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Volume 40, issue 3,
March 2008

ISSN 0378-2166

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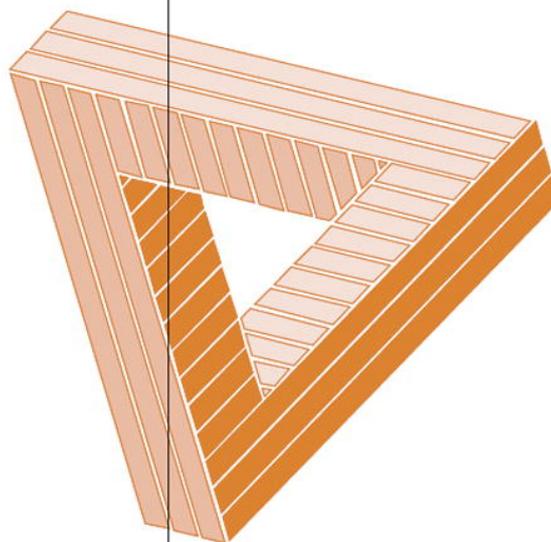
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Journal of Pragmatics 40 (2008) 385–406

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Dueling contexts: A dynamic model of meaning

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Received 5 February 2007; received in revised form 3 September 2007; accepted 12 December 2007

Abstract

This paper focuses on the role of context in meaning construction. My starting point is the assumption that context is a dynamic construct that appears in different formats in language use both as a repository and/or trigger of knowledge. Consequently, context has both a selective and a constitutive role. Unlike several current theories of meaning (e.g. Barsalou, 1993; Coulson, 2000; Croft, 2000; Evans, 2006) claiming that meaning construction is mostly dependent on situational context, I will argue that *meaning values of words* encoding prior contexts of experience play as important a role in *meaning construction* as situational context. These two sides of world knowledge (encoded and current) exist dialectically and relationally. Actual situation context is viewed through prior context, and their encounter creates a third space. According to this approach meaning is the result of the interplay of prior experience and current experience, which are both socio-cultural in nature. Prior experience is encapsulated in the meaning values of lexical items that make up the utterances used by the interlocutors, and current experience is represented in the actual situation context in which communication takes place, and which is interpreted (often differently) by the interlocutors. Meaning formally expressed in the *linguistic interactional context* is created on-the-spot, and is the result of the interaction and mutual influence of the private contexts represented in the language of the interlocutors and the actual situational context interpreted by the interlocutors. In speech communication people attempt to fit their language to a situational context that their language, in turn, helped to create in the first place. This reciprocity means that language both creates context and is created by it (cf. Goodwin and Duranti, 1992; Gee, 1999).

The dynamic model of meaning (DMM) is put forward as an attempt to give equal importance to message and actual situational context in meaning construction as described above, and blend the external and internal approaches to context. The model considers the communicative process as a structured whole, as something viewed from different perspectives. It applies Sciabarra's understanding of dialectics to context according to which dialectics is "the 'art of context-keeping,' because it counsels us to grasp the full context of any object through techniques of abstraction and integration. By examining an object from different vantage points and on different levels of generality, we achieve a more comprehensive grasp of its antecedent conditions, interrelationships, and tendencies (Sciabarra, 2002:381)".

The paper starts with a brief introduction to the cognitive approach followed by a discussion of different ways of understanding context. Then the DMM is presented, and it is demonstrated how the model can be

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used to explain the dialectics of context, word meaning, and utterance meaning. The paper ends with a section that discusses how the application of the DMM may affect our understanding of some major issues in pragmatics.

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Keywords: Context; Dialectics; Interaction; World knowledge; Meaning construction; Dynamic model of meaning; Saliency

1. The cognitive view

According to the cognitive approach human communication relies on two important components of the cognitive network: the meaning construction system and the meaning prompting system. Linguistic forms prompt for the construction of meanings. The problem is that they do not have a one-to-one relationship. Meaning is incomparably richer than the form of language because “grammar reflects only a small number of general frames and space builders which can apply to organize the very large number of situations that we encounter and imagine” (Fauconnier, 1997:190). A limited number of mergeable linguistic forms can cover a very large number of meaningful situations. Fauconnier and Turner (2002:360) argued that the general view that conceptual structure is encoded by the speaker into a linguistic structure, which then is decoded by the hearer back into a conceptual structure, is false because an expression provides only sparse and inefficient prompts for constructing a conceptual structure. The problem is described by Fauconnier and Turner (2002:277) as follows:

Conceptual systems are vast and rich and open-ended, but linguistic systems, however impressive, are relatively quite thin. How can a linguistic system be used to convey the products of conceptual systems, and how can these products find expression in language, given the stark mismatch in their respective infinities?

The answer to this question is that when forms prompt for the construction of meanings that go far beyond anything like the forms themselves, a well-developed inference and implicature system starts to operate to ensure the right interpretation of forms in language use. As a result of this explanation, recent research tends to consider meaning to be a fluid, flexible, and on-the-spot phenomenon, with the human mind as a pattern recognizer and builder rather than a rule-following logical calculator (cf. Barsalou, 1993, 1999; Croft, 2000; Evans, 2006) *This paper, however, argues that the mind is neither exclusively one nor the other but a combination of the two.* The mind is both a pattern recognizer/builder and a rule-following calculator. Pattern building and recognition need to rely on formal elements that have a certain regularity of occurrence at least for a period of time. The meaning prompting system that represents this regularity is the result of the dynamic and flexible operation of the ever-evolving meaning construction system. *Linguistic expressions can prompt for meanings because they represent prior encounters and experience.* Lexical units encode the contexts of their prior use. Through processes of blending, mapping, framing, and other cognitive operations, a great variety of meanings can be constructed from symbolic structures (grammar) that contain the required prompts for such constructions. This way, language allows a limited number of linguistically mergeable forms to cover an enormous range of meaningful situations. The inference system is dynamic, fluid, and constantly changes while grammar is conservative, relatively stable, and changes slowly.

What makes it possible for these two seemingly different systems to work together smoothly in producing and comprehending meaning? The key to understanding the relationship between the meaning construction system and the meaning prompting system is *context* that appears in different forms and functions in the course of communication, and *the lexicon* that, on the one hand, is a thesaurus of contexts and on the other, functions as an interface between the conceptual level and the relatively independent linguistic level.

2. Understanding context

In linguistics *context* usually refers to any factor – linguistic, epistemic, physical, social – that affects the actual interpretation of signs and expressions. The traditional, external perspective on context holds that context modifies and/or specifies word meanings in one way or another. Context is seen as a selector of lexical features because it activates some of these features while leaving others in the background. Some versions of externalist contextualism take this line of thinking to the extreme and claim that meanings are specified entirely by their contexts, and that there is no semantic systematicity underlying them at all (e.g. Barsalou, 1993, 1999; Evans, 2006). According to this view, the mind works primarily by storing experiences and finding patterns in those experiences. These patterns shape how people engage with, and store in their minds, their subsequent experiences.

