

12

An Anthropological Perspective

Language and Meaning

The Parameters of Context

One of the more obvious elements of contextualization is the concept of context. The parameters of the cultural context in which communication takes place can be defined in terms of the relationship between culture and language.

Culture

For the purposes of this discussion culture can be defined as the body of knowledge shared by the members of a group.¹ That knowledge takes the form of rules² which govern the way in which individuals relate to and interpret their environment. The utilization of such knowledge leads to culturally specific forms of behavior, patterns of communication (not language per se), sets of values, and types of artifacts.

1. James P. Spradley, *Participant Observation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980), 6. Compare R. Daniel Shaw, *Transculturation: The Cultural Factor in Transition and Other Communication Tasks* (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1988), 25.

2. On the concept of rules see James P. Spradley, "Foundations of Cultural Knowledge" in *Culture and Cognition: Rules, Maps and Plans*, ed. James P. Spradley (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland, 1987), 3-35.

This definition of culture emphasizes two basic concepts. First, it refers to shared knowledge. At the root of this idea are the dual concepts of learning and enculturation (transmission). The collective pool of knowledge which governs behavior in a given culture is something which can be transmitted, that is, passed on to succeeding generations or even to expatriates who are willing to learn.

Second, the definition focuses attention on the fact that this shared knowledge is used to interpret and evaluate the ways in which individuals and groups relate to one another and to their environment. On the basis of this learned set of rules both the individual and the group are able to evaluate the appropriateness of behavior, patterns of communication, and even emotions. How does one know that a certain reaction is appropriate? Only by comparison with the existing catalog of guidelines.

Language

The other component of context is language. Edward Sapir defined language as a "purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols."³ If we agree, then language is not primarily an expression of ethnicity but rather a convenient, perhaps even arbitrary, means of expressing the content or thoughts of a given culture. Sapir reasons that because cultural and linguistic content are derived from the "science of human experience" the latent content of all languages and cultures can be considered universal. Furthermore, since it is impossible to show that the form of language has even the slightest connection with national temperament no causal relationship between the development of language and culture exists. "Culture may be defined as *what* society does and thinks. Language is a particular *how* of thought."⁴

Nevertheless there is a correlation⁵ between the structure (constant ways of arranging data) of a language and the way in which its users interpret their environment. According to Sapir, it is an illusion to imagine that one can adapt to reality without the use of language or to assume that language is merely a means of solving specific problems of communication or thought. "The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language

3. Edward Sapir, *Language* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1921), 8.

4. Sapir, *Language*, 215-17.

5. The apparent discrepancy in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has been pointed out by a number of researchers. See, for example, Jane O. Bright and William Bright, "Semantic Structures in Northwestern California and the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis," in *Cognitive Anthropology*, ed. Stephen A. Tyler (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland, 1987), 66-78.

habits of the group. We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation."⁶

This phenomenon can be demonstrated at both the behavioral and conceptual levels. For example, Benjamin Lee Whorf reports the case of some distillery workers who were surprised by the fact that heat ignited a protective covering known as "spun-limestone" which had been applied to a metal still. The "behavior that tolerated fire close to the covering was induced by the use of the name 'limestone,' which, because it ends in '-stone,' implies non-combustibility."⁷

Whorf's research also verified the effect that language can have on one's worldview. He showed, for example, how the differences between the grammatical structure of SAE (Standard Average European) languages and Hopi speech determined the way in which time, space, substance, and matter are perceived. Within the SAE context reality is analyzed primarily in terms of objects plus "modes of extensional but formless existence that it calls 'substances' or 'matter.'" As a result existence is viewed as a "spatial form plus a spatial formless continuum" analogous to the outline of a container and its contents. This approach to reality is largely a result of the three-tense system of SAE verbs. At the heart of this structure is an objectification of time which enables us to arrange units of time sequentially. As a result we can "construct and contemplate in thought" a system of past, present, and future as an "objectified configuration of points on a line."

Hopi verbs, on the other hand, have no tenses, but rather "validity-forms (assertions), aspects, and clause-like forms (modes), that yield even greater precision in speech." The validity-forms denote that the speaker (not the subject) simply reports the situation. The aspects are used to denote different degrees of duration and tendency. The result is that Hopi language favors an analysis of reality in terms of events, which are referred to either objectively or subjectively. Objectively "events are expressed mainly as outlines, colors, movements, and other perceptive reports." Subjectively events are viewed as an expression of invisible intensity factors, upon which their stability and duration depend. This "implies that existents do not 'become later and later' all in the same way; but some do so by growing like plants, some by diffusing and vanishing, some by a procession of metamorphoses, some by enduring in one shape till affected by violent forces." This "growth" cycle is

6. Edward Sapir as quoted by Whorf in John B. Carroll, ed., *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1956), 134.

7. Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality*, 135-36.

inherent in every existent. Thus everything is already prepared for the way in which it has been, is now, and will be manifested.⁸

These studies seem to support the conclusion that the context of any communicative event is determined by the use of a specific language within the matrix of the culture with which it is associated. Language is a means of expressing and disseminating the content of culture. As such it functions as the key to, and primary vehicle of, the reflective processes which generate the pool of shared knowledge that defines a given culture. Language is also a determining factor in the way in which its users perceive the world. As such it is the interface between individual thought and the "real world."

In spite of its obvious importance most of the models we have discussed simply assume the existence of context without attempting to define it and, in some cases, without so much as mentioning it. This deficiency creates two major problems. One problem is that evaluation of these models becomes extremely difficult. If the meaning of a piece of information is tied to the context in which it was initially formulated, and if it may be modified to fit a second or third context, how will we know whether a message has survived transplantation unless we understand the nature, role, and function of the contexts involved? The second difficulty is that the lack of a clear definition gives the contextualizer too much latitude in transculturating the message. It is reasonable to assume that the context of the source culture may modify a message in a way similar to an analogous context within the receiving culture. Thinking in terms of the contextualization of the gospel, unless care is taken to identify and match context levels and functions, syncretistic distortions will be touted and defended as authentic contextualizations of the gospel. For these reasons it is advisable to add to our list of analytical perspectives a carefully defined understanding of context which will help us determine whether a contextualization is faithful to Scripture.

We tend to think of context in terms of a clearly defined set of factors outside of and therefore influencing the receptor. It might be more accurate to view context in terms of the interplay between a universal frame of conceptual reference (semantic fields), the nested layers of contexts of the receptor's life, and an internal template within the receptor. All of these determine how communication is interpreted.

The Universal Frame of Conceptual Reference

Recent anthropological research has contributed significantly to our understanding of the nature of language. One of the more interesting

8. *Ibid.*, 138ff.

developments is the idea that human knowledge can be understood in terms of fields of lexical/semantic relationships.

A Universal Set of Semantic Relationships

Our assumption is that, although lexical/semantic units differ among languages, the lexical/semantic relationships which build the internal structure of every language are universal.⁹ In other words, a shared function of each language is to allow its users to understand and communicate definitions—all the meanings which are possible in its lexical units.

In its most general form "a definition can be regarded as a statement of a semantic relationship between a concept (X) being defined and one or more other concepts (Y), presumed to be known to the hearer (reader), and having properties considered relevant to the term being defined."¹⁰ The interesting thing about this scheme is that it points out a recurring pattern of semantic relationships used to construct definitions which appear to be universal. Joseph B. Casagrande and Kenneth L. Hale have suggested fourteen such relationships.¹¹ They can be summarized as formula-like statements describing their nature and the questions which could be used to elicit each relationship (see fig. 13).

Casagrande's and Hale's initial conclusions were based on a preliminary study of only one language, Papago. However, subsequent studies have shown that these and other relationships are evident in all languages and can be reduced to more basic sets. Oswald Werner and G. Mark Schoepfle, for example, have suggested a three-part schema: taxonomy (T), modification (M), and queuing (Q).¹² To understand their approach two basic terms have to be defined. *Intension* (connotation) is the number of discriminations that need to be or can be made in order to recognize the applicability of a lexical unit. The *extension* (denotation) of a lexical unit is the set of examples which have the same intension. If the intensions of the term B are included in the intensions of A, it can be maintained that B is a kind of A, that is, the terms are related taxonomically (T). If the intensions and the extensions of two lexical units A and B are taxonomically identical, the terms are synonymous. Modification (M) implies that the intension of a term is increased by adding attributes. Queuing (Q) shows the relation of a term

9. See Oswald Werner and G. Mark Schoepfle, *Systematic Fieldwork*, vol. 1, *Foundations of Ethnography and Interviewing* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1987), 104.

10. Joseph B. Casagrande and Kenneth L. Hale, "Semantic Relationships in Papago Folk Definitions," in *Studies in Southwestern Ethnolinguistics*, ed. D. Hymes (Berlin and New York: Mouton, 1967), 167.

