



Situation-bound utterances as pragmatic acts

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 June 2010

Keywords:

Socio-cognitive approach
 Situation-bound utterances
 Pragmatic acts
 Speech acts
 Socio-cultural background
 Conversational routines
 Prior context
 Actual situational context

ABSTRACT

The goal of the paper is to discuss how situation-bound utterances (Kecskes, 1997, 2000, 2003) relate to pragmemes (Mey, 2001) that refer to generalized pragmatic acts. In pragmatic interpretation the cognitive- philosophical line of research appears to put more emphasis on the proposition expressed (e.g. Horn, 2005; Levinson, 2000) while the socio-cultural interactional line (e.g. Verschueren, 1999; Mey, 2001) underscores the importance of allowing socio-cultural context into linguistic analysis. Following the socio-cultural interactional line Mey claimed that the explanatory movement in a theory of pragmatic acts is from the outside in: “the focus is on the environment in which both speaker and hearer find their affordances, such that the entire situation is brought to bear on what can be said in the situation, as well as on what is actually being said (Mey, 2001:221).” In the paper I will argue that from the perspective of SBUs the explanatory movement should go in both directions: from the outside in and from the inside out. This is because SBUs not only fit into and bound to certain situations but they also create and help to maintain those situations.

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1. Introduction

The socio-cultural interactional view on pragmatics (e.g. Verschueren, 1999; Mey, 2001) considers pragmatics as “a general cognitive, social and cultural perspective on linguistic phenomena in relation to their usage in forms of behavior (Verschueren, 1999:7). This line of thinking was created partly as an opposing view to the component approach to pragmatics represented by neo-gricean pragmatics, relevance theory, and speech act theory. Mey’s (2001) pragmatic act theory (PAT) originates in the socio-cultural interactional view emphasizing the priority of socio-cultural and societal factors in meaning construction and comprehension. He argued that the problem with the speech act theory is that it lacks a theory of action, and even if it does have such a theory it is individual- rather than societal-centered (Mey, 2001:214). In Mey’s opinion human activity is not the privilege of the individual. Rather the individual is situated in a social context, which means that s/he is empowered, as well as limited, by the conditions of her/his social life. This is quite a deterministic view that gives limited space for individual initiatives.

For Mey it is the situation and extralinguistic factors such as gestures, intonation, rather than “wording” that defines pragmatic acts. He argued that “*a fortiori*, there are, strictly speaking, no such ‘things’ as speech acts *per se*, only acts of speech in a situation (Mey, 2006).” Further he claimed that “...indirect speech acts derive their force, not from their lexico-semantic build-up, but instead, from the *situation* in which they are appropriately uttered.” Mey is right emphasizing the importance of situation, environment and extralinguistic factors in meaning construction and comprehension. However, the “wording” of linguistic expressions is as important in shaping meaning as the situation in which they are used and supplemented by extralinguistic factors. Both sides are equally important contributors in meaning construction and comprehension. Words, expressions, speech acts encode prior experience of the individual with these linguistic elements in social situations (Kecskes, 2008). The question is *to what extent* the linguistic and

contextual factors contribute to meaning construction and comprehension at different stages of the communicative process.

2. The socio-cognitive approach (SCA)

The approach I am proposing here differs from Mey' view and is based on a dialectical socio-cognitive perspective on communication and pragmatics (Kecskes, 2003, 2008). This view unites the societal and individual features of communication and considers communication a dynamic process in which individuals are not only constrained by societal conditions but they also shape them at the same time. Speaker and hearer are equal participants of the communicative process. They both produce and comprehend relying on their most accessible and salient knowledge expressed in their private contexts in production and comprehension. Consequently, only a holistic interpretation of utterance from both the perspective of the speaker and the perspective of the hearer can give us an adequate account of language communication. In this paradigm communication is driven by the interplay of *cooperation* required by societal conditions and *egocentrism* rooted in prior experience of the individual. Consequently, egocentrism and cooperation are not mutually exclusive phenomena. They are both present in all stages of communication to a different extent because they represent the individual and societal traits of the dynamic process of communication (Kecskes and Zhang, 2009). On the one hand speakers and hearers are constrained by societal conditions but as individuals they all have their own goals, intention, desire, etc. that are freely expressed, and recognized in the flow of interaction.

