CONTEXTUALISING CONTEXT AND THE DYNAMICS OF MEANING[1]

by

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> Context is everything and nothing. Like a shadow,
> it flees from those who flee from it,
> insinuating itself as the unnoticed ground
> upon which even the most explicit statements depend.
> (Hanks 1996:140)

1. Introduction: Defining context

This paper explores the dynamics of context from (primarily) pragmatic, linguistic, and interdisciplinary perspectives. Context is examined in relation to verbal language, to visual modes of discourse, and to combinations of the verbal and the visual – called multimodal discourse – where the impact of context is often easier to judge. The instantiation of meaning, be it mediated by the word and/or the image, always occurs within a societal or cultural frame – the broader picture – but it is also rooted, of course, in the immediate set of circumstances accompanying and interacting with any instance of verbal or visual communication, as well as in the participants' personal dispositions to the communication in hand.

The pragmatic perspective on context and verbal communication asserts the centrality of the language user, recognizing as it does that language is embedded in the many situations and settings in which we live, work and communicate. To quote Mey (2001:177):

> The world in which people live is a coherent one, in which everything hangs together: none of its phenomena can be explained in isolation.

Pragmatics is not alone in adopting a contextually-driven view of communication. Focus on context is something it shares with other

societally- and user-oriented disciplines, such as anthropological linguistics. For instance, Duranti (2001:1) suggests that:

> If we want to understand the role of languages in people's lives, we must go beyond the study of their grammar and venture into the world of social action, where words are embedded in and constitutive of specific cultural practices such as telling a story, asking for a favor, greeting, showing respect, praying, giving directions, reading, insulting, praising, arguing in court, making a toast, or explaining a political agenda.
>
> Linguistic anthropology is one of many disciplines dedicated to the study of the role of languages (and the language faculty) in these and the many other activities that make up the social life of individuals and communities.

Pragmatics and anthropological linguistics see language as mediated through society and culture and view considerations of society and culture as indispensable to an understanding of what language is about, once the focus is shifted beyond the more traditional and linguistic-centred concerns of grammar and syntax. Being socially embedded, 'language as speech is part of the world, a social activity on a par with others' (Hanks 1996:119).

In pragmatics, context is seen as paramount. It is, as Mey (2001:14) declares: 'the quintessential pragmatic concept'. In his comprehensive introduction to the theoretical basis of pragmatics, Verschueren (1999:75f.) refers to Malinowski's observations on 'context of situation' 'as one of the necessary pillars of any theory of pragmatics'. Both authors argue the case for a contextually-oriented approach to language. This inevitably involves looking at what Mey (2001:29f.) refers to as the 'world of users': language does not come about of itself but is created by human interaction. All utterances (spoken or written verbal communication seen in their contexts of use) depend 'crucially on the worlds in which their speakers live'.

Pragmatics, therefore, views language as more than a system of structures with sets of communicative functions. Language needs to be seen in relation to its users, and as a societally-embedded, meaning-making resource, which constantly meshes with its ever-changing

social and cultural contexts of use. The view that context is not just 'out there' as some *static* entity, a backdrop, as it were, to the activity of communication, is important. Context is *dynamic*: 'It is', as Mey (2001:39) remarks,

> to be understood as the continually changing surroundings, in the widest sense, that enable the participants in the communication process to interact, and in which the linguistic expressions of the interaction become intelligible.

Yet, how can we set about defining context? What is 'context'? What is its significance? What part does it play in the instantiation of meaning? In an effort to answer these questions and grasp something of the synergy between context and what is contextualised, this paper considers different modes of communication: the verbal, the visual, multi-modal combinations of both and, in passing, music.

