features could provide the context of communication. For instance, the facial expression, gestures, speech mannerism could have some impact of the verbal expressions. This is why an adequate description of language must be done from functional or social perspective (such as that proposed in Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics) rather than from a formal type. The form of language is the one that might suffer alterations in accordance with the manner in which functions change within daily communication (Matei 155). Hymes has been one of the advocates of sociolinguistic description of language. For him, the study of communication must accommodate sociolinguistics particularly when viewed from the perspective of ethnography of speaking. He distinguishes the following seven orientations: 1) the structure, or system of speech (which is called *parole*); 2) function; 3) language as organized in terms of its multiple functions corresponding to varying

perspectives; 4) the appropriacy of choice of language; 5) multiplicity of varying language functions; 6) the social environment as the starting point of analysis and understanding; 7) subjecting functions to temporal and spatial contexts (Angeleli 583).

Hymes suggests a taxonomy of speaking, whose natural unit of analysis is the speech community (Angeleli 584), which is “a social, rather than a linguistic entity” (47), and thus different from language. Hymes’ theory of speaking considers as fundamental the notions of ways of speaking, fluent speaker, speech community, speech situation, speech event, speech act, rules of speaking and function of speech (53-62).

Halliday describes contexts of situation in terms of three main features: the “field,” the “tenor” and the “mode” of discourse. The field of discourse “refers to what is happening, to the nature of the social action taking place” (Halliday and Hasan 12). The tenor of discourse “refers to who is taking part, to the nature of the participants, their statuses and roles” (Halliday and Hasan 12). The mode of discourse “refers to what part the language is playing” (Halliday and Hasan 12). This includes the channel of communication (e.g. spoken or written), the function of the text in context, and the “rhetorical mode, what is being achieved by the text in terms of such categories as persuasive, expository, didactic, and the like” (Halliday and Hasan 12). Halliday relates each of the three features of context to one of his functions of language, and defines register as a “kind of variation in language that goes with variation in the context of situation” (Halliday and Hasan 38).

Short (80-105) adopts a tripartite framework for the analysis of contexts of communication similar to Halliday’s, and uses this framework to literary extracts which feature contrasts between the language actually used and the language normally associated with the relevant contextual configuration. Literature “is prototypically written language,” opines Short, “but writers often create special effects by

writing in ways which borrow characteristics associated with speech (91)". He further points out that:

[I]n terms of tenor, poetry prototypically uses formal language. This is partly because it is expected to be serious, and so a fairly formal tenor is appropriate. But poetry (particularly short lyric poetry) is also characteristically a *written* form which does not attempt to evoke characters and this fact about medium also pushes poetry towards formality. This does not mean, of course, that all poems, or all parts of poems, will exhibit only writing characteristics. (Short 93)

Clearly, Halliday's and Short's frameworks are relevant to the discussion in this paper in that, while the latter applies his framework to the study of literature, the former applies his to language use in general.

Context in Linguistics

The phenomenon of context is vital to numerous aspects (if not all) of linguistics. This is so because language itself is never used in isolation of context. In language use, we often find the user, the addressee, and the place. We also find certain behavioural pattern accompanying all these. These are what often constitute the context of language use. The role of context in grammar, semantics and pragmatics is examined below.

Context in Grammar

Grammar constitutes a central position in linguistics, and the role of context in it is phenomenal. Often, when structural ambiguity emanates in language use, particularly in speech, context plays an important role in disambiguation. In fact, when many grammatical inconsistencies feature in spoken language, interactants usually rely on the context to make meaning, and it is only when that fails that they

may seek clarification from the other language user(s). In writing, there are three important grammatical phenomena to which context is indispensable. These are reference, substitution and ellipsis.

First, reference will have no value if it cannot be contextually linked with referent in a text. In other words, anaphoric and cataphoric references are context-tied. In this case, the context is the same as co-text. In the case of a homophoric reference, the context is situated outside the text, usually in the language user's experience or knowledge. The expression, *He is a teacher*, may be meaningful to an audience, but he/she may never understand what the reference, *He*, point to because of the absence of co-text that will clarify this. However, if the audience shares the same communication background/context with the speaker, he/she could give the pronominal an appropriate exophoric interpretation.