11. *Ibid.*, 168, 190-91.

12. Werner and Schoepfle, *Systematic Fieldwork*, 1:111-16.

Figure 13
Semantic Relationships

1. Attributive:	X is defined with respect to one or more distinctive characteristics of Y. What does X (God) have that is distinctive?
2. Contingency:	X is defined with relation to a usual or necessary antecedent or concomitant Y. What usually proceeds from or follows X (repentance)?
3. Function:	X is defined as the means of affecting Y. What is X (lamb) used for?
4. Spatial:	X is oriented spatially with respect to Y. Where is X (church) located?
5. Operational:	X is defined with respect to an action of Y of which it is a characteristic goal or recipient. What does one do with X (Bible)?
6. Comparison:	X is defined in terms of its similarity and/or contrast with Y. What is X (sin) similar to?
7. Exemplification:	X is defined by citing an appropriate co-current, Y. What is an example of or has the quality of X (love)?
8. Class inclusion:	X is defined with respect to its membership in hierarchical class Y. Is X (Christian) a member of a class?
9. Synonymy:	X is defined as being equivalent to Y. Is there another way of saying X (faith)?
10. Antonymy:	X is defined as the negation of Y, its opposite. Is X (truth) the opposite of anything?
11. Provenance:	X is defined with respect to its source Y. Where does X (salvation) come from?
12. Grading:	X is defined with respect to its placement in a series or spectrum that also includes Y. What comes after (or before) X (conversion)?
13. Circularity:	X is defined as X. Is X (unbelief) an X (sin)?
14. Constituent:	X is defined as being a constituent part of Y. What is X (the Gospel of John) a part of?

Adapted from Joseph B. Casagrande and Kenneth L. Hale, "Semantic Relationships in Papago Folk Definitions," in *Studies in Southwestern Ethnolinguistics*, ed. D. Hymes (Berlin and New York: Mouton, 1967), 190-91. Used by permission.

to the larger world in serial order or sequence. This relationship may be spatial, chronological, or logical.

The three atomatic relationships (MTQ) clarify a number of complex semantic relationships. Of particular importance to our study is not so much relationships between identical (synonymous) terms but the equivalence of two or more terms (double implications). A term may be used by two languages to refer to the same or a similar object or person but have vastly different intensions (folk theories/definitions). The term *God*, for example, may have the same referent but very different intensions for various African tribes (Shona, Karanga, Zambesi, and Ila) as noted by John S. Mbiti (see p. 100). Equivalence or referential identity could be established only if one were able to say that X in language 1 means Y in language 2 and Y in language 2 means X in language 1.¹³ For this reason it is highly unlikely that data taken not only from several tribes, but also from various strata of each tribe's

13. *Ibid.*, 115.

religious experience (shamanism, spirit worship, sacrifice) would have sufficient intensional similarity to justify the conclusion that all of these tribes worship the same "supreme God."

Deep Structures

These schemes are similar to Noam Chomsky's deep structure theory. Chomsky concluded that each language draws upon a universal set of phonological and semantic features for its own internal, deep structures. The deep structures express the semantic content of a given language. Each language, then, has an inner, context-free set of rules used to rearrange the words and sounds or phonemes to generate speech patterns which can be recognized as standards of correct usage in English, French, or whatever language is involved.¹⁴

Linguistic Context

Both the deep structure and the universal set of semantic field play a significant role in organizing or partitioning knowledge within an individual or culture. Partitioning of knowledge into specific domains of discourse is absolutely necessary if interpersonal communication is to remain consistently accurate. Partitioning determines how to interpret a sentence such as "The truth will set you free." This sentence means one thing in a political context (partition), such as is described by Gutiérrez, and quite another thing in the biblical/theological context of John 8:32. This kind of partitioning functions as a metalinguistic modifier not only of specific words, but also of entire verbal events. It creates the "context" for a given verbal exchange.

Implications

This research has several implications for our discussion of useful perspectives in the evaluation of contextualization attempts. First, the evidence seems to verify at least the possibility of a universal paradigm or conceptual frame of reference (see p. 162). If all languages use universal semantic relationships certain basic categories of meaning must exist. Second, each language has within it the basic structures which make communication (translation) possible. All languages share a sufficient number of semantic relationships to allow for the same semantic/lexical meaning to be expressed even though the units of expression differ. For that reason we need not be overly pessimistic about the prospects for accurate cross-cultural transmission of information. Third, some form of categorization or partitioning is required to

14. See John P. B. Allen and Paul van Buren, eds., *Chomsky: Selected Readings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 55-68.

efficiently manage the sheer vastness of human knowledge. It is this partitioning which helps establish the context of any given linguistic situation.

