

# Context and Linguistic Change\*

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## 1. Introduction

In the last decades, from being an almost irrelevant element, context has adopted a central place in linguistic studies. This can be explained by the wide dissemination of the theoretical frame of Cognitive Linguistics, which places linguistic change in the usage we make of language. Langacker (1987, 1988, 1991) was a pioneer in this usage-based linguistic approach. This approach was the novelty of his model and the main contrastive element between the Cognitive Grammar defended by Langacker and the Structuralist and Generative Linguistics in vogue during the 20th century. In the Cognitive approach, the linguistic knowledge of the speaker is based on experience: there is no level of grammar independent from the usage, rather the speaker induces his knowledge from concrete usages:

While all linguists are likely to agree that grammar is the cognitive organization of language, a usage-based theorist would make the more specific proposal that grammar is the cognitive organization of one's experience with language. (Bybee 2006: 711)

Therefore, a usage-based approach rejects the dichotomy, in Fernand de Saussure's terminology, between *langue* and *parole*. It also rejects the hypothesis according to which the speaker's linguistic knowledge comes from an innate, biologically-predetermined capacity, as generativism defends. The usage-based

\* This special issue was done in the context of the following research projects: "Variación y cambio lingüístico en catalán. Una aproximación diacrónica según la Lingüística de Corpus" (MICINUN, Ref. PGC2018-099399-B-100371) and "Gestión de la Información y Estructuración Lingüística (GestInf)" (MICINUN, Ref. FFI2017-85441-R).

approach to the linguistic fact implies “in the end the recontextualization of grammar, the establishment of a dialectic relationship between *langue* and *parole*”, according to Geeraerts (2006: 27).

Langacker’s proposal influenced different models that, while being heterogeneous, agree in thinking that grammar derives from language usage and that linguistic change happens in the concrete contexts of interaction between the speaker and the addressee or, in Traugott’s words, “language change is change in use” (2010: 30).

If the context has become a key element in how we conceive language and linguistic change from a theoretical perspective, it also occupies a central role in the renewal of research methodology. From a methodological perspective, within the usage-based Linguistics, research must be done in real communicative contexts and the pragmatic analysis of concrete cases becomes fundamental. As a consequence, linguistic corpora are the necessary tool for the study of language in contrast to other approaches that have tended to prioritize the linguistic introspection of an advantaged speaker. In this regard, we must be satisfied with the balance achieved in the last years. At the beginning of the century, Geeraerts asserted that “corpus research is a trend that is clearly emerging, but that has not yet gained as prominent a status as one would expect” (2006: 17). In contrast, nowadays linguistic research is mostly based on corpora, as proved by the studies included in this *special issue*. This methodological reorientation goes hand in hand with the creation of a large number of computer-based textual corpora (be they oral or written, diachronic or synchronic, of general language or specific varieties). The development of a methodological reflection on the interpretation of the data derived from these corpora and on the tools themselves have considerably improved as well (see as an example Stefanowitsch 2011 and 2020, among others).

When explaining how linguistic structures and meaning emerge, within the theoretical and methodological approached abovementioned, the concrete communicative contexts represent the space where the linguistic system interacts (as part of human cognition), as well as the concrete usage that materializes in the interaction between speaker and addressee. In each concrete communicative act, speaker and addressee negotiate meaning and it is precisely in this negotiation where the seed of linguistic change lies.

With regard to the formalization of the semantic change as a change in context, one of the most complete theoretical approaches with a high degree of acceptance is the Invited Inference Theory of Semantic Change (IITSC) developed by Traugott (2012; Traugott & Könnig 1991; Traugott & Dasher 2002, among other works), which is assumed by most of the articles included in this volume. Traugott starts with the premise that there is a distinction between semantics and pragmatics, that is, between the meaning codified in linguistic expressions (semantic), which is independent from the context, and the meaning that depends on the context, contextually inferred by the addressee (pragmatic). When the pragmatic meaning becomes routinized by usage, the semantic change takes place. This contextually-inferred meaning – that has been frequently termed implicature – is called invited inference by Traugott (Traugott & Dasher 2002; Traugott 2010). This new term emphasizes the role of context in the semantic change, that is to say it makes possible a non-

conventional interpretation of the construct, either an interpretation desired by the speaker, who “evokes implicatures and invites the addressee/reader to infer them” (Traugott & Dasher 2002), or an interpretation not desired by the speaker but promoted by the addressee. In the latter case we speak of a “context-induced reinterpretation” (Traugott & Trusdale 2013, following Heine, Claudi & Hünnemeyer 1991). In both cases, the invited inference is linked to the context that makes it possible, which is referred to as a bridging context, i.e., cases that allow a double interpretation of the construct, that of the original meaning and that of the innovative meaning. Once again, context is the key of linguistic change.