In the socio-cognitive approach framed by the dynamic model of meaning (Kecskes, 2008; Kecskes and Zhang, 2009) communication is characterized by the interplay of two traits that are inseparable, mutually supportive and interactive:

<i>Individual trait:</i>	<i>Social trait:</i>
attention	intention
private experience	actual situational experience
<i>egocentrism</i>	<i>cooperation</i>
salience	relevance

Communication is the result of interplay of intention and attention motivated by socio-cultural background that is privatized by the individuals. The socio-cultural background is composed of dynamic knowledge of interlocutors deriving from their prior experience encoded in the linguistic expressions they use and current experience in which those expressions create and convey meaning.

This socio-cognitive approach integrates the pragmatic view of cooperation and the cognitive view of egocentrism and emphasizes that both cooperation and egocentrism are manifested in all phases of communication to a varying extent. While cooperation is an intention-directed practice and measured by relevance, egocentrism is an attention-oriented trait and measured by salience. Intention and attention are identified as two measurable forces that affect communication in a systematic way. The measurement of intention and attention by means of relevance and salience is distinct from earlier explanations (e.g. Sperber and Wilson, 1986; Wilson and Sperber, 2004; Giora, 2003).

The first part of the paper I will discuss Mey's PAT. In the second part I will describe the nature and characteristics of situation-bound utterances in the socio-cognitive approach (Kecskes, 2003, 2008). The third part aims to explain the similarities and differences between pragmatic acts and situation-bound utterances.

3. Pragmatic act theory

Mey's pragmatic acts theory is an ambitious approach to explain the way pragmemes are represented in pragmatic acts in speech situations. His main criticism against the speech act theory is that in order for speech acts to be effective they have to be situated: "they both rely on, and actively create, the situation in which they are realized (Mey, 2001:218). "In short, "there are no speech acts, but only situated speech acts, or instantiated pragmatic acts". As a consequence, the emphasis is not on conditions and rules for an individual speech act, but on characterizing a general situational prototype (what Mey calls a pragmeme) that can be executed in the situation. Thus, a particular pragmeme can be substantiated and realized through individual pragmatic acts. In other words, a pragmatic act is an instance of adapting oneself to a context, as well as adapting the context to oneself. For instance:

- (1) - She is after my money.
- *Like I care.*

"*Like I care*" is a pragmatic act that expresses the pragmeme "I do not care", which can be also substantiated by several other concrete pragmatic acts such as "*I do not care*", "*I do not mind*", "*it's none of my business*", etc.

According to Mey pragmatic acts are situation-derived and situation-constrained. There is no one-to-one relationship between speech acts and pragmatic acts because the later does not necessarily include specific acts of speech. For instance:

(2)

- Mother: - Joshua, what are you doing?
 Joshua: - Nothing.
 Mother: - Will you stop it immediately. (Mey, 2001:216)

The pragmeme represented by the pragmatic act “Nothing” can be described as “trying to get out (opt out) of a conversation” that may lead too far.

Mey’s pragmatic act approach is right in many respects. It is definitely true that speech acts never come alone, but carry always with them several other acts that also contribute to their success in conversation. Some of these other acts are strictly speech-oriented, while others are more general in nature, and may include, besides speech, extralinguistic aspects of communication such as gestures, intonation, facial mimics, body posture, head movements, laughter, and so on. Besides, the role of context is also inevitable. With Mey’s words. . . “No conversational contribution at all can be understood properly unless it is situated within the environment in which it was meant to be understood (Mey, 2001:217).”

Mey also understands the dynamic and dialectical nature of conversation when he speaks about the fact that our acting is determined by what the scene can afford, and by what we can afford on the scene, that is to say, the scene not only determines our acting but also our actions determine and reaffirm the existing scene (Mey, 2001:218).

Everything looks good with the pragmatic acts theory: relationship of pragmemes and pragmatic acts, understanding role of contexts and dynamic and dialectical nature of conversation. So is there any weak point in the theory? Before I answer this question we should look at situation-bound utterances.