The internalist perspective on context considers lexical units as creators of context (e.g. Gee, 1999; Violi, 2000). Violi (2000) claimed that our experience is developed through a regularity of recurrent and similar situations that we tend to identify with given contexts. Standard (prior recurring) context can be defined as a regular situation that we have repeated experience with, and about which we have expectations as to what will or will not happen, and on which we rely to understand and predict how the world around us works. It is exactly these standard contexts that linguistic meanings tied to lexical units refer to. This argument leads us back to Gumperz (1982), who said that utterances somehow carry with them their own context or project the context. Referring to Gumperz's work, Levinson (2003) claimed that the message versus context opposition is misleading because the message can carry with it or forecast the context.

In the semantics–pragmatics interface debate, contextualists are committed to rich pragmatic effects throughout what is said by a sentence, or throughout the proposition expressed, or throughout semantic content. Contextualism derives from speech act theories of meaning, which is a school of thought that includes Austin, the later Wittgenstein, and others. There are moderate contextualists who claim that only *some* expressions outside the basic set are context-sensitive and/or semantically incomplete, while radical contextualists claim that every expression or construction outside the basic set is context sensitive. Radical contextualists include Searle, Recanati and the relevance theorists (e.g., Carlston, Sperber, Wilson), while moderate contextualists include those who argue for the context sensitivity of quantified phrases (e.g., Stanley and Szabo), belief statements (e.g., Richard and Perry) and epistemic claims (e.g., DeRose).

The problem with the externalist and internalist views of context is that they are both one-sided because they emphasize either the selective or the constitutive role of context. However, the dynamic nature of human speech communication requires the development of a model that recognizes both regularity and variability in meaning construction and comprehension, and takes into account both the selective and constitutive roles of context at the same time. Millikan (1998) claimed that the conventional sign (lexical unit) is reproduced or “copied,” not discovered or invented anew by each producer–processor pair. This is only possible if the linguistic unit has

some kind of regular reference to certain contexts in which it has been used. This is more than just the “semantic potential” that Evans (2006) speaks about. To some extent I agree with Evans and others (e.g., Langacker, 2000; Fauconnier and Turner, 2002) that words serve as points of access to larger-scale encyclopedic (world) knowledge structures, and in meaning construction not all aspects of this repertoire are activated. However, the core of the knowledge a particular lexical item refers to is always activated because this knowledge in the mind has been created partially through the repeated use of the given lexical unit in relatively similar actual situational contexts. So we recognize not only patterns but also actually can reproduce and create patterns. Since both the points of reference and points of access keep changing, the lexicon is in a constant state of movement; that is, words and expressions keep changing their meaning values (cognitive contexts) based on their use. This dynamic change results in a kind of vagueness that may apply not only to content words but also to figures of speech, implicatures, and other extensions of usage that slowly move from being entirely innovative, to being somewhat familiar, to being handled automatically without parsing or derivation of meaning from compositional structure. This is why external contextualists claim that word meaning is protean and “the meaning associated with a word in any given utterance appears to be, in part, a function of the particular linguistic context in which it is embedded” (Evans, 2006:492). However, as we will see later, this issue is more complex than the external contextualists claim.

3. Dynamic model of meaning (DMM) and context

The DMM argues for a broad understanding of context that includes both prior and present experience with the outside world. According to the dialectics of context both sides of world knowledge (encoded private context and actual situational context) participate in meaning construction. The extent of their respective contributions keeps changing, depending on *which phase* of a concrete speech situation the interlocutors happen to be in. It should be underlined, however, that linguistic signs encoding prior contexts are not mere indicators of pre-existing knowledge but resources that speakers can draw on and shape to their social and interactional needs. At the same time every use of a lexical unit contributes, to some extent, to its ever-changing content. The DMM serves to demonstrate this dynamism. It is built on two assertions:

- (1) The dynamic behavior of human speech implies a reciprocal process between language (message) and actual situational context as demonstrated in Fig. 1. Language encodes prior contexts and is used to make sense of actual situational contexts, so *language is never context-free*. There are no meanings that are context-free because each lexical item is a repository of context (contexts) itself; that is to say, it is always implicitly indexed to a prior recurring context(s) of reference. Even when an explicit context (actual situational context) is not available, one is constructed from stored knowledge originating in prior experience during the process of comprehension (cf. Katz, 2005). Suppose we hear or read the sentence “I am bored with you, I’d rather sleep with you” without any actual situational context. With no difficulty at all can we create a context based on the meaning of the words in the sentence. The interesting thing is that we all will probably make up the same context that is based on the figurative rather than the literal meaning of “sleep”. This is how powerful salience encoded in lexical units is.

Dynamism of context means that when people speak or write they craft what they need to express to fit the actual situational context in which they are communicating. But, at the same

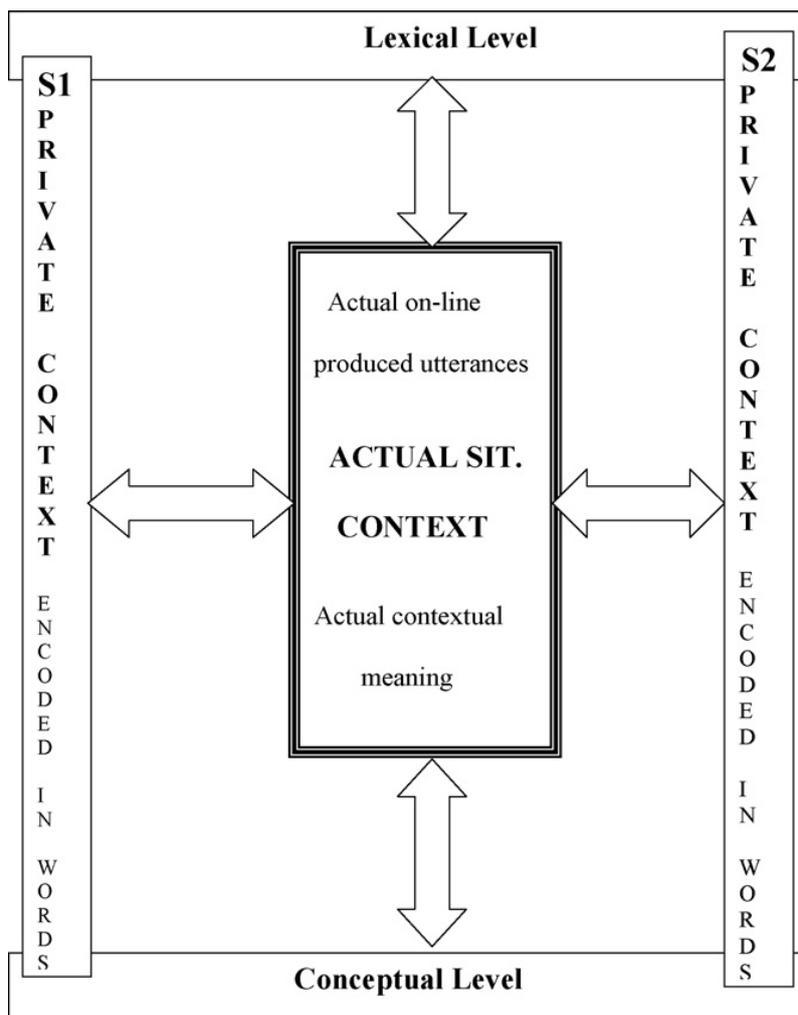


Fig. 1. Understanding context.

time, the way people speak or write, including the words, expressions, and utterances they use, create that very situation or context in which the given communication occurs. Consequently, as Gee (1999) claimed, two things seem to happen simultaneously: people attempt to fit their language to a situation or context that their language, in turn, helped to create in the first place. These co-constructive aspects of speech communication, in particular the co-construction of meanings and identities in and through discourse have also been explored in recent discourse studies, especially in ones focusing on intercultural communication (e.g., Scollon and Scollon, 2001; Shi-Xu, 2004).

