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Dimensions of context. Classifying approaches to the context of Communication

This paper analyzes the concept of context. We suggest two ways of classifying approaches to the context of communication:

(i) **Classifying approaches based on a number of relevant contextual dimensions and context foci**

Communication always involves at least three possible main focal dimensions for a context to be the context of: (i) production of information (by at least one communicator), (ii) interpretation of information (by at least one other communicator) and (iii) interaction between the communicators. Given the three suggested focal aspects of communication, we can distinguish at least the following further possible context foci in both Human-Human communication and Human-Computer interaction: (i) The social activity, (ii) The participants in the activity we are interested in, (iii) The users of a computer supported system, (iv) The system, (v) The message(s), (vi) A particular contribution to communication, (vii) A particular linguistic expression, (viii) A particular gesture.

(ii) **Classifying approaches based on the dimensions of Peirce's semiotics**

We take as our point of departure the semiotic analysis of a sign proposed by Peirce, in combination with the characterization of the aspects of a sign system (syntax, semantics and pragmatics), suggested by Morris. Using the three elements distinguished by Peirce (representamen, object and interpretant), we can distinguish three approaches to context and and possible combinations of them. We use the dependence of the constitution of a sign on a sign user (interpreter) to explore the general context dimensions of a sign.

We can now distinguish three types of context:

1. The context of the representamen – syntactic context

2. The context of the object – semantic context

3. The context of the interpretant – pragmatic context

4. Combinations of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic context

For example, the interpretant is the interpretation given by the user of a representamen. This interpretant links the representamen with the object it represents and with the interpreter, i.e. the users of a sign and a sign system are included and create the context of the interpretant and also the context of the usage of the interpretant. This is the pragmatic notion of context, which involves the study of a sign system in use, where contextual factors can include syntactic, semantic context and factors mentioned in the first approach

Building on these two ways of classifying approaches to the context of communication, we present our own proposal for how to analyze the main relevant contextual dimensions influencing human interaction and communication.