2. An interdisciplinary glimpse at context: archaeology, art and music

In its broadest sense, context refers to all the factors or circumstances which surround a particular event or phenomenon – be this attending a live concert, reading a poem, viewing a painting, recognizing a familiar logo, witnessing a trial, participating in a debate – whatever. And these circumstances always have a direct bearing on how we understand and respond to such events or phenomena. The mediating effects of context can be very potent: contrast the cable TV broadcast of a football championship with the experience of seeing the game live; or the experience of listening to their CD, rather than being with the 'Three Tenors' in concert in the surroundings of the Stadio Braglia, Modena, Italy or in the Forbidden City, Beijing, China. Or, to situate us in the realm of fine art and wall painting, consider the impact of seeing Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescoes in the flesh, live at the Vatican, rather than as reproductions in a book on the living-room coffee table! And in the context of great art, of art's greatest icon, context itself may draw the crowds and become the focus of attention

in its own right. Recalling the theft of the *Mona Lisa* from the Louvre in 1911, Leader (2002:3) remarks:

> It was the empty space left by the vanished Mona Lisa that the crowds flocked to see. It was less a case of going to see a work of art because it was there, than, on the contrary, because it wasn't there!

The contextual setting can embody and trigger unique meanings and associations. The British archaeologist Howard Carter's discovery of the tomb of a young Egyptian Pharaoh, Tutankhamen, in 1922, caused a worldwide sensation. It was possibly the most remarkable archaeological find of the twentieth century, and it was to provide unique insights into the mysteries and royal culture of ancient Egypt. The excavation of the tomb and subsequent retrieval of countless objects of beauty has become the stuff of legend and the mainstay of many an exhibition up to this day. Something of the sheer awe and excitement surrounding the discovery is captured by Carter's own diary entry (November 26:1922), describing what he witnessed when peering into the inner burial chamber of the tomb for the first time:

> It was sometime before one could see, the hot air escaping caused the candle to flicker, but as soon as one's eyes became accustomed to the glimmer of light the interior of the chamber gradually loomed before one, with its strange and wonderful medley of extraordinary and beautiful objects heaped upon one another.

This is nothing less than a living context! For Carter and his colleagues, the funereal objects possessed a signature all of their own, resonant with their surroundings, with their history and with the purpose they were originally destined to serve: to provide for the young Pharaoh in his new life in the next world. Removed from their cradle of origin, portrayed as exhibits in a museum and thus divested of their funereal role, these 'extraordinary objects' can now only hint at the wonder Carter and his team must have felt at their discovery.

   In this instance, the physical environment, the tomb itself, was required for the meanings of the various objects to be fully articulated

and properly understood, at least as their authors had apparently intended. The terracotta tomb warriors of Shaanxi province, north-west China – another major archaeological discovery of the twentieth century – are a further case in point. Here, the site of the excavation itself – an enormous mausoleum – remains an integral part of the experience. Some 7,000 life-size figures and warriors and other artefacts have been excavated thus far and restored *in situ*. As with the artefacts in Tutankhamen's tomb, this underground army, buried in front of the Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi's tomb, had the purpose of accompanying their master into the afterlife, in this case to defend him. The context, as it were, fulfils and completes the meanings embodied by these tomb sculptures.

As can be seen from these examples, context may be regarded as immanent to the object it surrounds and accompanies. It is not some optional, tag-on, static dimension of meaning. Removal of an object from one context necessarily involves its placement in another (a process we refer to as 're-contextualisation'), such that new meanings are created, just as old ones are lost. No object, in this sense, can exist independently of its context. Admittedly, Carter's viewing of the objects in the context of Tutankhamen's tomb in the Valley of the Kings is very different from our viewing of those same objects in the context of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Yet, some context is always present: it is a constant, fluid and dynamic force. Thus, whilst it was never intended – or at least envisioned or anticipated – that the tomb sculptures and artefacts in Egypt and China should see the light of day again, the re-contextualisation that their discovery has brought about remains potent and imbues these same objects with new meanings.

The all-pervasive impact of context and the processes of re-contextualisation is immediate and powerful. Their effects are not confined, of course, to considerations of physical objects – be these archaeological artefacts or works of art. In his commemorative essay on the late German composer/conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler, Ashman (2005:14) recalls the impact of Nazism on this renowned figure's music-making. Choosing to remain in National Socialist Germany, Furtwängler invariably insisted on using 'huge orchestras', thus sparing as many musicians as possible from the horrors of military service at the front. This resulted in performances (especially of

Beethoven) of 'a manic, frightening grandeur. They became a barely concealed call to resistance or a manifesto of suffering'. In short, the contextual imperative of the times underpinned decisions which were as much political in their articulation as they were musical.