(2) The fact that communication is increasingly intercultural (cf. Rampton, 1995; Blommaert, 1998; Kecskes, 2004a) requires the development of a theory of meaning that can explain not only unilingual processing but also bi- and multilingual meaning construction and comprehension. Fauconnier (1997:188) wrote that when we deal with a single language the complexities of modeling meaning do not necessarily stand out. However, when we compare two or more languages, or translate something from one language to the other, we realize that different languages have developed different ways of prompting the required cognitive constructions. Furthermore, different cultures organize their background knowledge differently (e.g. Wierzbicka, 1996). So *both the meaning construction systems and the*

meaning prompting systems differ in languages because both are culture-specific. Translating from one language to another requires a reconstruction of cognitive and cultural configurations that were prompted by one language and a determination of how another language would set up similar configurations with an entirely different meaning prompting system and pre-structured background.

Processing contexts and establishing repositories of contexts in the mind have both individual-specific elements and common elements. That is why communication is full of misunderstandings. In Rapaport's words "We almost always fail [. . .]. Yet we almost always nearly succeed: This is the paradox of communication (Rapaport, 2003:402)."

Why do we both fail and succeed? We have difficulties in speech communication because individual socio-cultural experience with lexical items and actual situational contexts may be different in a given speech community. Prior experience creates *private context* that gets encapsulated in lexical items in the mind of speakers of a particular speech community. This private context incorporates core knowledge (tied to the prior experience), which is the public part of the private context, and individual-specific knowledge that may not be shared by the other members of the speech community because it is the individualized reflection of the socio-cultural context. The *public context*, that is to say, the public part of the private context, however, is available to each speaker of that speech community because it refers to relatively similar conceptual content that is conventionalized. The important point here is that the meaning value of a lexical unit refers to both relatively static and dynamic elements that are the results of actual use of the given lexical unit in different actual situational contexts.

Fig. 1 demonstrates the different ways context is understood in the DMM. *Speaker's private context* encoded in lexical units and formulated in an utterance (*actual linguistic context*) is uttered (or written) "out there" in the world by a speaker in a situation (*actual situational context*), and is matched ("internalized") to the *private cognitive contexts* "inside" the head of the hearer (prior knowledge). Meaning is the result of interplay between the speaker's private context and the hearer's private context in the actual situational context as understood by the interlocutors.

4. Meaning value of words

The DMM serves to explain not only relations between contexts encoded in lexical units and actual situational contexts, but also the meaning values of words and bigger lexical units such as situation-bound utterances (Kecskes, 2003), speech formulas, and fixed expressions. This paper focuses mainly on the meaning values of words and emphasizes that the word functions as an interface that links the phonological, syntactic, lexical and conceptual structures in working memory in the course of perceiving or producing an utterance (cf. Culicover and Jackendoff, 2005).

4.1. Do words have meanings?

In fact, they do, although Evans (2006) and others argue that they do not. This is what Evans (2006:496) says:

"I argue that meaning is not a property of language per se, but rather is a function of language use, and thus, a characteristic of a process of meaning construction, rather than relating to mental entities/units stored in memory. Meaning construction is not an

unpacking of stored information, as assumed in more traditional accounts. Rather, it is a constructive process, in which integration of lexical units involves differential access to the conceptual knowledge which lexical entities potentially afford access.”

I agree with Evans that meaning construction is a constructive process. The question is, however, what situational meaning is constructed from if “meaning is not a property of language per se.” The DMM claims that language is meaningful, and we need to make a difference between the *meaning values* of lexical units on the one hand, and *situational meaning* on the other. The process of situational meaning construction includes both “unpacking” (stored private contexts expressed in meaning values of lexical units) and “constructing” (interplay of private contexts of interlocutors with the actual situational context). Current work in cognitive psychology appears to support this view (e.g., Swinney, 1979; Gibbs, 1996; Giora, 1997, 2003). Gibbs (1996:33) argued that “context becomes operative only at a post-access stage, guiding the selection of the contextually relevant meaning of the ambiguous words.” The main claim of the graded salience hypothesis of Giora is that salient meanings are processed automatically (though not necessarily solely), irrespective of contextual information and strength of bias in the first phase of comprehension when lexical processing and contextual processing run parallel (Giora, 2003:24). This assumes that while situational context can be predictive of certain meanings, it is deemed ineffective in obstructing initial access of salient context encoded in lexical units based on prior experience.

According to Evans, words are purely linguistic units that make access to conceptual knowledge structures. These structures represent only “semantic potentials” that are realized in language use. He acknowledges that words have some kind of “meaning,” whatever it may be called. Evans (2006:493) says the following: “What a word ‘means,’ which is to say, which part of its encyclopaedic knowledge potential is activated will always be a function of how it is being used in any given context.” I have several problems with this approach. Evans ignores that words encapsulate prior contexts of their use, so when he uses the term “context,” he means actual situational context only. Evans’ claim is that words do not mean anything without situational context. There are two ways to demonstrate that this is not quite so, and that words happen to have more than just “semantic potential”: (1) When a word is uttered or written down without any actual situational context (this is what Evans means by “context”) it can actually create its own context based on prior experience encapsulated in it. Kecskes (2001) gave a list of words and expressions to a group of native speakers of English and a group of non-native speakers, and asked them to write down what came to their mind first when they saw or heard the given lexical unit. None of the subjects asked for actual situational context to execute the task. The native speakers’ responses showed a remarkable similarity in most of the words and expressions such as “break;” “welcome;” “piece of cake;” “get out of here;” etc. As the lexical units were polysemic in some cases, however, there were deviations in subjects’ responses, or they gave two or three “stored contexts” in a hierarchical order. Certain deviations in subjects’ responses were essential because their first response was the most salient context that came into their mind based on their prior individual experience with the use of that word. The “context-free” exercise has pointed to the fact that words have meaning values without actual situational context. Uttered or written without any situational context, words create a context in the mind of the hearer/reader. These meaning values, however fuzzy they may be, are the results of prior experience with, and prior use of, the given lexical unit. (2) Research in second language acquisition (e.g., Kroll and Stewart, 1994; Nan Jiang, 2000; Kecskes and Cuenca, 2005) demonstrated that in the first phase of L2 development, when encountering a new word in L2, the learner tries to reach into the

conceptual base to find the concept that the word in the L2 stands for. Since the conceptual system of the learner is L1-based, the closest concept can be reached through an L1 word that denotes the concept in the L1. The problem, however, is that *concepts are culture-specific*. Consequently, there can hardly be any direct route between the L2 word and the L2 concept at this stage of development. The obvious way for the L2 learner to reach the concept is through the L1 translation equivalent. This is called the “word association model” by Kroll and Stewart (1994), and most recently “the first language (L1) lemma mediation stage” by Nan Jiang (2000:47). For instance:

- | | | | |
|-----|-------------------|-----------------------------|--------------|
| (1) | L2 (Spanish) word | → L1 translation equivalent | → L1 concept |
| | <i>almuerzo</i> | “lunch” (English) | [LUNCH] |
| | <i>escuela</i> | “school” (English) | [SCHOOL] |

The higher the fluency in L2, the less the learner has to rely on L1 word association because the growth of L2 proficiency brings about changes in the conceptual system, which starts to accommodate socio-cultural knowledge and concepts gained through L2 use and experience. This makes it possible for the learner to reach the appropriate conceptual structures directly without associating them with L1 translation equivalents.

