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An Overview of Contextual Variables in the Analysis of Conflict with an Example of their Operation in Literary Discourse

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AN OVERVIEW OF CONTEXTUAL VARIABLES IN THE ANALYSIS OF CONFLICT WITH AN EXAMPLE OF THEIR OPERATION IN LITERARY DISCOURSE

1. Introduction: context in literary discourse

“All the world is a stage ... and the stage is a world in its own right.”¹

The famous above quotation, taken from Shakespeare’s comedy *As You Like It*, was so paradoxically reversed in order to show the nature of the relationship between drama and life. Fictional dramatic worlds seem to have “a complex relation to the world of existing human affairs on which they draw for their possibilities of meaning, remaining both like and yet unlike those worlds in which they are embedded.”² Dramatic worlds have also been described as ‘possible worlds,’ ‘as if’ worlds, whose logic nevertheless resembles (and is purposefully taken to be similar to) the ‘real world’ in which they are represented. However, to be able to truly understand and appreciate a literary work, the reader must take into account various other types of context.

The following four types of context in a literary text have been distinguished: (1) the surface representation context (context as co-text, relying on the semantic structure of the text, as well as other linguistic features); (2) context projected by the text itself; also referred to as: the situation model, context of the fictional world, mental model, context of reference; (3) context of the

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¹ V. Herman, *Dramatic discourse. Dialogue as interaction in plays*, London 1995, p. 12.

² *Ibidem*, p. 8.

reader's prior knowledge, where the reader activates schemata, frames and scripts to be able to construct the projected context; (4) extra-linguistic context in which communication takes place: wider social, cultural and historical setting of the text.³

Another general division of contexts in literary discourse assumes that, in essence, two kinds of context must be considered while attempting to arrive at a potential meaning: one is the internal, linguistic context, built up by language patterns inside the text; the other one is the external, non-linguistic context, relating our understanding of the textual plane to ideas and experiences outside the text: the text's genre, topic, purpose and function; the socio-historical setting of the text; associations with other texts; as well as the "identities, knowledge, emotions, abilities, beliefs and assumptions" of both the writer and the reader.⁴ The same contextual elements may be divided into three sets, thus constituting context as text, situation and knowledge.⁵

1.1. How contexts interact

These contexts and their various detailed conceptualizations are in constant interaction. Firstly, in a context-oriented analysis of dramatic dialogue, it is essential to bear in mind the contextual embeddedness of drama. Also referred to as discourse-layering, this feature has important implications for characterization and plot. A widely quoted framework was devised by Mick Short, who suggests the existence of two sets of interactive contexts: the fictional context that surrounds the characters within the world of the play, and the 'real' context that frames the interaction between the playwright and the reader.⁶ In this way, "the features that mark social relations between people at the character level become messages *about* those characters" at the level of discourse between the author and the reader.⁷ Another effect of this interdependence of contexts is the creation of dramatic irony. Actions and happenings within the fictional world

³ M. Short, J. Culpeper & E. Semino, "Language and context: Jane Gardam's 'Bilgewater'," in T. Bex, M. Burke & P. Stockwell (eds.), *Contextualized Stylistics. In Honor of Peter Verdonk*, Amsterdam 2000, pp. 110–131.

⁴ P. Verdonk, *Stylistics*, Oxford 2002, p. 19.

⁵ Cf. Kopytko 2002, 168 for a review of approaches to context in discourse analysis.

⁶ Here, after P. Simpson, *Stylistics: a resource book for students*, New York 2004, p. 34.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

frequently reveal more to the reader than to other characters. Thus, the context of reception necessarily interacts with the context of situation. By activating prior knowledge (e.g. schemata – mental representations of typical situations), the reader (re)creates the situation model. The process is dynamic: our cognition evolves with every piece of processed information. Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory is often referred to, in which context is treated as a cognitive phenomenon, a subset of the reader's existing assumptions against which the information is processed in order to arrive at new assumptions.⁸ Then, these new assumptions are incorporated, old assumptions are weakened or altogether cancelled, and new knowledge is applied, thus enabling recontextualization.

