

# The Role of Contextual Guess in the Process of Foreign Language Teaching

Tatiana Sallier

University Associated with Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of EurAsEC, St. Petersburg, Russia

Tatiana Samsonova

Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, Moscow, Russia

*What does thinking mean? Just sitting still?*

*---A ten-year-old boy*

The article focuses on the linguistic aspect of contextual guess and presents some techniques of stimulating and encouraging contextual guess in the process of teaching reading in a foreign language. Contextual guess is an important element of the reading process, because it reduces the necessity of using the dictionary, speeds up and facilitates reading and stimulates the student's mental activity. Three types of contextual guess techniques are considered: contextual guess based on the syntactic structure, contextual guess based on the semantic structure, and contextual guess based on the surrounding lexis. Some exercises aimed at stimulating contextual guess are presented and an algorithm of deriving the word's meaning from the context is worked out. The article is based on the authors' linguistic research and experience of teaching English to Russian ESP students.

*Keywords:* context, guess, syntax, structure, semantics

## Introduction

Contextual guess is a process helping the reader derive the meaning of a certain word by the meaning of surrounding lexemes or by the syntactic structure.

It is impossible to overestimate the role of context in communication. Even in numerical communication, figures have different numerical meanings depending on their position within a number. Thus, figure "5" in the number "555" has different numerical value depending on its position: The first "5" means five hundred, the second one fifty, and the third one five.

In Russian and Soviet linguistics, the term "context" was introduced by Natalia Amosova, a professor at St. Petersburg (then Leningrad) University (Amosova, 1968). Context was considered as an instrument of choosing the right meaning of a polysemantic word. N. Amosova also introduced the concept of syntactic context, describing it as "a context where the indication comes not from the lexical meaning of the indicator, but from the structural peculiarities of the sentence" (Amosova, 1968, p. 47). Contextual guess was addressed in a number of

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Tatiana Sallier, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department for Social Disciplines, University Associated with Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of EurAsEC, St. Petersburg, Russia.

Tatiana Samsonova, Senior Lecturer, the Institute of Law and National Security, Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, Moscow, Russia.

papers. M. B. Çetinavci (2014) considers guessing word meaning from context as one of the most favored vocabulary learning strategies; A. A. Mokhtar and R. M. Rawian (2012) highlight the importance of contextual guessing in the increase of the students' vocabulary; S. D. Siregar (2019) analyses the use of contextual guessing techniques in reading; D. Frantzen (2003) and M. Kanatlar (1995) focus on the way various groups of students employ contextual guess. The present study concentrates on specific linguistic (syntactic and lexical) contextual clues helping to derive the lexical meaning of a word from the surrounding context.

Contextual guess may occur intuitively, which is frequently the case. When one of the authors was teaching her nine-year-old daughter and reading the "Treasure Island" by R. L. Stevenson, the girl, reading the sentence "John Silver was the best shot on the ship"<sup>1</sup>, identified "shot" as a person and translated accordingly. When asked how she understood it, the child answered blandly: "I am not an idiot".

Intuition may or may not occur, but it seems useful to see and show the students some specific contextual clues helping to infer the meaning of a word.

### Methods

The main method of research is contextual analysis, based on identifying the syntactic or lexical elements helping to derive the lexical meaning of a word. Dictionary analysis is applied to identify the traditional word meanings. The Google Translator was used to avoid subjectivity in the translation and to identify the semantic value of certain lexemes. The authors also rely on their long teaching experience. The study is based on the material drawn from the English National Corpus and from works of fiction and journalism; the few examples composed by the authors are marked with \*.

### Results

The research conducted made it possible to draw the following conclusions:

Contextual guess may be based both on syntactic and lexical factors. The syntactic contextual guess relies on the fact that the syntactic position of a lexeme determines the sphere of meanings it may acquire. The lexical units derivable from the syntactic context belong to closed classes of meaning, which makes contextual guess possible. Lexical context is less systemic than the structural one and requires individual approach.