Second language learning and bilingual experience show that in the first phase of development there is an interaction of L2 and L1 lexical equivalents on the linguistic level. This interaction relies on linguistic rather than conceptual knowledge. This points to the fact that what Evans calls “linguistic knowledge” comprises not only an abstract network of grammatical rules but also lexico-semantic information that derives from conceptual information. A wrong word choice by L2 learners often occurs because they believe that (relative) lexical equivalency means also conceptual equivalency, which is not the case, as we can see in the following example: In a Bucharest hotel lobby: “The lift is being fixed for the next day. During that time we regret that you will be unbearable.” (*The Octopus*. Oct. 1995)

Evans is right when he makes a distinction between “linguistic knowledge” and “encyclopaedic knowledge”¹ (the semantic potential). The problem is, however, that he considers linguistic knowledge an abstract network of grammatical rules only: “... lexical concepts constitute the semantic units conventionally associated with linguistic forms, and form an integral part of a language user’s individual mental grammar” (Evans, 2006:496). Linguistic knowledge in the DMM is the result of not only grammaticalization but also lexicalization, a process of language change broadly defined as the adoption of concepts into the lexicon, as the “development of concrete meanings” (Brinton and Traugott, 2005). As a result of lexicalization words may have “word-specific semantic properties” (Cruse, 1992), which are the results of recurring use of words in particular contexts. Some part of the “encyclopaedic knowledge” may become lexicalized and developed into a part of linguistic knowledge. The meaning properties that differentiate cognitive synonyms like ‘GIVE UP;’ ‘CAPITULATE;’ ‘SURRENDER;’ ‘CHICKEN OUT’ can be viewed as properties of the individual lexical units, as distinct from properties of the common concept. Word-specific semantic properties will include such things as emotive coloring, stylistic value, and various kinds of contextual affinities (see Cruse, 1990, for a more detailed discussion of word-specific semantic properties).

¹ In the DMM we use the term “world knowledge” instead of “encyclopaedic knowledge”.

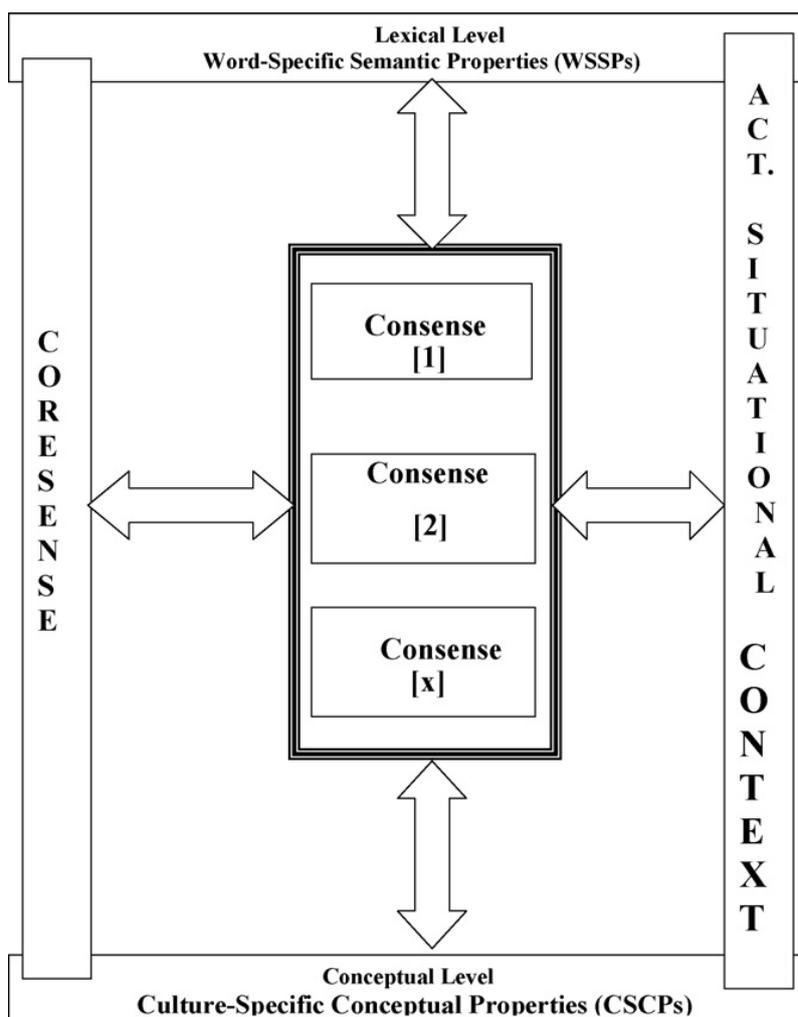


Fig. 2. The dynamic model of meaning.

4.2. Two facets of meaning value of words

According to the DMM (see Fig. 2) there are two facets of the meaning value of a word (lexical unit): *coresense* and *consense* (actual contextual sense). *Coresense* is a denotational, diachronic, relatively constant, and objective feature that reflects changes in the given speech community, while *consense* is actual, subjective, referential, and connotational, and changed by actual situational context (cf. Kecskes, 2004a). In the DMM, a lexical item represents world knowledge based on prior contextual experience. Fig. 2 shows how “privatized” world knowledge may be represented in a lexical unit as a blend of *coresense* (general world knowledge tied to the given concept), word-specific semantic properties² (lexicalized part of world knowledge), and culture-specific conceptual properties (culture-specific part of world knowledge). The dynamism of language use may result in changes in the relationship of these constituents of the blend.

4.2.1. *Coresense*

Coresense is abstracted from prior contextual occurrences of a word. It is neither conceptual nor lexical, but the interface between the two linguistic and conceptual levels. *Coresense* is not

² I am using Cruise’s term (1992) here.

the sum of the most essential properties of the given category, but a summary of the most familiar, regular, typical, and (generally, but not always) frequent uses of a word. It is the common core information that was called *public context* above, and is usually shared by members of a speech community. Coresense is not a pure linguistic phenomenon because it depends on extralinguistic factors such as familiarity, conventionality, and frequency. It is an essential feature of the word that pulls together conceptual semantic and lexical semantic information when a word is uttered.

