

On the Critical Reappraisal and Evolution of Van Dijk's Cognitive Context Conception

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Abstract

As a pivotal figure in Critical Discourse Analysis, Teun A. van Dijk has constructed a distinctive theoretical framework for investigating context from a sociocognitive standpoint. This study undertakes a critical reappraisal of van Dijk's cognitive context theory by tracing the historical trajectory of context research, examining its departure from traditional perspectives, and analyzing its evolution through engagements with existing cognitive context theories. By situating van Dijk's work within the broader landscape of linguistic and sociocultural inquiry, this paper argues that his sociocognitive paradigm offers a transformative lens for understanding how context operates in discourse production and comprehension. Specifically, it addresses phenomena that elude traditional theories, such as the coexistence of uniqueness and commonalities in language users' communicative behaviors within identical scenarios. Furthermore, this paper critically evaluates the strengths and limitations of van Dijk's framework, highlighting its contributions to bridging linguistic, cognitive, and social dimensions of context, while also identifying avenues for future research to enhance its empirical validity and practical applicability.

Keywords: Van Dijk's sociocognitive approach, mental models, systemic functional linguistics, relevance theory, social cognition and communication

1. Introduction

For much of the 20th century, context research in linguistics was heavily shaped by the tenets of traditional structural linguistics, which adhered to a formal-structural paradigm. This approach prioritized the analysis of language as an autonomous system, focusing on syntactic and semantic structures while marginalizing the cognitive, psychological, and social factors that influence communication. Studies within this paradigm were often fragmented: some explored context as a static backdrop for linguistic forms, others as a set of situational variables, but few attempted to integrate these perspectives into a cohesive framework. As a result, our understanding of how context dynamically interacts with human cognition and social practice remained limited.

The latter half of the 20th century witnessed a paradigm shift, driven by interdisciplinary advancements in linguistics, cognitive psychology, and sociology. This shift laid the groundwork for Teun A. van Dijk's innovative concept of cognitive context, which introduced an explicitly cognitive dimension to context research. Van Dijk's two influential monographs, *Discourse and Context: A Sociocognitive Approach and Society* and *Discourse: How Social Contexts Influence Text and Talk*, marked a turning point: for the first time, context theory was systematically explored through a lens that fused social and cognitive perspectives, moving beyond single-discipline inquiries to integrate insights from semantics, pragmatics, sociology, and cognitive psychology.

In essence, van Dijk's cognitive context concept constitutes a theoretical framework that redefines how we understand the relationship between language, mind, and society. This paper aims to provide a critical review of its core propositions by examining van Dijk's critical engagement with and advancement of traditional context views and existing cognitive context theories. Additionally, it will identify key limitations of the framework, offering reflections on how future research might address these gaps.

2. Background of Van Dijk's Cognitive Context Concept

To appreciate the novelty of van Dijk's cognitive context concept, it is essential to situate it within the broader history of context research. Two key strands of inquiry have shaped this history: the socio-cultural perspective and the cognitive-psychological perspective. Van Dijk's work emerges as a synthesis of these strands, addressing their respective limitations through a sociocognitive lens.

2.1 The Socio-Cultural Perspective on Context Research

Early approaches to context were deeply rooted in structural linguistics, which treated language as an

independent symbolic system. Within this framework, context was often reduced to a syntactic-semantic environment—a set of co-occurring linguistic elements that helped disambiguate meaning—with little attention paid to its social or situational dimensions. This narrow view began to shift in the early 20th century, driven by scholars who recognized that language could not be fully understood in isolation from its social and cultural contexts.

A pivotal figure in this shift was the Polish anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski, whose work in the 1920s and 1930s revolutionized the study of context. Malinowski argued that language is inherently tied to social action, and he introduced two foundational concepts: context of situation and context of culture. The context of situation refers to the immediate physical and social environment in which speech occurs, while the context of culture encompasses the broader cultural norms, values, and practices that shape communicative behavior. For Malinowski, these contexts were not mere backdrops but active determinants of meaning: an utterance's significance, he emphasized, could only be fully grasped when situated within the specific activities and cultural frameworks in which it was produced.

