

Reperspectivation as a Factor of Topic Recontextualization

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Abstract. The article presents the study of perspective as a dynamic phenomenon and its function in topic recontextualization in the process of communication. Understanding context as a mentally construed subjective representation of the relevant properties of a communicative situation in episodic memory of its participants gives the opportunity to differentiate the speaker's and the hearer's context models which overlap in the process of communication. Topic as an object of the speaker's thought can be appropriately identified by the hearer under condition of activating the relevant context model. Topic contextualization is marked by the perspective impact which is defined as a speaking stance or position according to which the topic is viewed and interpreted. The existence of various and often divergent perspectives of the interlocutors on the same topic produces its multiperspectivity. Special attention has been focused on the cases of perspective change or reperspectivation that results in context model modification and consequently in topic recontextualization – the process of viewing and interpreting topic in a new context model.

Keywords: context model, topic, perspective, reperspectivation, recontextualization

The present-day study of context is marked by its fundamental rethinking in various branches of linguistic research: pragmatics, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, cognitive linguistics and others. Context is no longer treated as purely linguistic environment (co-text) of a language unit but a set of linguistic and non-linguistic factors which play a crucial role in the effective production and interpretation of discourse. As Ch. Goodwin and A. Duranti state, "linguistics could no longer be content with analyzing language as an encapsulated formal system that could be isolated from the rest of a society's culture and social organization" [2, p. 1].

T.A. van Dijk suggests a radically new sociocognitive approach towards studying context according to which context as an objective phenomenon doesn't exist at all. Instead we deal with context models - mentally construed subjective representation of the relevant properties of a communicative situation in episodic memory of its participants [1, p. 16]. Such relevant properties include time and place parameters, participants and their various identities and roles, actions, goals and knowledge. It demonstrates the great importance of taking as a point of departure for the analysis of context the perspective of the participant(s) whose behavior is being analyzed [2, p. 4]. Accordingly within a communicative situation there exist at least two context models: the speaker's context model and the hearer's context model which overlap in the process of communication.

Topic as an object of thought formed in the mind of the speaker and expressed in the discourse can be easily recognized and appropriately identified by the hearer under condition of taking into consideration the relevant context model. Thus topic and context stand in a fundamental figure-ground relationship to each other. Alongside with subjectivity, uniqueness and flexibility the most distinctive functional property of context models is their dynamic character. Contexts as mental models are not static. In other words, contexts develop "ongoingly" and "on line," that is, in parallel with interaction and (other) thoughts [1, p. 18].

Topic contextualization is an integral part of effective communication. Its perspectival impact lies in its function to display how interlocutors want their topic to be interpreted and therefore what choice of informational background characterizes their mental position in relation to the topic. Alongside with topic contextualization the interlocutors face the necessity of topic recontextualization – the process of viewing and interpreting topic putting it in a new context model. The goal of this paper is to study how the change of interlocutors' perspective (reperspectivation) influences the process of topic recontextualization.

The term "perspective" originated in the theory of visual arts and denoted a position in physical space from which a person looks at his world (*visual perspective*), but nowadays it has become metaphorical and broadly used in philosophy, sociology, history, psychology and linguistics. The present-day understanding of perspective characterizes it as a form of representation by which the parts of an object or the elements of a complex state of affairs and their interrelations are construed and presented as if seen from a given point of view (*linguistic perspective*) [4, p. 25].

In our communication with others we learn that any cognition, sensory or non-sensory, perceptual or judgemental, may turn out to be position-related. Growing up together with others and talking with them we experience the relativity and perspectival structure of human knowledge: one and the same thing can be viewed, judged and evaluated from more than one viewpoint, but, above all, one and the same thing, person, event or state of affairs can be named and communicated in different ways [4, p. 1].

Topical perspective can be defined as a specific way of viewing, understanding and evaluating the things talked about. *Perspectivation* is mental and communicative activities (perspective-setting and perspective-taking) performed by interlocutors to display their point of view on the given event. Perspective and perspectivation are studied by Carl F. Graumann, Werner Kallmeyer, Per Linell, Paul Simpson and others [4; 5; 6].