Coresense grows as a generalization from the most common conceptual features of contexts the word has been used in through various interactions. This set of core conceptual features is abstracted from speakers' usage of the given lexical item. It changes in time by losing some features and/or adding new ones. Just think about the historical change in the coresense of words such as “candy,” “kidnap,” “school,” “snack,” etc.

Coresense has a unique relationship with the word-specific semantic properties (WSSP) and culture-specific conceptual properties (CSCP). Word-specific semantic properties link the coresense to the lexical level while culture-specific conceptual properties tie it to the conceptual level. Culture-specific conceptual properties belong to conceptual pragmatics, while word-specific semantic properties are features of the word itself, hence are a matter of lexico-semantics. It is within these two types of properties where individual differences occur, where individual speakers' private contexts tied to a particular word may differ.

4.2.2. Culture-specific conceptual properties

As noted above, culture-specific conceptual properties tie coresense to the conceptual level. They are the basis for figurative, metaphorical meaning and the development of word specific semantic properties. Culture-specific conceptual properties can be revealed relatively easily if we compare words from different languages that show lexical equivalency but differ as to their CSCPs. For instance, let us take the concept denoted by the word “lunch” in English and “*almuerzo*” in Spanish. “Lunch” for a native speaker of American-English refers to a light meal consisting of a sandwich, soup and salad, or something else that is consumed in a 30–60 min break around noon. “*Almuerzo*,” for a Spaniard, denotes the main meal of the day (usually consisting of three courses) that s/he consumes between 1 and 4 o'clock (no Spanish restaurant will serve “*almuerzo*” before 1 p.m.). The coresense of the two words is relatively the same; there is no word-specific semantic property attached to either, however, they differ in culture-specific conceptual properties. Bilingual people will have the same coresense for each word with different culture-specific conceptual properties, which will result in a synergic concept whose content may change depending on the extent of exposure to the two language and cultures (about this issue see [Kecskes, 2007](#)).

Not all concepts have culture-specific conceptual properties. For instance, the concept denoted by the English word “salt” has hardly any culture-specific conceptual property, nor does its lexical equivalents in other languages. The word “pumpkin,” however, is different. It has a culture-specific conceptual property that usually has a positive value in American culture: a pumpkin is a popular symbol of autumn and Halloween, and parents often use the word as a nickname for their children:

- (2) Father: Listen *Pumpkin*, how about going for ice cream?
Margie: Cool, let's go.

As seen also in the English-Spanish example (“lunch” versus “*almuerzo*”), these CSCPs do not apply across cultures. A conversation like the one in (2) could hardly take place in Hungarian,

where the lexical equivalent of the English word “pumpkin” is “*tök*,” which carries a CSCP with a negative value. Hungarian children would not be happy if addressed by the word “*tök*,” which has the connotation of “stupid.”

Culture-specific conceptual properties are very dynamic features of words and keep changing all the time. They are sensitive to socio-cultural changes in the given language community. CSCPs represent the cognitive base for word meaning value, and are responsible for changes in the coresense of a word and its word specific semantic properties. *When culture-specific conceptual properties get fully lexicalized they turn into word specific semantic properties.* This is why native speakers of English do not have to check with the conceptual system when they use words such as “chicken out,” “kidnap,” “blackmail,” etc.

4.2.3. Word-specific semantic properties

The term “word-specific semantic properties” (WSSP) was coined by Cruse (1992) to denote specific semantic properties that belong to the lexical rather than the conceptual level. WSSPs make it possible for speakers to have alternative lexical access routes to a single concept: for instance, “run,” “dash,” and “rush;” or “sleep,” “doze,” and “nap.” Cruse (1992:291) argued that cognitive synonyms map onto identical concepts. The meaning properties that differentiate such cognitive synonyms as “die,” or “pass away,” can be viewed as properties of the individual lexical units, as distinct from properties of the common concept.

Word-specific semantic properties are the result of the recurrent use of words in particular contexts. Originally WSSPs derive from the interplay of the given lexical unit and actual situational contexts, and they are the best evidence for category stability and variability. They usually develop from metaphors or other figures of speech, and over time they become lexicalized and conventionalized. Cruse (1992) argued that words with word-specific semantic properties can create a more emotive, more “colorful” context than words without WSSPs. Compare the following sentences:

- (3) Peter *ate* the steak. → Peter *devoured* the steak.
John *repaired* the car. → John *overhauled* the car.

It should be emphasized that word-specific semantic properties (that is, “semantic loads”), just like culture-specific conceptual properties, are not mandatory features that are attached to each lexical unit in use. There are lexical units that have neither word-specific semantic properties, nor culture-specific conceptual properties (such as “division,” “example,” “depart,” etc.) no matter what actual situation context they are used in. Actual situational context can suppress culture-specific conceptual properties. This is, however, hardly the case with word-specific semantic properties encoded in the word, such as “pass away,” “chicken out,” “dash,” and so forth.

4.2.4. Consense

Coresense should be distinguished from *consense*, which is the situated, contextual meaning value of a lexical unit in an actual situational context. Coresense is the invariant while consense represents the possible variants. Consense realizes a particular aspect or aspects of the coresense by uniting it with the appropriate word-specific semantic property and/or culture-specific conceptual property when the word is actually uttered in a particular situation. Consense is based on private contexts encoded in the given lexical unit. It is a mental representation consisting of a variable set of conceptual features compositionally related to the syntactic structure of the lexical unit. This set may vary with every use of the given expression in actual situational contexts. There

is a dialectical relationship between coresense and consense. Coresense changes diachronically while consense changes synchronically. Systematic, repeated changes in consenses (actual uses) will result in changes of coresense. Change in the coresense of the following words overtime clearly supports this point: “gay”, “google”, “anchor.”

Fig. 2 demonstrates how coresense and consense fit within the dynamic model of meaning. As the diagram shows, coresense is the interface between the conceptual and lexical level. Word-specific semantic properties are links to the lexical level, while culture-specific conceptual properties are ties to the conceptual level. Consenses are the variations of coresense in context. The actual contextual interpretation of coresense is expressed in a consense connected to other consenses of lexical units to form an utterance.

5. Application of the dynamic model of meaning

5.1. How can DMM be used to explain meaning values of words?

The DMM can be used to explain how the word form pulls together cognitive information (both linguistic and encyclopedic knowledge) when it is uttered in actual situational contexts. It demonstrates the different aspects of the meaning value structure of lexical units, and how these different aspects of the meaning value structure may change (strengthen, weaken or get canceled) depending on the actual situational context, and how prior experience encapsulated in the meaning values of lexical units interacts with current experience in actual situational meaning construction. For example:

(4)

(A) The player *kicked off* the ball.

(B) They *kicked Imus off* the air forever.

(C) The president *kicked off* the school year with an excellent speech.