Malinowski's ideas were later adopted and refined by linguists, most notably John Rupert Firth, who is credited with introducing context theory into mainstream linguistics. In 1957, Firth expanded on the concept of context of situation, defining it as encompassing three key elements: the characteristics of the participants (their roles, statuses, and relationships), the objects involved in the speech activity, and the effects of the speech on the participants and their environment. Firth's work emphasized the empirical study of context, focusing on observable, objective features of communicative situations. However, his approach remained largely descriptive, lacking a systematic framework for explaining how these situational features interacted with language to produce meaning.

The socio-cultural perspective was further advanced by M.A.K. Halliday, a leading figure in systemic functional linguistics (SFL). Building on Firth's work, Halliday subdivided the context of situation into three interconnected components: field, tenor, and mode. Field refers to the social activity being undertaken by the participants (e.g., a business meeting, a classroom lecture); tenor describes the social relationships between participants (e.g., hierarchical, egalitarian, formal); and mode refers to the channel or medium of communication (e.g., spoken, written, face-to-face, digital). Halliday argued that these three dimensions of context directly influence the metafunctions of language: the ideational function (constructing experience), the interpersonal function (negotiating social relationships), and the textual function (organizing coherent discourse).

Halliday's contribution lies in his emphasis on the *systemic* relationship between context and language: he viewed context as a set of social variables that constrain and enable linguistic choices, with language itself functioning as a social semiotic system for encoding and transmitting meaning. He also highlighted the complementarity of situational and cultural contexts, arguing that the former is always embedded within the latter. However, despite its richness, the socio-cultural perspective—particularly as articulated in SFL—has a critical limitation: it tends to overlook the cognitive agency of language users. By focusing on objective social structures and their influence on linguistic forms, it pays insufficient attention to how individuals subjectively interpret and actively construct context in the process of communication.

2.2 The Cognitive-Psychological Perspective on Context Research

While the socio-cultural perspective focused on external, social dimensions of context, another strand of research emerged that centered on internal, psychological processes. This shift began with Gestalt psychologists, who explored how humans perceive and organize their environment. Kurt Koffka, in 1935, was among the first to distinguish between two types of context: the *geographical context* (the objective, external environment) and the *behavioral context* (the subjective, internal representation of that environment). Koffka's work marked a crucial turning point, as it introduced the idea that context is not merely an external given but a psychological construct shaped by perception and interpretation.

The cognitive revolution of the 1960s and 1970s further advanced this perspective, with cognitive linguists and psychologists developing more nuanced models of how context operates in the mind. One influential framework is Charles Fillmore's frame theory, which posits that meaning is grounded in frames—cognitive structures that organize knowledge and beliefs about recurring situations. For example, a "restaurant frame" includes knowledge about waiters, menus, ordering, and paying, which allows individuals to interpret utterances like "Can I get the check?" within a restaurant context. Fillmore's work unified context with human psychology, showing how cognitive structures enable speakers and listeners to navigate communicative situations by activating relevant knowledge.

Another landmark in cognitive context research is Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson's Relevance Theory

(1986), which conceptualizes context as a dynamic psychological construct. Sperber and Wilson argue that context consists of a set of assumptions stored in the mind, which are used to derive meaning through inferential processes. In their view, communication is not simply a process of encoding and decoding messages but a form of ostensive-inferential communication, where speakers provide “ostensive” stimuli (e.g., utterances) to guide listeners to infer their intended meaning. Context, in this framework, is not fixed but constantly updated as new information is processed, with the goal of maximizing relevance the balance between cognitive effort and cognitive effect.

A third influential figure in the cognitive-psychological tradition is Ruth Wodak, whose Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) integrates cognitive and historical dimensions of context. Wodak defines context comprehensively across four dimensions: (1) the discourse itself (its structure and content); (2) the producers and receivers of discourse (their identities, beliefs, and goals); (3) the objective settings (time, space, and physical environment); and (4) the institutional, socio-historical backgrounds, and social functions of the communicative event. Wodak emphasizes intertextuality—the way discourses draw on and respond to prior texts and historical contexts—arguing that understanding discourse requires tracing its historical roots.