However, it is not the only way in which contexts in literary discourse interact. The context of production oftentimes fundamentally influences the context of situation. Elements of historical, political or biographical context may be easily retrieved in the examination of the situation model. Another example of interaction can be traced between the internal linguistic context and the projected context of the fictional world; e.g. lexical choices inform the reader of the characters' education, social class or origin; syntactic patterns (such as agent / object position) reflect the point of view of narration, and the person-deictic expressions show the relations between characters. Another dimension of contextual interaction has been pointed out, namely, that the relation between the linguistic context, the situation model and the context of reception.⁹ In the case of poetic drama, also called verse drama, whose popularity extended from the ancient times to approximately 19th century, plays were written to be acted (spoken), not to be read silently, therefore context had to be verbalized. Language was used to communicate important contextual features to the audience; characters delivered long turns describing the situation, i.e., the projected context, which then had to be processed against the cognitive context of the audience. Therefore, it may be assumed that both textual features and the prior knowledge are involved in the creation of the projected context of situation.

⁸ M. Short, J. Culpeper & E. Semino, *Language and context...*, pp. 110–131.

⁹ H.G. Widdowson, "The unrecoverable context", in T. Bex, M. Burke & P. Stockwell (eds.), *Contextualized Stylistics...*, pp. 229–242.

2. Context in interpersonal communication

Short et al. devote considerable attention to the ‘situation model’ (context projected by the text itself). Briefly speaking, in order to analyze a literary text, the reader should assume that the characters are real and that creating the situation model is the major goal in understanding the text: “If we are unable to imagine a situation in which certain individuals have the properties or relations indicated by the text, we fail to understand the text itself.”¹⁰ Within this projected context of the fictional world of the text, conflicts between fictional characters may be examined with respect to contexts of ‘real’ interpersonal interaction, with discourse-analytic and pragmatic tools designed to analyze the meanings of ‘real’ utterances.

Interpersonal communication is never context-free. It is always situated in some historical and cultural reality, and no two mental worlds of interactants are identical. The sum of relations in which interactants are involved makes up a dynamic relational context. Generally, any social interaction may be said to take place in some relational context. Thus a basic dichotomy of pragmatic context, namely the (interrelated) intrinsic and extrinsic sets of contextual elements and phenomena, has also been suggested.¹¹

2.1. The internal (mental) context

The internal (mental) context of language use is based on the concept of the self-system, viewed as an integrated cognitive-affective-conative system. In terms of language use, these three aspects of the self-system are correlated with the three functions of the language: cognitive, emotive and conative.

An analysis of language in its cognitive context is done in relation to the interactants’ knowledge, access to information and its processing, reasoning, thinking, assumptions, attention, perception and so on. The cognitive context constantly evolves, as every piece of new information or a clash of assumptions or beliefs changes the cognition of the interactants. Whatever frames, scripts or schemata are activated in the course of interaction, they may well be subject to change, as context is a dynamic phenomenon which can be negotiated,

¹⁰ M. Short, J. Culpeper & E. Semino, *Language and context...*, p. 141.

¹¹ R. Kopytko, *The mental aspects of pragmatic theory*, Poznań 2002, p. 181.

deconstructed, altered etc. The view of context as knowledge underlies two fundamental pragmatic theories: the Speech Act Theory whose rules constitute a type of cognitive context which enables the interpretation of utterances, ensuring successful communication, and the Cooperative Principle, which assumes the existence of a shared cognitive context (shared background assumptions and beliefs) that helps interactants calculate implicatures and infer speaker meaning.¹²

The affective context is associated with the language user's personality (e.g. the quality of being extrovert or introvert, optimistic or pessimistic, sanguine or phlegmatic etc.), as well as needs, attitudes, emotions, a capacity for compassion and empathy, and the level of involvement. The affective variable of involvement is connected with the social contextual variable of distance; obviously, the greater the involvement, the smaller the distance between interactants. The personality traits that 'belong to' the affective context include self-esteem. Enhancing one's own and attending to the other's self-esteem can be linguistically realized within the framework of 'face' and the derived frameworks of politeness and impoliteness (though, again, the rules of how speech acts operate must be part of the interactants' competence).

