The Role of Context in Word Meaning Construction:
A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The role of context in the interpretation of a linguistic unit has long been considered, even if from different perspectives: from the view that regards context as an extralinguistic feature, to the position that meaning is only meaning in use and therefore, pragmatics and semantics are inseparable. Still, context, both linguistic and situational, is often considered as an *a posteriori* factor in linguistic analysis. However, when language is studied in use, context always comes first, directing the process of meaning construction from the very beginning. In the present paper, a case study will provide evidence for these claims.

KEYWORDS: Context, meaning construction, lexical meaning, pragmatics, cognitive semantics

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is about context, particularly about the way in which context not only affects but *directs* construction meaning. From a Cognitive Linguistics approach, I will claim that context is not some extra information we turn to when bare semantics is not enough. On the contrary, in real uses, context always comes first, that is, before the linguistic unit can be interpreted there is a big amount of information available to participants that will direct the process of meaning construction and determine which sense, from all the possible ones, must be selected.

After a brief account of some of the main assumptions of Cognitive Linguistics regarding context, such as the impossibility of separating semantics from pragmatics, I will analyse the meaning construction of the word *black* in a specific context. The whole sentence in which the word occurs, the type of text, the images accompanying it, the situational context, etc. will be taken into consideration. In this way, the impossibility to clearly separate semantics and pragmatics in the process of meaning construction will become apparent, as well as the essential role that context plays in the process.

II. THE SCOPE OF CONTEXT IN LINGUISTICS

Context is not a new object of study in linguistics. It has long been considered an essential factor for the interpretation of linguistic expressions. As early as the 1930s, Firth had started to work on linguistic corpora, and already pointed out that "the complete meaning of a word is always contextual, and no study of meaning apart from a complete context can be taken seriously" (Firth 1935: 37). But it was around the 1970s that context became the focus of most linguistic trends. Among the several contributions from this time, there was Bransford and Johnson's (1972) claim that the understanding of a sentence does not only depend on our knowledge of the language, but also on our knowledge of the world. According to these authors, a *semantic anomaly* only occurs when it is impossible to establish a relationship between a sentence and some relevant aspect of our knowledge of the world (Bransford & Johnson, 1972, 1973). Also, Fillmore's theory of *frames* (Fillmore, 1977, 1985) and Schank and Abelson's *scripts* tried to introduce context and participants' knowledge of the world in the meaning of a linguistic unit (Schank & Abelson, 1977). Typical examples are the COMMERCIAL EVENT (Fillmore, 1977: 104 ff) and the RESTAURANT SCRIPT (Schank & Abelson, 1977: 42 ff.). Both theories involve that hearers can fill the gaps of information in a linguistic expression with their previous knowledge about what implies, for instance, eating in a restaurant (entering the restaurant, being seated, reading the menu, ordering, etc.). For example, if we read:

(1) John left the restaurant immediately after the phone call

we assume that John paid the bill before leaving, unless we are explicitly told otherwise.

After that, Pragmatics came into the scene, to openly deal with issues that had not been usually addressed in other areas of linguistics, such as context, implicatures, negotiation

of meaning, etc… In the 1980s, Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory went deeper into the participants' intention by considering inferences (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). In their theory, the same sentence can convey different meanings depending on the situation in which it is uttered, the participants, their intentions…, that is, on the context.

In all these approaches, however, context has typically been considered *a posteriori*. That is, the idea underlying most of these approaches to contextual meaning is that whenever a linguistic expression cannot be straightforwardly interpreted, we turn to context to find some extra cues in order to get the right meaning.

As a contrast, in the last twenty years, Cognitive Linguistics has always made a point of integrating context into meaning. As a matter of fact, its object of study is not language as an abstract entity, but language to mean, i.e. language in use, and it is quite obvious that real language use must necessarily involve context.