Clearly, context mediates all these familiar modes of communication, a point commonly acknowledged through observations such as 'you need to read it in context' or 'you need to hear/see it in context' and 'it's all a matter of context'. The term 'context' however, not to mention the variants 'situation', 'environment' and 'setting', are often invoked with little explanation given of their scope. The significance of context for *what* we hear and see and for *how* we understand what we hear and see is to do with its agentative role at the time meaning is instantiated.

3. Linguistics and context: The case of modality.

In linguistics, context is generally invoked in two ways. Firstly, it may be understood to refer to the immediate linguistic environment of something spoken or written which clarifies its meaning. The term 'co-text' is often used in this sense, to refer to the language which accompanies or surrounds the expression concerned, and which situates it grammatically and meaningfully, within the framework of a particular argument. Secondly, it may also be taken to refer to all those non-linguistic factors with which language interacts, its 'setting', and which are determinant of what we eventually understand.

An example from the linguistic domain of modality provides a case in point. Modality, as Verschueren (1999:129) points out, 'is an inherently pragmatic phenomenon. It involves the many ways in which attitudes can be expressed towards the 'pure' reference-and-predication content of an utterance'. As has already been noted, the pragmatic perspective on language use targets the very *nature* of everyday linguistic action, seen in terms of its users, the uses which language serves, and the dialectal synergies which arise between these elements and the ever-shifting social, cultural and ideational contexts in which they act and exist. Acting as individuals or institutional mouthpieces, acting for good or for ill, acting with transparency or surreptitiously,

we want our opinions recognised, if not endorsed, our assertions supported, our requests, orders, commands or policies to gain compliance, our advice taken, our apologies accepted: it seems that as human beings we have a profound need to negotiate our views and effect modifications to the mindsets and beliefs of our interlocutors. In short, we aim to get our worldview accepted and adopted, if not (fully) understood.

The change of mind that this process involves – in particular, having one's own mind changed – is taken up from a psychological perspective by Howard Gardner (2004:1-2), who refers to a number of different scenarios where mind-changing occurs:

> Many aspects of our lives are oriented towards [changing minds] – convincing a colleague to approach a task in a new way, trying to eradicate one of our own prejudices. Some of us, even, are involved professionally in the business of changing minds: the therapist who affects his patient's self-concept; the teacher who introduces students to new ways of thinking about a familiar topic; the salesperson or advertiser who convinces consumers to switch brands. Leaders almost by definition are people who change minds – be they leaders of a nation, a corporation, or a non-profit institution.

Seeking to modify – or have modified – alternative mindsets takes us inevitably into the realm of modality. Modal concepts are central to the way we conceive and express our assessments and wishes in order to effect changes in our audience.

An apposite example of linguistic modality at work in this sense is provided by what has now become known as the *Probably wouldn't* sketch, from the 1980s British comedy *Yes, Prime Minister!* The immediate context of this exchange involves Sir Humphrey (SH), Cabinet Secretary, who is propounding the merits of the nuclear deterrent *Trident*, whilst his adversary, Jim Hacker, the Prime Minister (PM), is less than convinced of the security it might afford:

> *SH*: With Trident we *could* obliterate the whole of Eastern Europe.
> *PM*: I don't *want to* obliterate the whole of Eastern Europe.

SH: It's a deterrent!

PM: It's a bluff … I *probably wouldn't* use it …

SH: Yes, but they don't *know* that you *probably wouldn't*.

PM: They *probably* do.

SH: Yes, they *probably know* that you *probably wouldn't* but they *can't certainly know*!

PM: They *probably certainly know* that I *probably wouldn't*!

SH: Yes, but even though they *probably certainly know* that you *probably wouldn't*, they don't *certainly know* that, although you *probably wouldn't*, there's no *probability* that you *certainly would!*

PM: What?!

