Elements of Critical Context Studies

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Abstract

In this paper, it is argued that Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) should be extended to also include what may be called Critical Context Studies (CCS). After a summary of the new theory of context, defined in terms of special mental models in episodic memory, subjectively representing the 'definition of the communicative situation' by the participants, it is argued how a critical analysis of text-context relationships is fundamental for CDS. The focus of CDS on power and domination presupposes the relevance of the ways social contexts are defined by the participants, and how such social context may influence text and talk. This theoretical paper is illustrated by a detailed analysis of fragments from a debate of 2004 held in the British House of Commons on the Hutton Report, which deals with the aftermath of the media coverage of the war in Iraq.

Keywords: *discourse studies, critical discourse studies, context model, critical context studies, parliamentary debate*

1. Introduction

In this paper, I shall use the term *Critical Discourse Studies* (CDS), instead of the well-known label *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA) so as to emphasize that we are not dealing with a specific method of analysis, but with a much broader cross-disciplinary perspective of critical studies, featuring many methods, and not only analysis but also theory and the study of the social and ethical foundations of critical inquiry (see also Van Dijk, 2008b, 2009b).

As its name also suggests, CDS has been focusing on the critical study of discourse, that is, on text, talk and their structures. Thus, Roger Fowler and his associates in what may be seen as the first booklength study in CDS, *Language and Control*, showed how syntactic structures, such as the use of active and passive voice, or nominalizations, may emphasize or de-emphasize the agency and hence the responsibility for certain actions (Fowler, Hodge, Kress & Trew, 1979). Such emphasis or mitigation may clearly have political or ideological functions, as indeed it had in the examples they analyzed. For instance by using such structures in the news or in political discourse, the authorities may emphasize their blame of black urban youths for criminal or

aggressive behavior, rather than accuse 'our' own police for its violence against, and racist provocation of such youths (Van Dijk, 1991, 1993a).

Since the early CDS books of the end of the 1970s and 1980s (such as Fairclough, 1989; Van Dijk, 1984, 1987, 1988, Wodak, 1989), thousands of critical studies of text and talk have been published, among which hundreds of books, in many countries and many languages, using many methods or approaches, ranging from detailed conversation analysis, to analysis of rhetoric, style, narrative, argumentation, topics, pronouns, politeness formula, speech acts, and so on.

Different from most other approaches in the vast field of discourse studies is that CDS is not only about the structures of text and talk, but essentially about *structures of society*, that is, about power, domination, inequality, oppression, marginalization, discrimination, and all other forms of power abuse perpetrated in and by language use, discourse, interaction and communication. Hence, CDS is specifically interested in sexism, racism, ethnicism, anti-Semitism, nationalism, and all other –isms that form the broader ideological and societal frameworks of practices of daily discrimination, marginalization, exclusion, and problematization, if not of assassination and extermination (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1993b; 2008a; Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

The fundamental aims of CDS are not merely to better understand text or talk and their functions, but also or rather to deal with more fundamental, social and political, issues and problems of which discourse is an expression, a means or a conduit on the one hand, or essentially constitutive, on the other hand. *In other words, the focus of CDS is rather on context than on text.* More than, for instance, sociolinguistics, CDS is specifically interested in analyzing very specific relations between text and context, for instance in the ways power and power abuse can be reproduced by discourse (Van Dijk, 2008a).

If we realize that CDS is rather about context or about text-context relations than about text or talk alone, then we obviously need not only theories of text and talk, but also theories of context, and theories of text-context relations.

Theories of discourse abound, from classical rhetoric, to contemporary grammatical, stylistic, conversational, narrative, or argumentative descriptions of discourse. Although there are still vast domains of discourse to explore, in the last decades we have accumulated a vast library of books and articles that study every nook and cranny of the structures and strategies of many types of written and oral discourse (see, for instance the representative selection of papers in the field of discourse studies collected in the 5 volumes of Van Dijk, 2007).

Throughout the 20th century, linguists extended the study of language use from phonology and morphology to syntax and semantics, from phonemes and words to whole sentences and finally to the structures of text and talk,

more representative of real language use. Philosophers helped us realize that beyond form and meaning, language use also means act and action, that is, speech acts. Sociologists insisted that such language use is essentially a form of social interaction, most fundamentally in the form of everyday interaction. Semioticians emphasized that discourse also involves a visual dimension, and that many forms of communication today are multimedia. Many scholars thus emphasized that language use is essentially discursive, that is, sequential, macro as well as micro, coherent, complex, multi-level, and multi-media. At the same time, psychologists showed that such complex discourses can only be produced and understood on the basis of vast amounts of knowledge, and that language use should not only be studied concretely and empirically as abstract structures, as linguists do, nor only as actual interaction as conversational analysts do, but also in terms of strategic cognitive processes and mental representations. In other words, discourse analysis has many dimensions and levels, and its structures are accounted for by many theories and concepts, which are increasingly being integrated.

Despite the interest of psychologists and sociologists in discourse 'itself', and despite the recognition of the increasing relevance of cognition, interaction, institutions, groups and group relations and their relationships to discourse, what is still lacking is an explicit theory of what constitutes the *context* of such discourses. In this paper, I shall summarize my ideas about such a theory, and especially show how such a theory is relevant for critical discourse studies. Indeed, we may call this particular branch of CDS 'critical context studies', here abbreviated as CCS (for details of my new theory of context, see Van Dijk, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b).

2. Context

The commonsense notion of 'context', widely used in the media and the social sciences, implies that a phenomenon or problem is focused on, studied or analyzed in relation to some kind of *environment.* Often this is a geographical environment, a place, country or region, such as the study of poverty, or AIDS or leadership in the African, Spanish or suburban 'context'. Context here often takes the meaning of 'background', that is, a set of explanatory factors that may help understand or explain the phenomenon or problem under study. To view problems or issues 'in their context' implies an emphasis on the fact that they are not isolated, autonomous or independent, but that their structures or properties are controlled by broader mechanisms, processes or structures. Thus, many thousands of books in the social sciences feature the notion of 'context' in their title, so as to show that the study seeks to understand a phenomenon against a broader explanatory environment, surroundings or setting.