4. Situation-bound utterances (SBUs)

4.1. Definition of SBUs

This paper focuses on a particular type of formulaic expressions called “situation-bound utterances” (Kecskes, 1997, 2000, 2003). SBUs are highly conventionalized, prefabricated pragmatic units whose occurrences are tied to standardized communicative situations (Coulmas, 1981; Fónagy, 2001; Kiefer, 1985, 1995; Kecskes, 1997, 2000). *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 situation (Kecskes, 2000).* SBUs are unique lexical units because they demonstrate the distinction between conventions of language and conventions of usage. This was division was made by several researchers including Searle (1979) and Morgan (1978).

Searle said: “It is, by now, I hope, uncontroversial that there is a distinction to be made between meaning and use, but what is less generally recognized is that there can be conventions of usage that are not meaning conventions (Searle, 1979:49).” This distinction is expressed even more clearly by Morgan: “In sum, then, I am proposing that there are at least two distinct kinds of convention involved in speech acts: conventions of language . . . and conventions in a culture of usage of language in certain cases. . . The former, conventions of language, are what make up the language, at least in part. The latter, conventions of usage, are a matter of culture (manners, religion, law. . .) (Morgan, 1978:269).”

The pragmatic functions are not always encoded in these expressions, therefore SBUs often receive their “charge” from the situation they are used in (conventions of usage). It is generally this situational charge that distinguishes SBUs from their freely generated counterparts. Compare the following situations:

(4)

- Sally: - Bob, can I talk to you for a minute?
 Bob: - Sorry, I must run, but *I’ll talk to you later*. So long.

(5)

- Jane: - OK, this is all for today.
 Paul: - Fine, *I’ll talk to you later*.

In (4) the expression “*I’ll talk to you later*” appears to be freely generated as opposed to (5) where it is an SBU rather than a freely generated utterance.

Several labels have been used to refer to this type of expressions in the relevant literature: “*interaction rituals*” (Goffman, 1967) “*routine formulae*” (Coulmas, 1981) “*énoncés liés*” (Fónagy, 1982), “*situational utterances*” (Kiefer, 1985, 1995), “*bound utterances*” (Kiefer, 1995), “*institutionalized expressions*” (Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992), and “*situation-bound utterances*” (Kecskes, 1997, 2000). This variety of terms can be explained not only by the difficulty of defining this particular type of pragmatic units but also by the fact that these expressions are discussed in different subfields of theoretical and applied linguistics, and sometimes authors seem to care relatively little about research on SBUs made outside their own respective field. I prefer the term “situation-bound utterances” to any other term because this label refers to the main characteristic feature of these utterances: their strong tie, their boundedness to a particular situation. “*Routine formulae*” is too broad a

category, “situational utterances” presupposes that there are utterances other than situational, and “institutionalized expressions” seems to be too specific a term. The French term “énoncés liés” used by Fónagy (1982) expresses best what these expressions are all about. Kiefer (1995) refers to Fónagy when explaining “situational utterances” but the term “situation-bound utterances” appears to be a closer equivalent to “énoncés liés” than “situational utterances”.

4.2. SBUs, idioms and conversational routines

It is important to clarify the relation of SBUs to “conversational routines” (cf. Coulmas, 1981; Aijmer, 1996) on the one hand, and to idioms on the other. Semantic idioms (“*make both ends meet*”; “*kick the bucket*”) do not have psychological reality. They are stored as unanalyzed chunks in memory just like words, and are retrieved as a whole. They are not tied to particular situations and can occur in any phase of a conversation where speakers find their use appropriate. Pragmatic idioms are different. They can be split into two groups: conversational routines and situation-bound utterances. The difference between them is socio-cultural rather than linguistic.