SH: It all boils down to one simple issue. You are the Prime Minister of Great Britain …

(Yes, Prime Minister: The Grand Design, 21'39" – 22'01", 9th January, 1986)

It is the Prime Minister's observation that he *probably wouldn't* use a nuclear deterrent that sets in train the series of modalized rebuffs, as the interlocutors parry each other's claims as to the efficacy of 'Trident'. The PM's initial use of the epistemic frame *probably wouldn't* acts as a discoursal or contextual cue: it triggers the modal (and largely) epistemic flak which so clearly marks the conflicting views of the two protagonists and their desire to change the other's mind. The interlocutors 'manage' the discourse by weaving together their modalized assertions; the modal texture thus created is symptomatic of how the co-text structures and drives the interaction, predicated as it is on the participants' respective claims to knowledge. The modal expressions deployed (modal lexical verbs, modal auxiliaries, and modal adverbs) exhibit a mix of (primarily) epistemic and deontic functional values: their concatenation, crescendo-fashion, results in strings of harmonic and non-harmonic combinations (see Lyons 1977:807), the latter, such as *They probably certainly know*, being the source of much of the humour the sketch generates. As Nuyts (2001:xvi) remarks:

Evaluating the likelihood of a state of affairs is not just a linguistic category, however. It relates directly to the way we perceive, memorize, and act in the physical and social world we live in [that is, the broader context]. More specifically, it taps a crucial dimension of our mental activities, viz. our capacity to reflect on our knowledge and our reasoning with it, i.e. our capacity to metarepresent.

The exchange indicates that the speakers' assessments or judgments of the situation, whilst clearly subjective and a matter of opinion and, arguably, a matter of shared knowledge, are linked to and inspired by differing understandings or interpretations of the world and its ways, and that each speaker feels he has good reason to promote the particular worldview he asserts. In other words, each speaker interacts in his own way with the wider and more immediate contexts in accordance with his own sets of beliefs. The grounds for the speakers' differing convictions are nowhere explicitly stated, but the strength with which they are held – given the characters' contrasting personalities, their status (a prime minister on the one hand and a cabinet secretary on the other), the political, institutionalized context of the exchange, and the (at that time) background of Cold War threat and nuclear conflict – is a matter for the individual's worldview and ideational knowledge.

In their landmark collection of papers on 'Modality in Grammar and Discourse', Bybee and Fleischman (1995) comment that

In recent years, an increased understanding of many grammatical categories has come about through an examination of these categories in the actual contexts in which they are used – what is referred to as 'discourse' or 'situation' context. (1995:8)

Analysis of the *Probably wouldn't* sketch clearly demonstrates the benefits of using such a contextual approach to explicate how modality functions in and across discourse. Seen in its discoursal setting, modality, of course, cannot be explained by reference simply to the modal auxiliaries or other modal expressions, discussed in isolation. Only a contextually-motivated framework for the appraisal of modality

can properly explain the modal synergies which arise in text, such as modal-adverb collocations, lexical modal-modal auxiliary co-occurrence or, for that matter, any combination of modal expressions.

4. *Looking at multi-modal discourse: Advertising discourse and modality*

The dynamic synergies between verbal and visual texts in multimodal discourse, such as advertising, and the (re-)contextualisation of the other mode that each mode of discourse brings about, further reveal the agentative role of context in bringing about meaning.

The text considered here is an advertisement for *Malaysia Airlines* which recently appeared in an in-flight magazine, servicing international travellers and business professionals. The accompanying discourse comprises articles on world travel, holiday planning, luxury consumer products and the like. The text consists of visual and verbal elements. The dominant visual element depicts a tropical idyll – blue sky, a pearly-white, sandy atoll, crystal blue ocean; to the right of the text, a diminutive, solitary male stands looking out across the water, in contemplative mood. Six lines of verbal text, suggesting thought balloons arranged in descending order, 'crown' this figure; five of them are equally spaced and carry a similar message, but with a progressive change in the day mooted for departure: *Maybe I'll stay till Tuesday*; *Maybe I'll stay till Thursday, … Friday, … Saturday, …Sunday*. The last line reads: *Maybe I'll stay* and is spaced further apart from the preceding five lines of text, to visually suggest the (minimal, as it turns out) cognitive effort needed for our protagonist to reach his final decision to stay. (Below the visual text with its intimations of an ideal life style, is additional verbal text, down-to-earth in its message, about the frequency of flights between Frankfurt and Kuala Lumpur.)

