

《論 文》

A Closer Look at Cotext.

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Abstract

Cotext is “what is said before an utterance and what is likely to come after an utterance,” (<http://www.pragsig.org>) . Cotext is often confused with Context but they couldn't be any more different: Cotext is subjective while Context is objective. This paper covers three areas: (1) a working definition of Cotext, (2) how Cotext can be used in daily conversation and (3) how Cotext can be taught in a Japanese university.

Key words : Context, Cotext, “I” statements, Pragmatics, Utterances

Introduction

The genesis of this paper begins at a March party held in honor of teachers who were both leaving the university and also teachers who were beginning their tenure. During the evening, the teacher I was to replace made a fantastic farewell speech that brought people to their feet. An hour later, I was asked to introduce myself. I consider myself to be an entertaining speaker but, after considering several factors, I decided to deliver a standard “happy-to-be-here, promise-to-do-my-best” speech. The response from the audience was lukewarm and I was disappointed in myself as I returned to my seat. Standing near my seat was the teacher I was to replace. The teacher was involved in a conversation with a professor. Just before I arrived at my seat, the teacher left and the professor turned to me. As I reached for my chair, the professor looked me up-and-down and said in perfect English, “You need to go on a diet.”

I pondered a number of responses and settled for, “I'll get to work on that.”

The professor then asked me about my areas of academic interests. I replied that I studied Pragmatics with a focus on Cotext.

“Do you mean ‘Context?’” the professor asked. I assured him that I meant Cotext and tried to explain it to him.

“I have no idea what you are talking about and I don’t think you do, either.”

“Well,” I said, now convinced that the best way to salvage this meeting was to end it. “It was nice to meet you. If I can help you with anything, please ask.” I then sat down.

“I will probably ask you to proofread one of my English reports later in the spring,” the professor said as he turned away. “Good-bye.”

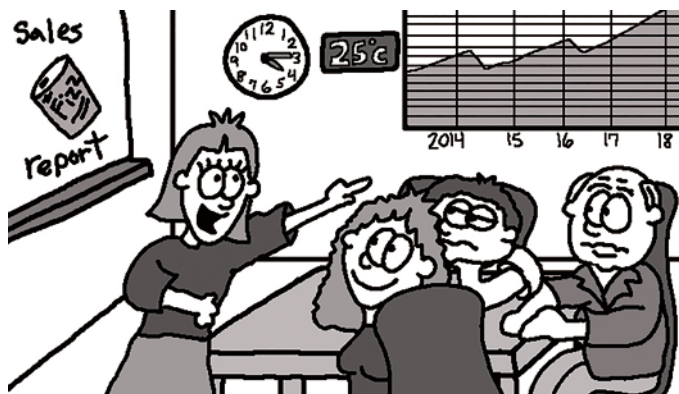
I nearly fell off of my chair. Nonetheless, this chance meeting resulted in two positive developments; 1) I began to get into better shape and 2) I finally had an effective method to explain Cotext.

This paper has three objectives; offer a working definition of Cotext, explain how Cotext can be used in daily conversation and suggest how Cotext can be taught in a Japanese university.

What is Cotext?

The JALT Pragmatic SIG website defines Cotext as “what is said before an utterance and what is likely to come after an utterance,” (<http://www.pragsig.org>) . To be certain, there are people who will forget more about Pragmatics than I will ever learn. Having said that, I believe that the definition of Cotext mentioned above needs to be revisited.

Let’s begin by comparing Cotext with Context. Context can be defined as the objective setting for all members of a given conversation. The picture below can show the context for everyone in the conversation.



It is 4:15pm.

It is 25 degrees Celsius.

The people are talking about soft-drink sales.

These factors comprise the context of this conversation. The context is the same for each person involved in this conversation. Despite the context being the same, people are expressing a variety of emotions. To understand why people are reacting differently we must consider each person's beliefs and experiences.

Now look at this picture.



One person is feeling queasy because of the heat.

A different person is enjoying the meeting because she is proud of the logo she designed.

Another person is worried about his impending retirement.

The final person is happy because she believes she is going to be promoted.