Contexts within Contexts

Anthropologists often refer to several kinds or layers of context—cultural, social, and situational.

Contexts of Culture

"Contexts are nested within contexts, each one a function of the bigger context, and all . . . finding a place in the context of culture."¹⁵ Our understanding of context at this level assumes an integrating body of knowledge and language behavior shared by a number of groups or communities. It embodies the total system of cultural principles, inter-community communication patterns, and forms of acceptable behavior of that culture. Thus, one can speak about Mexican, Japanese, or even Asian contexts.

Although we should never overlook this wider dimension, the problem is its scope, at least in the relationship between context and the process of contextualization. At this level the number of variables required for adequate description and understanding has been multiplied until only general phenomena can be predicted and described.

Imagine, for example, a description of "the typical Frenchman." Such a composite sketch might serve usefully as an orientation, only as long as we keep in mind that the person thus described likely does not exist. Similarly, Mbiti's description of African culture is a generalization which will require considerable fine tuning if it is to be applied to specific peoples of Africa. This type of overgeneralization can be quite misleading. Thus, Mbiti's observations about the "African" concept of time may well apply to certain groups, but it hardly has pan-African validity.

Social Context

The concept of social context is complicated by the various ways in which it can be used. Generally it refers to the individual's membership in a community. It implies familiarity, often unconscious, with cultural values and beliefs, institutions and forms, roles and personalities, and the history and ecology of the community. When applied to communicative events and social situations, this knowledge enables

15. J. R. Firth, "On Sociological Linguistics," in *Language in Culture and Society*, ed. Dell H. Hymes (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 70.

the individual to behave in a socially appropriate manner. This can be viewed as the effect of a regulatory matrix in which certain variables limit the behavioral options open to the individual in any given situation. These sociological variables include differences in sex, status, and relatedness to a group. They are constantly being updated by the process of social change, which itself is subject to rules that define what changes can occur under what conditions. The variables also determine the structure or organization of society. Accordingly, social organization can be described as "a network of partial or complete understandings between members of organizational units of every size and complexity . . . which is being re-animated every day by particular acts of a communicative nature."¹⁶ It can be seen that speech is the primary means by which an awareness of social structure becomes part of the individual's experience.

Although an understanding of the dynamics of this contextual layer ties much together and helps put such experiences as conversion into perspective, it still lacks the power to adequately describe individual behavior in a given situation.

Context of Situation

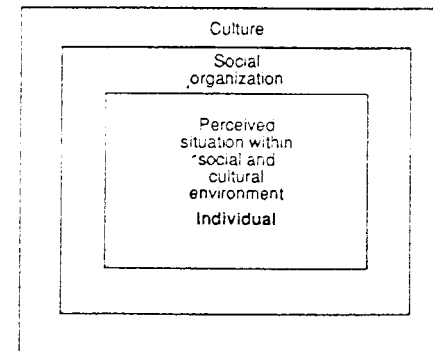
The most specific layer of context is the individual's relationship to the immediate situation in which he is involved. It has been suggested that "a statement in real life is never detached from the situation in which it is uttered."¹⁷ In that case, context functions as a mechanism of reference, that is, the participants learn a given situation and reuse its major components by recalling from memory the physiological, intellectual, and emotional experiences of that situation. Here the focus of contextual function begins to shift from the general dynamics of the cultural matrix to the deliberate and conscious action of the individual. Obviously "one cannot speak of any aspect of human behavior without talking about culture, social organization, etc. Context, to be operative, must pervade all levels."¹⁸ But it is this lowest level—the individual's internal view of his own cultural context, both past and present—which is the ultimate key to cross-cultural understanding, communication, and contextualization (see fig. 14).

16. Edward Sapir, "Communication," in *The Psychology of Language, Thought, and Instruction*, ed. J. De Cecco (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 75–78.

17. B. Malinowski, "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages," in *The Meaning of Meaning*, ed. Charles K. Ogden and Ivor A. Richards (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubney, 1923), 450–51.

18. Oswald Werner and Gladys Lewis-Pilz, "Memory and Context: Toward a Theory of Context in Ethnoscience," *Language and Logic in Personality and Society*, ed. Harwood Fisher (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 65.