It must pointed out here that context is used here in its broadest sense, since anything around a particular word can potentially affect its meaning. In Werth's words:

> The context of a piece of language (..) is its surrounding environment. But this can include as little as the articulatory movements immediately before and after it, or as much as the whole universe, with its past and future (Werth, 1999: 78-79)

In order to reasonably delimit the scope of context, it is widely agreed that context can be divided into linguistic and situational context. Linguistic context would encompass the phonetic, morphological, syntactic or textual material surrounding to the word, whereas situational context entails anything to do with the immediate situation and the socio-cultural background in which the language event takes place. Note that it is not only the objective situational context that should be taken into account, since the individual experiences, beliefs, intentions and perceptions of the participants can also affect the way in which meaning is constructed for a particular communication event.

III. CONTEXT IN COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

It is a major claim in Cognitive Linguistics that words do not contain meanings. Instead, we use words as mere instructions to construct the meaning of a linguistic expression. Therefore, meaning is not compositional, so the meaning of an utterance cannot be reduced to the addition of the meaning of its parts, either words or morphemes (see Croft & Cruse, 2004; Dirven & Vespoor, 1998; Evans & Green, 2006; Fauconnier, 1994; Langacker, 1987, 1991, 1999; Talmy, 2000; among others).

Another tenet in Cognitive Linguistics is that polysemy is the norm. Most words are polysemous and their possible uses in different contexts are organized in radial prototypical categories. Consequently, both in the production and the interpretation of utterances, there is a continuous process of selection among the possible senses where context plays a major role. This organization in prototypical categories allows new senses for a linguistic unit to be

created and acquired without substantially altering the whole category, by simply establishing new links to any of the already existing senses in the category (Geeraerts, 1997; Geeraerts, Grondelaers and Bakena, 1994; Langacker, 1991, 1999; Taylor 1995).

Considering this, interpreting an utterance is a matter of putting together all the pieces to construct its meaning; the *pieces* can be purely linguistic, as well as any kind of individual background knowledge of the participants, memories, experiences, etc. that can affect a particular communication event. Thus, the conventional meaning of the words that conform an utterance, what traditionally has been called *literal meaning*, is but a small piece of the whole, just one of the cues that guide the process of meaning construction. All the others come from what we broadly refer to as *context*.

Cognitive Linguistics does not consider context as an addition to meaning, but an essential part of it. For cognitive semanticists every lexical concept is profiled against a base or background (Langacker, 1987, 1991). For example, the concept of FINGER can only be appropriately interpreted if profiled against another concept, HAND, which acts as a base. Thus, both base and profile together conform the meaning of a lexical item *finger*. This means that no linguistic unit can be understood isolatedly, because all lexical concepts presuppose others. Consequently, all our knowledge of the world can be seen as a huge network of interconnected concepts; a word is actually a point of access to the entire network of encyclopaedic knowledge (Langacker, 1987, 1999), just the starting point of the process of meaning construction. The range of possible associations that can be made during the process is potentially infinite.

For this reason, Cognitive Linguistics does not separate linguistic from encyclopaedic knowledge, or even semantics from pragmatics. Instead, most of what is said about meaning in Cognitive Linguistics incorporates aspects that are often regarded as extralinguistic in other approaches. In *Idealised Cognitive Models* (ICMs) (Lakoff, 1987), as well as in *domains* (Langacker, 1987), *frames* (Fillmore, 1985) or *mental spaces* (Fauconnier, 1994), there is an idealized version of the world constructed from previous experiences. It follows that no meaning is possible disregarding the participants' encyclopaedic knowledge, their perceptions, their cognitive capacities.