The conative context is perceived as the interactant's set of motivations and goals which explain the strategic use of language, whether aimed at smooth cooperation or manipulation and conflict. Since the conative context accounts for the intentions of the interlocutor, it will facilitate the Gricean inferencing of intended meaning, in particular, where the illocutionary force of a (performative) speech act and its perlocutionary effect are surprisingly divergent.

2.2. The external (social and physical) context

The social context of language use revolves around interlocutors and their relations. There are a number of variables that exert mutual influence on one another; as they are dynamic as well, each may either constrain or catalyze the operation of another.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 166.

2.2.1. Power

The first of these variables is (relative) power. This variable has been given several different labels: it may sometimes be referred to as *social power*, *status*, *dominance*, *authority*.¹³ There are various bases of power, not only resulting from (often unclear and confusing, culture-dependent) social role relationships. The bases of power include: reward power (control over positive outcomes), coercive power (conversely, control over negative outcomes), expert power (based on knowledge or expertise), legitimate power (grounded in unequal status / role relations in given circumstances) and referent power (arising from admiration and the want to emulate the other).¹⁴ Another approach to power in the social context assumes that power “can be defined as the ability of people and institutions to influence or control the behavior and material lives of others,” with a more positive connotation attached to ‘influence’ and negative to ‘control.’¹⁵ Hence the first distinction within the concept: between power as enablement and empowerment (connected with ‘giving’) and power as domination and oppression (used to constrain or marginalize others). The other distinction is between “institutionally or socially legitimated power and discursively constructed power” (ibid.) as reflected in participant identities. The types of participant identities include: (1) master identities: permanent identities, irrespective of discourse: age, sex, social class; (2) situated identities: assumed in particular social settings and therefore not as permanent, e.g. ‘student;’ and (3) discourse identities: constantly shifting, dependent upon linguistic acts that threaten face – in the case of acts that threaten the speaker’s face, discursive power moves over to the hearer, and the other way round.¹⁶ Weber assumes that despite the relatively stable master identities, to some extent, power is an effect of discourse as it is negotiated through the participants’ discourse identities. As a result, power relations are dynamic: even socially powerless participants may gain some discursive power in particular circumstances.

¹³ H. Spencer-Oatey, *Culturally Speaking: Culture, Communication and Politeness Theory*, London 2008, p. 34.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 35.

¹⁵ J.J. Weber, “Three models of power in ‘Oleanna’,” in P. Verdonk, J. Culpeper & M. Short (eds.), *Exploring the Language of Drama: From Text to Context*, London 1998, p. 114.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

2.2.2. Distance / affect

Another variable of the social context is distance; an intuitive measure of ‘like-mindedness’ in a relationship. Also labeled *social distance*, *solidarity*, *closeness*, *familiarity*, *relational intimacy*, this variable depends on a number of possible factors, for example, how often we contact the other person, how long and how well we have known each other, to what extent we share the social background, whether we have the feeling of like-mindedness and share positive or negative affect.¹⁷

2.2.3. Gender and age

Though gender and age rarely seem to be of great contextual importance independent of other variables, they influence interaction when combined with other variables, especially status and / or distance. The simplest contrast that may illustrate this hypothesis is the difference between interactive styles of a middle-aged male professor and a teenage female student: the first would hold all the advantages and the second would practically be vulnerable in a conversation.

