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## Interpreting for the European Parliament. Precision or illusion

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### Abstract

The European Parliament offers a unique multilingual and multicultural context with its twenty-four official languages interpreted. This institutional context does not correspond to any national reality but affects the meaning. How could an interpreter improve cognitive contextual awareness and convey the message better? How does identifying context models reflected in discourse categories improve interpreting? Comparing political discourse in Polish and Spanish shows that an interpreter must identify and understand context models so that they can convey the message adequately in the target language. Thus, identifying discourse categories is a crucial tool in interpreter training.

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### 1. Introduction

There are meetings in which twenty-four languages are interpreted simultaneously in the European Parliament. This is a unique institutional multilingual and multicultural context. It is supranational, thus it does not correspond to any national reality. However, even such symbolically austere context affects and shapes discourse and the interpretation of its meaning into a different language. It can result in the speaker being more communicably neutral and using a more culturally streamlined approach or, on the contrary, it can provoke an abundance of national references in order to reflect a speaker's unique national identity. The better the contextual awareness of the interpreter, the drastically better the understanding and the interpreting of the discourse. In order to convey the precise and adequate meaning of an intervention, its context must be properly understood. Van Dijk offers the following

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definition of context. It is (...) *a type of environment of action or discourse. (...) Something that we need to know to understand correctly, an event, an action or a discourse. (...) Something that serves as a background, frame, environment, conditions or consequences* (Van Dijk, 2002, p. 16). Logically, it incorporates different elements, such as time, place, and participants, but also what was said or decided during previous meetings, background information on a discussed subject and the participants' knowledge, roles and objectives.

A temporal framework is essential for political discourse because it is nurtured on the basis of current political events, magnifying some subjects and omitting others. A discourse on the Common Agriculture Policy can include references to the current immigration situation or "Panama Papers". As mentioned before, the European Parliament is a special location for political discourse. Being a stage for discourses in 24 languages, it is governed by its institutional code of conduct and requires a particular register. This register is institutional, however it differs from one political group and party to another. The sociolinguistic factors such as age, origin, education etc. are also reflected in the political discourse. The identification of the influence of these characteristics in the message conveyed is crucial for an interpreter. However, this paper will focus more globally, on context. These models organize cognitive context aspects in interpreting and include, among others, participants' knowledge, roles and objectives.

## 2. Context models

The Theory of Context Models define them as follows. They are (...) *personal (cognitive) mental constructs and interpretations of a communicative event. (...) They may hence be partly different for different participants, which often gives rise to communicative conflicts* (Van Dijk, 2002, p. 18). Van Dijk points out that the differences in context models can lead to conflicts in communication even in the same language. The risk is even bigger in the case of interpreting between two languages. Therefore, the interpreters should be able to identify and understand the context models so that they can convey the message adequately in the target language. As context models *allow [others] to understand the discourse: [the] implicit meanings, allusions, presuppositions in a given communicative situation* (idem.), identifying them in different source languages can be a significant tool for interpreters looking to improve their professional skills. Cognitive contextual awareness plays an important role in interpreting work as it gives a lot of useful information to interpreters. This is expressed by Van Dijk who states that *context models define what speech acts are being performed, what aims, goals and functions a discourse has, what knowledge and other beliefs the participants have (also about the others' beliefs), and in general how the structures of discourse are adapted to the social situation. Context models define what (for a language user) is the whole of the relevant information of a communicative event* (idem.).

## 3. Context models for interpreters, ideology and common ground

Contextual cognitive awareness caters for seamless and more precise interpretation of a communicative event. Reflecting knowledge in a biased way and conveying the beliefs of the participants; context models lead to the framing of a speaker's ideology (Lakoff, 2014). Reading these discursive frames allows interpreters to identify the communicative strategies of different political groups. However, apart from the more or less persistently presented ideology, the speakers share wider cultural frames. In case of the European Parliament this cultural basis covers 28 Member States from one continent. The cultural diversity of this *common ground* is undoubtedly significant (Van Dijk, 2002). However, this diversity seems communicatively less complex and more homogeneous and contrasting during, for example, the visit of an Asian delegation to the institutions. This shared, general knowledge is discursively expressed as presuppositions which indicate the speakers' awareness of the existence of such noncontroversial and non-ideological ideas. Still, it is expressed through common context models and can be easier identifiable for interpreters that have European general knowledge. Ideological mental models are cognitive constructs which reflect specific beliefs and are expressed through discourse. They may be troublesome to identify even for interpreters coming from the same cultural background.

Context models are encoded in the discourse within various discourse categories. Therefore, in order to interpret them into a target language, it is necessary to be able to identify these linguistic representations of the cognitive models in a source language. Let's compare the usage of discursive categories in Spanish and in Polish and analyze the information that is given to an interpreter.

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