Substitution is another grammatical possibility in which context plays a vital role. The phenomenon allows one item to replace another within the same grammatical context, so that the 'substitutor' must be contextually interpreted as the 'substitutee'. In the expression, *The teacher asked the students to clap, and they all **did***, it will not be difficult to find out of the meaning of the 'substitutor', *did*, if the co-text is considered. In fact, it appears that all instances of substitution, nominal, verbal or clausal, rely on linguistic context.

Ellipsis, too, is a grammatical operation whose success depends on co-text. Given that the major motivation for ellipsis is to avoid unnecessary repetition, the linguistic context provides the appropriate atmosphere for this kind of operation. In the expression, *James and Paul have written poems; other students' plays*, the second clause, *other students' plays*, is only grammatical and meaningful only when considered in the linguistic context where it appears. While the (second) clause exhibit verbal ellipsis, it is the preceding clause that enables this elliptical

formulation having contained the verbal unit, *have written*, that also applies to the final clause.

Context in Semantics

Semantics is often conceived as the study of lexical and structural meanings of expressions. Although it is popularly believed that context has no place in semantics (so that pragmatics is only different from semantics because of its focus on context), there are two important subjects in semantics which rely on context for their sustainability. These are presupposition and entailment. It is impossible for interlocutors to take certain important units of information for granted unless they have a shared background. Shared background is nothing more than context, what is often referred to as situational context. If a language user says, *My uncle is a woman*, the expression may not trigger a surprise or vagueness from other language users when the situational context is considered. For instance, if the expression is uttered in a patriarchal society, it may be a reference to the man's fluidity and, probably, gullibility. However, if the situational context has nothing to do with feminine frailty, it could refer to the man's unnecessary attention to his facial looks and general appearance—something that is common to the women. Whichever case, the situational context is valuable in the interpretation of such an expression.

Most of our day-to-day conversations rely on presupposition. This suggests that interlocutors often rely on the situation context in understanding one another. If a student says, "I left the examination hall immediately I finished my paper", we would presuppose that the student submitted hi/her paper before leaving the hall even though this was never expressed. In arriving at this understanding, we would have relied on our knowledge of examination processes, something that has not been betrayed by any linguistic cue in the student's expression.

Apart from presupposition, entailment also yields itself to a situational context. Our understanding of the fact that an expression entails another must be borne out of our knowledge of the world, something that corresponds to situational context. To say that ‘Peter killed the boy’ entails that ‘the boy died’ only confirms our understanding of the fact that killing someone else is to take the person’s life.

Context in Pragmatics

Context is pervasive in pragmatics, which is agreed to be the study of meaning in context. By this, every account of meaning in pragmatics is tied to the context: setting, behavioural environment or extra-situation (Goodwin and Duranti 6). For instance, extra-situation can confer oppositeness to the semantic meaning of an expression as in when someone utters, “I will visit you tomorrow”, with a facial gesture indicating the opposite. It is in that regard that John Austin notes that a single locutionary act can have multifaceted illocutions depending on the context. An expression, ‘the gun is loaded’, for instance can be a warning if it is said to a child playing around a loaded gun, or a threat if it is said by a policeman to a motorist who refuses to obey his order, or a piece of information if it is said by policeman to his colleague when going for a duty.

When Paul Grice notes that the inability to obey the conversational maxims does not lead to communication breakdown, he implies that the context is enough to resolve whatever problem that arises in communication. In fact, his concept of implicature is strongly founded on context. Otherwise, it would be impossible to account for an unsaid meaning. For instance, how do we account for the maid’s failure to mop the floor in the following dialogue?

Boss: Have you swept and mopped the floor?

Maid: I have swept the floor.

Following Grice, mere silence on the second part of the question indicates she has not mopped the floor. While this is true, we have to rely on our understanding of the world to make this inference. The maid would not have kept quiet on it if she had done it. After all, she expressly stated the situation of the first part of the question.

Context has an immeasurable value in linguistics. It is useful not only in pragmatics, but also in semantics and grammar. Any account of language use should, therefore, take cognizance of the context if a proper reckoning is to be done. Not accounting for it will not only make the submission inadequate, but also defective.