Gender analyses show that the interactive behavior of men depends on whether they take part in a ‘mixed-party talk’ or an ‘all-male’ interactions: when the targeted hearer is a woman, and the speaker is a man, men seem to control the interactional floor: they interrupt women more and their turns are longer, they ‘silence’ women, tend to be inattentive and rarely use minimal response markers.¹⁸ In all-male encounters too, there is a tendency for the dominant ones to be competitive and challenge others. However, Herman also notes that men also tend to be inexpressive and inarticulate, especially talking about personal and emotional matters, which appears to be “a consequence of socialization, given that the male domain was the public sphere in which emotional considerations and feelings were required to be suppressed.”¹⁹ Therefore, male displays of emotions are stereotypically regarded as non-masculine or as a sign

¹⁷ Based on a review of different pragmatic studies in H. Spencer-Oatey, *Culturally Speaking: Culture, Communication and Politeness Theory*, London 2008, p. 36.

¹⁸ V. Herman, *Dramatic discourse...*, p. 255. It should be noted that E. Chaika in *Language: The Social Mirror*, Boston 1994, mentions some evidence to the contrary.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

of weakness (not considering here manipulative uses of these ‘female’ interactive strategies). It is one aspect of the ‘sex-imposed’ stereotyped expectations of gendered interactive behavior: in male conflict dyads, it seems, the participant who adopts the more cooperative, more sensitive – stereotypically, more feminine – style, is deemed the weaker one. Through the use of language, men ‘do power’ and confirm their masculine identity. It is also noted that men tend to avoid self face threatening acts such as apologizing and they rationalize their wrongdoings instead.²⁰

Age in itself may be a base of power, but it is only one possibility. Traditionally, older age is associated with wisdom, experience (expert power) and in relations with one’s children, age is a factor that determines reward and coercive power. The troublesome phase begins when children are adults and challenge their parents, taking over the bases of power. In the selected father – son conflicts, the interactional roles combine with gender and age: father, head of a patriarchal family, older, who used to control bases of power in the past, now has to face the reversion of ‘order.’ Fathers and sons struggle between the need for involvement and independence; it looks as if they “juggle the need for and danger of being close.”²¹

2.2.4. Spatio-temporal frame

Contextual knowledge also includes understanding the possible impact of the time and place of a given exchange. The physical context (setting) may be expected to influence the speech activity and act as a constraint, and the temporal frame refers to time of the day, seasons, holidays as well as a wider political and ideological context, century, decade and so on.

3. Variables in conflict

Apart from the proposed set of contextual variables for any type of interaction, a separate subset of variables typical of conflict may be distinguished.

²⁰ D. Tannen, *I Only Say This Because I Love You. Talking to Your Parents, Partner, Sibs, and Kids When You’re All Adults*, New York 2001, p. 101.

²¹ D. Tannen, *Conversational Style. Analyzing Talk among Friends*, Oxford 2005, p. 5.

Understandably, most conflict variables may be obscured, not evident, fuzzy, viewed differently by participants, dynamic and negotiable.²²

3.1. Issues (focus, motives, goals, stakes)

Motivations, grounded in conflict participants' self-systems (either affect or cognition), may be explicit or implicit.²³ Any conflict, from interpersonal (or, in fact, intrapersonal) to international can be classified according to its underlying issues or focus, generated by motivations. Issues can be divided into: facts (conflict over perception and judgment of facts), values (what things should be), interests (distribution of scarce resources) and non-realistic issues (such as style of interaction).²⁴ Grimshaw classifies conflict as focusing on things/rights (objects, access, control), beliefs (rules, priorities, norms) or facts (who, what). It needs to be borne in mind that the manifest ('official') issues may differ from what actually is disputed, due to other contextual variables. Another distinction between two types of conflicts has been drawn: one "is oriented toward the pursuit of claims and the expectation of gains, that is, aimed at the attainment of a concrete result ... and the second type which is oriented towards the expression of aggressive impulses."²⁵ Whatever the content of the conflict, participants usually have their own perceptions of stakes: a particular dispute may be very important, and the attainment of a pursued result will be a game of 'all or nothing,' for example, when the stakes are seen as embodying one's principles.²⁶

3.2. Constraints (norms, limitations, emergencies)

This variable may greatly influence the occurrence and the development of conflict talk. Various twists and turns in conflictive exchanges should be attributed to the operation of constraints rather than the content of the talk itself.