In linguistics and discourse analysis, the term 'context' more specifically refers to surrounding words, sentences, text or talk of a given linguistic structure, on the one hand, or with the social situation, event or encounter in

which language is being used, on the other hand (see, e.g., Auer & Di Luzio, 1992; Duranti & Goodwin, 1992; Fetzer, 2004, 2007).

Contrary to most uses in the social sciences, the use of 'context' in linguistics and discourse studies usually refers to situational micro-contexts. Such micro-contexts or communicative situations are typically defined in terms of face to face interaction of a few participants at a specific time and place, rather than understood as the broader societal structure defined by organizations, institutions, groups, group relations, cities or countries among other social or geographical structures or dimensions of 'environments'.

Thus, in discourse studies when we deal with the context of conversation, we intuitively rather think of the participants and their relevant social roles and of how setting aspects, such as properties of place or timing may influence talk. When we examine the context of news reports in the press, we rather think of the everyday strategies of news gathering of journalists, of interviewing, and actual news writing and its institutional constraints, such as routines or editorial meetings or phone calls with sources, and of such places as the newsroom, and timing constraints such as deadlines.

When we deal with macro-contexts, we take a broader perspective and focus on institutional and organizational constraints, as well as those of group relations, domination and power abuse, for instance on what happens in the courtroom, or what happens when women and men, old and young, or rich and poor are engaged in talk, or written about in texts. Such a broader, institutional, organizational or societal background is taken into account rather indirectly, namely as being related to the local situation, interaction or social practices at the micro-level of description. Hence micro and macro contexts are mutually related in several ways, for instance as constitutive, controlling or enabling each other. In most of these studies, however, the use of these notions of context is more or less intuitive, for instance, as some kind of *social environment* of text or talk.

The fundamental problem, however, is how to put constraints on such a 'contextual' or 'situational' study. Indeed, how do we know or decide where to begin and where to stop such an analysis, since obviously it may begin with details of the interaction, the properties of speakers or of settings, but may stretch to such vast societal 'contexts' as contemporary capitalism, neoliberalism, globalization, patriarchy, postmodernism, and so on. That is, if contextual analysis should be relevant, it is crucial not only to study possible contexts, but especially to *limit* and hence to *define* them.

The standard solution to the problem of the infinity of context has been provided by the crucial notion of *relevance*. Contexts are only those properties of micro or macro social environments that are *relevant* for discourse. This is of course fine when we are able to define and describe relevance, as Sperber & Wilson (1995) tried to do in a more formal approach to relevance. One obvious (socio)linguistic way to do this may be in terms of *covariation*: A situational factor is relevant when its presence or absence co-

varies with changes in the structures or strategies of discourse. Thus, age is often a relevant factor of context, as a property of speakers or recipients, when for instance young or old age associates with different forms of talk, for instance specific politeness forms, pronouns, and maybe even topics of conversation. Indeed, it seems quite plausible that we talk differently to a child than to an adult, and differently to old people than to younger people. The same is true for gender, class, social position, and other aspects of social structure, although sociolinguistic studies often do not find the kind of systematic variation most people would expect in language use (Macaulay, 2004).

Although a decent relevance theory of contextualization is a step forward, it leaves many problems unsolved. Indeed, age or gender, and a host of other social 'variables' often co-vary with some forms of text or talk, but not always and in each situation. Does this mean that they sometimes are part of a context and sometimes not? Does this mean that contexts are not well-defined in the first place, and that many vary freely? Are there context features that always influence discourse, and others that do so often or only sometimes? And what is the nature of the 'influence' or the covariation in the first place? It is causal, or rather rational, objective or subjective? Being a woman nearly always influences the phonetics of speaking – we usually can distinguish a man's voice from a woman' voice – but that is obviously another, a biological, kind of influence than the social kind of influence of being a speaker or recipient of female gender, as it may become obvious in sexist talk.

In other words, a theory of context needs to go beyond a mere notion such as relevance, and needs to account for a more complex way to deal with 'covariation', conditioning or causation between social situation and discourse structure.

3. Contexts as Mental Models

3.1. Towards a new theory of context

The main argument for a new theory of context is the fact that contexts — as they are conceptualized in the humanities and the social sciences and as we discussed them above — *do not condition text or talk at all,* and hence should not be called con-texts in the first place. Indeed, little argument is needed to show that people's age, gender, social position, power, group or institution cannot *as such* directly influence how they speak or write. This point of view is easiest to demonstrate by showing the absurdity of its obvious consequence: If this were the case, all people of the same age, gender, social position, etc. would speak or write in the same way, which they obviously do not.

What is missing is a crucial *mediating interface* that allows for personal variation and avoids the fatal flaw of social determinism. In other words, we

somehow need to combine the powerful explanatory power of the various social constraints, on the one hand, and the equally unmistaken presence of situational and individual diversity and subjectivity as a component in the explanation of discursive variation.

The obvious way to do this is to introduce a notion that avoids the objectivist or determinist influence of social structure, and emphasizes the *subjective construction of such social constraints by the participants themselves.* This way of formulating the notion of context has many attractive theoretical and analytical properties (for detail see Van Dijk, 2008b, 2009a).

First of all, such a formulation obviously accounts for a more realistic notion of *relevance.* That is, relevance is not something abstract or objective, but a subjective construct of participants: something is relevant *for* someone.

Secondly, this way of formulating the concept of context is consistent with basic principles of *constructionism* in modern cognitive and social psychology, ethnomethodology, conversation analysis and ethnography: social categories are not something objectively 'out there', but social constructs, shared by groups or communities (Burr, 2003).

Thirdly, such an account emphasizes the local, situated nature of social phenomena, as contingent practices of social members.