The reading of this multimodal text depends on how we respond to the rhetorical reiteration of the modal adverb *maybe* and the visual pause/leap between the penultimate line *Maybe I'll stay till Sunday* and the sixth *Maybe I'll stay*. At the same time, to make sense of the repetitions, we have recourse to the visual backdrop which effectively contextualises the verbal text. The scene provides compelling visual evidence for the verbal reasoning process, by which *maybe* gradually

undergoes a process of reinforcement such that by its final iteration, *Maybe I'll stay*, the adverb has taken on the discursive force of *certainly* or *definitely*. Clearly, this is a case of the dynamics of context working on the literal meaning of words and effecting significant shifts in how these are to be interpreted. That interpretation depends on the verbal resonating and interacting with the visual.

5. In context and 'out of context': Mona Lisa and (more) visuality

In everyday language, as we have noted, expressions such as 'in context' or 'out of context' are often used to capture the significance of the immediate environment in helping us to understand the intended meaning of a quote, or the thrust of a sound-bite. Once removed from its original environment, the quote may take on a new lease of life, to assume fresh meanings in new arguments, and so a scholar constructs a premise by (mis)quoting expert opinion or the politician in debate scores a point by (mis)citing an opponent. The quote is divested of the responsibility it once owed its surroundings; it is mis-represented and re-represented in new guises, in fresh settings, and of course sometimes to humorous effect. It is, in short, not simply 'de-contextualised' but, as noted above, 're-contextualised' through such processes of transformation. In fact, we might argue that decon-textualisation is always and necessarily a form of recontextualisation. The focal event – be this a verbal or visual instance of communication or a combination of both – is always embedded within a 'field of action' (Duranti and Goodwin 1992:3).

As with verbal communication, visual discourse is also subject to acts of 'quotation' or 'misquotation'; in fact, where the visual is concerned, this is common practice. Images are regularly lifted, transformed and re-contextualised. Sturken and Cartwright (2001:25), in their introduction to visual culture, 'Practices of Looking', emphasize the centrality of context to understanding the visual:

> The capacity of images to affect us as viewers and consumers is dependent on the larger cultural meanings they invoke and the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they are viewed.

Their meanings lie not within their image elements alone, but are acquired when they are 'consumed', viewed, and interpreted. The meanings of each image are multiple; they are created each time it is viewed.

What makes viewing images a dynamic and complex activity is primarily due to the ever-shifting contexts in which those images appear and in which they are seen. In his highly influential study *Ways of Seeing* (1972), Berger elaborates on how we see images and how our ways of seeing are manipulated through the changing contexts of art and the media. With the invention of the camera, works of art could easily be reproduced on an unprecedented scale, their images transposed in time and space, and thereby removed from their original context of existence. The feasibility of such displacement and its impact on our viewing of the visual was anticipated by the distinguished French poet and polymath, Paul Valéry (1964:226):

Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our need in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign.

Confining his observations to works of fine art, Berger (1972:19) argues that paintings, especially religious paintings, such as those to be found in a chapel or a church, were once an original and integral part of their surrounding fabric. Once displaced from those surroundings, say, to be re-housed in a museum or to be reproduced as a poster, the uniqueness of their meanings is altered forever:

When the camera reproduces a painting, it destroys the uniqueness of its image. As a result its meaning changes […], its meaning multiplies and fragments into many meanings.

This 'fragmentation' can be seen in terms of the processes of re-contextualisation referred to above, as new contexts work on and transform the displaced image, mediating what we see and how we see

it. In contrast to the original work, the reproduced image lends itself to many different purposes. Ultimately, once the uniqueness of an image is 'destroyed', through its reproduction and subsequent redeployment, quoting it 'out of context' is, perhaps, no longer an issue, as the primordial synergy of the image in its original context is itself forever lost. Thereafter, context becomes something of a moveable feast.