²² A.D. Grimshaw, "Research on conflict talk: antecedents, resources, findings, directions," in A.D. Grimshaw (ed.), *Conflict talk: Sociolinguistic investigations of arguments and conversations*, Cambridge 1990, pp. 280–308.

²³ R. Kopytko, *The mental aspects...*, p. 74.

²⁴ J.L. Hocker & W. Wilmot, *Interpersonal conflict*, Dubuque 1995.

²⁵ R. Kopytko, *The mental aspects...*, p. 155.

²⁶ A.D. Grimshaw, *Research on conflict talk...*, p. 288.

Three types of constraints have been described as: cultural, sociological and ‘ecological.’²⁷ Cultural constraints are seen as norms about the private – public dimension of conflict talk, general norms about whom not to involve in conflict (‘protect the weak’) and the differences in conflict styles generated by class, race, gender, age etc. Sociological constraints refer to the sociological variable of power: in the presence of a third party of greater power, conflict participants are more likely to cease or postpone their dispute, and the stakes must be sufficiently important for subordinates to challenge superiors, when strategies are usually modified, e.g. from open assault to deceit. Considering the variable of affect (whether the participants are in close relationships), we may observe a paradoxical effect that those who are not sure their relationship was a strong one avoid conflicts, and those confident about it may engage in conflicts more comfortably, not worrying about possible break-ups in relationships. Finally, ‘ecological’ constraints are the ones that are out of the interactants’ control. They include disasters and emergencies of various salience, as well as weather conditions, noise, physical comfort and temporal constraints. The stakes have to be high for participants to continue their conflicts in such circumstances. Thus, conflictive exchanges are postponed, tabled, or terminated.

3.3. Dynamics (intensity, reactions, outcomes, change in focus)

Conflict talk may change over its course in most unexpected ways. It is a dynamic phenomenon, and the operation of contextual variables influences its nature, intensity and development. In terms of intensity, conflict talk can be generally classified as “more or less benign or malign,” which can be recognized by whether the talk is “friendly, neutral or hostile” and “pleasant, neutral or threatening” and shifts in intensity / tone are signaled by greater coolness or, conversely, emotionality, displayed by prosodic features.²⁸ More openly, conflict participants resort to “negative verbal characterizations” of the other and their behavior, motives, strategies or even personality traits; although, as Grimshaw emphasizes, some persons show their anger by becoming quiet.²⁹ Another classification of conflict has been offered with regard to its intensity and out-

²⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 298–302.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 294–295.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

comes, namely, constructive and destructive conflict.³⁰ In brief, the outcome of constructive conflict is some kind of compromise, while destructive conflict ends with a sense of defeat on both sides. Another characteristic of destructive conflict is diffusing the real focus of the dispute, moving away from the issue. It seems to be connected with the cognitive context – as new information comes into the light, priorities change, conflicts grow more intense or die down, ‘real’ feelings replace ‘feigned’ ones and so on. As far as outcomes are concerned, they include (non)resolution of the explicit issues (victory / defeat, compromise, stand-off) as well as some secondary outcomes, such as enhancement of communicative competence, confidence, learning new tactics, changing power relations etc.³¹

4. A sample analysis of interpersonal conflict in the selected play

Human social behavior results from a combination of two factors: the cognitive-affective-conative system and social interaction, with all their contextual variables at play. The analysis of interpersonal conflict should account for its three aspects: the psychological aspect, reflected by the cognitive-affective-conative context; the socio-cultural aspect, connected with the social context and its elements; and the linguistic aspect, represented by the language use in conflictive interaction, which can be considered within pragmatic frameworks and theories. One can attempt a correct interpretation of conflictive exchanges drawing on the knowledge about the participants’ cognitive-affective states, their goals, motivations and intentions, and the social context in which communication is taking place.³² It is in such larger pragmatic context combined with narrow linguistic context that the examination of conflict should be carried out: the structure and dynamics as well as sources, issues, motives, constraints and outcomes of the conflict are undoubtedly conditioned by contextual variables.