Fourthly, the notion is consistent with subjectivist and phenomenological approaches in philosophy, psychology and the social sciences that emphasize the fact that the phenomena of social reality are relevant for social members only in as far as they are interpreted as such by them: Social reality is real for people if it is *defined* as real by its consequences (Luckman, 1978; Schutz, 1972).

In other words, our informal definition of the notion of context is the following: a subjective construction or definition by participants of the social situation in which they are discursively interacting. This is the crucial definition of context, but it needs more theoretical body, since the notions 'subjective construction' and 'definition' are still very vague.

3.2. Context models

To make these vague notions more precise, we shall have recourse to a powerful notion from psychology, that of a *mental model.* A mental model is a personal, subjective, interpretation of an event or situation as it is represented in Episodic Memory (Johnson-Laird, 1983; Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983; Van Oostendorp & Goldman, 1999). Episodic Memory (EM) is the part of Long Term Memory where people store the (interpretations of their) personal experiences (Tulving, 1983). In that respect, EM is some kind of autobiographical memory store, where we accumulate the myriad of the subjective interpretations (definitions, etc.) of our daily life's events – most of which are not longer retrievable later, because in isolation they are no longer relevant later (Neisser & Fivush, 1994).

Usually we generalize and abstract from such experiences of specific events, and thus *learn* from our experiences, as do other people in society, so that such more general knowledge becomes relevant for interaction and discourse. It is thus that we know about breakfast, going to school or work, shopping, and a host of other activities of our social life, and how to participate in them as competent social and cultural members. Below, I shall deal with this kind of general *knowledge*, as it is socially shared in groups and communities

Distinct from such general, socially shared knowledge — assumed to be stored in Semantic Memory, for instance in the form of scripts (Schank & Abelson, 1977) — mental models are subjective, specific, ad hoc, and unique, as are all our experiences represented in autobiographical episodic memory. Because the communicative situations we traditionally define as context are very much everyday experiences, mental models are ideal to represent them. We call such episodic representations of unique communicative events *context models* (Van Dijk, 1999; 2008b, 2009b).

Our main thesis is that discourse is not directly influenced, let alone determined, by local social situations or global societal structures themselves, but rather by these mental models of communicative events as construed by the participants, that is by context models. Context models account for the way participants *plan*, *interpret* and *define* the communicative situation as it is now, ongoingly, relevant for them.

These context models are the missing *interface* we were looking for. They mediate between social situations and discourse. It is not gender, class or age of participants that controls how they speak, but rather how they *define* themselves as such, how they *experience* their identity, and how they may do (possibly differently) in each situation. *Context models account for these personal, flexible, situated definitions of the communicative situation.* They uniquely combine personal experiences, identities and goals of language users, with more general social aspects of communication, such as the fact that language users may be members of specific groups, communities or organizations. In this sense, context models are both personal and social.

Despite their subjective properties, context models of course have a *social* basis, that is, they are rooted in socially shared and interactionally acquired knowledge about communicative situations. This fundamental social property of context models explains how we learn them, how we partly share them with others, and why despite their subjective aspects they are not totally idiosyncratic. If participants would have context models that are totally different, mutual comprehension and interaction would be impossible.

On the other hand, the occurrence of communication conflicts also reminds us that context models are not always the same: Different participants by definition have different definitions of the 'same' communicative situation, for instance a different definition of their identity or goals, a different perspective or point of view, a different location, and of

course different knowledge — which makes text and talk necessary in the first place.

Although the contents of context models may be unique, their *schematic structures* and *categories* are socially shared. Thus, context models always need to have a category of spatiotemporal Setting or Participants and their identities, roles or relations, and such categories are standard in a given culture, and not an ad hoc construct of individual participants. In other words, the structure of context models need not be invented in each situation.

Indeed, this is also true for the usually variable *contents* of these context categories. Context models are seldom construed from scratch at the beginning of text and talk. As is the case for most action and interaction, people also plan communicative events, and this means that they often already construe such models long before the actual communicative event, especially in institutional settings. When I give a lecture I already know beforehand something about the setting (where and when I have to talk), the participants (first of all my Self), as what I give such a lecture (e.g., as a professor and discourse analyst), for whom and with what goals. I may have to negotiate some of these anticipated definitions of the communicative situation, and adapt my provisional model (plan) to local constraints, but large part of the context model is already in place before I even begin to deliver my lecture. The same is true for many other forms of institutional or organizational interaction and communication.

In order to avoid confusion, we must emphasize that context models are subjective representations of the communicative situation in which we participate and talk, write, read or listen. They do not represent what we talk *about*, that is some person, act, event or political situation. What we talk about, or refer to, is also represented in subjective models, but to distinguish these models from the contextual or *pragmatic* models we deal with in this paper, these 'referential' models may be called *semantic* — they represent what we refer to or think *about*, not what we are now doing when we are talking, writing, reading or listening.

I emphasize this difference here, because these different kinds of models are quite often confounded, as is more generally the case for semantics and pragmatics. For instance, a reporter may have a (semantic) model of a bomb explosion in Iraq, and such a (subjective) mental model may be the basis of the news report. But the pragmatic model of the news production context is defined in terms of the here and now of the Setting of the journalists, and involves the writer as a journalist, engaging in the social acts of newswriting and with the goal of informing the public. The same semantic model about the bomb explosion may also be used by the same person when he tells about it in a different communicative situation, for instance to colleagues or friends in a bar. In that case the semantic model would be the same, but the context model different, and hence also the discourses in these two different communicative situations: a news report is very different from an everyday

conversational story. In sum, discourses are controlled both by underlying semantic models (which define what the speaker is talking about) as well as by pragmatic context models (which define when and where, as what, with whom and why the speaker in speaking, among other situational parameters).

3.3. Cognitive properties of context models

In this paper, I shall not further elaborate on the many cognitive properties of mental models, but only assume that context models *control* the communicative action. Without such control, people are unable to act, interact or speak in a way that is interactionally and socially relevant or understandable. Without context models, language users are unable to adapt what they say to the communicative situation, and hence are unable to speak *appropriately*. This means that a theory of context also is part of the foundation of *pragmatics*, as the theory that defines appropriateness (Van Dijk, 2008c).