While these cognitive-psychological approaches advanced our understanding of context as a mental construct, they each have limitations. Fillmore’s frame theory, for instance, focuses primarily on semantic knowledge, with less attention to social dimensions of context. Sperber and Wilson’s Relevance Theory, though dynamic, remains largely a formal model of inference, with limited engagement with the social structures that shape cognitive processes. Wodak’s DHA, while historical and social, is less concerned with the specific cognitive mechanisms that underpin context construction. It is within this landscape that van Dijk’s sociocognitive approach emerges, seeking to integrate the strengths of socio-cultural and cognitive-psychological perspectives while addressing their gaps.

2.3 Van Dijk’s Contextual Conception (*Sociocognitive Perspective*)

Van Dijk’s sociocognitive approach to context represents a deliberate synthesis of the socio-cultural and cognitive-psychological traditions. In 2008, he proposed a framework that emphasizes not only the influence of social context on discourse structure but also the role of subjects’ subjective definitions of communicative situations. At the core of this framework is the concept of context models—cognitive representations that mediate between society and discourse. Van Dijk argues that cognition acts as a crucial intermediary: social structures and situational features do not directly determine discourse; instead, they are filtered through the mental models that individuals construct based on their experiences, beliefs, and social identities.

For van Dijk, context is thus a sociocognitive construct: it is shaped by social factors (e.g., culture, institutions, power relations) but exists in the minds of individuals as dynamic, subjective representations. This perspective bridges the divide between objective social structures and subjective cognitive processes, offering a more holistic account of how context influences language use. By systematically analyzing discourse structures through this lens, van Dijk provides a foundation for understanding not only how context shapes language but also how language, in turn, shapes social reality through cognitive processes.

3. Van Dijk’s Concept of Cognitive Context

Van Dijk’s cognitive context theory represents a radical rethinking of how context operates in communication. Central to his approach is the rejection of context as an objective, external entity; instead, he conceptualizes it as a subjective, dynamic mental model constructed by individuals in the course of social interaction. This section explores the core tenets of his theory, including its definition of context, its departure from traditional views, and its critical engagement with existing frameworks.

3.1 Cognitive-Based Definition of Context

Van Dijk defines context as a *mental model*—a specific cognitive schema or subjective interpretation of situation-relevant attributes constructed by participants in social, interactive, or communicative scenarios. This definition emphasizes three key features:

First, context is *participant-oriented*. It is not an objective set of situational variables but a product of individuals’ subjective experiences, beliefs, and social identities. For example, in a classroom setting, a teacher’s context model might prioritize authority, instructional goals, and classroom management, while a student’s model might focus on participation, comprehension, and social relationships with peers. These divergent models shape how each participant produces and interprets discourse (e.g., the teacher’s directives vs. the student’s questions).

Second, context is mediated by cognition. Van Dijk argues that objective environmental features (e.g., a classroom's physical layout, the time of day) only influence communication insofar as they are encoded into mental representations. A student, for instance, may not attend to the classroom clock (an objective feature) unless they are thinking about an upcoming appointment, in which case the clock becomes part of their context model.

Third, context is dynamic and ever-updating. As communication unfolds, individuals revise their context models in response to new information, such as a speaker's utterances, nonverbal cues, or changes in the environment. A job interview, for example, may start with a candidate's context model focused on formal professionalism, but if the interviewer uses humor, the candidate may update their model to include a more conversational tone, adjusting their language accordingly.

3.2 *New Developments in Cognitive Context Theory*

Van Dijk's theory represents a significant departure from both traditional socio-cultural approaches and earlier cognitive models. By reframing context as a dynamic mental model, he addresses phenomena that remained unexplained by previous theories—most notably, the variability of linguistic behavior among individuals in identical objective settings. This section examines how van Dijk's theory critically engages with and advances two influential frameworks: systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and Relevance Theory.