Conversational routines (CR) have an inclusive relation to SBUs. CRs constitute a much broader category than SBUs. Conversational routines include speech formulas (“*you know*”, “*I see*”, “*no problem*”), discourse markers (see Fraser, 1999) and SBUs. All SBUs are conversational routines, but this is not so conversely because not all expressions labeled as conversational routines are SBUs. For instance, “*you know*”, “*I see*”, “*no problem*” can be considered conversational routines but they are not SBUs. Aijmer argued that conversational routines are expressions which, as a result of recurrence, have become specialized or ‘entrenched’ for a discourse function that predominates over or replaces the literal referential meaning (Aijmer, 1996:11). It is not easy to draw the dividing line between conversational routines and SBUs but there are some features that distinguish them. Conversational routines are function-bound rather than situation-bound. They can express one and the same particular function in any situation while SBUs frequently receive their charge from the situation itself. For instance, ‘*after all*’ or ‘*to tell you the truth*’ are CRs rather than SBUs. They can be uttered in any situation where they sound appropriate. However, expressions such as ‘*how do you do?*’ upon acquaintance, or ‘*welcome aboard*’ as a greeting to a new employee make sense only in particular well-definable situations.

The tie of SBUs to a particular situation that charges their particular meaning may become so dominant that the functional-situational meaning may take over as the most salient meaning of the expression. For instance: “*piece of cake*”, “*help yourself*”, “*give me a hand*”. Conversational routines tend to have discourse functions rather than a situation-bound function. Discourse functions are not necessarily tied to particular situations. They can be expressed by conversational routines including not only SBUs but also expressions of turn-taking, internal and external modifiers, discourse markers, connectors, and others.

SBUs differ from idioms in origin, purpose and use. The likelihood of occurrence of lexico-semantic idioms is usually unpredictable while the use of situation-bound utterances is generally tied to particular social contexts. Idioms just like metaphors arise from a creative act. They are used to represent complex content in a tangible way that can hardly be analyzed conceptually. Situation-bound utterances are repetitive expressions whose use saves mental energy. Idioms are like lexemes while SBUs are more like pragmatic markers. SBUs fulfill social needs. People know if they use these prefabricated expressions they are safe: nobody will misunderstand them because these phrases usually mean the same to most speakers of a speech community. However, there is a price for repetitiveness. SBUs often lose their composition meaning and become pure functional units denoting greetings, addressing, opening, etc. This is where we can draw the dividing line between semantic idioms (*spill the beans*, *kick the bucket*, *pull one’s leg*, etc.) and SBUs (*see you later*; *it’s been a pleasure meeting you*; *say hello to*, etc.). While semantic idioms are not transparent at all, pragmatic idioms (SBUs) remain transparent and usually have a freely generated counterpart (see examples #4 and #5 above). In contrast to idioms SBUs do not mean anything different from the corresponding free sentences: they simply mean less. Their meaning is functional rather than compositional.

The loss of compositionality is a matter of degree. When SBUs are frequently used in a particular meaning they will encode that meaning, and develop a particular pragmatic function. This pragmatic property is getting conventionalized when it starts to mean the same thing for most native speakers. That is to say, when native speakers are asked what comes into their mind first when they hear a given expression, and their response will be very similar, we can say that the SBU has already encoded a specific pragmatic property. SBUs are both selective and complete. They are selective because they are preferred to be used to a number of utterances, both freely generated and idiomatic, which equally could be used in the given situation. SBUs are complete because they evoke a particular situation, which freely generated utterances usually do not do. For instance, “*let me tell you something*” generally creates a negative expectation by the hearer, or “*step out of the car, please*” is something that most people identify with police stops. In freely generated utterances the sense of the utterance is defined by the interplay of linguistic meaning and context, situation, background knowledge. In SBUs, however, the communicative meaning, the sense of the utterances is encoded, and fixed by pragmatic conventions. Consequently, prior context encoded in them can create actual situational context. For instance, “*license and registration, please*”, “*can I help you?*”, “*you are all set*”. All these expressions can create their own situation without being used in an actual situational context.

4.3. Characteristics of SBUs

SBUs are usually transparent and have psychological reality. They are idiomatized in the sense that the words in them as a whole constitute a pragmatic unit with a particular function. Nattinger et al. (1992:128) referred to them as “idioms with a pragmatic point”. The weaker an SBU is motivated, the stronger it is idiomatized. According to the degree of motivation we

can distinguish three types of SBUs: plain, loaded and charged (Kecskes, 2003). Plain SBUs have a compositional structure and are semantically transparent. Their situational meaning may only differ slightly from their propositional meaning because their pragmatic extension is minimal if any. Their meaning can be computed from their compositional structure. For instance:

(6)

Assistant: - *Can I help you, Madame?*
Customer: - *Thank you. I'm just looking.*

In this conversation “*Can I help you?*” and “*I'm just looking*” function as plain SBUs while “*thank you*” is a speech formula.