Although often planned ahead, context models do not remain the same during text or talk. On the contrary, they must ongoingly be adapted to each moment of the current situation, if only because the knowledge of the recipients is constantly changing. That is, context models are *dynamic* structures that are constantly *updated*.

The crucial role of context models in actual discourse processing is to *control* the production of text and talk, and especially their *variable*, context-dependent structures.

Context control is complex and takes place at all levels of text and talk. First of all, context models control *meaning*: They select from semantic event models (the information we have about some event) what information may be or must be expressed, and what may be left implicit while known to the recipients. Then they control many of the *grammatical structures* and other variable ways such information may be formulated and organized in actual discourse. Conversely, context models of recipients control how text and talk is understood by these recipients — possibly quite differently from the intended discourse model of the speaker.

Since such context control of discourse takes place 'on line', language users need to maintain at last part of their context model in working memory. Due to the limited storage capacity of working memory (of 7 plus or minus two units), this means that context models must be relatively simple, and consist of only some of the basic categories as mentioned above, organized in a simple schema that can be strategically applied in many social situations.

3.4. Culture and the Contents of Contexts

In this paper, I also shall avoid the complex and more substantial question what context models are 'made' of: what are their socially relevant but culturally variable categories? I have assumed, along quite classical lines, that such categories as age, gender, ethnicity, position, power, knowledge and

goals are very often relevant in everyday life, interaction and hence in discourse. The same is true for such well-known setting categories as place, time, circumstances, as well as the kind of actions we are being engaged in, among several other categories. We may also assume that some of these categories are quite general, if not universal, such as those of setting, knowledge, and a few social categories, such as age, gender and power, but others may be culturally variable.

Thus, in some cultures more than in others it might be relevant that speaker and recipients are kin, friends or of the same village, for instance, or whether they have known each other for just a short time or a long time. Linguistically and discursively interesting, of course, is that such categories *as they are subjectively represented as relevant by the participants* actually do influence people's 'ways of speaking', including different lexical or syntactic style, pronouns, politeness formula, turn taking rules, rhetorical figures, overall discourse organization, among a host of other discourse structures. And as suggested above, we may be pretty sure that there are properties of events that are socially relevant, but not discursively. This means that they are part of the social situation, but not part of the context as defined here, as is typically the case for the clothes or body shape of participants, or many of the properties of the room, building or street where we communicate or interact.

4. Critical Context Analysis

Against the background of the theory of context sketched above, we now need to move to the main point of this paper: How do we deploy such a new theory within a more general, critical framework? Does it make sense to speak of 'Critical Context Studies' in the same way we have been speaking of Critical Discourse Studies? And if so, what exactly does such a new perspective offer, theoretically as well as analytically, and especially also practically – since the main criteria of CDS in my view always will be whether critical studies will be socially relevant, for instance in understanding and resisting power abuse in society?

In other to examine such a special role of the new context theory, we first need to realize what CDS is all about, namely a special focus on the role of discourse in the (re)production of domination in society. This is a very tall order, obviously, and can only be carried out when we attend to the details of both discourse as well as social structure. Thus, we may want to know, more specifically, how discourse is involved in the reproduction of sexism or racism, or how power in organizations is established and maintained, and indeed how the organization is discursively produced and reproduced. Even more specifically, we may ask whether specific words, metaphors, pragmatic markers, arguments or conversational moves may more prominently contribute to everyday sexist or racist discourse, for instance in the press parliamentary debates or textbooks. We thus get down from the general issue

of societal domination as a form of power abuse of groups, to the much more specific, more micro, questions of how group members actually are 'doing domination' by specific properties of text and talk.

Although we are still far from a moderately complete theory of discourse or conversation structures, the many thousands of studies in these areas during the last 40 years or so, have contributed much to our insights in such structures, from the classical ones of phonology and syntax, through those of semantics and narrative or argumentation schemas, to the pragmatic ones of speech acts or politeness, all the way to those of interaction and cognition. But although many contemporary theories of language and discourse are functional in intention if not in actual practice, we know much less about the text-context interface. Thus, we might speak of gender, ethnicity, age, class or position in more or less intuitive ways, and take these as (constructed) elements of context models, but this of course does not yet mean that we thus capture the profound ways such social constructs interact with the complex ways people manage text and talk. In other words, a theory of text-context relations is still in its infancy, especially where the social relevance of its notions is concerned.

Yet, despite this fundamental incompleteness of the theory of context as well of the meta-theory of critical discourse studies, we may assume that CDS precisely is about the kind of text-context relationships that are important in a theory of context. Thus, 'gender' will be a crucial notion both in a theory of context and in a meta-theory of CDS because not only gender is (also) construed and reproduced discursively, but also because gender inequality, and hence domination, is so reproduced. The same is true for age, race and class, among other fundamental categories.

So, a context theory of gender may contribute to our insight of how gender is actually 'done' by women and men, how concepts of men and women may control pronouns, politeness forms, storytelling and rhetorical moves, among others, and vice versa, how ways of speaking may locally contribute to 'being' feminine or masculine. On the other hand, and based on such insights, a *critical context analysis* would need to focus specifically on those gender aspects of context that have to do with forms of domination and their resulting inequality.