3.2.1 Critique and Development of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

Van Dijk is highly critical of SFL's approach to context, describing it as “misguided and in need of rejection.” His critique centers on the foundational limitations he identifies in SFL's intellectual lineage, which traces back to Malinowski and Firth, and extends to Halliday's elaboration of their ideas.

First, van Dijk argues that Malinowski's contribution, while groundbreaking, was incomplete. Malinowski introduced the concepts of context of situation and context of culture but failed to define their underlying nature or develop a systematic theory of how they interact with language. His work remained descriptive, offering little insight into the mechanisms through which context shapes meaning.

Second, van Dijk critiques Firth's focus on observable, objective contextual traits. Firth's approach, he argues, excludes the idiosyncratic cognitive processes that mediate between objective situations and linguistic behavior. By prioritizing empirical observation of external features, Firth overlooked the subjective interpretations that make context meaningful to individuals.

Third, van Dijk takes issue with Halliday's “social semiotics,” which he argues overemphasizes grammatical (lexico-syntactic) analysis at the expense of exploring the sociological and anthropological dynamics of context-language interactions. Halliday's tripartite model of context (field, tenor, mode) and his corresponding metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal, textual) are, in van Dijk's view, overly rigid and ambiguous. For example, the distinction between “field” (activity) and “tenor” (social relations) is often blurred in practice: a business negotiation (field) is simultaneously shaped by the hierarchical relationship between negotiators (tenor), making it difficult to disentangle their influence on language use.

Most fundamentally, van Dijk critiques SFL's static view of context. SFL treats context as a set of pre-existing social structures that determine linguistic choices, but it fails to account for the dynamic, cognitive processes through which individuals interpret and respond to these structures. If context were purely objective, van Dijk argues, individuals in the same situation would exhibit uniform linguistic behavior—a premise contradicted by real-world observation. In a courtroom, for example, two defendants facing the same charges may respond very differently: one may be defensive, the other cooperative—differences rooted in their subjective interpretations of the situation (e.g., their beliefs about the justice system, their emotional states) rather than objective features of the courtroom setting.

Despite these critiques, van Dijk acknowledges SFL's insights, particularly its emphasis on the correlation between social contexts and grammatical features. His sociocognitive framework builds on this by introducing a more nuanced account of context as a mental model with three defining characteristics:

- **Subjective and individualistic:** Context models are shaped by unique life experiences, even among members of the same cultural or social group. In a corporate meeting, for instance, a manager and a junior employee may share the same objective context (field: project planning; tenor: hierarchical), but their context models will differ—the manager may focus on deadlines and resource allocation, while the employee may focus on meeting expectations and avoiding mistakes.

- **Affective and evaluative:** Context models encode not just factual information but also opinions, emotions, and values. When discussing controversial topics such as climate change or political elections, individuals' context models are infused with their personal beliefs, leading them to interpret the same discourse (e.g., a news article) in sharply different ways.
- **Memory-rooted:** Context models draw on long-term episodic memory, which stores representations of past experiences. A person who has had a negative experience with a doctor, for example, may construct a context model of medical appointments that includes anxiety and distrust, influencing how they communicate with their next physician (e.g., avoiding direct questions, appearing defensive).

3.2.2 Critique and Development of Relevance Theory

While Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson) represents a key advance in conceiving context as a dynamic psychological construct, van Dijk argues that it remains limited by its formal, philosophical orientation. Sperber and Wilson define context as a set of assumptions used in inferential communication, with relevance determined by the balance of cognitive effort and effect. However, van Dijk identifies two critical shortcomings in this approach:

First, Relevance Theory reduces context to propositional sets-collections of factual or belief-based statements-focusing on parameters like time, space, and shared knowledge without explaining how these parameters are mentally represented or socially constructed. It treats cognitive processes as abstract computations rather than grounded in social experience.