### Discussion

#### Contextual Guess Based on Syntactic Context

Syntax-based contextual guess is possible when lexemes in a certain syntactic position tend to acquire a restricted range of meaning, and, consequently, are derivable from the context. They are not, strictly speaking, closed class words (Norquist, 2020), because they have different meanings in other contexts and new lexemes can occur in this position, but they confer closed class of meanings. The evolution of "open class words" into "closed class words" is described by M. L. Murphy (2010). Further discussion will focus on such syntactically based semantic restrictions facilitating contextual guess.

**Lexical units governing the infinitive.** Lexemes governing the infinitive tend to lose their lexical meaning partially or completely and become modal, quasi modal, or phasal links. A spectacular example is a modal verb

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<sup>1</sup> The sentence is quoted by memory.

“can” derived from the Old Germanic “cunnan to know”<sup>2</sup> (Traugott, 1989; 2017).

The semantic evolution of verbs governing the infinitive in Modern English is described by one of the authors (Sallier, 2020).

See the examples:

1. Mr. Perry is just **itching** to know what it’s all about. (Kaye, 1979, p. 190)
2. He **burned** to distinguish himself in battle. (Seton, 1991, p. 78)

In both cases, the verb denotes strong desire. This meaning is not included in the dictionary definition however and is seen only in the context. Consequently, lexemes in this syntactic position can’t be understood on the basis of the dictionary definition only; their meaning is strongly regulated by the context and is limited to such modal meanings as possibility, desire, intention, negation, etc. If this regularity is explained to the students and presented in a special exercise, they will get a clue to deriving their meaning from the context.

See an example of such exercise in a textbook of English by one of the authors and her colleagues (Sallier, Valieva, & Voskresenskaya, 2007, p. 319):

3. In the library, students were **free** to choose anything they wanted to read, except comics.
4. She was **in a fever** to look out of the window at the fascinating street and to examine the sumptuous hotel rooms.
5. I’ve been **dying** to get my hands on your manuscript.
6. The Duchess was **anxious** to hasten to the banquet, which could not start until she arrived.
7. The reporter **took care** to avoid biasing his story in favor of or against the government.
8. The rule of law, as it developed in the medieval England, **came** to encompass a parliament and a court system.
9. During the colonial era, Protestant peoples **came** to dominate the area that would become the United States.
10. Through the entire evening the Duke and the Duchess had **failed** to leave their hotel suite.
11. The Fourteenth Amendment to the American Constitution, adopted in 1868, **failed** to secure full legal rights to the freed slaves.

The examples show that the words or phrases governing the infinitive have meanings of possibility (3), desire (4-6), effort (7), phase (8-9), and negation (10-11).

On the basis of such exercise it will be easier to demonstrate to the students that lexemes in this syntactic position (governing the infinitive) have a limited range of meanings and help them to see the syntactic context as a supportive instrument for understanding the structure.

**Lexemes governing an object clause.** Predicates governing an object clause with the conjunction “that” usually have meanings of speech, opinion, knowledge, demonstration, or perception. They can be classified into lexemes denoting receiving information (to see, to hear, to understand, to realize), possessing information, or holding an opinion (to know, to consider, to think) or imparting information (to say, to declare). They also display a strong tendency to suppress more concrete elements of meaning and become information links. See the examples:

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that modal “can” and the verb “to know” are of the same root. The former underwent the semantic evolution, whereas the latter preserved its full meaning.

12. History **shows** that regimes who fear their own people will eventually crumble. (COCA<sup>3</sup>)
13. Epicureanism **says** that life can be meaningful only if we are happy. (COCA)
14. The constitution **says** that the Congress must meet at least once a year. (Law of Nation, 1963, p. 20)
15. Did you **see** that Mother Jones is launching a new Corruption Project? (COCA)
16. I now **saw** that the pigeon was one of God's creatures. (BNC<sup>4</sup>)

In (12) “shows” doesn’t mean visual demonstration, but just imparts information; “says” in (13) and (14) is not a verb of speech, but an information link because of the inanimate subject; “see” in (15) and (16) means “understand” because the nature of the object clause doesn’t contain visual information.