So, whereas general discourse studies may be interested in gender or race and their reproduction in text and talk, CDS is typically interested in sexism and racism. Moreover, Critical Context Studies (CCS) focuses not only on sexist or racist language use, but examines in more detail how such language use relates to sexist or racist situations or whole communicative events. Indeed, most uses of languages are not sexist or racist in isolation, but only 'in context': it depends who is speaking, as what, to whom, with what intention, and so on. Well-known is the use of 'nigger' as a form of address among black youths, and in most of such cases obviously not a racist term. Women among themselves may say things that if men would say the same

things in specific situations and addressed to women this would no doubt be interpreted as sexist. *These few examples suggest that a sound critical study of discourse cannot be limited to a study of the structures of text and talk in isolation, and necessarily needs to relate these to relevant aspects of the social situation as it is represented by participants in their context models.*

The relevant question is: How? Indeed, contexts as mental models cannot be observed directly, as is the case for any cognitive notion. And in the same way as in psychology and other sciences many phenomena and structures are studied that are not directly observable, but only through their manifestations, expressions or consequences, we also can study context models only through the ways they are expressed explicitly, commented upon, referred to – indeed as ways of understanding the social situation – and through their consequences for talk and text, that is, through the 'contextual' analysis of structures. And since analysts are also language users, and daily participate in social situations, they have of course social as well as cognitive experiences about what kind of things their interpretations of social situation are.

Despite their mental nature, it should be emphasized that contexts are no less 'hidden' or 'unobservable' than other phenomena studied in linguistics, conversation analysis and discourse analysis, such as 'meaning' 'interpretation' or 'action'. The same is true for any kind of abstract structure or strategy (syntax, narrative, argumentation, metaphor, turn taking) studied through its concrete, ad hoc, manifestations. From a cognitive point of view, these are *all* mental representations — just as from a social point of view these are all (parts of) social practices.

Critical Context Studies not only focuses on the ways text structures are indirectly controlled by domination, and not only on how such control needs to be accounted for in typical contextual terms (such as those of gender, age or race), but also how communicative situations themselves, interpreted as contexts, may be constrained as a *consequence* of domination, and thus contribute to the reproduction of domination.

For instance, men not only may discriminate against women by the ways they talk about them (e.g. on the basis of sexist semantic models or attitudes), but also by their ways of constraining the very participation of women (and in what roles and relationships) in the communicative situation itself. Such marginalization or exclusion may actually be enacted through interruptions or refusals to yield the floor in a conversation, but also need to be described in terms of the very situational structures themselves, as they are represented in the mental models of the participants, that is, in their context models.

Thus, a critical context analysis in CDS studies needs to attend to who must/may speak, as what, to whom, when, and under what conditions, and may thus account for various kinds of marginalization and exclusion in discourse. For instance, one may have access to the media by participating in a talk show, but much of such access depends on the control of the program

leader or the host over the topics, turns, timing, style and many other aspects of the interaction. One may be recognized and ratified as a competent participant because of one's academic titles and position, but actually being constrained and marginalized when one's critical knowledge is ridiculed, as is the case for many critical scholars in the mass media.

In sum, a critical context analysis focuses on the ways power abuse, domination and inequality are specifically expressed, enacted and reproduced in the contexts of texts and talk – that is, the way participants represent, understand, project or plan communicative events.

5. Context and Domination

After these first observations on the ways contexts of political debates in British parliament are represented and discursively indexed by the speakers, we need to turn more explicitly to the more 'critical' aspects of such an analysis. That is, we need to show how contexts as represented and as controlling interaction and discourse *also need a description and an account in terms of power and power abuse*. That is, discourses not only express, enact or legitimate power and domination, but also the ways participants construe the very communicative situation in their context models, as suggested above. For instance, who is allowed to speak in Parliament, as a member of which party, and for how long, are all aspects which also have to do not only with participant roles (Prime Ministers, MPs, Speaker of the House) and their associated rights and duties, but also with questions of access, control and power.

For instance, Tony Blair, both as leading speaker in this debate, and as Prime Minister, may not only take advantage of his speaking rights and position to answer critical questions the way he wants to, and not only may thus legitimate his action and policies in the Iraq war and the Kelly affair, but also may be heard to manipulate, hide, lie, evade critical questions, and so on. Let us examine these 'critical' aspects of the debate and its context somewhat more closely.

We shall *not* further analyze those aspects of power that are within the boundaries of parliamentary rules (and hence not an abuse of power *in this communicative situation)*, such as the interventions of the Speaker about who may speak, for how long, and whether some remark is "in order" or not – e.g., on the topic of the debate, or not -- among other ways to exercise his institutional power. Nor shall we further analyze the obvious aspects of power implied by the access of MPs to this debate – that they can interpellate Tony Blair, and not other citizens. And finally, we shall not examine either the questions of party power that are involved in the decisions who of which party will be able to intervene in the debate – as also the initial decision of the Speaker of the House about the time allocation for speeches of backbenchers suggests. In other words, there are many aspects of social or political power that are the 'normal' dimensions of a parliamentary

democracy, and that are not abuses of power, and hence not a privileged focus of critical context studies.

One aspect of parliamentary rules and norms that *is* relevant here and in need of attention is the fact that Tony Blair, as Prime Minister, is first speaker, and thus able to define the current action, and to explain what he will (not) do:

> **(1). The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair):** This is a debate on the Hutton report, but I know that the House will want to range wider than the report itself. I intend to cover four issues: the report itself and its findings; the inquiry into the issue of intelligence announced yesterday; the threat of weapons of mass destruction more generally; and the current situation in Iraq. I shall try to take as many interventions as possible, to allow questions on those issues.

The privilege of being first speaker and thus to define the situation, the speech event (a debate), its topics, and what speech acts (questions) that will be allowed is of course based on the considerable power of the Prime Minister. Note, again, that this is not just a question of political knowledge of the analyst, but a relevant and hence contextually represented knowledge of participants Blair and the MPs he addresses. It is also because of this shared knowledge that no MP (or the Speaker of the House) challenges Blair's right to speak first, and to decide that he shall "allow" questions on the issues he mentions. The use of "allow" presupposes this contextually relevant political power of the Prime Minister.

But let us consider some other aspects of power and domination in this debate, and how context analysis may explain specific features of the speeches of the participants.