Advertising discourse is an apposite case in point, where fine art is regularly cloned in the service of commercial purpose. In *The Fine Art of Advertising*, a racy and insightful review of how advertisers appropriate art-history icons, Hoffman (2002:54f.) writes of the *Mona Lisa* as 'queen of all media' because

> No one has her reputation. No one has her scope or popularity. No painting and no woman has left the protective walls of the museum world and been embraced by more different elements of the new world of media.

No-one, it might be said, has been jettisoned so fervently into the realms of publicity and the propagating machinery of consumer culture. The feature most widely defamed is *La Gioconda*'s inscrutable smile: if the smile is understood to convey satisfaction, then advertisers who 'love nothing better than an endorsement from a satisfied user' (Hoffman, *op. cit.*) have a ready-made ally to speak for their products. What Leonardo might have to say about the semiotic travesties the culmination of his portraiture is made to undergo is a moot point, but he would surely consider his work '(mis)quoted out of context', as 'travesties' of the original, re-contextualised and 'made to mean', yet always with reference to the 'original'.

6. In context and 'out of context': A case study of the Swastika and contextual migration/transgression

In this section, we revisit a very potent symbol, the swastika, from an intercultural pragmatic perspective. Described in a major nineteenth century monograph (Wilson 1894:763) – thus predating its adoption /adaptation by the German Nazi Party – as 'the earliest known

symbol', the swastika is a symbol which has a diverse contextual base. In is its most recent, occidental and Nazi guise, it has come to signify and symbolize the darkest side of human action and behaviour. The scene is Hong Kong in the late summer of 2003.

It is early August in Hong Kong and fashion retailers are preparing for their Fall/Winter season. The gloom and despondency surrounding the recent SARS epidemic has largely abated, as optimism spreads throughout the territory. The worst seems to be over, and the SARS siege mentality, with all its embattled rhetoric, gives way to more positive thinking and the prospects of a brighter future.

Enter http://www.izzue.com – not just a website, but a fashion chain of 14 retail outlets, spread across Hong Kong, with flagship stores in the Central district and other main shopping areas. To promote their new range, and as part of their attention-grabbing public strategy, the marketing team have decided to use a military theme for promoting their new wares. What should this be? And how can it make a genuine impact on this small, East-meets-West community of Hong Kong, with its well-healed several million shoppers? American military uniforms themed the previous summer's promotion campaign. Mao Tse Tung and the Red Army have already been appropriated by an up-market Hong Kong competitor, *Shanghai Tang,* not to mention the countless 'antique' stores peddling artefacts from the Cultural Revolution, including clocks, plates and paraphernalia, sporting the visage of the Great Leader, and maybe even conjuring up romantic images of the past, and of other glorious revolutions. Certainly, the team at *Izzue.com* have to be seen as innovative, daring and provocative. After all, crudely put, the basic tenet of advertising is to grab the consumer's attention, each and every which way possible, and to keep it grabbed for as long as possible, in the hope of making a sale. *United Colours of Benetton* had earlier set the trend of 'shock-em and shake-em' tactics; they are widely known for the shocking success of their advertising campaigns. *Izzue* could take a leaf out of *Benetton*'s book and maybe go a few steps further. Many steps further, as it turned out …

Now, the above scenario or something similar is not wholly implausible. Whilst the present author was not privy to *Izzue*'s marketing deliberations, he was certainly witness to their result!

The English-language Hong Kong daily, *South China Morning Post*, in its front-page article of 9th August (2003), reported:

> Walking into any of fashion chain http://www.izzue.com's 14 stores is like taking a trip back to the dark days of Nazi Germany – with swastikas and party logos displayed on the walls and flags hanging from the ceiling.
> The symbols – and references to dictator Adolf Hitler – are also emblazoned on clothes for sale.

In one store, the visual event took place to the accompaniment of recorded speeches and music from the era. In short, for their new promotion, the marketing powers-that-be at *Izzue.com* had decided to deck out their stores in full Nazi regalia.