On the other end of the continuum we find loaded SBUs that are the closest to semantic idioms because they may lose their compositionality and are usually not transparent semantically any more. Their pragmatic function is more important than their original literal meaning that is difficult to recall if needed. These SBUs are “loaded” with their pragmatic function that remains there, and usually cannot be cancelled by the actual situational context because it is encoded in the expression as a whole. They are pragmatic idioms whose occurrence is strongly tied to conventional, frequently repeated situations. We think of a particular situation even if we hear the following expressions without their routine context: “*Howdy*”; “*Help yourself*”; “*you are all set*”, etc, because their most salient meaning is the one that is extended pragmatically.

Charged SBUs come in between plain and loaded SBUs. An SBU may exhibit pragmatic ambiguity, in the sense that its basic function is extended pragmatically to cover other referents or meanings (c.f. Sweetser, 1990: 1). For instance, this is the case with a phrase such as “*See you soon*”, which retains its original sense but can also be conventionally (situationally) interpreted as a closing, a way to say good-bye to one’s partner. So this expression has two interpretations: a literal and a situation-bound one. However, the situation-bound function (“closing”) is charged by the situation only. If the expression “*See you soon*” is given without a particular actual situational context it may be ambiguous because it can create one of two situations in the mind of a hearer: (1) closing, a way to say good-bye, and (2) what its compositional meaning says: the speaker will see the interlocutor soon. Here is another example with the expression “*come on*”.

(7)

Jenny: - *Come on, Jim, we will miss the train.*
Jim: - *Relax, we have plenty of time.*

(8)

Jill: - *Bob, I think I can't go with you.*
Bob: - *Come on, you promised to come with me.*

In (7) “*Come on*” is transparent and functions like a speech formula while in (8) it is more like an SBU that serves to press the interlocutor to do something.

According to the dynamic model of meaning (DMM) situation-bound utterances encode the history of their use just like words (Kecskes, 2008). However, there is a significant difference between the two types of lexical units. Words can collocate with many other words in creating meaningful utterances and their use is very rarely tied to particular situations only. SBUs, however, are usually tied to one or more particular situations. Coulmas (1981) argued that frequency of occurrence has a crucial impact on the meaningfulness of linguistic expressions. The more frequent they are, the more meaningless they may become in terms of referential semantics. The compositional meaning of utterances often becomes of secondary importance and the functional aspect begins to dominate. Frequency and familiarity correlate in a unique way. Frequency can be general or attached to a particular register or situation. For instance, the utterance “*Hello, how are you?*” is very frequently used in everyday interaction. This is true because the situation (meeting and greeting others) requiring the use of this (or a similar) expression occurs very often. There seems to be a difference between word frequency (WF) and utterance frequency (UF). WF refers to the general use of words in any kind of situation. UF, however, is more register-oriented and/or situation-bound. It is especially true if we take SBUs. It does not make much sense to speak about the general frequency of utterances when they are usually register-oriented and/or situation-bound. Consequently, the frequency of an SBU depends on the frequency of a given register or a situation the SBU is attached to.

5. SBUs as pragmatic acts

5.1. Pragmemes

Mey’s (2001) uses the term “pragmeme” in his PAT to refer to a generalized pragmatic act that is concretely realized by “practs” in situational use.

Defining pragmemes Capone (2005) refers to Geis’s view of speech acts, according to which there are broad mappings (or correlations) between sentence types and illocutionary forces (or types of illocutionary force). The appeal to the context serves to determine the specific meaning accruing to the situated use of a literal speech act (Geis, 1995). However, in addition

to the defeasible aspects of meaning (identified as the ‘point’ of an utterance; Dummett (2003;210)), Capone also considers certain non-defeasible aspects of meaning deriving from the interaction between the context, the discourse type, and the utterance type in question, etc. He emphasizes that pragmemes involve both defeasible and non-defeasible inferences (Capone, 2005). This is in line with Mey’s approach (2001) that I also agree with.

SBUs can be considered practs because they function as concrete realizations of a pragmeme that may refer to a general situational prototype, a socio-cultural concept that usually has several possible realizations. This is where SBUs may be used to clarify the relationship between pragmemes and practs. In my understanding pragmemes represent situational prototypes to which there may be several pragmatic access routes (practs). An SBU can be one of several possible pragmatic access routes to a pragmeme. For instance:

(9)

Pragmeme: [inviting someone to take a seat]

Practs: Why don’t you sit down?; Please take a seat; Sit down, please, etc.

There are several practs through which this pragmeme can be realized. All these expressions can be considered SBUs. However, there are many cases where an SBU is only one of the possible realizations of the given pragmeme. See example (10) below.

(10)

Pragmeme: [greeting a new employee]

Practs: Nice to have you with us; Welcome aboard; Hope you will like it here.

Two of these expressions have some kind of pre-patterned structure in which elements can be changed. However, “Welcome aboard” appears to be an SBU with an unanalyzable structure, definitely tied to the situation represented by the pragmeme.

5.2. Interplay of prior and actual situational context

This is what Mey says about pragmatic acts: “The theory of pragmatic acts does not explain human language use starting from the words uttered by a single, idealized speaker. Instead, it focuses on the interactional *situation* in which both speakers and hearers realize their aims. The explanatory movement is from the outside in, one could say, rather than from the inside out: instead of starting with what is said, and looking for what the words could mean, the situation where the words fit, is invoked to explain what can be (and is actually being) said (Mey, 2006:542).”

As I said in the abstract, the problem with this definition is that it emphasizes that the explanatory movement should go from the outside in. I argue that *the explanatory movement in any pragmatic theory should go in both directions: from the outside in (actual situational context → prior context encoded in utterances used) and from the inside out (prior context encoded in utterances used → actual situational context)*.

In Kecskes (2008) and Kecskes and Zhang (2009) we argued that meaning and common ground are dynamic constructs that are mutually constructed by interlocutors throughout the communicative process. Mey also emphasized the dynamic nature of conversation when he spoke about the fact that our acting is determined by what the scene can afford, and by what we can afford on the scene, that is to say, the scene not only determines our acting but also our actions determine and reaffirm the existing scene (Mey, 2001:218). This is all true. Where he may not be right is the overemphasis of the role of social contexts and situation. He seems to have overlooked two important facts. First, lexical items encode the history of their use. His claim that the explanatory movement in a theory of pragmatic acts is from the outside in gives too much weight to actual situational context and appears to ignore that utterances as linguistic units (encoding prior contexts) play as important a role in meaning construction and comprehension as the situation. Linguistic units encode the history of their use, i.e., the situations in which they have been used (Kecskes, 2008). What happens in communication is that context encoded in the utterances “matches” with the actual situation context, and their interplay results in what we call “meaning”. There is movement in both directions: from the outside in (actual situational context → prior context encoded in utterances used) and from the inside out (prior context encoded in utterances used → actual situational context). Second, words encode the experience of individuals. Consequently, when individuals enter into conversation with other individuals the words and utterances they use are selected and formulated according to their prior experience. This means that *a conversation is a unique clash of individual and societal factors*. As it was underlined above individuals are not only constrained by societal conditions but they also shape them at the same time. Communication is driven by the interplay of *cooperation* required by societal conditions and *egocentrism* rooted in prior experience of the individual. Consequently, egocentrism and cooperation are not mutually exclusive phenomena. They are both present in all stages of communication to a different extent because they represent the individual and societal traits of the dynamic process of communication (Kecskes, 2008; Kecskes and Zhang, 2009).

Instead of a speaker- or hearer-centered pragmatics we need an interlocutor-center pragmatic approach that the socio-cognitive approach offers. A speaker always tries to use those utterances that s/he thinks will convey his/her intention best in the given situation, and vice versa, a hearer will always rely on those prior experiences with the linguistic items heard that s/

he thinks best match the speaker's utterance in the given situation. So utterances are not underspecified, and they do not get their full specification from the actual situational context because these linguistic units usually bring as much into the situation as the situation gives them. What gives specification to utterance meaning is neither the actual situational context nor the prior context encoded in the utterances but both (Kecskes, 2008). The interplay of both sides specifies meaning in a given situation. Mey is right that speech acts should be situated. But this does not mean that their linguistic and/or socio-cultural load encoded in the linguistic units constituting the utterance becomes of secondary importance when they get situated. However, the question of "to what extent" is always there. The extent of the contribution of prior context and actual situational context to meaning construction and comprehension keeps changing in the process of communication. At certain stages of the communicative process actual situational context seems to be dominant, at some other stages prior context encoded in the utterances overrides actual situational context. This constitutes the dynamics of communication.

SBU's are ideal means to demonstrate the interplay of actual situational context and prior context in meaning construction and comprehension because they are often linguistically transparent and carry a socio-cultural load at the same time. Let's take an example:

(11)

Sam: - Coming for a drink?
 Andy: - Sorry, I can't. *My doctor* won't let me.
 Sam: - *What's wrong with you?*

(12)

Sam: - Coming for a drink?
 Andy: - Sorry, I can't. *My mother-in-law* won't let me.
 Sam: - *What's wrong with you?*

The situation-bound utterance "*What's wrong with you?*" has two different meanings in (11) and (12) although the only difference between the two conversations is that '*My doctor*' was changed to '*My mother-in-law*'. So it is not the actual situational context that creates this difference in meaning. Rather, it is the stigmatic load that is attached to the use of the lexical phrase '*My mother-in-law*', which has a negative connotation in most contexts. If we use a third option "*My wife*", the meaning of "*What's wrong with you?*" will depend on the actual situational context, i.e., on how the hearer processes his friend's expression "*My wife*", based on his knowledge about the relationship between Andy and his wife. In this case, because of the "weakness" of the conceptual load encoded in the expression "*My wife*", the dominance of actual situational context becomes dominant.

In these three situations the dominant role seems to be changing and depends on what interpretation the encoded conceptual load of the expression makes possible. If the load is very strong and deeply conventionalized the actual situational context can hardly cancel it.

As the examples above demonstrated prior experience encoded in lexical items is as important in meaning construction and comprehension as actual situational context. The sexual connotation of the sign "Girls wanted for different positions" could hardly be canceled in spite of the fact that the expression was at the entrance to Walmart. This shows that even ad hoc created expressions can dominate meaning construction and comprehension if the coined expression refers to some phenomenon that is strongly carved in the mind of interlocutors for some reason.

Mey (2006) argued that quoting out of context is a well-known means of manipulating a conversational partner. Based on what said above we have to be careful how we understand "quoting out of context". What it really means is "quoting out of the actual situational context in which the given linguistic expression has been used". This manipulation does not mean that there is no context because the linguistic expression will create a context itself. But this context will not necessarily match the original situational context. Definitely we are talking about two different meanings here. The original one is created as the result of an interplay of the actual situational context and the given expression. In the second case ("out of actual situational context") meaning construction is based only on prior context encoded in the linguistic expression. The following example from a sitcom shows this difference.

(13)

Jane: - Josh, I really am bored. I feel like *I want to sleep with you*.
 Josh: - Well, Jane, this is not only my fault.

(14)

Jane said to Josh: "... *I want to sleep with you*."

If we take the expression "*I want to sleep with you*" out of the original actual situational context it will give way to an entirely different interpretation that is based on the most salient meaning of the expression, which is the figurative rather than the

literal meaning of “*I want to sleep with you*”. This happens because context created by an expression without actual situational context relies on the most salient meaning that is the result of most familiar and frequent use of the expression.

5.3. Indirect speech act paradox

Pragmatics literature has often sought answer to the question of how to explain that speech acts are often realized by expressions that have very little to do with the literal interpretation of those expressions, but rather much with their conventional interpretation (e.g. Searle, 1975:82; Mey, 2001:219). Mey’s answer to this question is that indirect speech acts derive their force, not from their lexico-semantic build-up, but from the actual *situation* in which they are appropriately uttered. Conventions and rules of society determine what is appropriate speaking behavior for a particular situation. Mey suggests that the indirect speech act paradox can be dissolved by moving the focus of attention from the words being said to the things being done. This is where I cannot agree with Mey. *We simply cannot move our attention from the words being said because they are as important as the things being done.* Austin (1962) and Searle (1975) may not have been quite right when they assigned power mainly to words forgetting about the important role of actual situational context. However, Mey also may be wrong when he makes the same mistake but from the opposite direction: advocating the importance of “things being done” and relegating “words being said” to a secondary position. The dynamism of the process of conversation points to the importance of both. Words and utterances encode their prior situational use. For instance:

(15)

Beata: - Do you think we will write a test on Friday?

Molly: - Is the Pope catholic?

The expression “*Is the Pope catholic*” is appropriate, and makes sense for the interlocutors because this expressions carries the load of “obviousness”. But the appropriateness of the expression in the given situation can be explained not only by pointing to convention but also by the compositional meaning of the expression that means something obvious: the Pope is catholic. Consequently, convention, actual situational context is only one side of the matter. There is some reason why exactly this expression became conventionalized in similar situations, and this reason should be sought in its wording. So in (15) the “*isn’t this obvious?*” meaning is due not only to the actual situational context but also to the wording of the expression “*Is the Pope catholic*”.

Situation-bound utterances clearly demonstrate the interplay of prior situational context and actual situational context in meaning construction and comprehension. They become conventionalized but they almost never become unanalyzable units. Their semantic transparency helps to reestablish their original meaning that explains why exactly they became conventionalized in the given situation and not other expressions.

Let’s take, for instance the SBU “*Help yourself*” that is often used at the table to urge guests to start to eat or take some more food. The original cognitive mechanism responsible for the situational meaning of the expression could be described as follows: “*Take as much as you wish. I don’t want to help you because you know how much you need —> so help yourself to as much as you need.*” This culture-specific pragmatic property of the SBU is no longer maintained consciously. No inferential reasoning is necessary to find out that the speaker asks you to “help yourself” not because she does not want to help you but because she thinks that you yourself know exactly how much you want to eat. The linguistic form has acquired a pragmatically motivated sense that became conventionalized.

Non-native speakers have trouble with such expressions because their limited prior experience with SBUs does not give them enough background knowledge to move away from the literal meaning of the expression and acquire the meaning of the SBU that derives from the symbiotic relationship of prior situational contexts and actual situational contexts of use. This is what Doi said about the expression in question: “The ‘please help yourself’ that Americans use so often had a rather unpleasant ringing in my ears before I became used to English conversation. The meaning, of course, is simply ‘please take what you want without hesitation’, but literally translated it has somehow a flavor of ‘nobody else will help you’, and I could not see how it came to be an expression of good will (Doi, 1973:13).”

6. Conclusion

In this paper I argued that the Pragmatic Act Theory proposed by Mey is one step forward in the right direction to describe conversation as action. However, it was also pointed out that PAT is not consistent enough in describing the relationship between the semantic content of expressions and the actual situational context. Although PAT claims that pragmatic acts both rely on, and actively create, the situation in which they are realized, more emphasis is given to the situational context in meaning construction and comprehension than to the linguistic expressions that encode their history of use that relies on prior experience of interlocutors.

The socio-cognitive approach was offered as an alternative to explain the dynamism of pragmatic acts and situation-bound utterances. SCA unites the societal and individual features of communication and considers interaction a dynamic process in which individuals are not only constrained by societal conditions but they also shape them at the same time. I argued that the dialectical relationship between prior context encoded in lexical units and utterances and actual situational

context requires that we emphasize the equal importance of both prior and actual context in meaning construction and comprehension. The extent to which prior context encoded in linguistic units and actual situational context contributes to meaning construction and comprehension in a given conversation keeps changing in the course of communication.

Using situation-bound utterances I made an attempt to demonstrate how pragmatic acts represent pragmemes, and also showed the interplay of prior context embedded in SBUs and actual situation context in meaning construction through several examples. SBUs serve as excellent tools to show this process because they are not only linguistic but also socio-cultural units that become conventionalized because of their frequent occurrence in the same or similar situational contexts. Through SBUs interlocutors not only fit their contribution to the given situation but also establish and reaffirm the social situation.

Based on the examples I claimed that the explanatory movement in any pragmatic theory should go in both directions: from the outside in (actual situational context → prior context encoded in utterances used) and from the inside out (prior context encoded in utterances used → actual situational context).

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