Certainly, these verbs are mostly familiar to the students of intermediate level and usually cause no difficulty. But other, less frequent lexemes in this position may not be known to students and have either to be derived from the context or looked up in the dictionary. For example:

17. The animal rights activists **hold** that animals have a right, just as human beings do, to be free from pain and suffering. (The Humane League, 2022, p. 14)
18. I **gathered** that the guests were not going to stay for dinner. (Howatch, 1982, p. 28)
19. One day she finally **grasped** that unexpected things were always going to happen in life. (pinterest.ru<sup>5</sup>)
20. Supporters of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal **charged** that much of the press was opposed to socioeconomic reform. (Kennedy, 2009, p. 18)
21. The Mayor **argued** that the building of the new road would be too expensive. (VOA, 2002)
22. The company still **maintains** that the medicine they manufacture is safe. (TMC<sup>6</sup>)

“Hold” in (17) denotes “opinion”, “gathered” and “grasped” in (18) and (19) mean understanding, verbs in (18), (19), and (20) have the meaning of speech.

The main function of the verbs in the examples quoted is linking information to its source and receiver—imparting (20, 21, 22), storing (17), or obtaining (18, 19) information.

Not all these words have that meaning in their dictionary definitions. For example, the Cambridge dictionary definition of “charge” contains no such meaning; for “maintain” it is the last meaning, required for C2 level; for “argue” the main dictionary meaning is “disagree”, and the meaning quoted in (21) is presented only in the examples. This verb, as the authors know from their experience, causes a lot of mistakes when students use the dictionary without analyzing the context. An object clause serves as a contextual clue to help the reader derive the meaning of the verb as an information link.

**Lexemes governing an abstract noun.** Predicates governing abstract nouns, which are understood as nouns denoting qualities, actions, and states (Khokhlova, 2014; Savelyev, 1985), are easily derivable from the context. They have a limited range of meanings and sometimes suffer semantic loss. See the examples:

23. The idea of liberty **enjoyed** great popularity in France. (TMC)
24. The party **suffered** a humiliating defeat in the general election. (TMC)
25. Palestinian fighters **offered** stiff resistance to the advancing tanks, that were backed by air support from Apache helicopters and fighter jets. (Reuters, 2014)

<sup>3</sup> Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>.

<sup>4</sup> British National Corpus (BNC) <https://www.english-corpora.org/bnc/>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.pinterest.ru/pin/35677022026343396/> (Accessed February 28 2023).

<sup>6</sup> Time Magazine Corpus (TMC) <https://www.english-corpora.org/TMC/>.

26. Dutch Foreign Minister Frans Timmermans **offered** apologies to Russia over the incident with Russian diplomat. (BBC News, 2013)

27. Refugees from Africa **staged** riots in the Italian towns. (Reuters, 2010)

It can be seen that the verb itself adds little to the meaning of the sentence, and the phrase can be transformed into a single word (was popular in (23), was defeated in (24), resisted in (25), apologized in (26), rioted in (27)). A different verb can be used in translation into Russian. For example (23) was translated by the Google<sup>7</sup> as:

23a. “Идея свободы **пользовалась** большой популярностью во Франции”, with the verb “пользоваться”—to use—not synonymous to “enjoy”. In the back Google translation:

23b. The idea of freedom was very popular in France.

The verb is excluded.

The same phenomenon can be seen in the Google translation of (26):

26a. Министр иностранных дел Нидерландов Франс Тиммерманс **принес** (brought, delivered) России извинения за инцидент с российским дипломатом.

With the back Google translation into English:

26b. Dutch Foreign Minister Frans Timmermans **apologized** to Russia for the incident with the Russian diplomat.

Like in (23) the verb and the abstract noun are transformed into a single word.

The analysis shows that a verb governing an abstract noun is of little semantic value, whereas the abstract noun itself offers definite contextual clues when used as an object; the teacher’s task is to advise the student to look up the object first and then derive the predicate from the context.