Perhaps the main point of this long debate is Tony Blair's claim that the Hutton Report had totally vindicated the government's position that it had not doctored the intelligence reports on Iraq so as to legitimate the war. He does so in many ways throughout the debate, and most explicitly at the beginning, in the following way, which I shall cite at length:

> **(2)**. The report itself -- clear, forensic and utterly comprehensive in its analysis of the evidence -- is the best defence to the charges of Government whitewash, often from the same people who just over a week ago were describing Lord Hutton as a model of impartiality, wisdom and insight. I simply make two points to those who cannot accept that Lord Hutton could acquit the Government of dishonesty. On the principal point, Lord Hutton confirmed the conclusion that the Intelligence and Security Committee had found before him, and the Foreign Affairs

> Committee before it, and the Government published responses to their reports yesterday. It would have been impossible from the evidence, frankly, to find otherwise.
> I read that there are some who still say that the broadcast by Mr. Gilligan was 90 per cent. right. Actually, it was 100 per cent. wrong. The claim by Mr. Gilligan was that, a) the intelligence about Saddam using some weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes of an order to do so was inserted into the dossier {768} not by the Joint Intelligence Committee, as I told Parliament, but by Downing street; b) that this was done against the express wishes of the intelligence community; c) that it was done by Downing street,
>
> "probably knowing that it was wrong";
>
> and, furthermore, d) that the source of this unprecedented charge was
>
> "a senior official in charge of drawing up the dossier".
>
> In fact, every single one of those claims was wrong -- not a little wrong, 100 per cent. wrong. The reason why Lord Hutton found as much was that not a single shred of evidence was presented to his inquiry that would have justified an alternative finding. The same is true for the Intelligence and Security Committee and for the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Blair says and does many things here, and most interesting for us are of course the political things he does, and the political vindication he claims the Hutton report implies for his government. First, against the opinion of most citizens, even of his own party, Blair used his parliamentary majority, that is, his political power to go to war, and it would not be exaggerated to say that such was an abuse of power. Second, as appeared later, the main argument to go to war was the alleged possession of WMD by Saddam Hussein (which later reports, also of the CIA, showed to be a figment of the imagination). In other words, for many MPs and others Blair's policy was based on faulty intelligence, if not on a lie. Third, the government used all its power to denounce the BBC and its journalist, Gilligan – who had interviewed arms expert Kelly – for having made a wrong accusation of the government. Fourth, the government had the power to appoint an independent judge.

In the current communicative situation of the parliamentary debate these various forms of power also transpire, first of all, as we have noted, by the fact that Blair as Prime Minister may speak first, and hence define at length the main topics and issues for the debate. Thus, obviously, a main topic is the Hutton report itself. However, note that in this passage, Blair is not simply

referring to or describing the report, but doing so primarily for pragmatic reasons, that is, as a function for his own strategy of defense and vindication. Since there apparently are still people who doubt the government, as Tony Blair also recognizes in his intervention, he still needs to defend himself. The best way to do so is through the independent Hutton report, that is, using the authority of an independent judge and his inquiry. This argument is backed up, first of all, by praising the report ("clear, forensic, and utterly comprehensive"), as well as Judge Hutton. The latter praise is however even more credible when Blair formulates it in the attributed words of his very opponents: "a model of impartiality, wisdom and insight". Note that this is not, so to speak, a *semantic* argument, for instance merely about something being true or false, but a *pragmatic* argument, that is an argument supporting Blair's speech act of defending himself (he explicitly uses the term of the speech act: "the best defense"). Strictly speaking, the defense is a fallacy, if Blair claims that something is true (and that he was right) just because Lord Hutton says so, which would be a fallacy of authority. However, since there is consensus about the authority of Hutton, the argument is of course valid, and hence also that support for his defense. In fact, the authority argument is triple here, because apart from Hutton, Blair also cites the Intelligence and Security Committee, and the Foreign Affairs Committee.

But Blair does more. Not only he is defending himself, but he also is attacking his opponents, described as "those who cannot accept that Lord Hutton could acquit the Government of dishonesty", by matching their opinions directly with those of Hutton, and since by consensus Hutton must be right, the opinions of the opposition must be misguided. And Blair not only claims that his opponents are wrong from the start, but that they remain incredulous despite the Hutton findings and those of two other committees. That is, not only are they wrong, but they are also obstinate or stupid. He then specifies that accusation by showing that his opponents, just like Mr. Gilligan were not a bit right, but not right at all, and hence totally (100%) wrong, after repeating the claims of Gilligan and rejecting each of them.

Blair does not merely defend himself and legitimate his Iraq policy by praising the Hutton report and its findings and saying his opponents were wrong, but also emphasizes the accusation by pointing out that every claim of his opponents proved to be wrong. He summarizes this very point ("every single one of these claims was wrong"), and emphasizes this again with the Hutton findings as described by Blair ("not a single shred of evidence") as well as those of the committees. In this passage we find the usual rhetorical emphasis (by repeated arguments, hyperboles, repetition, and so on) on what the opponents did wrongly.

If we contextually analyze these arguments and this rhetoric beyond what its actually said by Blair, and interpret it in light of the participants' knowledge and beliefs, also about the current communicative situation, we find that what Blair does, pragmatically speaking, is first of all defending and

vindicating himself, and secondly that he uses his own power and the authority of others to attack his opponents by totally discrediting them.

Apart from his vindication, this is of course the main *political* act in the current situation, namely to *discredit the political opposition*, also in his party, not only in the Kelly affair, but also with respect to the war in Iraq. I call this a *political implicature*, because in the present communicative event the participants may infer this from their general political knowledge as well as from the specific knowledge about the current communicative situation (who is speaking, to whom, with what intentions, etc.).

One of the other aspects of this intervention that may thus be analyzed critically is that by aligning Hutton and the committees to his defense in the Kelly case, and by rhetorically emphasizing the innocence of himself and his government as to the accusation of having doctored of the intelligence dossier, he makes himself generally more credible, that is, also for having decided to go to war. He uses a victory in a much smaller case in order to politically garner more credit in the major case — whether or not he had lied, or acted wrongly when going to war.