Effective communication presupposes "the accommodation of conversation-oriented and dialogue-oriented viewpoints" and thus the integration of functional values anchored to minimally two co-participants, topic and discourse [3, 79].

Establishing the formal structure of a sequentially ordered interaction demands perspective-setting and perspective-taking and the construction of a common perspective on a basic level. This elementary feature of perspective does not prevent perspective divergences on a higher level, but it is a necessary condition for the chance to negotiate divergences of positions and goals in a constructive and socially acceptable manner [4, p. 5-6].

Perspectivity is the necessary result of topic positioning. The speaker and the hearer possess their own perspectives on the topic under discussion (the speaker's perspective and the hearer's perspective). Thus the process of communication is characterized by *multiperspectivity* (more than one perspective) on the same topic rather than *monoperspectivity* (one perspective (e.g. dogmatism – the ideologically blind belief that there is only one true view of the world)).

Topical perspective is distinguished by the following main properties [4, p. 43-47]:

1) *relativity* – it concerns a relationship between an interlocutor’s position and a topic;

2) *discourse-basement* – it is connected with a particular communicative or cognitive activity in which a person views a topic from a particular position;

3) *implicitness / explicitness*– primarily perspective is implicit (it is shown in the way interlocutors talk rather than said explicitly), but sometimes they are motivated to make perspective explicit;

4) *asymmetry* – it presupposes the difference between the speaker’s and the hearer’s topical perspectives which is often the cause of perspectival clashes and divergences;

5) *statics / dynamics* – perspective is usually fixed in relation to the interlocutors who stick to a certain point of view on the given topic, though in the process of interaction topical perspective may change. Such shifts happen especially when the asymmetry of the speaker’s and the hearer’s perspectives leads to confrontation and reperspectivation.

On the ground of profound factual material analysis we singled out the following basic cases of reperspectivation leading to topic recontextualization.

1. Role-taking.

A. Speaker1 – speaker2. The speaker and the hearer change their communicative roles one by one in the process of communication. As the initiator of communication the speaker (S1) introduces the topic for discussion and sets his topical perspective depending upon the relevant context model. In his turn the hearer (potential S2) may also set his own perspective on the given topic which can be similar or different from the speaker’s one depending on his context model. As P. Simpson states, “all interpretations are in some sense context-bound and are contingent on the position of the analyst” [6, p. 3] relative to the topic.

Thus role-taking becomes synonymous with perspective-setting. Topic is contextualized by speaker1 and then recontextualized by speaker2. We may represent this process with a help of the following formula:

$$(1) R = \frac{TPs1}{CM1} \rightarrow \frac{TPs2}{CM2}, \quad (1)$$

where R – reperspectivation, TPs1 – topical perspective of speaker1, TPs2 – topical perspective of speaker2, CM1 and CM2 – context models of speaker1 and speaker2.

Let us analyze the following example:

S1 “I think I should go to school, mum. I don’t have to take gym if you give me a note”.

S2 “Michelle. You haven’t been feeling right for a month. You have a fever this morning. I think it’s time we did something”.

S1 “But I feel fine now and want to go to school” [CF, 30].

In the given example Michelle (S1) feels the necessity of studying and insists on its continuation in spite of her illness. Her stepmother (S2) worries greatly about Michelle’s health as she has been feeling bad for a month and suggests taking some measures for improving her state of health. The interlocutors’ perspectives on the topic are explicated through the use of personal deixis (*I, you, we*), temporal deixis (*now*) and perspectival expressions (*I think, I should go to school, want to go to school*). The focus of contrast marks two conflicting asymmetrical perspectives (Michelle – stepmother) on the topic and their divergence.