**Adjectives accompanying an abstract noun.** It has been shown (Sallier, 2022) that adjectives accompanying abstract nouns usually serve as intensifiers, which makes it easier to derive them from the surrounding context. In such phrases as “acute shortage”, “heavy accent”, “stiff resistance”, the adjectives have lost their initial meaning and just strengthen the meaning of the noun. So, when the meaning of the noun is clear, the student should be encouraged to find a suitable intensifier in his/her own language.

**Other structural clues.** The structures considered are not the only ones to supply syntactic contextual clues. One may mention complex infinitive constructions (\*Mary saw John enter the room), where the verb has the meaning of perception, mental activity, or causation; gerundial phrases where the governing verb “to take” has phasal meaning:

28. He **took to** wandering around the garden in endless circles” (BNC); Phrases with occasional causatives like:

29. I **talked** him into going to London. (BNC)

30. My father ... **steamrollered me into** accepting his invitation to dine at his place. (Howatch, 1982, p. 385)

where the governing verb has causative meaning, whatever its initial semantics.

The previous analysis demonstrates the importance of syntactic context in forming the semantic structure of a sentence and, consequently in deriving the meaning of lexemes relying on the surrounding syntactic elements. So, if a student is given a sentence like:

<sup>7</sup> The Google translation was used to avoid subjectivity.

31. \*The army suffered heavy casualties.

the algorithm of decoding is as follows: The international word “army” is presumed to be known; the analysis begins with the object “casualties” which, if the student doesn’t know it, has to be found in the dictionary; the word “suffered” is derived from the context, because predicate with no other meaning can occur between “Army” and “casualties”; the adjective “heavy” is an intensifier and, consequently, derivable from the context. The student has to identify the semantic structure built by the words “army” and “casualties” and insert the predicate and the intensifier in his/her native language. On the other hand, in:

32. The army **inflicted** heavy casualties on the rebels. (TMC)

the predicate “inflicted” is understood as causing casualties, because the object “the rebels” points to the victims of the combat.

These two examples show how the syntactic structure of a sentence serves as an indicative for deriving the meaning of an unfamiliar word.

### Semantic Contextual Clues

Lexical context is no less important for providing clues for understanding. It can be explained by the fact that every element of meaning (seme) is usually repeated to promote understanding. So in the sentence:

33. \*He heard the trample of feet.

The word “trample” is interpreted as “sound” because of the previous “heard”, marking the noun as a sound; the following phrase “of feet” qualifies “trample” as “sound produced by feet”. Another example:

34. The raging elephants left a trail of destruction across a suburb of the city of Mysore... after they **wandered** in from a nearby forest. (BBC News, 2011)

The verb “wandered” can be understood from the context as “moved” on the basis of two places “suburb of the city” and “nearby forest” with the prepositions “from” and “in” showing the direction of the movement and serving as the indicative.

An example from the same source:

35. The footage also shows an elephant angrily **butting** a cow.

The Cambridge dictionary defines the verb “to butt” as to “hit the head hard against something, or to have the heads of two people or animals hit against each other”.

Neither definition suits the meaning of the verb in the sentence quoted. From the context, however, it is clear that the elephant attacked the cow, probably with his tusks. Moreover, it’s not very important “what weapon” the creature used, in the general picture of the havoc wreaked by the animals. As to the indicative pointing to the meaning of the verb, the adverb “angrily” points to the aggression, and the general topic of the text—wild elephants on the rampage in a suburb—helps to understand the meaning of “butt” as “attack and probably kill”. It should be noted that contextual guess becomes easier with the reader’s progress along a text—the more information the reader accumulates, the easier it is to derive the meaning of individual words from the context.

A contextual clue for an unfamiliar word may be provided by members of coordinative strings. For example:

36. By doing so he would have set an example of chivalry and **Bushido** to the troops under his command. (Shute, 1950, p. 48)

“Bushido” is a Japanese word which may be unfamiliar even for a native speaker; the Google translator into Russian transliterates it. Its meaning—a samurai’s code of honor—is clear from the other member of the string—the word “chivalry” and from the fact that the subject is a Japanese officer.