Again, given the knowledge of the participants, this would be another valid political implicature, but this time not based on the local context (as when he is attacking his opponents in the House of Commons), but in a more global political context.

We see that at all levels of analysis of this debate we are able to make inferences about local as well as global political implicatures. These implicatures can only be derived from the combined text-in-context, that is, taking into account shared knowledge of the participants about who is speaking, as what, to whom, and with what intentions and knowledge.

Since the main strategies being accomplished here are the legitimatization of his political acts, the defense of his credibility and hence the confirmation of his power as the leader, all this is part and parcel of the power play Tony Blair engages in. In this case he badly needs to emphasize not only why he is 'right' and 'good' (or at least not 'bad', e.g. when he had lied), and not only that his opponents are 'wrong', but at the same time legitimates his power, and hence deserves to remain the leader. This is a classical case of attack and defense of political leadership, and all those present know this, and act and speak accordingly. Since large part of the debate also is a legitimation of the war, Blair later adds further arguments to show why the war is 'just'. In that case he emphasizes the sufferings of the Iraqi population and the bad nature of Saddam Hussein, and thus avoids focusing on the misguided western intelligence about WMD, the lies and other fundamental errors of the USA and its allies.

In sum, by making a big case out of being 'right' in a local affair (the Kelly affair and the role of the BBC), Blair is able to set up a smokescreen that will take away the attention from where he was possibly 'wrong' in global affair, namely the war in Iraq.

Such a contextual interpretation of the political implicatures of what is going on in the House is not just speculation, but need to be backed up by both the discourse structures – what is actually said by the participants – and the obvious structures of the current communicative event as represented by the participants in their context models. That Blair needs a lot of arguing and convincing to do to persuade his opponents also of the main point, namely, his going to war in Iraq, is also explicitly expressed in this debate by himself in the following passage:

> **(3).** The Prime Minister: I think that overall we gave a balanced picture to people. Those who have looked into the whole question of whether the dossier was altered in any improper way have found that we did not do so. I will come to what was being said in September 2002, not only by myself, but by everyone else. Issues arise now, because of the evidence that has been given by David Kay, who headed the Iraq survey group. The whole reason for the inquiry that was announced yesterday is that we accept that some things may have been got wrong. We cannot have a situation?[Interruption.] I somehow feel that I am not being entirely persuasive in {771} certain quarters. We cannot have a situation in which we end up translating what we know today back into the context of what was known and thought in September 2002, and then reaching a judgment. I shall come to that point in a moment.

Also in this fragment Blair continuously repeats that his government did not act improperly, but now adds a qualification: that the government did not act improperly given what it knew *then.* He then admits, of course in the usual mitigated, euphemistic way "that some things may have been got wrong".

This important concession (because that is how Blair's utterance is interpreted by the MPs and represented as such in their context models) obviously provokes a lot of interruptions in the House, so that Blair needs to resort to the self-ironic pragmatic meta-comment "I somehow feel that I am not being entirely persuasive in certain quarters".

We also see that in the last part of this passage he again argues why an admission that some things might have "gotten wrong" does not imply that the government was wrong *then,* because it did not know then what it knows now (such as the evidence of U.S. expert Mr. Kay). Blair actually uses the word 'context' to argue that 'being wrong' or 'right' depends on context, that is, the kind of knowledge one has at a specific moment — which suggests that language users also have explicit knowledge about contexts of speech. Again, the political implicature here is to defend his government and to

justify the decision to go to war because of what we knew in early 2003. A related implicature is then spelled out by Blair himself:

> **(4).** The Prime Minister : I have made it clear throughout that not merely do I take full responsibility for the {772} decision to go to war, but that our security services -- I shall come to this later -- do a magnificent job for this country. I hope that nobody in the House doubts their worth to the security of our people, or that they are immensely dedicated public servants.

Thus, once the condition is satisfied that at the moment Blair acted upon what he (claims) he knew, he cannot draw the conclusion that he was *then* justified for going to war, and hence *now* entitled to take the responsibility. That the intelligence services, however, *did* get it wrong on the particular issue of the WMD is in this case obscured by making a *general* positive evaluation of the security services.

We thus have another example of the general ideological strategy of emphasizing our good things, and deemphasizing our bad things (Van Dijk, 1998). One of the interactional moves to enact the latter part of the strategy is to use a positive generalization in order to mitigate the effect of a specific negative act, as when one excuses an occasional error of someone by saying that he or she is (generally) a good man or woman. The added value of this strategy is that it is hard to reply to, because obviously no one in parliament will stand up and say that the security services and civil servants are *in general* doing a terrible job.

Note that the evidence of political implicatures is obviously not in the text itself, because in that case we would call them (semantic or pragmatic) implications. Indeed, they would not follow from the discourse when someone else, on another occasion, would say the same things. Rather, the implicatures can be inferred only from the context models the current communicative situation (and hence they may hold for some people — say the MPs and the critical analyst — and not for others) in which the Prime Minister is speaking and addressing the House of Commons, and given the specific intentions and knowledge of the participants about the Kelly affair and Iraq.

An important critical dimension of this and many of his other interventions in this debate is what Blair does *not* say, namely that there actually never was a proof of WMD in Iraq also in early 2003, and that there were serious doubts about U.S. and other intelligence (such as among the very UN inspectors led by Hans Blix) that claimed that Saddam Hussein had such weapons. As we also saw in his strategic reply to the critical question posed by Clare Short, examined above, Blair no longer insists on the WMD as he did in his legitimation of the war, but on the fact that Saddam Hussein had broken U.N. resolution 1441 and that he was a terrible tyrant.

As we also have seen in the discourses by Bush and his administrators, the allegation of the WMD were later increasingly being replaced by the (originally invalid) argument to go to war, namely that Saddam Hussein was a dictator who had repeatedly violated resolution 1441 and that the Iraqis suffered.

