

Context and Appropriateness

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Natural-language communication is a context-dependent activity par excellence: Interlocutors produce and interpret utterances in context, and they evaluate language use as appropriate, more or less appropriate, and inappropriate. In the particular context of language learning and language teaching, sentences in context may be evaluated as grammatical or as ungrammatical. The interlocutors' evaluation of utterances in context is interdependent on sociocultural norms and sociocultural expectations, on the mode of communication and on discourse genre, to name but the most prominent pillars.

The goal of this talk is to analyse different conceptions of context and appropriateness, and discuss the implications they have on the analysis of language use in context as regards (1) language acquisition and teaching (Fetzer and Walsh 2006), and (2) institutional communication and media communication (Fetzer 2007). It argues for relational and dynamic conceptions of context and appropriateness, relating interlocutors and their utterances on the micro domain, relating interlocutors and utterances with communicative activity, and relating the activity to sociocultural context and society (Fetzer 2012).

A relational frame of reference allows for a more fine-grained analysis of language use in context, accounting not only for the interpersonal relationships between interlocutors and the communicative status of their utterances in context, but also for how they conceptualize the communicative setting and communicative activity in which they are engaged. A dynamic frame of reference opens up new perspectives for both analyst and interlocutors. Here context and communicative setting are not just external to the utterance and given, but rather co-constructed and negotiated providing interlocutors and potential interlocutors with the linguistic means for possible changes on the micro, if not the macro domains.

References

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