Figure 14
Layers of Context



Internal Template

Based on the concepts of lexical/semantic fields and nested layers, context could be defined as an internal template in the mind of a human being. Such a network contains everything the individual knows about his world, and is best conceived of as memory. The long-term memory is almost limitless expandable and is therefore never applied in its entirety to any given situation. That is, no context is broad enough to require all of a person's permanent memory. However, in order to interpret and respond to a situation properly the short-term memory which processes that information has to find the correct long-term memory partition. The intermediate memory processes, partitions, and integrates the components of the long-range memory and functions as a restricting mechanism which interprets language and behavior. Therefore, "contextualization means recognizing the criteria for the application of a particular rule of context by measuring perception against a template in memory."¹⁹

Aspects of Memory

For contextualization to take place context overlap or match will have to be achieved at one or all the levels we discussed. In the case of conversion, for example, information has to be inducted into the permanent memory of the listener, which in turn is integrated into the intermediate memory's template for future reference and application. The first part of this transaction assumes (1) a universal set of semantic

19. Werner and Schoepfle, *Systematic Fieldwork*, 1:118.

177

relationships making basic communication possible, (2) a universal paradigm of conceptual reference, which for our purposes means that every human being is capable of understanding the basic concepts in the kerygma, and (3) the distinction between identity and equivalence or referential identity.

Effective communication requires what could be called a matching of semantic/lexical fields. Thus, it is not only not necessary for the missionary to unilaterally substitute local terminology for biblical objects of reference which do not naturally occur in the host culture, but to do so invites distortion. If, for example, the listeners are not familiar with the "Lamb," explanatory information can be provided and received by the short-term memory and ultimately be added to a knowledge partition in the long-term memory. Several stages of instruction may be needed to refine the concept, but there is less risk of the listener identifying Christ with an animal which may be referentially equivalent but not identical.

Once the information is transmitted (and explained), the act of conversion, which may well be participated by the communicator's appeal, is concretized within the framework of the recipient's own culture. Thus, it is the confluence of the newly expanded memory (now focused on God's offer of salvation, kerygma) and the convert's inner template which becomes the actual context of the conversion experience. That being the case, the communicator has, and should have, only limited influence on the way in which the experience unfolds. It becomes superfluous to try to measure the authenticity of the experience in terms of impact. Anything short of absolute template overlap would render the standard of measurement nothing more than a figment of the source's imagination. Rather than passing judgment on the nature of the experience, it would be more appropriate to continue the process of supplementing the recipient's permanent memory with biblical data.

This scheme could be used to evaluate the degree of faithfulness to Scripture achieved by various models of contextualization. Consider, for example, Matthew 2:1-6 according to Clarence Jordon's *Cotton Patch Version of Matthew and John*:

When Jesus was born in Gainsville, Georgia, during the time that Herod was governor, some scholars from the Orient came to Atlanta and inquired, "Where is the one who was born to be governor of Georgia? We saw his star in the Orient, and we came to honor him." This news put Governor Herod and all his Atlanta cronies in a tizzy. So he called a meeting of the big-time preachers and politicians, and asked if they had any idea where the Leader was to be born. "In Gainsville, Georgia," they

replied, "because there is a Bible prophecy which says: 'And you, Gainsville in the State of Georgia, are by no means the least in the Georgia delegation; from you will come forth a governor, who will wisely guide my chosen people.'"²⁰

From our perspective this "contextualization" fails in all three areas of context discussed in this chapter. First, no semantic set match is achieved. Certainly we can speak of referential identity in the case of the two governors. However, in light of the vastly different sets of intensions (tizzy, big-time preachers, politicians, and delegation) equivalence is simply out of the question. Second, no context level match is achieved. The relationship between an elected governor to his autonomous state and the United States is altogether different from the imposed governor of a subjugated and insignificant province of the Roman Empire. Equally faulty is the decontextualization of the prophecy. By dehistoricizing the event this "translation" robs the incarnation of its very essence—God with us in a particular time and place. Third, no template match is achieved or even pursued. The intermediate memory rules which enable the first-century Palestinian to interpret or choose the appropriate partition for the relationships and events reported in the biblical text are quite different from those being used by the twentieth-century Georgian.

In this chapter we have suggested that recent anthropological and linguistic research can aid us in our attempt to evaluate the degree of biblical fidelity achieved by the various models of contextualization. Our analysis of the term *context* led to an evaluative framework which focuses on semantic fields, nested layers of contexts, and the internal template of the receptor.

20. Clarence Jordon, *The Cotton Patch Version of Matthew and John* (New York: Association, 1973).