
Original Paper

A look at the theory of “Hidden Cotext” in Pragmatics

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Abstract

“Why would you say such a thing,” is a common retort to someone who has said something that was unexpected during a conversation. Attempts to better understand why people make certain utterances as well as seeking how best to respond to them is to investigate the Pragmatic concept of “*hidden cotext*.” *Hidden cotext* is a novel concept in the linguistic area of Pragmatics that seeks to explain how personal experiences, beliefs, conversational motivations, and interpretations of previous utterances may influence communication. While the *context* of the conversation (the location and the timing of the interaction, as well as the relationship between the speakers) is obvious to all participants and allows for preparation, *hidden cotext* is less discernable, more spontaneous, and likely to be more challenging to the communicative process. By exploring the effects of *hidden cotext* as well as related strategies, people will likely improve their communication abilities.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Semantics, Context, Cotext, Misunderstandings

Introduction

Pragmatics is the study of how language is used to communicate. Unlike Semantics, which focuses on all possible meanings of a given word, Pragmatics is concerned with how a word is used and influenced by a variety of factors that include the location of the conversation, the relationship between the speakers and their shared experiences, often referred to as *context*. Less obvious but equally important to the interaction between the speakers is the *cotext* of the conversation. *Cotext* can be defined as the most recent utterance to which the current speaker is responding. Even more concealed is the novel concept of *hidden cotext*, which may be explained as the experiences, beliefs, motivations and interpretations of one speaker that influence his or her involvement in a conversation that are not observable to the other speakers. This paper has four purposes:

- 1.) To briefly explain the difference between pragmatics and semantics
- 2.) To compare and contrast the Pragmatic concepts of Context and Cotext
- 3.) To introduce the theory of Hidden Cotext
- 4.) To propose ways in which speakers can avoid and repair misunderstandings and miscommunications related to the Hidden Cotext of a speaker or speakers in a conversation.

Pragmatics versus Semantics

Imagine two people are sitting at a table eating hamburgers and French fries for lunch. Person A watches Person B add ketchup to his food and says, “Can you pass the ketchup?” Person B says, “Yes, I can,” and proceeds to put the bottle of ketchup on the table and continues to eat but does not give the ketchup to Person A.

People coming from a Pragmatic point of view would likely interpret this interaction as rude as Person A has insinuated a request. While not technically a question, the fact that both people are having lunch and eating foods that are routinely topped with ketchup (the context) implies that Person A is asking for

Person B to give the ketchup to him.

Semantics, however, is not interested in context or implications. From a semantic perspective, Person B's actions are perfectly acceptable. The question, "Can you pass the ketchup?" is no different from asking, "Can you sky dive?" or "Can you speak French?" Viewed semantically, any question that begins with "Can you" is an inquiry into a person's ability to undertake a task but not a request to do that task.

This type of miscommunication, intentional or otherwise, is where the phrase, "that's just semantics," comes from. A set of parents ask their college-age son what he is doing with his Saturday nights. The son replies, "I go to 'the library' with my friends." The parents are thrilled, assuming that 'the library' is the traditional building filled with books and a place where people study. It isn't until the parents call the dormitory room and are told by his roommate that their son is at a bar that the parents confront the son and accuse him of being dishonest. In response, he feigns ignorance. "You said you were going to the library," the parents say angrily. "Yes," the son says. "The name of the bar is The Library."

In short, Semantics is concerned with all possible meanings of a word or phrase at all possible times while Pragmatics is focused on what a word or phrase means and how it can be used at a specific time.

Context and Cotext

The context of a conversation is the influencing factors that can be observed by all participants and, on some level, prepared for. The location, the timing, the relationship between the people, and the shared experiences/knowledge are the primary examples of context. If a conversation between all of a company's senior managers and the associates (relationship between speakers) is to be held in the main conference room (location) on a Friday afternoon (timing) with yearly promotions on the agenda (shared experiences/knowledge), all participants will likely have ample time to adapt their appearance, behavior and certain speech actions to accommodate this situation.

By contrast, the cotext (the most recent utterance) of a conversation spurs a moment-to-moment operation of first the processing of what has just been said, choosing what words and phrases to use in response, deciding on the best way to transfer those words and phrases (volume, tone, eye contact, etc.) and finally actually delivering an utterance which will become the next cotext to the conversation.

For the purpose of illustration, imagine a group of friends have decided to hold a potluck picnic at a beach at noon on a summer's day. Everyone is dressed casually, passing food and drink and the conversation is light and fun in accordance with the context of the situation. Then suddenly, when asked about his plans for the future, one person announces that he has a terminal illness. This utterance, the cotext, will likely shift the conversation into a different direction. There will be the inevitable silence as people ponder how to respond, likely followed by questions, promises of support, and encouragement.

While certainly uncomfortable, this revelation will allow the utterance to move from the category of "cotext" to "context/shared knowledge." From this point, all participants in this conversation will take into consideration their friend's terminal illness when deciding on what next to say. People will be less inclined to talk about their future plans and the conversation will likely take on an acceptably somber tone. These shifts in conversational strategies, which take place in a matter of moments, are able to occur because this vital information was shared.

But what if this person had not shared it?

Hidden Cotext

This paper will define "Hidden Cotext" as the unseen factors that influence the utterances and reactions to other utterances made by participants in a conversation. Unlike the context, which is observable to all involved, the hidden cotext is the blending of the speaker's experiences and beliefs with the speaker's conversational motives and interpretations. Most people have had conversations where a person either said something totally unexpected or said it in a manner that took all involved by surprise. "Why would they say something like that?" is often the response when this occurs and it is likely the result of the conversation colliding with the hidden cotext of one of the participants.

Experiences

“We do not see the world as it is but as we are,” is a cliché that summarizes how our experiences and beliefs shape us. This is even more true when dealing with trauma. While most people will not develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), psychological trauma has been called a global epidemic with nearly 70 percent of the world’s population experiencing some form of trauma (Wilson, 2022). EFL classrooms are now making Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) part of their curriculum. The push to encourage empathy and mindfulness while fostering a supportive classroom environment are two ways that SEL seeks to accommodate the emotional needs of language learners (Antonenko, 2023). While it is not the scope of this paper to dive into mental health issues in the EFL classroom, it is necessary to acknowledge that the participants in our conversations often say and respond to utterances in ways that reflect their interactions with the world.

Beliefs

Paradigms and beliefs can be tools for growth or destruction. When speaking on the topic of EFL teacher training, Brown (2002) says that beliefs and paradigms held by those in education can facilitate the processing of new information and techniques but also can impede the acceptance of them. In other words, it is possible and often likely that we believe in something so strongly that it prevents us from understanding or even considering different ideas.

It is unlikely that this trait is limited to the EFL classroom.

Today’s world appears to be more polarized than ever. Politics, religion and views on social issues are among the most divisive of issues. Discussions or even comments have the potential to escalate otherwise random conversations into full-blown arguments.

Conversational motives

The value of communication partially depends on shared communicative goals. Unfortunately, the goals of each speaker are often in conflict. Yeomans (2022) and others may have put it best when they designed the Conversational Circumplex framework that suggests that the likelihood of successful communication depends on the extent to which each speaker’s motives are to give and receive accurate information (the informational dimension) and the extent to which each speaker wishes to build relationships with the other participants (the relational dimension).

For example, imagine a customer walks up to a clerk in a bookstore and asks where she can find a certain novel. The customer’s motivation is, of course, to locate this specific book. Unfortunately, the clerk’s motivation is to leave as soon as possible because his shift ended two minutes ago. He has never heard of this book and finding it will require extra time to look up the information and then share it with the customer. Since each speaker’s goal are opposed to the other, the communication will likely be unsuccessful with the clerk either saying something similar to “I don’t know, please ask someone else,” or “Check aisle 3” as he runs out through the door.

Interpretations

Communication is not always a straight-line process; what a person hears is not always representative of what the other person said. These communication breakdowns are known as “misunderstandings” are often the result of reacting to meanings that are semantically correct but pragmatically inaccurate.

The following is a comic that is used in the author’s classroom to explain misunderstandings.





The first two frames establish that the speakers have the same motivation: does the cat that was hit by the car belong to the man with the blue tie? In the third frame we can see that the man in the blue tie wants to know the color of the cat that has been hit. In the fourth frame, he asks “what does the cat look like”? In the final frame, the man in the red tie mimics the condition of the cat after it was hit by the car.

While humorous in a dark sense, this misunderstanding highlights the misinterpretation of the question in the fourth frame. The man in the blue tie wishes to know the color of the cat’s fur before it was hit, but the man in the red tie assumes the question is inquiring about the current condition of the cat. While semantically correct (the cat is likely contorted), the man in the red tie has given information that is pragmatically inaccurate.

This is not to infer that the man in the red tie is “wrong” or “bad,” but rather than communication is not always an exact process and that misunderstandings are a component of conversation that are to be investigated and repaired.

Navigating the hidden cotext of conversations

It is unrealistic to expect people to be aware of the experiences, beliefs, motivations and interpretations of every speaker they converse with and equally unfair to ask them to do so. Having said that, there are four strategies that speakers can use to preempt and repair communication breakdowns that arise from the hidden cotext of the other participants. They are 1.) 30-seconds of empathy, 2.) I-statements, 3.) Conversation “softeners”, and 4.) Refusals.

30-seconds of empathy

At a JALT (Japan Association of Language Teachers) conference in Hokkaido, a presenter talked about a concept called “the assumed benevolence of the speaker.” The principle was to interpret the utterance of a speaker in the best possible manner until given concrete proof to the contrary. This is especially important in conversations that involve non-native speakers of the language being used.

I-statements

Statements that begin with “you,” have the potential to be interpreted as threats or accusations while statements that begin with “I” are less likely to be perceived as aggressive speech acts. Look at these examples:

You need to help more.	➡	I need more help.
You said this.	➡	I heard this.
You’re late.	➡	I need to start on time.

The former statements are likely to put the person “you” is referring to on the defensive as each statement can be interpreted as a complaint whereas the latter statements have a greater chance of inviting discussion which leads to agreement.

Conversation “softeners”

A conversation “softener” can be defined as any word or phrase that acknowledges the possibility that an utterance is open to different interpretations or may even be inaccurate. The list of “softeners” is endless but there are four that may be effective in conversations. They are:

- 1.) In my opinion. This restaurant has the best seafood *in my opinion*.
- 2.) I think. *I think*, this sport is too dangerous.

3.) To the best of my knowledge. That road is closed for construction *to the best of my knowledge*.

4.) It has been my experience that... *It has been my experience that* driving in the winter is dangerous.

Each statement on its own does not appear to encourage debate and can be perceived as an end to a conversation. Conversely, adding a “softener” is likely to give the impression that the person who made the utterance is open to the possibility that there may be different views or that someone may have more accurate information.

Refusals

No person should be forced to speak when they do not know what to say or simply do not wish to speak. Every person has the right to refuse to engage in a conversation in which they do not wish to participate. While many EFL teachers would agree with this sentiment, there appears to be few instances of this skill being taught. At my university, a group of teachers created a resource that allows students to avoid participating in conversations when they so desire. Here is a copy of that resource.

Let's remember... when you have nothing to say...

言う事（話す事）がなにもない場合はどう言えばいいか思い出しましょう

I don't know.
I haven't thought about it.

わかりません。
それについて考えたことはありません。

I don't know.
I haven't decided.



I can't think of anything.
Nothing comes to mind.

何も考えられません。
何も思いつきません。

I'd rather not say.

答えない方がいいと思うので何もいいません。
(無回答を希望する場合)

This image is printed and given to students so that they may refer to it at any time that they wish to refrain from speaking. The phrases are practiced at the beginning of each class as a speaking warm-up and to reinforce the concept of privacy as a basic human right. While some teachers expressed concern that such an activity might encourage students to avoid participating in class, the opposite appears to be true; knowing that they can opt out of conversations at any time has actually empowered students to become more involved.

A case study

The following is a description of an actual conversation in which the hidden cotext of a speaker was considered and the techniques described above were used.

The context: the setting is a combined farewell party/welcome party at a hotel in Japan with over one hundred teachers and administrators in attendance. There is ample food and alcohol. One teacher, who is liked and respected by teachers and staff alike, makes a farewell speech. Shortly after, this teacher's replacement is introduced and makes a few remarks. On the way to his seat, the replacement teacher is met by a staffer who was quite fond of the retiring teacher.

Here is a condensed version of the conversation. The letters in parenthesis refer to points discussed later in the section titled “Analysis.”

Staffer: So, you are replacing “the retiring teacher”?

Replacement teacher: Yes. I am. Nice to meet you.

Staffer: What is your field of study?

Replacement teacher: I do research in the field of Pragmatics with a focus on Cotext.

Staffer: What is Cotext?

Replacement teacher: Is the study of how people respond to the most recent utterance in a conversation.

Staffer: I have no idea what you are talking about (A).

Replacement teacher: I understand. I believe that it is not a common field of study (B).

Staffer: I don't think you know what you are talking about either.

Replacement teacher: I probably did not explain it very well (C).

Staffer: "Retiring teacher" was very active in sports. Do you play any sports?

Replacement teacher: I enjoy walking and scuba diving.

Staffer: You don't look very athletic.

Replacement teacher: Luckily for me, both hobbies are not so demanding (D).

Staffer: You look fat.

Replacement teacher: I'm working on getting into better shape (E).

Staffer: How much do you weigh.

Replacement teacher: I'd rather not say. Please excuse me (F).

Analysis

In spite of the unpleasant nature of this conversation, it proved useful in how considering the hidden cotext of a speaker and using the related techniques can defuse a distasteful situation.

(A) At this point, the replacement teacher invested a few moments into empathy. The replacement teacher hypothesized that the staffer may (1) be intoxicated as alcohol was being served, (2) poor at using English and (3) may be dealing with sorrow at losing a close friend.

(B) Here, the replacement teacher uses both I-statements and "softeners" in an attempt to lessen the growing tension.

(C) Again, the replacement teacher uses an I-statement to alleviate the tension.

(D) The replacement teacher uses another "softener" and another I-statement.

(E) The replacement teacher uses a final I-statement.

(F) The replacement teacher uses a refusal to end the encounter.

In the days following this interaction, the replacement teacher did some research into his hypothesis regarding the staffer. The assumption that the staffer was intoxicated turned out to be false. The level of English ability was not ascertained. The suggestion that the staffer was grieving the loss of a valued colleague turned out to be accurate. Despite the inaccuracies of the first two hypothesis, the simple act of considering the staffer's possible challenges likely contributed to the replacement teacher being able to employ I-statements, "softeners" before disengaging from the conversation instead of escalating the encounter through the use of aggressive replies and retorts.

In conclusion

We cannot always choose the people we meet nor control the things they may say, but we can decide how we respond to them. Considering the hidden cotext that all people bring to conversations and using the related techniques mentioned in this paper can make our reactions and responses to difficult conversations more productive and less confrontational.

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