B. Side-participant presence. The canonical structure of a communicative situation presupposes the obligatory presence of two interlocutors (the speaker and the hearer). But there are communicative situations with extended anthropo-

logical structure which are marked by the presence of the third participant – a side-participant (SP) - who may at first just observe what is going on and sets his perspective on the topic under discussion “silently”. But in course of communication he may also change his communicative position from a passive observer to an active interlocutor and “verbalize” his own perspective on the topic depending on his own context model. In this case our basic formula of reperspectivation is modified in the following way:

$$(2) R = \frac{TPs1}{CM1} \rightarrow \frac{TPs2}{CM2} \rightarrow \frac{TPsp}{CM3}, \quad (2)$$

where R – reperspectivation, TPs1 – topical perspective of speaker1, TPs2 – topical perspective of speaker2, TPsp – topical perspective of side-participant, CM1, CM2, CM3 – context models of speaker1, speaker2 and side-participant.

The following conversation illustrates the change of topical perspective caused by the presence of a side-participant who displays his own position on the problem being discussed:

S1 Fred: *I have to go and you won’t let me use the car.*

S2 Dad: *All right. Then let’s talk it over. What’s so urgent?*

S1 Fred: *It is a secret.*

S2 Dad: *And you can’t tell us what it is?*

SP Mother: *Don’t you think you could let him this time, Paul?* [PR, p. 47-48]

The example illustrates the situation, when the son (Fred) (S1) addresses his father (Dad) (S2) to let him use his car, but he doesn’t receive a permission. This situation is characterized by the presence of a side-participant (Mother) (SP) who at first only observes the development of the events. But later she changes her position from an observer to an active participant and her son’s supporter in order to set her own perspective on the topic. The whole utterance (*Don’t you think you could let him this time, Paul?*) serves as a linguistic marker of reperspectivation and topic recontextualization.

2. Communicative acts of advice giving and persuasion.

As C.F. Graumann states, “besides expressing myself and appealing to my partner’s attention I refer my partner not only to an object or state of affairs but I also try to make him or her see (understand, conceive, judge, etc) it the way I do, i.e. from my point of view. Whatever I present as my view on a given matter, I offer as a potential perspective for others. The capacity to take other persons’ perspectives may be considered the elementary communicative competence” [4, p. 15]. In this case reperspectivation formula is as follows:

$$(3) R = \frac{TPs1}{CM1} \rightarrow \frac{TPs2 \approx TPs1}{CM2}, \quad (3)$$

where R – reperspectivation, TPs1 – topical perspective of speaker1, TPs2 – topical perspective of speaker2, CM1 and CM2 – context models of speaker1 and speaker2.

Taking others’ perspective is a vivid example of reperspectivation, especially in communicative acts of advice giving and persuasion which serve as an attempt to bring divergent perspectives to convergence.

A. Advice-giving. Let us consider the following example:

S1 “That woman from down below, Margot Quinn, is not to be trusted, Ms. Mcgrail”, he [Mr. Coyne] said, his jowls trembling with outrage. “She does not know the meaning of truth. Worse still, she is in league with thoroughly corrupt speculators. I would not want to deal with her if I were you... And I trust you are not considering selling your bungalow”.

S2 "This woman seems very interested in the land around here. Wanted to buy our house for a condominium development. But not at the moment... A lot of money to be made out here..." [GIL, 139].

The conversation given above is a friendly talk between two close friends (Mr. Coyne and Ms. McGrail) concerning the woman, Margot Quinn, who is going to buy the land around. Mr. Coyne worries greatly about Margot Quinn's attempt to buy Ms. McGrail's house and advises her not to sell it to this woman giving reasons for that (*That woman is not to be trusted; she does not know the meaning of truth; she is in league with thoroughly corrupt speculators*). His final remark "I would not want to deal with her if I were you... And I trust you are not considering selling your bungalow" serves as a linguistic marker of reperspectivation. Ms. McGrail's response (*But not at the moment... A lot of money to be made out here*) signals that she takes Mr. Coyne's perspective on the topic and thus perspectival convergence takes place.