All of these experiences and beliefs are not only likely to influence how each person reacts to an utterance but also influences what each person may say in response. For this reason and others, I suggest that Cotext be defined as the beliefs and experiences each speaker brings to a conversation and their influence on how the speakers interact with one another.

How can we use Cotext?

Let's return to my earlier meeting with the professor. The situation could have ended much worse. I could have said several nasty retorts that would have likely escalated the situation. Why didn't I? The reason is that I used Cotext by asking and answering the

following four questions.

Why did this person say what he or she said?

In my case, I've asked myself many times why did this professor make comments about my weight and my study of Cotext? Perhaps the professor was good friends with the teacher who was departing and he took his sadness out on me. Maybe the professor has a condition that prevents him from understanding appropriate communication exchanges. Now it turns out that my first guess was incorrect and I cannot judge my second but that is irrelevant as the salient point is that asking why a person is saying something may prevent the other participants in a conversation from possibly escalating the situation.

Why am I reacting in this manner to what was said?

Just as I believe it is important to ask why people say what they say, I believe it is necessary to examine how their beliefs and experiences influence the ways in which they interpret utterances. Again, in my case, I was already feeling down on myself. My introduction was bland and I had not made a positive first impression. In addition, I am sensitive about my weight. Could these things have influenced my reactions to the professor's utterances? It certainly is possible and being aware of that possibility prevented me from making a bad situation worse.

What is the best way for me to respond?

This may be the most important question as it takes the focus off how a particular utterance can be interpreted and puts the focus on how to steer the conversation in a more productive direction. In my case, the choice was easy; do I engage in conflict or protect my job? Since keeping my job outranks a conflict, I was able to choose neutral responses that allowed me to end the encounter while keeping the door open for future involvement.

How will this person most likely react to what I am about to say?

As I mentioned above, I wanted to keep my job so I had to choose my words and how I said them carefully.

How can we teach Cotext in a Japanese university?

I use three techniques and ad hoc "case studies" that originate from current events to teach students at Sapporo Gakuin University how to use Cotext. First, let's look at the techniques I use in the classroom.

Read the air.

The first is to teach students to “read the air” (which is a partial translation of the Japanese phrase “空気読めない” or “can’t read the air”) before making an utterance. In essence, I instruct students to observe both the contextual and—to create a new term—the cotextual situation. For example, I tell my students, let’s assume you want to ask your teacher for an excused absence so you may participate in an extra-curricular activity. Before you approach the teacher, take a moment and answer the following questions.

- Do you have enough time to ask the question in a relaxed manner or will the request have to be hurried and stressful?
- Is there sufficient privacy or will this be done in front of a number of people which may increase pressure on the teacher?
- How about the teacher? Is the teacher relaxed or stressed? Does the teacher appear open to such a request?

There are other questions that can be asked but I think the point has been made; taking a few moments to assess a situation before beginning a conversation or requesting favors may positively influence communication.

Soft language.

The second strategy I like to teach is the use of “soft language.” Phrases include:

Excuse me.

Is now a good time?

May I ask you a question?

In my opinion...

All of these phrases offer the listener a chance to refuse or delay communication which will likely reduce the pressure on the listener and the likelihood of confrontation. An example of this can be seen in the first week of most English conversation classes. In that first class, there is usually a meet-and-greet session in which students are asked to become acquainted with their classmates by asking their names, where they are from and so on.

Unfortunately, students will often walk up to a student and have a conversation similar to the following.

Student A: What’s your name?

Student B: Kenji.

Student A: Where are you from?

Student B: Sapporo.

Student A: What's your hobby?

Student B: Sports.

The only things terser than the questions are the responses. This, of course, shouldn't come as a surprise as the conversation above resembles more of an interrogation than a conversation.

Now a conversation that utilizes softer words and phrases may sound something like this.

Student C: Hi! My name is Keiko. May I ask you a question?

Student D: OK. Sure.

Student C: What's your name?

Student D: My name is Fumiko but Fumi is OK.

Does using softer language guarantee greater language acquisition? Probably not. But it will likely contribute to a relaxed environment in which all participants are more engaged in the conversation and that can assist student learning.