The verb “kick off” is used in three different senses in these sentences. The coresense in each use is the same: “initiate proceedings.” The culture-specific conceptual property that represents the cognitive base for the meaning value of the word comes from football as sentence A demonstrates. In sentence B the culture-specific conceptual property receives a metaphorical sense while in sentence C the word has a word-specific semantic property that turned the word into a lexicalized metaphor. It is important to underline that these senses of the word “*kick off*” are not necessarily the results of contextual enhancement as the followers of the Relevance Theory would say. Rather, these particular senses in those particular sentences are the results of word selection, and the interplay of the verb with its argumentations. The words “*kick off; Imus, air*” in sentence B and “*kick off, president, school year*” in sentence C were selected by the speaker because their conceptual domains make it possible to join them in a sentence to express what the speaker intended to say. The created utterance meaning would be different if different argumentations were selected by the speaker.

5.2. Situation-bound utterances in the DMM

The DMM can be used to explain the behavior of any pragmatic units including situation-bound utterances. These are highly conventionalized, prefabricated pragmatic units whose occurrences are tied to standardized communicative situations (Kecskes, 2000, 2003).

Kecskes (2000) claimed that if, according to their obligatoriness and predictability in social situations, formulaic expressions are placed on a continuum where obligatoriness increases to the right, situation-bound utterances will take the rightmost place because their use is highly predetermined by the actual situational context.

Lexical idioms (“kick the bucket;” “eat one’s words;” “pull one’s leg,” etc.) and pragmatic idioms (“I’ll talk to you later;” “Welcome aboard;” “Howdy”) typically differ in predictability. The likelihood of occurrence of lexical idioms is usually unpredictable while the use of situation-bound utterances (SBU) is generally tied to particular social contexts.

In the DMM situation-bound utterances also have coresense, culture-specific conceptual property and formula-specific pragmatic property.³ The following example shows how the DMM can be applied to the use of situation-bound utterances.

(5)

Policeman: - [(1) *What’s going on here?*] [(2) *What seems to be the problem?*], [(3) *What’s up?*]

David: - He hit my car.

Bob: - He stopped short for no reason.

Policeman: (To Bob, the driver of the other car): - How fast were you going?

Bob: - I don’t know. Maybe forty. (Genzel, 1991:8)

The dialog happens after a traffic accident. The policeman is talking to the two drivers. He has to address the participants and may choose from several situation-bound utterances which can substantiate this pragmatic function. Each of the three SBUs has a formula-specific pragmatic property that distinguishes it from the others. “*What’s going on here?*” and “*What seems to be the problem?*” are likely to open up the same frame while “*What’s up?*” appears to create a different contextual frame which is not appropriate in this situation. The culture-specific conceptual property that is attached to “*What’s up?*” makes the use of the SBU appropriate between close friends, but not necessarily between a policeman and a participant of a traffic accident. So while the three situation-bound utterances have the same coresense and can express a similar situated meaning, their formula-specific pragmatic properties and culture-specific conceptual properties are different. The difference of formula-specific pragmatic properties allows substitution like in (1) and (2); if, however, the culture-specific conceptual properties are different, the two situation-bound utterances are not interchangeable.

6. The dynamic model of meaning and current pragmatic theories

Being a model that attempts to pull together speaker and hearer perspectives the DMM directs attention to some problematic issues in current pragmatic theories and confirms some of the latest findings in language processing research.

6.1. *Need for a dialectic model of communication*

The DMM builds on reciprocity between cognitive context expressed in language and actual situational context in meaning construction and emphasizes the dynamism of speech communication in which interlocutors attempt to fit their language to a situation or context

³ In the case of situation-bound utterances the term “formula-specific pragmatic property” is preferred to “word-specific semantic property” although they both refer to the same (linguistic) level.

that their language, in turn, helped to create in the first place. This approach calls for the development of a dialectic model of communication that considers the process as a structured whole and can explain it from both the speaker's and the hearer's perspective. However, two of the current leading theories in pragmatics (Neo-Gricean approach; Relevance Theory) rely on a modular view, and start from the assumption that an essential feature of human communication is the expression and recognition of intentions (Grice, 1957, 1969). In pragmatic interpretation the hearer infers the speaker's intended meaning from the utterance(s) the speaker has produced. The hearer must recognize the speaker's communicative intention and identify what the speaker means. An utterance is a linguistically coded unit, so verbal comprehension should involve an element of decoding. However, the decoded linguistic meaning is only the starting point for an inferential process that results in the attribution of a speaker's meaning. This process is explained from either predominantly from the speaker's perspective (Neo-Gricean approach) or the hearer's perspective (Relevance Theory); consequently neither theory in its present form supports a dialectic model.

Clark's contribution theory (Clark and Brennan, 1991; Clark, 1996) can be considered a dialectic model of communication because it extended the traditional sender/receiver model of communication by enlarging the frame of analysis from the single message unit (utterance) to an interactionally developed "contribution." The construct of *common ground* is a mechanism by which joint understanding is achieved. It can be described as the mutual knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions of the participants in a conversation.

Grounding is the process in which common ground is updated in an orderly way, by each interlocutor attempting to establish that the others have understood their utterances well enough for the current purposes. Clark and Brennan (1991) claimed that "contributions" to common ground have two phases: the presentation phase and the acceptance phase. They argued that interlocutors not only signal a lack of comprehension in instances of miscommunication, but in principle, they try to ground every utterance and seek negative or positive evidence of understanding for every utterance.

The difference between Clark's contribution theory (Clark, 1996) and the DMM is that while the former considers communication as a constant search for common ground following a contribution by contribution sequence, the latter puts the main emphasis on the "ego" of interlocutors just like current theories in cognitive psychology (e.g., Keysar and Henly, 2002; Barr and Keysar, 2005; Giora, 2003), and underscores the "untidy," chaotic nature of communication which is not just recipient design and intention recognition as most theories that have grown out of Grice's approach claim.

The DMM approach reveals several problems in the communication process, which may lead to misunderstandings and require negotiation of meaning. Unlike Clark's contribution theory, the DMM recognizes meaning as the result of the "clash" of two or more private contexts (speaker's context and hearer's context) in an actual situational context that is usually processed differently from the perspective of the speaker and hearer. This leads to a unique dynamism of communication that is full of ups and downs, silence, unfinished and unacknowledged utterances, and breakdowns. Within ongoing streams of interaction, the distinction between "presentation and acceptance" (Clark, 1996) may be complicated, as an utterance may connect forward or backward to various other utterances. Contributions, therefore, may rarely occur in tidy, recognizable packages. Complications associated with multi-party interaction (e.g., overlapping utterances, no response) may make the relationship between presentations and acceptances ambiguous for participants and analysts alike (cf. Koschmann and LeBaron, 2003). The DMM also recognizes the "egocentrism" of contributors (see Keysar and Henly, 2002; Barr and Keysar, 2005) especially in the first phase of the communication sequence, and gives an account of how

participants in conversation routinely and relatively with little problem coordinate their understandings of matters at hand.

6.2. Context and processing

6.2.1. Differences in private contexts

Although both the speaker and the hearer work with lexical units from the same meaning prompting system (language) their meaning construction system may give different interpretations to the same items. Differences can be significant depending on the interlocutors' prior experience (frequency, familiarity, motivation, etc.) with the same words, expressions, and utterances. This is especially visible in intercultural communication where because of cultural differences not only speakers' private contexts can differ significantly but also their public contexts tied to the same lexical item. The following is a conversation between a South Korean student and an American student who took the same linguistics class. The South Korean student was very good at linguistics while her American friend could barely pass the course.

