

# ON THE ROLE OF ASSERTION, IMPLICATURE AND PRESUPPOSITION IN TEXT UNDERSTANDING AND CONTEXT CONSTRUCTION

The notions of presupposition, implicature and assertion are key concepts in the field of pragmatics and text-context update semantics. A multitude of approaches have been put forward to explain the text-context updating and constructing dynamic semantics, each representing the latter process unilaterally – by means of either presupposition, implicature (most theories on this issue identify presupposition with implicature) or assertion and its respective content. In the present paper I aim to bring forward the basic distinction between assertion, implicature and presupposition and the role they play in text understanding and context/ world building.

It is by now widely recognised that text/ discourse understanding goes beyond the “trivial” understanding of what is explicitly said but encompasses both the explicit information represented by what is said and the inferences encoded in the text itself, the latter being the comprehension of what is presupposed or/ and implicated by the text.

In this respect I find it relevant to delimit text and context. Text is the language behaviour of any length – from a single syntactically complete utterance to any quantity of semantically and syntactically complete and interrelated utterances, thus resorting to M. Stubbs and his practice of discourse analysis “By text, I mean an instance of language in use, either spoken or written: a piece of language behaviour (...)” (Stubbs 1996: 4). Context is that against which a text is evaluated as to its appropriateness and/or truth. Here I would like give a distinction between objective or mind-transcendent context (Gauker 1998) and “dynamically constructed context” as I would call it here. It is only with respect to something external to speakers and independent of what is focused upon as the presently considered text, that it makes sense to evaluate, or attempt to evaluate, that very text as a piece of linguistic behaviour. I will define objective contexts as consisting of the set of facts which the interlocutors have to take into account if a given verbal exchange is to achieve its ultimate purpose. Yet, there is but one problem with this view namely that evaluation may (and even must) remain provisional or defeasible. But actually the latter is characteristic of all of our knowledge, since if it is to be objective, it should (and even must) be potentially defeasible.

In the present paper I basically aim at text comprehension via individual perception and evaluation of textual data and further representation of the context – thus, dynamically constructed context. The two contexts (objective and dynamically constructed) may seem puzzling, yet the distinction between them is

more than clear – the dynamically constructed context is a mental product of the interlocutors while the objective context goes beyond their cognitive processes. Ultimately, the two are in a way overlapping as no subjective perception is devoid of objective premises on the very data under subjective perception.

At the present stage of my elaboration on text-context perception I would like dwell on the dynamic relation between text and context. By now the latter issue has been touched upon by many linguists, namely G. Gazdar (Gazdar 1981), R. Stalnaker (Stalnaker 1973, 1972), L. Karttunen (Karttunen 1974), M. Sbisà (Sbisà 1987), I. Heim (Heim 1991), etc. and in my recent works on text-context/ world semantics. It is almost common in all these theories with slight divergences that a text has a dynamic relation with its context. In the process of text production the addition of new utterances to those already successfully integrated in the common ground knowledge can be described as having context-changing and incrementing effects. The latter suggests that at step A the given context is different from the context at step B as a result of addition and elimination of some contents. Hence, at any new step text A is changed into text B as soon as a new utterance or a part(s) of it is added to the text. The latter process of updating and delimitation of the text gives rise to a new context so that a one-to-one correspondence between texts and contexts is preserved.

Note that there is still a difference between the objective context and the dynamically constructed context since the objective context is updated independently of our perception and integrates any datum – verbal or non-verbal – taking place during communication (e.g. a phone call or somebody's yawning), while the dynamically constructed context which, in fact, is our representation of the text is different in this respect as the text cannot integrate non-verbal data and hence the latter can't be represented in the dynamically represented context. Yet, the role of objective context shouldn't be reduced to none in text understanding as any text perception has human cognition as background knowledge and may take objective context as conventional context. Nevertheless, in the present paper I will dwell on how changes brought about by assertion, implicature and presupposition in the text can produce changes in the construction of the context and text understanding in general.

Hence, by now there have been two basic ways of how to conceive this implicitly conveyed textual information:

- i) the context dependent text perception
- ii) the context independent text perception.

Traditionally it is claimed that a full understanding of the text is gained when both textual and contextual premises are satisfied, namely the circumstances in which the text has been written or we know the goals for which an utterance has been uttered. The latter viewpoint is well grounded in R. Stalnaker's "Pragmatic Presuppositions" (Stalnaker 1974) and D. Sperber and D. Wilson's "Relevance Theory" (Sperber and Wilson 1986) where they claim that

for an utterance to be relevant in a given communicative context its presupposition, labelled "speaker presupposition" by R. Stalnaker, should be assumed and shared by his/ her interlocutor which makes the speaker's contribution relevant. The rationale of text understanding from the conversational-implicatures' point of view lies in observing Gricean Cooperative Principle and its maxims by the speaker, namely for the hearer to infer if the speaker is cooperative he/she should already know the circumstances in which the communication proceeds which will let him decipher whether the Communicative Principle holds. Hence, the present view of text understanding takes context as an indispensable condition necessary to the comprehension of the text. By saying context the extralinguistic phenomena – knowledge of and assumptions about the context – are meant.