Here is another fragment of Blair's speech in which he combines minor and duly mitigated concessions about the intelligence that might have been wrong with positive self-presentation, and a familiar change in the arguments for the war, namely that the world is better and safer without Saddam Hussein:

> **(5)**. Therefore, if any part of the intelligence turns out to be wrong -- and we know that much of it was right – or if the threat from Saddam turns out to be different or to have changed from what we thought, I will accept that, as I should. However, others should accept that ridding Iraq of Saddam Hussein has made the world not just better, but safer. It has hugely strengthened us in our fight against the proliferation of biological, chemical and nuclear weapons. Although the responsibility for going to war is mine, as it should be, it would also have been my responsibility if, having received the intelligence, I had refused to act on it. I know which course lies more easily on my conscience.
> (…)
> Democracy is on its way in Iraq. The people are free, and Iraq -- a nation of immense history and deepest culture -- is no longer a pariah, with its people enslaved. It is now a country with some hope for the future in its heart. That is a gain worth having.

Again, the critical analysis of such passages should be carried out in parallel for both the text and the context. Thus, semantically the first passage is a disclaimer ('Intelligence might not have been totally right, but….'), combining an apparent concession with positive self-presentation. But pragmatically and contextually, the speaker referring to himself as 'I' is the Prime Minister of the UK, and addressing MPs in the House, so the implicatures are of course political, and part of the global political strategy of legitimating his decision to go to war by assuming responsibility and showing that he did the right thing – if only because the alternative (*not* to have acted) would have been wrong, while allegedly too dangerous. We also see that the strategy is duly interactive, while presupposing previous critique, both in the House, as well as in the media (often referred to in the debate), and this contextual presupposition about what has been said before, leads to the (apparent or mitigated) concession that is the first part of the disclaimer that some part of the intelligence might have been wrong.

We also see that Tony Blair is very able to make a good impression, e.g., by emphasizing what he does not want on his consciousness, as well as having helped liberate the Iraqis, as we see in the second part of example 18. But he is also very able to avoid answering the most crucial questions by changing the *legally* valid reasons to go to war (actual danger, WMD, breaking UN resolutions, etc.) for *morally* valid ones (ridding Iraq of SH).

Only by carefully examining relevant context features, and matching these with more general political knowledge – shared by the participants and the analyst alike – are we able to derive the political implicatures that constitute the politically 'real' meaning and definition of this communicative situation: Tony Blair's self-legitimation and the delegitimation of his opponents.

That on the crucial question his opponents are not necessarily those of the Conservative party becomes crucial when opposition leader Michael Howard begins his speech:

> **(6). Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con)**: At the outset, may I say that I very much agree with the Prime Minister's concluding remarks? I agree with what he said about the United States, and about present conditions in Iraq. I agree, too, with what he said about the threats that we face in this dangerous world, and about the necessity to take action to deal with those threats. On all those vitally important matters, there is complete agreement between us.

Obviously, the very structure of this fragment suggests a disclaimer, which begins by saying what the speaker does agree with, followed by what he does not. The political implicature here is that if the opposition criticizes the Prime Minister and the government, it is not about the war in Iraq. So in what follows Howard insists on an inquiry about the failing intelligence, and that in the future the government first must convince the House and the British people:

> **(7)**. It is also vitally important that any future Government, before they discharge their most solemn duty -- the dispatch of our forces abroad -- must be able to convince the House and the British people of the necessity for action. I have little doubt that such a solemn duty will be required of a future Prime Minister and, given the fact that many of the threats we face from rogue states, weapons of mass destruction and terrorists are incubated in secrecy, we must have sound intelligence before we can make a convincing case for necessary action

We see that Howard as Conservative opposition leader obviously wants it both ways. As a pro-American conservative he obviously agrees with the war, and hence with Blair's overall policy. But in order to adequately 'do opposition' he must also criticize Blair and hence agree with Blair's critics that wars cannot be declared against the will of the people. The presupposition of this assertion is that Blair did *not* do so, and hence acted undemocratically. The contextually defined political implicature of that move is that the Conservative party would do a better job in that respect, while at the same time is trying to win the favor of those opposed to Blair — a move that for many of his opponents may be interpreted as hypocritical. Democratic arguments and populist arguments about the "will of the people" are very closely related here, but the upshot of Howard's intervention is that he and his party agree on some points with Blair and his government, and on the other hand, with those who oppose the war – a majority that of course cannot be politically ignored.

Also this observation is based on a combination of a textual and a contextual analysis, because the political implicatures only make sense (for the participants and the analyst) if it is explicitly spelled out who Howard is, what his function is, what his party stands for, what power the Conservatives have in parliament, and so on. With this knowledge about UK politics and parliament, and with this model of the current situation, we are able to make the relevant political implicatures explicit.

The specifically *critical* aspect of this contextual analysis resides in making these implicatures explicit, and to show how they are instantiations of the reproduction of political power in the UK, in general, and how a majority of parliament could accept going to war and supporting Blair even when it turned out that the argument of the WMD was unfounded, if not a lie.

In the last example, we also see that this was not just due to the Labour majority in the House, but also due to the collusion of the Conservative party. Indeed, Howard later explicitly says that without the support of his party, Blair might not have had a majority at all in this case.

We see that critical analysis also needs detailed contextual analysis, for instance of political implicatures, and how these arise from how participants interpret the communicative event. Indeed, most of the relevant political meanings of this debate are *not* spelled out explicitly, and a critical analysis has the task to make them explicit, and where necessary expose them.

6. Concluding remark

Further theoretical work will be necessary to make such contextual analyses much more systematic and explicit, so as to be able to derive political implicatures and other political meanings in a reliable way and to be able to explicitly criticize such text and talk within the framework of Critical Discourse Studies. We have been able to show that even an informal analysis can make these inferences plausible on the basis of what is known by the

participants and that these inferences often become explicit in the text itself when expressed by the participants. This also makes them relevant by definition, and hence also part of the context model as shared by the participants, and not (just) a speculation of the analyst about the speech event.

Note

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