(6)

Korean: - Jill, do you want me to help you with your essay?

American: - *Don't patronize me, please.*

Korean: - You say, you don't want support?

American: - Please just don't... . Okay?

There is a difference in how the American student uses the word “patronize” and how the South Korean student understands it. The coresense of “patronize” can be described as follows: [to act as a patron to someone or something]. This is the sense both interlocutors are supposed to have because in conversation it is usually the coresense of a lexical unit that constitutes the minimum set of features that we can assume to be shared by interlocutors. However, especially in intercultural communication, the same word may have different culture-specific conceptual property for the native speaker and the nonnative speaker. This is what may have happened here. In American culture the word “patronize” usually has quite a negative culture-specific conceptual property while in South Korean L2 speakers this English word is tied to some positive cultural load. This is because the Korean word “*huwonhada*”, which is the lexical equivalent of English “patronize” has a positive culture-specific conceptual property. For Koreans if they are patronized, it means that they receive a favor. This positive cultural load is transferred to the English word. This is why the South Korean student does not seem to understand the negative attitude of the American speaker. The application of the DMM can especially be helpful to explain intercultural communicative situations like this.

6.2.2. Actual situational context

Something functions as an actual situational context for an interlocutor only insofar as he or she has conceptualized it as such. So we have to be concerned with what things in the environment are *understood* by language users to be relevant context, which brings us to a deeply mentalist position. Bach (2006) argued that context does not literally determine, in the sense of constituting, what the speaker means. It must be so, because the actual situational context may be evaluated differently by the speaker and the hearer. When communication succeeds, actual situational context provides the hearer with the basis for determining, in the sense of ascertaining, what the speaker means. But what the speaker really means is a matter of his communicative

intention, not context, although what he could reasonably mean depends on what information is mutually salient. The following conversation between a Chinese waitress and an Australian traveler at a Chinese airport illustrates this point:

(7)

Waitress: - Can I get you some more coffee, sir?

Traveler: - *Who is stopping you?*

Waitress: - You want to stop me?

Traveler: - Oh no, just bring the damned coffee.

The waitress was confused because she did not recognize the expression '*Who is stopping you?*' as relevant in the actual situational context, having processed it literally. She did not realize how rude the expression was either. The negative intention of the Australian traveler had very little to do with the actual situational context.

6.2.3. *Speaker processing versus hearer processing*

When a lexical unit (a label for private context) is used by a speaker, private contexts attached to it are activated top-down in a hierarchical order that is based on salience. This hierarchical order works differently for the speaker and the hearer. For the speaker there is an *inter-label hierarchy* first, while for the hearer there is an *intra-label hierarchy*. Inter-label hierarchy works in the first phase of production when a speaker looks for words to express her/his intention. First s/he has to select a word (words) from a group of possible words to express his/her communicative intention. These words constitute a hierarchy from the best fit to those less suited to the idea s/he is trying to express. The hearer, however, has to cope with a different type of hierarchy from her/his perspective. Intra-label hierarchy occurs when the hearer processes a lexical unit(s) in an utterance. The label (word) uttered by the speaker triggers the history of the use of that particular label by the hearer and not by the speaker in a hierarchical order. This may also be a reason for misunderstanding in the communicative process.

6.3. *Salience and situational context*

Most pragmatic theories support the modular view according to which utterance interpretation falls into two phases, decoding and inference. Actual situational context affects comprehension after the initial literal interpretation of the sentence has been accomplished. From the perspective of the dynamic model of meaning there are two problems with this assumption. First, literal meanings that are expected to be decoded first are not inevitably present in comprehension. Second, semantic and pragmatic factors may come to play in the earliest stages of comprehension.

The DMM confirms the results of the latest research in cognitive psychology on language processing according to which both speaker and hearer rely on their most accessible and salient knowledge expressed in their private contexts in production and comprehension. The critical variable is saliency and not the literalness of the lexical unit (e.g., Giora, 2003; Katz, 2005; Kecskes, 2004b). Explaining her graded salience hypothesis, Giora suggested that the literal priority model ("the lexicon proposes and context disposes") should be revised. Instead of postulating the priority of literal meaning, the priority of salient (e.g., conventional, familiar, frequent, predictable) meaning should be assumed (Giora, 1997, 2003). The most salient meaning is the most probable meaning out of all possible meanings. Words and expressions usually have multiple meaning values, and some of these meanings are more accessible than

others because we ascribe greater cognitive priority in our mental lexicon to some meanings over the rest.

According to the graded salience hypothesis in the initial phase of comprehension contextual and lexical processes do not interact but run parallel, and this stage is dominated by lexical access (Giora, 2003; Kecskes, 2006). Salient meanings of lexical units are first accessed automatically, and are then revised in the case of a misfit with context. Salient meaning overrides literal meaning in production and comprehension. Giora's theory, however, does not make a difference between private context and public context, which the DMM does. In it salience is tied to private context while literalness relates to public context. According to the DMM it is essential that salience overrides literalness because, given the fact that the lexical unit encapsulates the history of its prior use, those usages will get priority in the meaning hierarchy that represent the most familiar and frequent encounters. As a consequence, what is salient for the speaker may not be equally salient for the hearer, and what is relevant for the speaker may not be equally relevant for the hearer. The following conversation that took place between a professor and one of his Japanese students in the professor's office illustrates this difference.

(8)

Noritaka: - Hi Professor X.

Professor: - Hi Noritaka. How are you? *Why don't you sit down?*

Noritaka: - Because you did not tell me to.

Professor: - OK, I am telling you now.

The speaker's intention and hearer's interpretation were different because the student did not have enough prior experience with the expression '*Why don't you sit down?*' to develop a non-literal understanding of the pragmatic unit whose most salient meaning for most native speakers is its non-literal rather than literal meaning.

It is important to note that there is some difference in the understanding of context dependency between the graded salience hypothesis and the DMM. The graded salience hypothesis talks about actual situational context dependency in the first phase of processing. The DMM, however, adopts a different approach. When someone is asked to interpret the lexical unit "*hot*" without context, according to the DMM we have to bear in mind the following: When we say "without context" we actually mean "without *actual situational context*." Context is created merely by uttering the word or the expression. When someone is asked to interpret the meaning of a lexical unit "without *actual situational context*," in fact s/he is expected to *create*, (or think of) a *situational context* into which the given lexical unit fits best in his/her mind. If someone says that "*hot*" refers to "spicy food" it usually means that this is the context that has priority in his/her mind.

The DMM approach distinguishes between *collective salience* and *individual salience*, a distinction that does not exist in Giora's theory. Collective salience belongs to public context represented in the coresense of a lexical unit while individual salience is a matter of private context tied to consense. What appears in actual situational context is individual salience represented in consense. This is why most misunderstandings happen in the first phase of processing. The same lexical item is processed differently by the speaker and hearer as in example 8.

