

### **Context and presuppositions**

I consider here presuppositions as sentences which are to be associated with a text as a background against which it turns out to be appropriate. They provide therefore the "context", or at least one part of the context, of the text they are associated with. Such a conception of presuppositions plays an important role in discourse analysis, since it permits to identify, make explicit and explain at least one kind of implicitly conveyed information. But the precise relationship of presuppositions to context is liable to receive different definitions according to whether context is considered as something "objective" or rather as a set of beliefs entertained or shared by the participants. My aim is to work out a conception of context suitable to account for presuppositions in the sense sketched above.

I will distinguish between the role of context in the understanding of utterances and its role in their evaluation. As to the former, the relevance of a "cognitive" conception of context is widely recognized. As to the latter, there are reasons in favour of an "objective" conception. First, a context can sensibly play a role in the evaluation of utterances only if its contents are not determined by the interlocutors, beliefs. Second, the phenomenon of informative presupposition (central for the use of presuppositions in discourse analysis) cannot be accounted for in a satisfactory way unless the context is conceived as "objective". It should be noted that the objectivity of context is here understood as that which makes it "mind-transcendent" (Gauker 1998) and not as its being recognized as objective (Penco 1999).

If an objective conception of context is accepted, however, there is a need to say (1) in what precisely context consists (facts or sentences?) and (2) how it is to be delimited in each particular occasion. I will make reference to Gauker's proposal which defines the objective context as the set of those sentences the compliance with which facilitates the achievement of the goals of the interlocutors. I will discuss briefly both the problem of the understanding or interpretation of the sentences which belong to the context and the risk of circularity which arises from putting a subjective element such as goals into the picture.

I will then discuss some examples that according to Penco (1999) an objective conception of context cannot account for. These examples raise problems with respect to the interpretation rather than the evaluation of utterances. I will try to show that the objective conception of context just outlined can cope with this kind of problems.

Finally, I will try to show how the objective context (in the sense discussed) relates to presuppositions (of speakers as well as of utterances).

Christopher Gauker (1998), What is a context of utterance?, *Philosophical Studies* 91: 149-172.

Carlo Penco (1999), Objective and cognitive context, in P. Bouquet et al. (eds.), *Modeling and Using Context*, Berlin: Springer, 270-283.