However, in most of our everyday communication we are faced with texts the contexts of which are not available for the moment, as it happens in most phone calls, in reading, shopping and in cases when little is known about our interlocutors and their possible intentions. In this case text understanding and context construction lie basically on our overall perception of the situation and its possible interpretation. So does the communication fail or we try to make sense of it and construct the context on our own and how? In such a case we make use of the linguistic data, makers of the text as much as possible because as it is known presuppositions are first triggered by surface structure elements and then interpreted on the discourse level in terms of extralinguistic phenomena. So the missing contextual information is detected even in the absence of any available data on it. Thus the context is actually shaped parallel to text production and moreover the hearer doesn't need to share the speaker's assumptions about or have common knowledge with him/ her as, in fact, the latter are elaborated during the course of interaction by both interlocutors. The speaker may even make contributions which are not relevant to the assumptions already shared by the participants of the communication. The case for implicatures is still easier as the speaker is not assumed to be cooperative prior to text production as implicatures and conversational implicatures in particular become the case during speech production and not prior to it. Hence, the speaker's observing or violation of the Cooperative Principle can't be assumed unless the communication is the case and moreover there may be other inferences in form of implicatures as well.

Now let's refer to assertion, implicature and presupposition as text-context updaters separately.

In regard to assertion it must be said that it should be viewed from three perspectives:

- i) as to speaker/ hearer commitment to the acceptance of the content of what is asserted;

- ii) as the differentiation of what is asserted, i.e. the content of the speech act, and what is said, i.e. the overall content of the text from which the inferences are drawn regarding the given assertion, and ultimately
- iii) how the content of an assertion can contribute to change the text-context and further to its understanding.

How does the content of assertion bring about a change in the objective and dynamically structured contexts? Note that the utterance of the assertion does not necessarily presuppose that its content should become shared knowledge among the interlocutors. The content of the assertion may be maybe taken as shared by the participants if the speaker commits him/herself to its truth and the hearer doesn't challenge it. Hence, the conventional text gets updated with the content of the assertion, i.e. the assumptions of the speaker become shared by the interlocutors and hence its truth is taken for granted. Saying the speaker is committed to its truth means that he/she must make his/her further contributions as relevant to what was said by that very assertion otherwise he/she may be liable if the constructed context appears in consistent or inadequate. Thus the conventional text with the contribution at each step with the content of a new assertion provides some information about the objective context from which the interactants must draw their own inferences and hence dynamically work out and construct the context. Hence, the above said brings about the idea that the speaker tests the text and asks for permission from the hearer(s) or makes a proposal to change and construct the context.

Now let's consider how implicatures get to influence text understanding and hence context change. The implicature plays a supplementary role in text understanding as it counts merely as a suggestion, which makes a certain update in the construction of the context available to the participants. How does this take place? To understand the latter it should be kept in mind there are two types of implicatures – conventional and conversational – as P. Grice first outlined them in 1967 (Grice 1989: 22-40), since each of them acts differently in text perception and context update processes. Implicatures are invited inferences in which the inferred proposition has no truth functional relationship to any utterance contained in the text: when “*p*” implicates that *q*, the falsity of *q* has no consequence on the truth value of *p* (Sbisà 1987). Consider (1):

(1) *Dan is a volleyball player, therefore very tall.*

(1) conveys that as far as Dan is a volleyball player he must be very tall. Nevertheless, it is not false neither completely unacceptable if Dan appears to be not as tall as is expected for a volleyball player. The inference about Dan's being very tall is drawn merely from the word *therefore*, so this is a conventional implicature. It's worthy to mention that conventional implicatures do not play a very important part in text understanding, being merely supplementary as further specification of the central speech acts as P. Grice terms them (Grice 1989: 121-22, 362), thus being “non central” speech acts. Namely, if the central speech act

is that of commanding, asking, asserting, commenting, the conventional implicature plays a supplementary role simply adding some side information to the content of the utterance, like for example, utterance (1) is asserting and the word *therefore* adds some side information to it, namely, that of explaining. Hence, the function of conventional implicatures in the content of the utterance is supplementary.

More functional is the role played by conversational implicatures, namely defining if the speaker's linguistic behaviour complies with the Cooperative Principle or not. Hence, conversational implicatures do not contribute to the content of the utterance and function as inferences drawn from the given communicative context. Hence, the conversational implicatures are provisional or defeasible unless they are interpreted in a given communication. In this respect consider (2).

