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Language *in* Context, Language *as* Context

It has been a traditional view in linguistics that structure and meaning reside in the language system, while all that is outside of language is relegated to a notional "context of situation" whose principal functional roles are to disambiguate linguistic meaning, and to supplement it in terms of speech act categorization (eg "this is irony", "this is metaphor"). This distinction between intra-linguistic meaning and contextual meaning thus parallels the theoretical distinction between semantics and pragmatics. More recent usage-based approaches in linguistics have challenged this distinction. I shall argue that, although it is true that semantics and pragmatics are indistinguishable in principle at the level of structure, it remains the case that a distinction between representational and contextual meaning remains both possible and necessary, but it is based not upon truth-functional definitions of semantics, but upon a semiotic-functional distinction between the relations "standing for" and "counting as".

The traditional view has a further fundamental inadequacy, which its failure to recognize and analyze the semiotic properties of "context", whether these be "paralinguistic" aspects of the multimodal message, or non-linguistic aspects of the discourse context. I argue that meaning resides in the signifying properties not only of messages, but also of material, especially artefactual, objects. Language is *part of* a "semiosphere" (Lotman) that is instantiated in particular communicative contexts as a situation-specific "Universe of Discourse". In the Universe of Discourse, language itself serves as a context for the moment-by-moment construction and appropriation of meaning. Furthermore, language is the fundamental "context", or instrument, for the development, evolution and transformation of human cognitive-cultural capacities and practices.