Context in Literature

Context is not only paramount in linguistics. It is also a valuable material to literature, which is not more than a language use (Roger Fowler 28). In what follows, the importance of context in three genres of literature will be considered,

Meaning, Context and Prose Narrative

Although every literary work is said to be open to new interpretations, it is no doubt that deciphering the primary message of a prose narrative requires that it is placed within a context. This also allows for an adequate account of the language adopted for the sake of the narrative. In other words, the language or languages of the novel must bear the semblance of the society being portrayed. Thus, the scene of a religious setting must have a language choice that will justify it. The same goes for the courtroom setting: not only that the language must reflect a serious legal ritual but the actions described must also be in consonance with those capable of happening in the courtroom. Without this consonance, it will be difficult to connect the meaning, context and the prose narrative. We shall buttress this position with

prose narratives of Helon Habila, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka as follows.

Habila's novel has a Nigerian context; the actions depicted are specifically those of the military era, the period defined by intermittent chaos, violence and oppression. Thus, a lot of lexical items in the text depict violence (see Bello and Adegoke 2018). In order to comprehend the justification of the innumeracy of 'violence-prone' lexical items in the novel, it is imperative to place the narrative within its socio-political milieu. Abacha's regime, the temporal setting of the novel, is turbulently regarded as violent locally and internationally. The regime witnessed numerous politically-motivated executions of several 'innocent' citizens, in addition to the killings of numerous demonstrators against the injustice and maladministration of the regime. It was during the regime that many top politicians were jailed and killed on account of a planned coup. Journalists were gagged, and the stubborn ones amongst them were eliminated. The high-handedness of the regime cannot be adequately captured. Understanding this political era gives a clear understanding of the reason for the multiplicity of the lexical items that depict violence in the novel. Probably, the lexemes are not enough in capturing the illegalities of the regime; however, they are enough in painting the regime as 'callous', insensitive, inhuman, and highly destructive.

Our position will be better understood if we consider the comments often made by critics when considering the prose narratives of Chinua Achebe and Soyinka. Achebe is regarded as having a simple style of writing while Soyinka is considered as very technical in his writings. By this, we mean that it is believed that Achebe makes his narratives simple for audience to understand while Soyinka makes his unnecessarily difficult to understand. This has made Soyinka come under a fierce criticism to the extent that many have 'wrongly' judged him as a poor prose writer. One thing that makes this asymmetrical

assessment unacceptable is that the language of the prose narratives of the two authors is assessed without recourse to the contexts within which their works are situated.

Achebe's novels, particularly the early ones, are contextualized within a rural setting, Umuofia. It will therefore be stylistically incongruous to portray the characters in such a setting as using a technical idiolect. In fact, to conform to linguo-contextual reality of the setting, Achebe makes his characters speak in parables, anecdotes and proverbs. To do otherwise, would have rendered Achebe's early novels stylistically weak. As for Soyinka, his novels are set in urban areas, and as it is accustomed with urban residents, his characters employ refreshing ways in language use. In *The Interpreters*, the central characters are individuals who have just completed their studies abroad, and are returning to Nigeria with the vision of positively changing their country.

Thus their speeches are comparable, lexically and grammatically, to those of most modern European speakers of the language. There are no proverbs, no traditional address forms, and no transliteration of traditional thoughts in their speeches. To get such things, we have to look into the speeches of Chief Winsala, the semi-literate and older politician. His speech during his encounter with Greenbottle at Hotel Excelsior is a good example. Another example is Dehinwa's mother's speech. (Omole 37)

In the light of this, it is stylistically justified for Soyinka to adopt a language that suitably coincides with not only the setting but also the personalities of the characters.

Thus, context plays a significant role in the assessment of the meaning and language of the novel so that any change in the setting must corresponds to the adoption of the appropriate language for it. A market setting will have a language peculiarity that will differ from a courtroom setting.

Meaning, Context and Drama

Placing drama in context is self-evident since drama avails us the opportunity of viewing author-created 'human beings' in their life-like natures. This is why any piece of drama gives a vivid description of the temporal and spatial backgrounds of every scene. This background coincides with a human-like environment, and it is this that invites the reader/audience to the society of the play. Events in a drama are largely 'watched' through the actions of the characters and their dialogue. A lot of the meanings in a dialogue are through linguistic and extra-linguistic features. Nevertheless, whether through linguistic and extra-linguistic, context becomes the key to arriving at meaning. For instance, deictic expressions abound in every dialogue, and deixis is context-bound.