B. Persuasion.

S1 "I've got a better idea", said Charles. "Why don't I go over Morrison's head to the director and just lay the cards on the table, explain that it's infinitely more important for us to stay with our own work".

S2 "I can't imagine it will help", cautioned Ellen. "Morrison told you the decision came from the board of directors... I think you are just asking for trouble".

S1 "And I think it's worth the risk".

S2 "Well, you're right" [CF, 47].

In the given dialogue Charles is sure that the open talk with the director may improve his difficult position and is trying to persuade Ellen that it's worth doing (*I've got a better idea; I think it's worth the risk*). At first Ellen doubts the appropriateness of his actions (*I can't imagine it will help; I think you are just asking for trouble*), but finally he changes his perspective and his final remark "Well, you're right" is an indicator of convergence of interlocutors' perspectives.

As P. Linell states, "since all communication predetermines asymmetries, it is that only by mutual taking the perspective of others we are able to communicate and, thereby, to become aware of our own (and others') perspectivity. The focus on mutual communication with its emphasis on the *reciprocity of perspectives* gives language a prominent role in the development of world and self knowledge" [5, p. 14].

With respect to knowledge "a person who knows less will accept his or her partner's perspective on the topic. The interlocutors may start to argue about more or less general aspects of their divergent views, but finally, they may reach a point of sufficient convergence of perspectives [4, p. 21]. But there is no movement of convergence between their personal perspectives but the acquisition of knowledge by the ignorant participant when he knows nothing about the topic talked about. In such a case the

corresponding dialogical movement is unidirectional (from the informed to the uninformed and not vice versa).

3. Topic-changing.

The intense debates evolve in dynamic, partly unpredictable ways, much like multi-party conversations in which topics emerge, disappear or branch off into quite different topics, stay on and get transformed as the contexts change, and as a consequence, new perspectives on partly the same and partly new subject matters appear. These reperspectivation processes thus recontextualize the discursive treatment of particular events into debates that are of a long-lasting nature [4, 52]. We may represent this process with the help of the following formula:

$$(4) R = \frac{T1Ps1}{CM1} \rightarrow \frac{T1Ps2}{CM2} \rightarrow \frac{T2Ps1}{CM1'} \rightarrow \frac{T2Ps2}{CM2'}, \quad (4)$$

where R – reperspectivation, T1Ps1 – perspective of speaker1 on topic1, T1Ps2 – perspective of speaker2 on topic1, T2Ps1 – perspective of speaker1 on topic2, T2Ps2 – perspective of speaker2 on topic2, CM1 and CM2 – context models of speaker1 and speaker2, CM1' and CM2' – partly modified context models of speaker1 and speaker2.

Let us illustrate it by the following example:

S1 "I hear you killed people for the wise guys out on the coast".

S2 "You are talking to the wrong man, my friend..."

S1 "Let me raise another subject. I understand you've made some remarks about my wife".

S2 "I don't know where you heard that, but it's not true. I have the greatest respect to you wife", he said.

S1 "Maybe we can take up the subject another time. On a more physical level", I said.

S2 "I've got to run. Get a good night's sleep..." [BPCR, 156].

Discussing the topic of killing introduced by speaker1 which turns to be unpleasant for speaker2 the interlocutors suddenly switch to another topic (remarks about a wife) partly modifying their context models. In this case the strategy of topic changing is used as manipulative in order to avoid a potential conflict. "Let me raise another subject" serves as a linguistic marker of topical change and the emergence of different perspectives of the interlocutors on the new topic.

Thus, on the ground of our research we may conclude that topical perspective is a discourse-based dynamic phenomenon. Perspective-setting and perspective-taking are mental and communicative activities performed by the interlocutors in the process of topic positioning taking into consideration the relevant context model. Topic multiperspectivity presupposes the existence of various perspectives of the interlocutors on the same topic which, on the one hand, may lead to perspectival divergence, but on the other hand, to perspectival convergence. Such differently directed processes signal about perspectival shifts or reperspectivation and, consequently, topic recontextualization.

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