Cognitive linguistics is not the first or the only discipline that has highlighted the role of context to explain the linguistic fact. There are other disciplines and approaches that have paid attention to this communicative element, such as Sociolinguistics or Textual Linguistics. These linguistic disciplines based on usage (and Cognitive Linguistics in particular) claim a return to the communicative situation and represent a rapprochement to other disciplines, as well as an interaction with them. In this special issue, this perspective is adopted by Antónia Coutinho’s contribution, which is placed within the theoretical framework of Socio-Discursive Interactionism.

The study of language from a contextual point of view necessarily involves the social dimension of the linguistic fact and the intrinsic variation implied by it: i.e., a variation of linguistic register, as well as territorial and social variations that condition the usage that the speaker makes of language in society. Within this context, grammar must be understood also as a social system regulated by social conventions that orient the communicative activity. If we lose sight of the social factors involved in the functioning of linguistic structures, we will only be able to know them partially. That is why in the last years usage-based linguists have begun to accept some of the principles of Sociolinguistics, and particularly of variationist Sociolinguistics. In this issue, social variation is an important factor when describing certain constructions, as shown in the papers by Ramos, De Cock or Cornillie & Gras. In addition, these sociolinguistic factors are also relevant when analyzing the development and dissemination of lexicosemantic change, as proven by Antolí’s or Martínez’s papers in this issue.

Finally, the variation shown by an approach to usage-based language is not only functional, social or territorial, but also chronological. From a cognitive standpoint, polysemy in synchrony is conceived of as the diachronic evolution of the meaning of words and linguistic structures. In other words, polysemy must be understood as “the process of transformations of a prototype that is constantly systematized” (Cifuentes 1990: 117). The synchronic and diachronic study of the language are then two sides of the same coin. The historical perspective must not be then forgotten if we wish to have a complete picture of the phenomenon, as exemplified by the contributions by Traugott, Ramos, Antolí or Martínez in this issue.

The papers integrating this special issue aim at shedding light on the many research possibilities suggested by usage-based linguistics. All the contributions have different goals, focus on different languages (Catalan, English, Spanish or Portuguese), use several chronological frameworks (there are diachronic and syn-

chronic analysis) and approach a variety of linguistic elements. However, despite this seeming heterogeneity, all the papers share a similar methodology and a conception of linguistic communication – and, specifically, of linguistic change – strongly based on usage.

## 2. Overview of the contributions

Elizabeth Closs Traugott opens this issue with a paper entitled “Is *Back to my Point* a Pragmatic Marker? An Inquiry into the Historical Development of some Metatextual Discourse Management Markers in English”. In her study, Traugott offers an approach to the study of discourse management markers using categorial, terminological and historical perspectives, and she describes the process of change that originates these pragmatic markers. To do so, the author uses some concrete cases in English (such as *to return to X point*, *back to my point*, *parenthetically* and *incidentally*) that are analyzed with a qualitative methodology combined with quantitative data. The samples come from three English diachronic corpora: the Corpus of Contemporary American English, the Early English Books Online and The Corpus of Historical American English. The results allow the author to define a pattern in the process of change that originates discourse management markers after going successively through the categories of adverbial adjuncts and conjunct adverbials. Besides its categorial and terminological contribution, the paper emphasizes the importance of the linguistic change and the historical perspective in linguistic studies.

Joan-Rafael Ramos contributes to the study of linguistic variation in his paper entitled “Formal Variation and Language Change in Catalan Quantifiers: the Role of Pragmatics”. The author studies the factors that explain formal, functional, and territorial variation in the masculine sg. forms of quantifiers derived from the Latin numeral UNUM in contemporary Catalan (*u/un* ‘one’, *algú/algun* ‘someone, some’, *ningú/ningun* ‘no-one, anyone, any, not one, none’, *cada u/cada un* ‘everyone, each one’). The study focuses on colloquial language and the author uses samples from several written and oral corpora as well as from several lexicographic, dialectological and grammatical Catalan works. The analysis takes into consideration a Romance perspective and considers the historical evolution of the words using the conclusions of some of his previous articles. When studying the functional specialization of the formal variants analyzed besides inner factors, the author outlines certain pragmatic and social aspects such as language contact, which turns into a motor for linguistic change.

José Luis Cifuentes Honrubia, in his contribution “Anaphora and Subjectification in Lexicalized Feminine Clitic Constructions”, highlights the relevance of anaphora for linguistic change. The paper explores the analogical processes triggering constructions with a lexicalized feminine clitic in Spanish (*dormirla*, *meterla*, *pirárselas* or *deberla*, for instance), which are characterized by the fact that the clitic does not have a specific antecedent. The paper departs from the conclusion reached at a previous paper, where he analyzed the historical development of around one hundred of these constructions. The historical perspec-

tive allows us to explain the presence of the feminine clitic in some cases but not in all of them. In order to explain the processes that originate these constructions, Cifuentes makes use of (inter)subjectification (following the proposals by Traugott et al. and Company) and analogy. He identifies several types of constructions with a feminine clitic according to the established analogy (in a continuum characterized by an increase of the intersubjectification): from contexts in which the feminine clitic refers to an intratextual or cotextual reference, to cases in which the clitic has a semantic, pragmatic reference based on a communicative situation (for instance *deberla*). This analysis allows the author to conclude that constructions with a feminine clitic can be considered as an example of discourse anaphora.