More importantly, plays, being reflections of certain real or imagined societies, are expected to adopt the language peculiarities of, not only their temporal and spatial settings, but also of their dramatic plots. Figurative expressions are, therefore, semantically situated within the story line. In other words, the meaning of figurative expressions is tied to the context of use. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, when King Hamlet's ghost appears to his son and declares: "the snake that stung thy father now wears his crown", it becomes clear Claudius is the culprit, since he has ascended the throne after the death of King Hamlet. The same situation is applicable to the innumeracy of proverbs in Ola Rotimi's *The gods Are Not to Blame*. When one of Odewale's subjects asks him: "when rain falls on the leopard, does it wash away its spot?", the context makes it clear that the proverb seeks to know whether the palatial life of the King has eroded his kindness to and concern for his subjects. In fact, the claim that *The gods Are Not to Blame* is founded on an ironical structure can only be substantiated when we look at the internal context of the play. Thus, it is ironical because the same baby that King Adetusa ordered to be killed because of the curse upon him (the baby) eventually

kills the king in a bid to prevent this accursed destiny. In the same vein, Odewale swears to bring the killer of his predecessor to book without knowing that the accusing finger points to him. Although the characters are portrayed as individuals without knowledge of some events, the readers/audience are aware of this because they have better contextual understanding than each of the characters.

Meaning, Context and Poetry

Poetry is written in language which makes ample use of figures of speech. These figures of speech contribute to the richness and complexity of poetry. According to Irmawati (37-38), to understand poetry, it is imperative that one learns how to interpret figurative language. Figurative language makes use of many kinds of figures of speech, of which the most important are: simile, metaphor, personification and symbol.

Literary functions have to do with communicating meanings in referring ways. The more unfamiliar the expression is the more refreshing. Although literary functions feature in virtually all the genres of literature, instances are drawn from only the poetic genre. This move is motivated by the need to contribute to the explanation of the linguistic working of poetry, a genre that many readers dread because of their erroneous notion of its language difficulty. We contend that poetry is not so much different from other genres of literature in particular or any other instances of language use in general except that there is an attempt to say so much in a very few words. Poetry is perhaps the clearest avenue for language economy. First, we can identify the following kinds of linguistic manipulations in poetry: phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic manipulations, most of which result in figures of speech. It is important to state that each of these manipulations can be given a very broad treatment, which a research of this nature cannot accommodate. Nevertheless, we shall enunciate the linguistic role of a number of figures of speech in this paper.

First of such figures of speech has to do with transfer of semantic quality. Examples of figures of speech that have to do with this are simile and metaphor. Similes, due to their essentiality, occur frequently in poetry, and are used for the purpose of making imaginative comparisons for purposes of explanation or ornament. Two similes appear in this quatrain from Robert Burns:

O, my luvie is like a red, red rose
 That's newly sprung in June;
 O, my luvie is like the melodie
 That's sweetly played in tune.

As we can see, an employment of simile in these lines makes it possible to compare two items that are not naturally connected. This is why Person asserts that “the goal of most stylistics is not only to describe the formal features of texts for their own sake, but in order to show their significance for the interpretation of text; or to relate literary effects to linguistic ‘causes’ where these are felt to be relevant” (Khattak and Khattak 97).

In metaphor, there is an implicit comparison, one thing is simply referred to as another. Niyi Osundare’s ‘The Leader and the Led’ is peopled with a plethora of metaphors. The first four lines highlight two instances of such:

The Lion stakes his claim
 To the leadership of the pack
 But the Antelopes remember
 The ferocious pounce of his paws

The general context of the poem showcases the problem often encountered in the choice of leadership in Africa, particularly in Nigeria. Making choice in that respect is often influenced by a number of factors such as ethnicity, religion, political affiliation. In those lines, Osundare likens would-be leaders to a number of animals that may be

referred to as constituting leadership in the animal kingdom. Lion and antelopes in those lines are referents of would-be political leaders. Knowing the leadership features in those animals is instrumental to identifying the kinds of political leaders Osundare is making reference to.

There are also some figures that depict semantic contradiction. Two of such figures are irony, sarcasm and paradox. Irony is intended to have the direct opposite of its superficial meaning. The following expressions are instances of irony:

- i. Ajayi is a generous man; he can even take from a street beggar.
- ii. Kate is really an intelligent student having emerged first from behind in her examination.