Leaving aside the question of its origins and migrations through history, the appropriation of the swastika by the German Nazi party in the last century continues to impact on present times, as the symbol re-emerges in new settings, its sinister associations as potent as ever. Its recent use by a Hong Kong fashion chain, in the context of a summer fashion promotion, led, not surprisingly, to a mighty furor, which brought the campaign and its associated range of products to an ignominious end. How could the company's designers and marketing team get it so wrong? A pragmatic act or, rather, a succession of visual pragmatic acts (read blunders) were certainly enacted, except that the intended effects and anticipated public take-up went seriously awry. Publicists and public were at loggerheads. Press editorials berated the accused for insensitivity, insularity and intercultural illiteracy, as the event became yet another episode in the long litany of public relations fiascoes that have bedeviled Hong Kong in recent times. Apologists would point out that use of the hammer and sickle in similar commercial contexts rarely provokes such controversy – whatever the nature of the acts committed in the name of that symbol. Why should this be so? The answer in part lies in the nature of 'symbol' itself.

Symbol is a broad term which in everyday use refers to 'all that is meant by a sign, mark or token' (Whittick 1960:3). A symbol is understood to stand for something else, to trigger an immediate, powerful and enduring association with what it represents. There is a

demonstrable symbolic association between the swastika and its use in the occidental context of Nazi rhetoric, with its racist imperative. The association is the more poignant when the swastika is set in the context of its Nazi use: a black gammadion emblazoned on a white disk, featured on red banners. Now we no longer witness the ancient symbol, but its transliteration or transposition into a more recent context and one which continues to evoke vivid memories of unspeakable loss and human depravity.

The perceived inappropriateness of re-contextualising the swastika and adapting it to the prerogatives of a marketing campaign in the Asian context was seized upon by the German and Israeli Consuls:

> 'It's totally inappropriate because these symbols of the Nazi regime stand for cruelty and crimes against humanity', remarked the German Vice-Consul in Hong Kong. 'It is unbearable to think that anyone can design a marketing campaign that desecrates the deaths of millions of people', echoed his Israeli counterpart. (From a report by journalist Niki Law in the *South China Morning Post*, 2003)

The protagonists at *Izzue* pleaded that it was never their intention to provoke such a public outcry with their Nazi-themed decorations and clothes. A salesman at one of the chain's major stores commented: 'We always have a military theme. We had American military uniforms last summer and we have the German ones this summer' (Law, ibid.).

Taken out of its occidental, Nazi context, the swastika, as the ancient symbol it is (or was, in its proper context), has positive associations of 'well-being' and 'goodness'. This is how it is regularly seen in the Asian context if, indeed, it is 'seen' at all. Compare that temples and shrines, on Japanese maps, are regularly indicated by a little swastika (with the 'hooks' sometimes turning right, sometimes left). Yet the sheer horror of the Nazi atrocities and the immorality of their agenda have impacted on the symbol well beyond its use in the WWII arena, as an occidental emblem of racism and annihilation. The symbol has been appropriated from its wider world contexts and divested of its positive connotations. Asian commentators might well condemn its occidental (mis)-use and argue for the rehabilitation of its more primitive contexts of use. This would be to ignore the potency of

the Nazi message. It would also be to ignore how globalisation impacts on local contexts, distorting them, as the international media carry messages of other contexts which history, in the present case, and for terrible reasons, has superimposed on the indigenous symbol and its uses.

Attempts by apologists to redeem the symbol and to re-invest it with its older meanings are misguided at best. For as long as the swastika is equated with Nazism, its symbolic status will remain not so much compromised as determined by the force of that unique and enduring association.