"I" statements.

The last technique I like to employ is the use of "I" statements. "I" statements are just what their name implies: statements or questions that begin with "I" and/or focus on the first person. The difference between "I" statements and "You" statements on a conversation can be profound. Notice the contrast in the examples below.

I don't agree. / You are wrong.

I need to start class at 9:10am. / Why are you late?

I think this is delicious. / You will like this.

The differences in each example are clear: the "I" statements cannot be disagreed with as they are expressing the thoughts of the speaker. Yet, these same statements are less likely to provoke a defensive response than "You" statements as the listener is neither being condemned nor being required to defend his or her actions. On the other hand, the "You" statements could possibly illicit a defensive or aggressive retort. This tendency can be seen in a Cotext-related activity I do with my classes. This activity is called "What would you say if...?" I show the students each of the following illustrations and ask how they would respond. Some of the responses are listed under each picture.



"OK." "Fine." "I see."



"Are you serious?" "Huh?" (Derisive laughter.)



"I'm sorry. I was sick."
"I'm sorry, I don't feel well."



"I have a fever." "I'm sick."



"Oh, OK." "I will try a little."



"I don't think so." "You don't know me."

Words that have been underlined symbolize responses made in a negative or aggressive tone.

When asked why their responses to the "I" statements were not as caustic as their "You" statement replies, the comments by the students could be summed up in the following: the "I" statements made them feel autonomous and less threatened.

Two case studies.

The following are two assignments I gave to my students earlier this year.

Case study number one.

In 1992, a Japanese politician said that “US workers are too lazy to compete with Japan. They want high pay without working.” In response, a US politician said that someone should draw a comic of an atomic bomb with a mushroom cloud and write, “Made in America by lazy and illiterate Americans and tested in Japan.” Imagine you are an assistant to both men. How would you advise each person?

The assignment was difficult and required a fair amount of supplementary explanation but in the end I was impressed with the results. In Mr. Sakurauchi’s case, students suggested replacing their original statements with the following ones (a few of which that were grammatically edited) .

Japanese tend to work longer than Americans.

Japanese are very loyal to their company.

I think American people like free-time more than Japanese workers.

Japan and America have different work cultures.

Responses for Mr. Hollings included the following statements.

America’s culture is different from Japan but America is still the world’s leading economy.

American workers are good at inventing things but Japanese workers are good at improving things.

Case study number two.

US president Donald Trump has said that in order to control illegal immigration he will build a wall between the US and Mexico and that “Mexico will pay for the wall, believe me —100 percent—they don’t know it yet, but they will pay for the wall.” Imagine you are an assistant to President Trump. How would you advise him?

A significant difference in this case is that the students have a richer contextual background to draw information from as this statement was made less than two years ago. I was impressed not only by their responses but also with their reasons for their responses. I chose three of the most impressive suggestions.

Student A: Trump should say that America will build a wall but not that Mexico will pay for

it. He can't tell Mexico what to do.

Student B: When Obama was president, there was more respect for minorities. Trump should be more careful. He should protect America with a wall but not with strong words. He should say I will not give any more money to Mexico until the wall is built.

Student C: Trump should not say Mexico will do anything. It will only cause problems and Mexico is America's neighbor.

It is unlikely that any of my students are experts on US foreign policy but I believe they showed an awareness of how language can be either a tool of progress or an instrument of destruction. I am also convinced that their increased understanding of Cotext helped them along the road towards making that distinction.

In closing

I suggest that Cotext be defined as the beliefs and experiences each speaker brings to a conversation and their influence on how the speakers interact with one another. I believe Cotext can be used by asking and answering the following questions.

Why did this person say what he or she said?

Why am I reacting in this manner to what was said?

What is the best way for me to respond?

How will this person most likely respond to what I am about to say.

Finally, I like to teach Cotext through these techniques; (1) "reading the air," (2) the use of "soft-language" and (3) the use of "I" statements.

Sources and Resources

2016, February 25th. CNN Republican Presidential Debate.

1992, February 16th. Newsweek.

Pragmatic SIG website. <http://www.pragsig.org>

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