Barbara De Cock analyzes the factors that explain the alternation in contemporary Spanish of two constructions which have been traditionally considered impersonal: i.e., the constructions respectively formed by *uno* and *se*. In her paper “Intersubjective Impersonals in Context: a Multivariate Analysis of Spanish *Uno* and *Se* in Spoken Language”, De Cock studies the use of these constructions – understood as strategies of agent defocussing construction – in the spoken language. To do so, she uses examples from the Corpus del Español centro-peninsular and the Macrocorpus de la norma lingüística culta de las principales ciudades del mundo hispánico. Her study combines qualitative and quantitative methodologies with a multivariate analysis, taking into consideration syntactic, pragmatic and discursive factors. The result of the study shows that, together with already-known syntactic factors, the alternation between the two constructions depends largely on discursive and pragmatic criteria which have been less studied to date. Among others, the author highlights the relevance of the variation depending on the discursive genre (that is, the degree of formality) or whether the construction has contextually an intersubjective use.

Antónia Coutinho argues in favor of an inclusive analysis of the linguistic fact in her article entitled “The Place of Semantics and Pragmatics in a Linguistic Approach to Texts”. Her proposal falls within the field of Text Linguistics, and specifically, within Discursive Interaccionism, in which the text is understood as a social object. She proposes a descending methodological approach to the text that goes from the superior level of the social activity to the intermediate level of the textual genres and to the final level of the linguistic resources utilized. Using a concrete case as a point of departure, the author argues that any approach to the linguistic level of texts should take into account all the possible connections among the different levels of study that are involved in the production of oral or written texts. Only doing this task will we understand and analyze the texts as global communicative units.

Jordi M. Antolí Martínez contributes a diachronic perspective to the study of politeness in his article “Subjectivization and Intersubjectivization in the Evolution of the Verb *Témer* in Catalan (13th-19th c.)”. In particular, his study analyzes the origin and evolution of the intersubjective values of the Catalan verb *témer* ‘to fear’ and synonymous idioms *haver/tenir por/paor/temor* during the 13th through 19th centuries. To do so, Antolí analyzes qualitatively and quantitatively examples from three historical Catalan corpora, from Old Catalan (12th through 16th c.), modern

Catalan (18th c.-1832) and contemporary Catalan (1833-present day). The results show that the verb *témer* and synonymous idioms display intersubjective usages in dialogical contexts in which they act as a negative politeness strategy, with a softening function on many occasions. These usages appear in contexts of apology, warning and request as well as in assertive contexts in which a negative information or opinion is offered by the addressee. The paper documents the diachronic process of creation of these new values using Traugott's concept of intersubjectivity and compares it to the evolution of parallel constructions in English.

Caterina Martínez Martínez highlights the function of the communicative context in the emergence of a pragmatic marker in her article "Genesis and Evolution of a Pragmatic Marker in Catalan: the Case of *Tanmateix*". Specifically, her contribution analyzes the process of grammaticalization of *tanmateix* in Catalan (derived from the structure *(ai)tant mateix* in Old Catalan) during the 17th through 19th centuries. This word is a *question-tag* in contemporary Catalan (also called "interjections", "tag-markers" or "conversational metadiscursive connectors") and it works as a pragmatic confirmation marker. To explain its creation, the author bases her study on the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the examples obtained from two Catalan historical corpora: the Corpus Informatitzat per a la Gramàtica del Català Modern and the Corpus Textual Informatitzat de la Llengua Catalana. She describes the evolution of this structure from an original value of 'calculus' (typical of Old Catalan) to the notion of 'confirmation' in modern times. Using theatrical texts, Martínez describes communicative contexts of negotiation between the speaker/writer and the hearer/reader that make possible contextual inferences that result in this linguistic change.

Finally, Bert Cornillie and Pedro Gras, in an article entitled "Evidentiality and Socioepistemic Status of Participants. A Case Study of Spanish *por lo visto* 'seemingly' and *al parecer* 'apparently'", analyze two evidential discourse markers: *por lo visto* 'seemingly' and *al parecer* 'seemingly/apparently'. Based on previous studies on evidentiality, already known in a Hispanic context, the authors offer a detailed description of the parameters under which these constructions are utilized. In concrete, the variables analyzed are a) the type of activity, b) the degree of formality; c) the position of the marker; and d) the *socioepistemic status of the speaker*. Their study is based mainly on the qualitative analysis of examples from the *Corpus oral de referencia de la lengua española contemporánea* and the *Corpus oral del lenguaje adolescente*. The main conclusion reached from the analysis is that these evidential markers are frequent in communicative contexts in which there is an exchange of information. On the contrary, they are not common in assessment contexts. A second conclusion is that the socioepistemic status of the speaker determines the use of these evidential markers.

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