The Communist hammer and sickle, symbols of the industrial worker and the peasant, is a banner in whose name many an innocent life was plundered. But as users of symbols we do not often rationalize their use. The hammer and sickle takes on almost Romantic associations with revolutionary youth and the heady 60s, redolent with Man's endeavour to genuinely improve his lot. In short, comparing the hammer and sickle with the swastika is not comparing like with like. Nazism never is and never was a noble aspiration. Communism had/has its ideals. Michael Halliday (2003:222) cites communism as the 'textbook illustration' of what he calls an FFT ('failed first try'), and the tenor of his commentary hints, perhaps, at the very idealism of which Nazism is so totally deprived:

> Here [in communism] people tried for the first time to design history on a theoretical foundation; and we all know the result – the kind of peasant-dynastic state capitalism that went under the name of communism was a prototypical instance of FFT. No doubt we will have to wait at least a generation before the next attempt, which will not be called communism but something completely different, with a name perhaps taken from Tamil or Yoruba and certainly not 'post-' anything.

Thomas Carlyle's (1831) observation that 'It is in and through symbols that man, consciously or unconsciously, lives, works and has his being' gives support to the view that the symbol can be seen as a visual act, whose deployment is intended to have a particular effect or series of effects, and whose deployment is intended to have take-up. *Izzue*'s

'pragmatic act of invitation' (Mey 2001:207) to enter its world became confounded with the symbol's invested status and invocation of evil. A status and powerful set of associations man has chosen to give the symbol cannot simply be altered through the willfulness of a marketing campaign.

Here we see context in conflict, where the idea of 'original context(s)' is at complete variance with the notion and processes of re-contextualisation. The *Mona Lisa* and the swastika are a disparate, if not cacophonous grouping. The *Mona Lisa* has an evident aesthetic appeal and is quite devoid of any negative connotations, unless one deliberately invests it with them. On the other hand, the symbol of the swastika, despite the striking simplicity and beguiling eloquence of its memorably graphic design, is, in its modern Nazi occidental guise, a symbol of racism, evoking deeds of immorality and violence. What is it that these visual artefacts share in common? In their different ways and for essentially different reasons, they draw us ineluctably into their universe of meanings. The dialogues which ensue are forever mediated by the multiplicity of contexts in which these visuals appear and are used. Each is a unique visual statement, a potent cocktail of both transient and enduring associations.

7. *Engaging context*

In the introduction to *Rethinking context*, Duranti and Goodwin (1992:31) remark that:

> Recent work in a number of different fields has called into question the adequacy of earlier definitions of context in favor of a more dynamic view of the relationship between linguistic and non-linguistic dimensions of communicative events. Instead of viewing context as a set of variables that statically surround strips of talk, context and talk are now argued to stand in a mutually reflexive relationship to each other, with talk, and the interpretive work it generates, shaping context as much as context shapes talk.

This paper – which has explored verbal, visual and multi-modal texts – aims to have demonstrated that, in order to appreciate the mediating force of context, context itself needs to be contextualised. The dynamics of context are created through the different dimensions of context working together, synergistically.

With a focus on language, Duranti and Goodwin (1992:6-9) talk of four dimensions of context: the 'setting' (the social and spatial framework within which communicative acts are situated); the 'behavioral environment' (the way participants use their bodies and behaviour in framing and organizing their talk; 'language as context' (the way in which talk itself both invokes context and provides context); and the 'extrasituational context' (background knowledge the participants share). Using Malinowski's distinctions, systemic functional linguistics (Halliday 2004) refers to 'context of culture' (the broader dimension of context) and 'context of situation' (the linguistic cues which mesh with that context when meaning is instantiated). The latter perspective is, perhaps, rather static in the way it is presented in this descriptive model. In any event, context is multidimensional. Internal factors – personal disposition – mesh with external factors which embrace shared knowledge and broader, ideational knowledge.

Ultimately, discussion of the dynamics of (pragmatic) meaning can only take place well beyond a mechanistic view of language and with speakers and their contexts of being and communicating firmly in view. All modes of communication are to be understood well beyond an analysis of their material features – their 'syntax' or their composition. The 'human condition' must always be at the centre of our theorizing (Haberland and Mey 2002:1681). Context isn't the wall paper, the theatrical scene, or the background against which activity takes place: it is there, generated, enacted, and created through the very human processes of communication, as we engage with understanding and interpreting what our senses behold.

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Note

1.   An earlier version of this paper was presented as a keynote address to 2nd China National Conference of Pragmatics, CPrA, Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou, PR China, Sunday 5th December 2004.

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