These sentences exhibit some contradictions within them, at least at their surface level. At first, it appears that there is a kind of semantic impossibility. How is it possible that a man described with generosity can stoop so low to take from a street beggar? Similarly, if indeed Kate is truly intelligent, she should not be taking the back spot in her class. It is the contradiction in the sentences that provide the context for their intended meanings. There must be an alternative to the superficial meanings of the sentences. We can observe that a vital information unit is delayed to the end of those sentences. It is this part of the information that necessitates an alternative view to the earlier part of the information. Therefore, if it is true that Ajayi can take from a street beggar, he must have been an individual contrary to the description of generosity: he must be stingy and greedy. In the same vein, if Kate took the last position in her examination, she should be empty-headed.

Paradoxical constructions are often used in poetry. A paradox is a statement which superficially looks vague but could have a deep meaning or implication when critically viewed. The statement, 'The

child is the father of the man', is paradoxical if we consider the semantic features of the lexical items, 'child', 'father' and 'man'. However, if the scenario, or technically the context, being described is taken along with the expression, we can now find out that, while both 'child' and 'man' retain their semantic features, 'father' loses its original semantic value as the progenitor. The context provides a new semantic value to the concept of father— caretaker. It is this context that makes this meaning/interpretation possible. Similarly, two lines of William Yeats' poem also provide an instance of paradox:

Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love.

Here, at first, the meaning of the expressions is vague. It does not make any sense to fight people for whom you have no hatred, and then guard people for whom you have no affection. However, the overall context of the poem makes it clear that the poet is forcefully conscripted into the air force, against his wish, in order to prosecute World War II. This forceful conscription makes it mandatory for him to fight the other side, which has never wronged him whatsoever. In the same vein, fighting on a particular side also means he is defending that divide, for whom he has no intimate social relationship. It is this that made the poet declare in another line that it is neither his duty to fight nor is there a law that mandates him to be part of the exercise.

Sarcasm is a form of irony. It is like an honest deceit. It often occurs when someone is addressed with a feature commonly known to be absent in the addressee, as in when a poet addresses a prostitute as a virgin. Indeed, the context of the use of expression will make it clear that 'virgin lady' would mean everything contrary to its original meaning.

There are also some figures of speech that exhibit semantic incongruity. Two of such are oxymoron and antithesis. Oxymoron is a literary figure that has to do with the placement of two contradictory

words side by side. An expression like ‘painful pleasure’ is an instance of oxymoron. Whereas the meaning of the lexical items contradicts each other, their placement affords us the third possibility of meaning reality, something that stands between ‘pain’ and ‘pleasure’. It is not entirely painful neither is it entirely pleasant, but rather has a bit of the two feelings.

Similarly in antithesis, two ideas (rather than words) contradict each other. ‘More haste, less speed’ is a popular antithetical statement. Antithesis affords us the possibility of establishing an idea within the cautionary ambience of another idea. In reality, to hasten contradicts having less speed. But, in the context of literary figure, hastiness needs to be ensured while speed that could damage an effort should be put in check. This suggests that the second idea in an antithesis is usually a caution. The last line of Yeat’s ‘An Irish Airman Foresees His Death’ also exhibits an antithetical possibility: ‘This life, this death’. In this context, the general atmosphere being painted is that of death, having painted a war scenario. The poet, therefore, describes his life as a worthless one, only waiting for death to come.

Conclusion

The study has so far shown that context plays a significant role in meaning building in linguistics and literature. It is useful not only in pragmatics, but also in semantics and grammar. Any account of language use should, therefore, take cognizance of the context if a proper accounting or reckoning is to be done. Not accounting for it will not only make the submission inadequate, but also defective.

Literature also thrives on context since the differences in the narrative style of several novelists are often in tune with the different contexts within which their narratives are placed. Similarly, plays are strictly tied to the context not only in form of spatial and temporal settings but also in form of dramatic structure. Thus, the meaning of

the utterances (including the figures of speech) of the characters is contextually interpreted. Context is also prominent in poetry, which is not as difficult as many people think. Many of such people probably make attempts to interpret poetic lines without making any recourse to the context being described. The meaning/interpretation of poetry is context-dependent. The whole poem has to be taken as a whole discourse, which can now help in providing the right interpretation to the lines that constitute the poem.

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