37. They (dresses, T.S., T.S.) came in satins, silks, laces, wools, jerseys, cottons, brocades, velvets, twills, broadclothes, tweeds, nets, organzas, and muslins. (Gallico, 1989, p. 62)

The story describes a Dior dress show and the names of textiles presented may not be familiar to the reader, but those familiar (e.g. silk, wool, cotton) can help identify the unfamiliar ones as names of textiles.

### **The Comparison of Structural, Semantic, and Textual Clues**

It can be seen from the previous section that the context provides structural, semantic, and textual clues for understanding the meaning of words. Whereas structural indicatives help to derive the meaning of closed—or semi-closed semantic groups and, being systemic in their nature, can be presented by means of special exercises, semantic clues are more diverse—and consequently more difficult to teach; textual clues belong to an individual text and have to be pointed to individually.

### **Stimulating Contextual Guess in the Classroom**

The development of various electronic translators and dictionaries sometimes makes students declare that learning to read in a foreign language and trying to understand a word from the context is unnecessary and tedious. It takes a lot of patience on the part of the teacher to explain that an electronic device will translate this text, but will give no clue to other texts; that, looking up a word in a dictionary, students must know what they are looking for; that brainwork has never harmed anybody, etc.

This section presents some techniques encouraging students to see contextual clues and derive the meaning of unfamiliar words. If the lexeme in question has a limited range of meanings, a special exercise may be offered to illustrate this phenomenon (see examples in “Lexical Units Governing the Infinitive” part). If this is not available or the problem occurs spontaneously, the authors suggest a method of “language equation”. The unknown element is designated as “X” and the resulting sentence looks like:

38. \*The senator X that the situation was improving.

Students usually identify X as a verb of speech; if the exercise is continued, they outline the semantic range of the lexemes used in the X position. Or, returning to example (31):

39. \*The elephants X to the city from the jungle.

where the two place names and the prepositions enable the students to identify X as a verb of motion.

The purpose of such exercises is to teach the students to organize all the information they know into logical and syntactic order, which helps to derive the meaning of the unknown lexeme. The authors have already pointed out the importance of grammar in language teaching (Sallier & Samsonova, 2022). To derive the meaning of an unknown lexeme, the student must be able to recognize the sentence structure and the place of this lexeme within the sentence.

### **Using the Dictionary in the Classroom**

It is sometimes taken for granted that a person who knows the alphabet can use a dictionary. Students often mistakenly believe that the dictionary will solve all their problems without any effort on their part. In helping students use the dictionary intelligently, the authors suggest the following algorithm of using the dictionary or guessing the meaning of the word without one:

- (1) Arrange the elements of the sentence which you do know;
- (2) Establish the syntactic function of the unfamiliar word;
- (3) Establish which part of speech it belongs to;

(4) Find out the approximate meaning of the word (a person, an organization, an artefact (for nouns), physical action, motion (for verbs) a quality (for adjectives), etc.);

(5) Consult the dictionary (if necessary).

To sum it up, when using the dictionary, the reader must know what he/she is looking for. Of course, such an approach requires good knowledge of grammar, especially of syntax, but no reading skills can be developed without grammar.

### Conclusions

The research conducted makes it possible to draw the following conclusions:

- Context is a powerful supportive mechanism enabling a reader to understand a message in the native or a foreign language.
- Contextual guess may be intuitive, but intuition depends on information and it is important to find definite elements of information facilitating contextual guess.
- Every text contains various contextual clues (indicatives) which help the reader understand unfamiliar words.
- These clues may be of syntactic and lexical nature.
- Syntactic clues are systemic in their nature, as there is a number of syntactic constructions where the elements belong to a closed class of meanings, making contextual guess possible.
- Lexical indicatives are more diverse, they belong to an individual text and may be based on the semantic structure of the sentence, coordinated strings, and textual information.
- The teacher's task is to find these clues, show them to the students, and explain why contextual understanding occurs.

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