Second, the theory lacks mechanisms to describe how context cognitively impacts discourse production and comprehension. It offers a philosophical account of inference but provides little insight into how social factors (e.g., power, culture, identity) shape the construction of context models or the interpretation of meaning.

Van Dijk's context model addresses these limitations by integrating three dimensions-setting, participants, and communicative events-with "egocentricity" as its core. This integration bridges objectivity and subjectivity, showing how social structures influence cognition, which in turn shapes discourse:

- **Setting:** Includes temporal and spatial elements (e.g., a coffee shop at 3 PM), but these are only relevant insofar as they are mentally encoded. A couple on a first date may encode the coffee shop's cozy atmosphere as part of their context model, using it to guide conversational topics (e.g., discussing shared interests rather than controversial issues).
- **Participants:** Organized around the self, with context models structuring relationships to others (e.g., friend, stranger, authority figure). In a parent-teacher conference, a parent's context model will center on their role as a caregiver, while a teacher's model will center on their role as an educator, leading to different communicative goals (e.g., the parent may focus on their child's well-being, the teacher on academic progress).
- **Events:** Linked to both social and individual cognition, forming "communicative relevance" -a connection between context, shared knowledge, goals, and intentions. A political rally, for example, involves a communicative event (a speech) whose relevance is defined by shared ideological goals (e.g., advocating for policy change) and individual intentions (e.g., a speaker's goal to persuade, an audience member's goal to be inspired).

This model explains how discourse can influence society through cognitive mediation. News media, for instance, use detailed reporting to shape audiences' context models: a news story about crime may emphasize specific details (e.g., the race of a suspect, the location of the crime) to activate audience members' preexisting beliefs (e.g., stereotypes about certain neighborhoods), reinforcing those beliefs even if the reporting is factually skewed. Crucially, context models also account for miscommunication and conflict: when individuals' context models diverge (e.g., due to cultural differences), they may interpret the same utterance in incompatible ways, leading to misunderstanding.

4. Conclusion

Van Dijk's sociocognitive context theory represents a significant advancement in our understanding of how context operates in communication. By critiquing and building on traditional socio-cultural and cognitive-psychological approaches, he offers a framework that bridges objective social structures and subjective cognitive processes, addressing phenomena that eluded previous theories.

Central to van Dijk's contribution is his redefinition of context as a dynamic, participant-constructed

mental model. This shift from objective scenarios to subjective interpretations explains why individuals in identical situations exhibit diverse linguistic behaviors, highlighting the agency of discourse participants in shaping meaning. Unlike SFL, which treats context as a static set of social determinants, van Dijk's theory emphasizes the cognitive mediation of social factors, showing how individuals actively interpret and reconstruct context as communication unfolds. Similarly, it advances beyond Relevance Theory by integrating social dimensions into cognitive models, explaining not just how inferences are made but why they vary across social groups and individuals.

However, the framework is not without limitations. First, van Dijk's critique of SFL, while incisive, is sometimes overly dismissive, overlooking the value of SFL's systematic analysis of language-context correlations. His own sociocognitive model, while theoretically rich, lacks concrete, actionable guidelines for empirical research-leaving questions about how to operationalize concepts like "context models" in practice. Second, the theory relies heavily on interpretive analysis, with limited empirical validation. Cognitive processes are inherently unobservable, making it challenging to test the existence or structure of context models through quantitative methods.

Future research might address these limitations by combining van Dijk's theoretical insights with empirical approaches, such as experimental psychology (e.g., measuring reaction times to test context model activation) or corpus linguistics (e.g., analyzing patterns of language use to identify context-dependent variations). Additionally, cross-cultural studies could explore how context models differ across cultural groups, shedding light on the interplay of culture and cognition in communication.

In sum, van Dijk's sociocognitive context theory offers a transformative lens for understanding the complex relationship between language, mind, and society. By emphasizing the dynamic, subjective nature of context, it opens new avenues for research in discourse analysis, linguistics, and social psychology-ultimately deepening our understanding of how communication shapes and is shaped by the contexts in which it occurs.

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