Collective salience is a more complicated matter. A typical example can be what may be called "patronizing syndrome" in American-English native speaker–non-native speaker communication. This was demonstrated in example 6 above. "Patronizing" is a unique feature

of American culture. It has to do with the expectation and trust of doing a good job. Americans do not like to be told either directly or indirectly how to do their job. Sometimes they may misinterpret good-willed suggestions and recommendations because they think they are being patronized. This culture-specific conceptual property is usually attached to the coresense whenever the word “patronize” is used. Differences in collective salience attached to the concept (denoted by the word “patronize”) in different cultures led to a misunderstanding in example 6 above.

The predominance of salience over literalness is supported by the “egocentrism” approach described by cognitive psychologists (e.g., Keysar and Henly, 2002; Barr and Keysar, 2005; Keysar, 2007) who argued that language users egocentrically anchor their judgments in available information regardless of whether this information is actually useful for solving the given problem, and fail to fully adjust to the perspectives of others. The most salient information is usually the most accessible information. Barr and Keysar (2005:30) claimed that “. . . language processing is anchored in the assumption that what is salient or accessible to oneself will also be accessible to one’s interlocutor.”

The dynamic model of meaning, the graded salience hypothesis and the egocentrism approach have something in common. They all question the priority of literal meaning in language processing and advocate the priority of salient meaning instead. At the same time they all underline the equally important role of prior experience encapsulated in lexical units and current experience represented in the actual situational context in meaning construction.

6.4. *Linguistic underspecification*

Linguistic underspecification of utterance content is widely accepted across different frameworks including the neo-Gricean approaches (cf. Horn, 2005; Levinson, 2000), relevance theory (Carston, 2002, 2005; Sperber and Wilson, 1995), Bierwisch’s (1996, 1997) two-level conceptual semantics, and Pustejovsky’s (1995) theory of the generative lexicon. These approaches claim that the meaning of the lexical units is underspecified and gets conceptual specification in context. It is argued that the specification of word meaning in context is accomplished by conceptual shift, which “shifts” the core meaning into various conceptual fields, and by conceptual differentiation, which only “differentiates” the core meaning within one and the same conceptual domain, thereby yielding literal meanings. There is also an agreement that if linguistic underdeterminacy is given, pragmatic inference is required if a hearer is to recover a speaker’s meaning successfully. However, in pragmatics there is much less consensus on the nature of principles in the pragmatic inferential process, and whether pragmatic additions are strictly guided by the underlying structure of the uttered sentence, or are relatively free of linguistic constraints.

The underspecification approach relies on the assumption that the linguistically encoded element of an utterance is not generally geared toward achieving as high a degree of explicitness as possible, but rather toward keeping processing effort down. As a consequence, information that is clearly already highly activated in the addressee’s mind is often not given linguistic expression (cf. Carston, 2002). In recent pragmatic theories there is a tendency to distinguish three levels of interpretation instead of the Gricean two: the proposition literally expressed (compositional meaning), explicitly communicated content (“explicature” or “implicature”) and implicitly communicated content (implicature). There is no consensus on the explicit nature of pragmatically enriched content. The debate is about whether the pragmatically enriched content is explicitly communicated or not. The relevance theorists argue that the pragmatically

enriched content is explicitly communicated so they use the term “explicature.” However, most neo-Griceans (e.g., Bach, 1994; Horn, 2005) resist the term “explicature” because they do not consider the pragmatically enriched content explicitly communicated. Therefore, they prefer to use the term “implicature” for these cases. For Bach, the implicature is an implicit component of what is said, and it is not explicitly communicated. Recanati (2001) speaks about “what is said_{max}” in these cases. The pragmatically enriched content is a partially pragmatically determined proposition which may accommodate different degrees of explicitness and implicitness. It appears necessary to distinguish this level because in most cases the proposition literally expressed is not something the speaker could possibly mean. For instance:

- (9) At a gas station
 - I am the silver Mercedes over there. Could you fill me up with diesel, please?
 - Sure.

The recognition of linguistic underspecification by both the neo-Griceans and the relevance theoreticians shows that they consider context (what is called “actual situational context” in the DMM) as the most decisive factor in the process of meaning construction. The dynamic model of meaning follows a somewhat different path. According to the DMM private cognitive contexts represented in the speaker’s utterances have a dynamic interplay with the actual situational context in which they are uttered. As described above, both private context and actual situational context have a decisive role in the communication process, but at different stages. *In the DMM there is no underdeterminacy of lexical units in the first phase of speaker production* because the lexical units selected by the speaker are supposed to be the most salient representations of the speaker’s intention. Actually the rather firm determinacy of salient meaning in the first phase of processing suppresses actual situational context. Bach (2006) was right when he said that (actual situational) context does not literally determine, in the sense of constituting, what the speaker means. The DMM emphasizes that what the speaker really means is a matter of his communicative intention expressed in private contexts encoded in the lexical units the utterance consists of. So speaker meaning is not underdetermined from this perspective. Based on the egocentric view (cf. Barr and Keysar, 2005; Keysar, 2007), the graded salience hypothesis (Giora, 2003) and the DMM, we can argue that in the first phase of processing speaker meaning is not underdetermined from the hearer’s perspective either. In this phase the hearer matches the private context of the speaker to his/her private context. If the two do not match, actual situation context will serve as a basis for determining, in the sense of ascertaining, what the speaker means.

7. Conclusion

The DMM represents an approach with new elements to meaning construction and context from a multilingual rather than a unilingual perspective. It is built on the assumption that the key to understanding the process of meaning construction is world knowledge that is represented in the head of interlocutors (private contexts), and outside in the world (actual situational context) as interpreted by the interlocutors. The different aspects of world knowledge expressed in actual communication bring together prior and present experience of interlocutors.

Aspects of world knowledge built on prior experience are encapsulated in lexical units while aspects of world knowledge originating in current experience are expressed in the actual situational context. The prior experience based aspects of world knowledge tied to lexical items are as follows: A general aspect of world knowledge is expressed in the coresense of a lexical

unit, culture-specific aspects are given as culture-specific conceptual properties, and language-specific aspects are represented in the word-specific semantic properties. However, neither side of world knowledge is static. In fact, they are in constant change. We change the world, and the world changes how we think about it. This approach allows us to understand the dialectics of meaning construction as reflected in the interplay of two sides of world experience as well as the dynamism and synergism of the process of meaning creation and comprehension.

The advantage of the application of the DMM is that it puts into new perspective some of the key issues in language use and language processing such as salience, literalness, relevance, common ground and cooperativeness. The dynamic model of meaning calls attention to the relatively disorderly and chaotic nature of communication, which has a unique dynamism full of ups and downs, silence, unfinished and unacknowledged utterances, and breakdowns. The claim that in this process speakers strive to be maximally informative and relevant in lexical selection does not seem to fit what they actually do. Cooperativeness and reliance on possible mutual knowledge usually come in only after the speaker's ego is satisfied and the listener's egocentric, most salient interpretation is processed. In order to give adequate explanation to these processes we need a dialectic model of pragmatics that combines the perspective of both the speaker and hearer. The development of the dynamic model of meaning may be considered an attempt toward this goal.

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