IV. A CASE STUDY: *BLUE IS THE NEW BLACK.*

As stated above, Cognitive Linguistics makes a point of studying the language in use. It is therefore a *usage-based* model, as it holds that a word only comes to be meaningful as a consequence of use and, consequently, context of use guides meaning construction (Evans & Green, 2006: 211 ff.). As mentioned before, context is not something we turn to when everything else, i.e. purely linguistic knowledge, fails. In real situations, context always comes first. Consider the following sentence:

(1) Blue is the new black

It is a quite straightforward sentence, very simple syntactically and its words are quite common; still it cannot be interpreted by the mere addition of the meaning of the parts. When trying to make sense of this sentence, hearers do not go through a list of possible meanings of *blue* or *black* (see below)*,* hypothetically stored in their minds as in a dictionary, to see which matches better with the rest of the sentence:

i.   black = black colour
ii.   black=excellence (as in *black label*)
iii. black=negative (as in *black future*)
iv.   black=out of light (as in *blackout*)
v.   etc…

Instead, hearers try to understand the sentence as a whole, and in order to do so, they probably search in their memory for a previous experience where this sentence could fit, a situation where blue colour could become black for some reason. Therefore, the key here is not the lack of a stored meaning, but the lack of a proper context. As soon as the place, text or situation where this sentence could belong to is found, you would have the key to construct its meaning.

We, as linguists, may be quite used to this kind of isolated sentences that we analyse thoroughly; after this, we look for the various potential contexts where they would be meaningful. However, this only happens in linguistics. In real life, context always comes first and thus, if this sentence were uttered in a real situation, all participants would already have a big amount of information about the ongoing language event and the right sense of, say, *black* would be automatically selected without going through other possible ones first.

This fact evidences another interesting aspect of meaning construction that contradicts some traditional views of compositionality: the meaning of a particular word in a sentence is only clear when we know the meaning of the whole. Certainly, there is something like a conventional core meaning for lexical items, but it is rather schematic, and, as a matter of fact, this conventional meaning is an abstraction from the different contexts where that particular word has been encountered before (Evans & Green, 2006: 213). So, once again, context comes before coded meaning.

Deidre Wilson (2004) deals with a sentence similar to this one in her paper on relevance theory and lexical pragmatics[1]:

(2) Brown is the new black.

Since her view is mainly pragmatic, it is significant the way in which Wilson rejects the idea that polysemy can be *enough* for the right interpretation of the sentence:

Appeals to polysemy are probably justified in many cases. However, since each encoded sense of a polysemous word may undergo further pragmatic

processing, polysemy does not eliminate the need for lexical pragmatics (Wilson 2004: 347)

She considers that sentence (2) is a case of category extension, where *black* would designate an *ad hoc* category, i.e. one made for the occasion, that could be defined as "staple colours in a fashion wardrobe" (Wilson, 2004: 345). Thus, the meaning of the sentence is that *brown* must now be included as a new member in the category where *black* is the prototype.

This is a very satisfactory pragmatic explanation, but from a cognitive approach, pragmatics is part of the meaning and cannot be considered as some sort of secondary automatic processing "to fine-tune the interpretation of virtually every word (Wilson, 2004: 347). My claim is that context comes first, so the process of meaning construction is already guided by context and there is no need of further fine-tuning.

To start with, sentences (1) and (2) are probably too general to be real. As a matter of fact, sentence (1) is actually a simplification of a more complex headline:

(3) Aqua Blue Crush. A first glimpse at "the new black"

It could be claimed that sentences (1) and (3) have the same meaning, but no doubt there is much more information in (3). Everything, from the specification *aqua blue*, and not just *dark blue* or *light blue*, to the inverted commas for *the new black*, provides lots of information about how to interpret the sentence. Still, these are but little clues from a purely linguistic context. The whole context of the sentence is shown in Figure 1 *(*From *Time* magazine. October 2004):
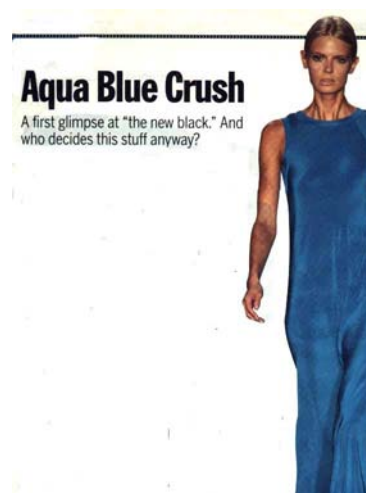