(2) *Semantics is the glazing of pragmatics.*

Utterance (2) is merely senseless if viewed in isolation or in a communicative setting where semantics and pragmatics are known as two autonomous linguistic disciplines. While in a communicative setting, as for example in a conference on semantics-pragmatics delimitation, utterance (2) can well be interpreted as meaning "semantics is the part of the utterance seen or heard by the interlocutors while pragmatics is the major part of meaning on which semantics rests". In such a case the speaker cannot be accused of being incommunicative or violating any of the maxims of cooperative communication. In such a case, where Cooperative Principle has its share, the inferences are drawn on the basis of what is said, i.e. the words uttered which are the starting point for any inference drawn from the given text or on the basis of what is asserted which already carries inferences. In the first case they simply contribute to the content of the assertion, while in the second case they associate extra content which is conveyed together with that assertion but does not make part of it. The above said comes to prove that the asserted and implied contents go parallel, they are somehow different but yet related. Why do we say that they are related but do not make part of each other? The answer to this question proceeds from Gricean framework of conversational implicatures that claims that the key property of conversational implicatures is that the hearer on hearing the sentence S does not infer that p, as is the case with presuppositions, but thinks that p. The latter comes to prove the parallel and defeasible nature of conversational implicatures drawn from the given communicative setting. Consider S. Levinson's famous exchange (3).

(3) A: *Where is Bill?*

B: *There is a yellow VW outside Sue's house.*

B's contribution is a relevant answer to A's question only insofar as it licences the inference that if Bill has a yellow VW, he may be in Sue's house (Levinson 1983: 102).



The inference that Bill may be at Sue's house is a mere inference as the hearer doesn't know that Bill may be at Sue's place but thinks he may be there. Hence, conversational implicatures are inferred implications that are not necessarily true.

So how do conversational implicatures eventually come to help text understanding? Being parallel to the assertions they add extra information to the content of the utterance and thus contribute to text understanding and context construction.

Correspondingly, there are two ways implicatures can help construct the context – either supplement (conventional implicatures) the content of the assertion or contribute to it (conversational implicatures).

Now I would like to dwell on how presuppositions contribute to text understanding and context construction. Semantic accounts of presupposition claim presuppositions to be strongly connected with truth conditions. Thus, for a sentence to be felicitous in a given context its presuppositions must be true. Pragmatic accounts of presupposition descending from R. Stalnaker (Stalnaker 1974), L. Karttunen (Karttunen 1974), S. Soames (Soames 1982), I. Heim (Heim 1988), G. Gazdar (Gazdar 1981) and others claim that the utterance to be felicitously uttered in a given context its presupposition should be mutually shared by the interlocutors or if it is not shared it felicitously becomes part of common ground by the accommodation mechanism worked out by D. Lewis (Lewis 1979). Hence, as is clear, all presuppositional phenomena ascend to the notion of "prior" context which is shared by the communicants and which guarantees the felicitous admittance of new utterances and the incrementation of the context.

Text understanding without any "prior" context available makes it quite different since the interlocutors are obliged to work out the context and construct it from the textual data. How is the latter process realised? Presuppositions are known to be triggered by certain linguistic markers. An utterance with a certain proposition contains linguistic elements that function as presupposition triggers and a certain presupposition becomes common ground and constructs a context during speech production and not after it. Often interlocutors produce utterances whose presuppositions are in the common ground though not rare are the cases when the speaker produces an utterance without assuming that the hearer already shares his/her presupposition or even knowing that he/she does not share it. In such cases, contrary to the established pragmatic theories ascribed to R. Stalnaker's, L. Karttunen's, G. Gazdar's and other's we may come across inappropriateness and communication failures. Yet, in this case D. Lewis's presupposition accommodation mechanism comes to settle all communication drawbacks and further the exchange smoothly. Hence, the context is dynamically constructed via the aspects of the surface structure of the sentence and the objective context comes to help the interlocutors in the latter issue providing

general information on the reality and not a certain communication situation. Thus, utterances test the context trying to accommodate their presuppositions in it and if the latter is felicitous in the given context it constructs the context and therefore contributes to the understanding of the text. From then on the presuppositions of the context are expected to be taken for granted. So, the text itself incorporates presuppositions means which once triggered must be taken for granted and thus construct the context.

Concluding, assertion, implicature and presupposition play distinct roles in text understanding and context construction and have different strategies in recovering the implicit information carried by the text which enables the interlocutors create a representation of the context.

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**Հաստատման, իմպլիկատուրայի և կանխենթադրույթի դերը տեքստի ընկալման և համատեքստի կառուցման մեջ**

Սույն հոդվածը արծարծում է, թե ինչ դեր ունեն հաստատումը, իմպլիկատուրան և կանխենթադրույթը տեքստը ընկալելու և համատեքստը կառուցելու գործընթացում: Վերջինս կազմված է երկու զուգահեռ գործընթացներից՝ համատեքստի կառուցումը և դրա համալրումը: Հաստատումը, իմպլիկատուրան և կանխենթադրույթը երեք տարբեր միջոցներ են, որոնք կարող են ներազդել համատեքստի վրա և փոփոխություններ առաջացնել դրանում: Վերլուծությունը փաստում է, որ կանխենթադրույթը և իմպլիկատուրան երկու իրարից անկախ համագոյակցող երևույթներ են՝ ի հակադրություն այս խնդրի շուրջ առկա կարծիքների մեծամասնությանը: