Contextualization and Meaning in Public-Sphere Discourses of Government Ministers- Citizen Interactions in Nigeria

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Abstract

Public sphere discourses of government ministers-citizen interactions are common political discourse events in Nigeria. There is seemingly nothing unfamiliar about political discourses, but what needs clarification is the place of context and contextualization in encoding and decoding intentions/meanings, especially in public sphere discourses of government ministers-citizen interactions in Nigeria. Aspects of Presupposition in Jacob Mey’s Pragmatics that deal with context was adopted as theoretical framework in explicating contextual factors and enhancement of meaning in texts. Data were sourced from interactions of the Ministerial platforms and the National Good Governance Tours of Nigeria through live-recordings on national radio and television broadcasts and transcribed verbatim to written texts. Analysis reveals that physical settings, background knowledge of participants and reasons for the discourses, which encompass the physical and social world and the socio-psychological factors, together influence how meaning is encoded and decoded. Also, it was identified that context determines the choice of language use and that speaker meaning is dependent on basic assumptions of knowledge that are shared by both the speaker and the audience. Overall, it is submitted that an awareness of contextual factors and the cues that herald them in texts will ensure clearer understanding of how intentions/meanings are encoded and decoded in texts.

Keywords: Political discourse interactions, Context, Public sphere discourses, Presupposition.
Introduction

It is common to note that language depends on context for effective communication and understanding of meaning in interactions. For instance, the notion of deixis, presumes that linguistic structures that use deictics like ‘I’, ‘here’, or ‘now’, show a dependence on context that is thought to be essential. However, the relationship between language and context is far from clear and has been the centre of a debate by linguists. The argument begins with the question of how much of language and which parts of it are context-dependent, but it perhaps includes the question of how the relationship between language and context should be conceptualized in more theoretical terms. Pragmatic principles, especially the presupposition, deal with how context becomes an important variable in encoding and decoding meaning(s) in interactions. This paper will show that listing linguistic structures beyond deixis which must be interpreted with reference to context in order to be understood properly does make room for the typology of other contextual elements. Such elements include: co-textual features, physical surroundings of the speech situation, social situation, participant’s common background knowledge and the channel or medium of communication, which play a role in understanding meaning in interactions. Secondly, it will deal with the notion of how contextualization is equally important if not superior to that of context.

By contextualization, we mean the use of language (both spoken and body language) that signal relevant aspects of an interaction. This may include clues pointing to the people talking, their relationship, where the interaction is occurring and the like. These clues can be drawn from how the language is being used, what type of language is being used, whether it is formal or informal, and the participant’s tone of voice (Andersen and Risor, 2014). Contextualization includes verbal and non-verbal clues of things such as the power dynamic or the situation apparent from interaction(s) being considered. These clues are referred to as “contextualization cues” (Gumperz, 1992).

Aim and objectives of the study

The study aims to investigate how contextualization enhances meaning(s) in public sphere discourses of government minister-citizen interactions in Nigeria. The specific objectives are:

i. to identify contextual elements in public-sphere discourses of government minister-citizens interactions in Nigeria;

ii. to establish the relevance of contextualization cues in the public-sphere discourses; and

iii. to ascertain the meaning potentials of contextualization for better understanding of texts.

Overview of related scholarship

Public sphere dialogues are social interactions in which members of the public come together to freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through discussions influence political actions. It is, thus, a discourse event in which people meet for deliberations on matters of mutual interest to possibly reach a common judgment about issues. They constitute a sphere of social life in which public opinions on issues of communal interests are formed. This discourse event is said to have emerged sometimes in the 18th century to solidify participatory democracy, and ensure that public opinions become political actions (Habermas, 1989). The basic idea about public sphere dialogues is that government laws and policies should be steered by the people, and that the only legitimate governments are those that listen to the people. Hence, democratic governance
especially relies on the rights of citizens to engage in enlightened debates with those in the reins of governance.

Existing literature reveal a myriad of political discourse studies from various platforms. Some of the platforms investigated include: political campaigns, manifestoes, debates, interviews and advertisements that highlighted various aspects of discourses from linguistic representations of language features, stylistic and pragmatic meanings but have not sufficiently examined public sphere discourses especially of government minister-citizen interactions. Amongst the extant studies and the issues addressed, Alo (2008) illustrated how political actors present their proposals to the public in a language that speaks of preferred norms and values in order to persuade the populace. This study focused on political campaigns, whereas the current study investigates discourse interactions that feature government ministers and citizens in town-hall meetings across the nation.

Taiwo (2008) cites how, Awonuga (2005) examined the linguistic features in the broadcast to the nation by Nigeria’s former president, Olusegun Obasanjo on August 25, 2002. His analysis reveals a discourse characterized by the use of personal pronouns, coupling, strings of words, analogy, repetition and eight types of metaphor. Taiwo’s (2008) concern was on presidential broadcasts which are more-or-less scripted speeches, while the interactions being considered in this study are mostly spontaneous spoken discourses. Also, Adetunji (2006) analyzed two speeches by Obasanjo, focusing on his use of deixis. The author was able to demonstrate how politicians use rhetoric to associate and dissociate themselves from their actions. This is another discourse study that accounts for scripted texts, whose structure and organisation are quite different from the current study that deals with spontaneous speeches.

Opeibi (2006) looked at negative political advertising in Nigerian newspapers. He provided a structural and functional description of the emerging trends in negative advertising during political campaigns in Nigeria. He observed that, most political office seekers abandoned positive, issue-focused, image-building campaigns and rather engaged in rhetorical strategies of direct attacks on their opponents. His findings are corroborated by Taiwo (2007), who identified political satire as the major campaign strategy of Nigerian politicians during the 2007 general elections in the country. Also, Opeibi (2007) discussed how Nigerian politicians demonstrate their multilingual creativity and showed how politicians engage both English and indigenous languages, alongside the pidginized version of the English language, in their bid to persuade their audience. These works constitute political discourses as they feature in the media. A genre that is distinct from current study whose participants engage in a one-on-one interactive encounter.

Alo (2008) established that rhetorical gambits, vague terminologies and concepts of power are aspects that politicians use in their manifestoes to masquerade personal and hidden motives. This work also deals with political campaign as against sustaining political gains which interactions of the present study attempt to consolidate.

These studies and many others deal with political discourses and address various issues within the Nigerian political context,
but their contexts differ with the present study. The government minister-citizen interactions being studied here have a unique setting that is characterized by mainly unscripted and spontaneous spoken discourse, this is against formal speeches read from scripts, interviews, and written texts as most of the previous studies have researched into and therefore require an investigation to determine contextual variable that ensure meaning is construed and understood.

Context
Defining context is an uphill task. Mey (2001) is of the opinion that ‘context’ is a “notoriously hard concept to deal with…” Sperber and Wilson (1995) see context as “not limited to information about the physical environment”, and define context as a “psychological construct, a subset of a hearer’s assumptions about the world”. It involves “expectation about the future, scientific hypothesis or religious beliefs, anecdotal memories, general cultural assumptions, beliefs about the mental state of the speaker”. Unlike some definitions of context, it is not limited to immediately preceding discourse and the physical environment of the interlocutors. Context will include all knowledge that may be necessary to process the utterance, including scientific knowledge, religious attitudes and cultural knowledge; in fact anything which may affect an individual’s interpretation of an utterance. Context considers how addressers (speakers/writers) and addressees (hearers/readers) rely on some “relevant features of the dynamic setting or environment in which a linguistic unit is systematically used” to carry out what could be wholly considered as meaningful communication. Context is categorized into different types: physical, general knowledge and psychological contexts. While the physical context has been established to refer to the physical setting of the utterance, like the knowledge of the time and place in which an utterance is used; exemplified in the choice of the lexical item “bank”, which could mean different things; depending on the context it is used – for the riverside or a financial institution. General knowledge context – is information derived from a pragmatically well – informed situation; for instance, the word “pyramids” if used for a country like Egypt, will imply the application of well-informed knowledge of Egypt as a home to pyramids. General knowledge context is therefore, the background assumptions shared by the addressee and the addressee. Psychological context is taken to mean a situation where interactants unveil their minds through actions, utterances, attitudes and emotions.

Meaning
This study observes meaning to be at two levels: form - meaning and user - (speaker) meaning. This is in agreement with Yule (1996), who views pragmatics as interacting with context to account for language use that covers both explicit and implicit meaning, or in the assignment of meaning in linguistic and extra-linguistic contexts. Form-meaning is viewed from the linguistic techniques employed in the various forms of language use; while user - (speaker) meaning triggers linguistic meaning with regards to the contexts of use. The user - (speaker) meaning shall be considered from the pragmatic principle of presupposition in this study to determine how language users generate the intended meanings that are also shaped by varying contexts.

Methodology
The data for this study are sourced from public-sphere discourses of The Ministerial Platforms (TMP) and the National Good Governance Tour (NGGT) of Nigeria that began in 2013. The study adopts a random selection of 12 out of 40 interactions, one
interaction from each geo-political region of the country, and six TMPs. These interactions were sourced through downloads, and live recordings on national television and radio. The interactions got were played over, listened to, and transcribed verbatim. The transcribed version of the interactions became the source of data and was subjected to pragmatic analysis using the principles of presupposition in this study.

Theoretical framework
This study adopts ‘Presupposition’ from Jacob Mey’s Pragmatics (2001) as theoretical framework for this study. Presupposition simply entails making allowance for background knowledge. It is about the information that is accommodated by the addressee as part of a non-controversial background necessary for the addressors’ utterance to still be sensible. These are shared assumptions held by both parties in an interaction that need not be explicitly spelt out but that both parties draw from to make and understand utterances. This concept is found to be inherent in the researched text.

Data analysis
Contextual factors and their influence on the discourse interactions
Contextual factors entail how the physical settings, background knowledge of participants and reasons for the discourses, determine what issues are discussed and how the issues are discussed. It is about how meanings of texts are determined by knowledge of the physical and social world, the socio-psychological factors that influence the communicative encounters; as well as knowledge of the time and place in which the interactions take place (Hanks, 2006). The focus in looking at context here is to see how context determines the choice of language use, the communicative meaning of linguistic items as used in the interactions. In looking at context in this perspective, we first determine the speaker’s meaning, which is dependent on basic assumptions of knowledge that are shared by both speaker and the audience; then we look at how speakers construct linguistic messages by looking at the forms, and how intentions are implied and meaning construed in texts. In addition, we look at how the audience interpret and infer meanings in the message based on the shared background knowledge.

In light of the foregoing, the study in this section shall highlight those areas in the texts that point to aspects that are drawn upon such as shared knowledge of participants in the interactions, based on various pointers to context; and to show how they enhance encoding and decoding of meaning(s). Investigation reveals the following examples as drawn from contextual backgrounds.

Excerpt 1:
Let me quickly say without fear or equivocation that, what we are saying in the course of this tour remains what we have seen; I want to say this because, we have come in this country to the point where people feel that the easiest way to gain popularity is to say negative things about the government and leadership. And I say the hallmark of civil society movement does not lie in negativism...

Excerpt 2:
...when we came here, we were taken on a train ride; and let me tell you, right in there I was talking to people who were calling me from all over and I said ‘as I speak to you, we are riding on a
train’. Somebody said to me ‘are you sure; or are you watching the train’ I said ‘we are right inside the train’... Engr. Nwosu – President RATAWU – NGGT town-hall meeting Kwara state.

Excerpt 3:
You know, we are in the time of politics, people can say just anything, but I can tell you that it is just political talk, it is not true that the money is being diverted; and there are 30 thousand jobs to be created this year, next year and the following year, so please show interest...

Excerpt 4:
It is important, as you all know that, we have challenges; I can tell you that at the level of the federal government that there are challenges, why? Almost all our roads are looking for attention at the same time, throughout the country. Everywhere you go, and the reason is because for decades there was no other means of moving in Nigeria apart from the roads. Except for those travel by air, so the roads don’t last, that is why the president is fixing the railways...

Excerpt 5:
Now one thing that we must not take for granted is security. Why are we talking about security? The people of the Niger-Delta have seen what crises could look like. Before two years ago, the region of the Niger-Delta was a region known more for violence than for development. Today the Niger-Delta is recovering from the past... LabaranMaku NGGT interaction Bayelsa state

Excerpt 6:
...Ministry of Finance. It’s not an easy ministry to run, as you all know, nobody likes Finance because everybody likes to say they never have enough...

Excerpt 7:
I want to remind people of our mission. Our mission is to manage the nation’s finances in an open, transparent, accountable and efficient manner that delivers on the country’s development priorities. There are four basic things we do in managing these finances and helping to manage the economy.

Excerpt 8:
Now, I want to spend one minute on something very important, because after we talk, people will say, “GDP growth, what is GDP growth? It’s not important; that’s not what we will eat.” But let me explain to you that without that growth, you cannot even begin to solve the problems of this economy. Let me illustrate to you. [She picks up a cake]. This cake
symbolises our income, our GDP or your income within your household. GDP is nothing but the income of the country – the amount of cake you have to eat, you and your wife and children – the same with a country. So, let’s say this is the amount of cake we have to eat.

Finance Minister at the ministerial platform

The foregoing excerpts indicate some cues that presuppose aspects of context as drawn upon in the interactions. In Excerpt 1, it is observed how the speaker draws on a shared background experience in the country, to raise an issue of concern. What is deducible from the text is that people are generally disgruntled; this is evidenced in the text as the speaker affirms that, saying negative things is the easiest way to gain popularity in the country, as at the time of the discourse event. Negativism refers to a strong tendency to be pessimistic and to think of situations in the worst light. This happens especially when people have lost every sign of hope, for a turnaround of situation(s) for the better. Hence, from Excerpt 2, the study observes that, based on background knowledge and experience, the speaker choose to dissociate self from the prevalent mindset and attitude of disenchantment and negativism which are presumed known by participants.

Similarly, in Excerpt 3, another instance of drawing from shared background knowledge and experience is reflected. In the text, the speaker affirms to the audience that, “You know we are in the time of politics...” this statement implies that both the speaker and the addressee are aware of the basic knowledge and experience that they all are in the same political clime. The words, “You know”, that start the text are a good cue that points to the fact that, what the speaker is talking about, or is about saying, is something the audience are not ignorant about. This is because ‘you know’, signifies that the one talked to has the information in mind. Hence, the study affirms that, this is an indication of context of situation at work in the text.

In like manner, Excerpt 4 recounts that, “It is important, as you all know that we have challenges...” This is another clear incidence of drawing on shared background knowledge and experience. “As you all know” presupposes that there is information that is firmly held unto, and that information or knowledge is common to the speaker as well as the audience. In the instance of the interaction, it is that, there are challenges; challenges of infrastructural decay in the country; and this is a common knowledge and experience of all concerned in the text.

From the foregoing, it is noteworthy that, based on the shared background knowledge and experience of the discussants in the interactions, the discussions are better organised and focused. There are no explicit elaborations of minute details, as discourse participants are expected to fill in the unsaid details; and the discourses are focused on issues identified. The shared background knowledge can thus be said to determine and organise the way discourses are shaped in texts.

In another instance, Excerpt 5 indicates how context is drawn upon to determine the discourse situation in a text. In this case, the speaker provokes reasoning of the addressees thus, “why are we talking about security? The people of the Niger-delta have seen what crises could look like...” In this instance, the speaker draws on the prior experience and knowledge of the people to make a point. The people of
the region are those who have for several years been under siege by militancy and various forms of violence and molestations. Therefore, when the issue of security is brought about, which is something they relatively have experience to a considerable degree in a short period, they can appreciate the subject matter based on where they are coming from. Thus, when their past experience is mentioned, it does not need further elaboration to bring back memories. Hence, it is apt to state that the parties in the interactions are all aware and appreciate the contextual aspects of the discourse situation; and that is informing their discourse levels in the text.

In Excerpt 6, the speaker takes a concept from a conventional symbol to explain an abstract idea. Conventional in the sense that what is used to explain the other is something that is generally known and common to all—a cake; this is a baked sweet food made from flour, fat, sugar and other ingredients. It is something most people can identify with. The speaker uses this conventional representation to describe something not conventional—the nation’s GDP growth. In the text, the speaker states, “This cake symbolises our income, our GDP or your income within your household. GDP is nothing but the income of the country— the amount of cake you have to eat; you and your wife and children—the same with a country.” This is a clear case of resorting to shared background knowledge to go about an ensuing discourse, as it makes clearer the understanding of the issue engaged in by the discourse participants.

**Conclusion**

From the Excerpts above, the study observes how participants frequently recourse to shared background knowledge identified by cues such as: ‘you know...’; ‘as you all know...’; ‘I want to remind you...’ etc. in the texts. All these are pointers and cues indicating a basic shared assumption or previous knowledge of the issue(s) at stake. Others are direct reference to issues or concepts that are presumed to be general knowledge; like in Excerpt 4 above, reference is made to the deteriorating state of the nation’s road network—which is common knowledge as a basis for the argument that follows. Also in Excerpt 8 for instance, we see a direct reference of the nation’s GDP, which is likened to a cake, and the significance of its growth illustrated and also likened to a household’s income; what presumably everyone should know. This is a clear demonstration of tapping into shared background knowledge to ensure effective communication.

From these examples in the text, it is apt to postulate that context does have a significant influence on language use and by extension, enhances how meaning is encoded and decoded. This is because from the excerpts above, we have noticed how, based on context, (that draws particularly from shared background knowledge) certain arguments are made using different strategies to convey such arguments.

**References**