Figure 1. Magazine article

The point is, then, that before we even start reading this headline, we are already immersed in blue colour. When the reader turns over to this page, the image of a big blue gown, a model in the middle of a fashion parade and some smaller photos of other complements, also in blue, makes sense of the headline *Aqua Blue Crush.* There is no chance of considering which hue of blue is *aqua blue,* since the image reached the reader's mind

before he could even start reading. It must be also observed that even the titles of the captions, the name of the section on the top left corner of the page, as well as the initial capital letter are all blue, too, or rather *aqua blue*. So, blue colour is everywhere on this page. Besides, the FASHION domain is immediately accessed through the images and the name of the section, as much as through the register employed all throughout the article.

As for the meaning of the new black, see Figure 2 for a (partial) possible representation of the category of senses that compose the conventional meaning of *black*:
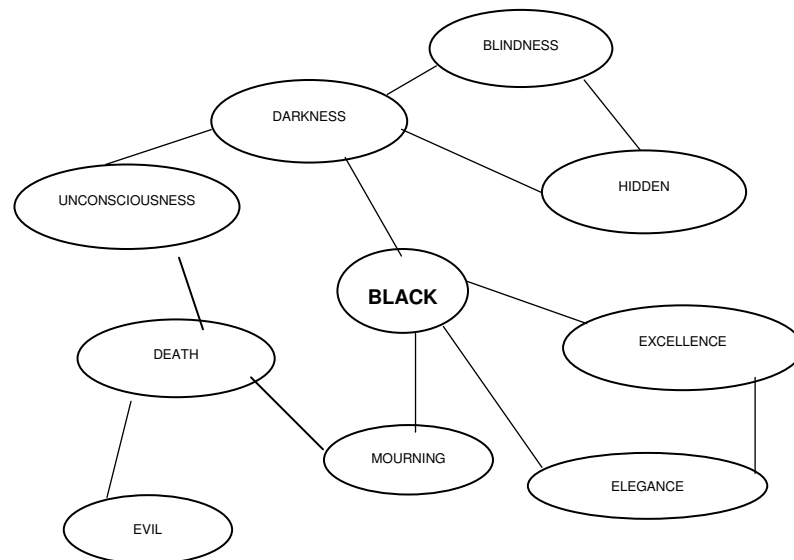

Figure 2. Category of senses for *black*

The centre of the category is occupied by the colour in the colour spectrum, the prototypical sense of the word *black*. Then, there are several other senses that can be associated to the prototype. So, for instance, black is the darkest colour, or rather the absence of colours, so black connects directly with concepts such as DARKNESS or BLINDNESS, and also indirectly, that is, by means of metaphorical projections, with the concepts of UNCONSCIOUSNESS and DEATH[2]. Besides, there is a whole network of knowledge that connects BLACK with DEATH, at least for Western cultures and so for instance, *black* also means "mourning". Moreover, and as a consequence of these associations, it has a sense of "negative" as in expressions like *black future*. On the other hand, there is also a network of links that associate *black* to the idea of EXCELLENCE, as in *black label* or *black belt* in martial arts.

However, all this is just a sort of formal, conventional analysis of possible meanings that does not reflect the real processing of meaning construction, since none of these senses will probably be contemplated by the reader of the article in the magazine. Who would think of DARKNESS, EVIL or DEATH when first starting reading this page? Since the context is

FASHION, the only senses activated by black in the headline will probably be those related to colours in clothes and in fashion. In Croft's words, contextual factors "modulate" or "conceptually highlight" different aspects of our knowledge associated with a particular entity (Croft, 1993).

What is more, it is highly unlikely that readers of the article even consider the central prototypical sense of the word *black*. As stated above, the reader is immersed in blue even before starting reading the headline, so by the time the sentence (3) is interpreted, the reader already knows that *black* does not mean "black colour", because, by looking at the photos and the whole page, it is clear that this is a text about "blue colour".

This takes us to the idea, already pointed by Croft (1993) and also by Evans (2006), that the individual meaning of the words is determined by utterance meaning rather than the other way round. "From this perspective, meaning construction involves first determining the meaning of the whole before the contributions of the parts can be established." (Evans, 2006: 516)

One last factor in meaning construction is the individual experience and background knowledge of the participants. The possibilities that you have already guessed the meaning of the expression *new black*, greatly depend on your own personal interest in fashion; you may or may not know that black is a very recurrent colour in fashion, partly because it is considered elegant, partly because it combines easily with all other colours. As a consequence, fashion conscious people are expected to have several black pieces of clothing in their wardrobes. The author of the article, anticipating for the cases in which the reader is not such a connoisseur, provides an explicit definition of black at the very beginning of the article:

(4)   one color that keeps popping up on clothes, housewares and paint chips

This explanation reinforces the intuition that the main topic of the article is that blue is everywhere, as much as it is on the page. Certainly, this sort of definition is not so common in everyday language, but it must be taken into account that this is a magazine article and in the language of the press, headlines are typically interpreted cataphorically (White *et al.* 2006).

Finally, a new sense has been added to the meaning of *black*, at least a new sense that will be maintained for as long as the reading of the article is taking place. Thus, towards the end of the article, the word *black* is used with that new sense without the need of, say, inverted commas or any further explanation:

(5)   Nancy Reagan almost single-handedly made red the new black

Sentence (5) obviously means that Nancy Reagan wore more red clothes than any other colour. This semantic extension of the word *black* might become a conventionalized sense and, therefore, become part of its meaning permanently, if not for general use, at least for the fashion field. In this sense, there is much work on the role of context and encyclopaedic knowledge in the development of new senses and semantic change, either from

a pragmatic perspective, including relevance, or from a more cognitive one (Croft, 2000; Traugott & Dasher, 2002; Tyler & Evans, 2003; Wilson, 2004).

V. CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis of the meaning of *black* in its proper context has evidenced how the meaning of an utterance goes far beyond the meaning of its parts. What is more, the interpretation of the whole is previous to the decoding of the meaning of each word, that is, it is a *Gestalt* where we perceive the whole before we come to the analysis of its components (Croft & Cruse, 2004: 100). This whole cannot be reduced to its linguistic elements, but must also include everything surrounding the language event, what we have called here its *context*.

Furthermore, it has been shown how it is impossible to distinguish between semantics and pragmatics when it comes to the study of a real language event. Any account of the meaning construction of a linguistic unit isolated from a real context can only be hypothetical and will necessarily be forced to consider a number of different possibilities where context is the only answer to decide which is the most appropriate. However, in real life, the range of senses to choose from is considerably reduced, as context is not something to take into account on a second thought, but the leading feature of discourse, and what guides the process of meaning construction. Most of the possibilities carefully analysed by linguists in a sort of "language lab", as if sterilised from pragmatic aspects, just do not exist when it comes to real use. In this sense, Evans and Tyler argue that "pragmatic meaning, rather than coded meaning, is 'real' meaning" (Evans & Green, 2006: 216). Coded meaning, as seen, for instance, in dictionaries, is in most cases nothing more than an abstraction made from all the previous contexts where the word has been used before. And this is finally why we should conclude that context is what leads the process of meaning construction.

NOTES:

[1] I must thank Prof. José Luis Oncins for drawing my attention on this paper by Wilson (and sending it to me, actually).

[2] For a full account on the connections between DEATH, BLACK, DARKNESS, see Lakoff and Turner (1989).

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