³⁰ J.L. Hocker & W. Wilmot, *Interpersonal conflict...*, pp. 34–35.

³¹ A.D. Grimshaw, *Research on conflict talk...*, p. 305.

³² R. Kopytko, *The mental aspects...*, pp. 149–151.

4.1. Example: August Wilson's *Fences* (1986)

The main conflict in *Fences* is the one between Troy (father) and Cory (son). Troy is a 53-year-old garbage man and Cory is a 17-year-old student, Troy's son by his second wife, Rose. The spatio-temporal frame of their conflict is determined by the setting of the play: their 'present' is 1957 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (although it is never directly named in the course of the play, critics have assumed that it is this 'middle American urban industrial city,' Wilson's hometown, which aptly demonstrates the impact of the historical context of production on the context of the fictional world of the text³³). They are an Afro-American family living in the times when "the hot winds of change that would make the sixties a turbulent, racing, dangerous and provocative decade had not yet begun to blow full;" the times of unceasing racial tensions: on the one hand, court-ordered desegregation under the Civil Rights Act of 1957, on the other, widely condoned activity of the Ku-Klux-Klan.³⁴ The popularized version of history of the decade is the so-called white history: with an emphasis on progress, assimilation, America's becoming 'the melting pot,' promoting conservative values and the idea of nuclear family. Upward mobility, uniformity and white picket fences have become symbols of the 1950s. Blacks fell outside of history and wide discrimination in housing, employment and citizen rights was common. Wilson does not mention any historical events that marked the decade, focusing not on "the center of social and political action but [on] the margin."³⁵ The fact is that the characters in *Fences* witness "subtle yet decisive change", and at the core of the analysis of the mental context lies the question of how the excluded and the empowered perceive the reality around them.³⁶

The major change that Troy and, to a lesser degree, Cory, construct their identities on, is the integration of professional sports in the USA. In *Fences*, Cory wants to compete for a football scholarship to a college, and Troy, once

³³ Christine Birdwell in an excerpt from "Death as a Fastball on the Outside Corner: *Fences*' Troy Maxson and the American Dream" quoted in H. Bloom (ed.), *Bloom's Major Dramatists: August Wilson*, New York 2002, p. 36.

³⁴ C.W.E. Bigsby, *Modern American Drama, 1945–2000*, Cambridge 2000, p. 296.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 195.

³⁶ J. Timpane, "Filling the Time: Reading History in the Drama of August Wilson," in A. Nadel (ed.), *May All Your Fences Have Gates. Essays on the Drama of August Wilson*, Iowa City 1994, p. 69.

a great baseball player in Negro Leagues, is embittered because segregation laws prevented him from becoming a baseball star in his younger days.

Excerpt 1 (Act One, Scene Three)³⁷

- (1) CORY The Pirates won today. That makes five in a row.
- (2) TROY I ain't thinking about the Pirates. Got an all-white team. Got that boy ... that Puerto Rican boy ... Clemente. Don't even half-play him. That boy could be something if they give him a chance. Play him one day and sit him on the bench the next.
- (3) CORY He gets a lot of chances to play.
- (4) TROY I'm talking about playing regular. Playing every day so you can get your timing. That's what I'm talking about.
- (5) CORY They got some white guys on the team that don't play every day. You can't play everybody at the same time.
- (6) TROY If they got a white fellow sitting on the bench ... you can bet your last dollar he can't play! The colored guy got to be twice as good before he get on the team. That's why I don't want you to get all tied up in them sports. Man on the team and what it get him? They got colored on the team and don't use them. Same as not having them. All them teams the same.
- (7) CORY The Braves got Hank Aaron and Wes Covington. Hank Aaron hit two home runs today. That makes forty-three.
- (8) TROY Hank Aaron ain't nobody. That's what you supposed to do. That's how you supposed to play the game. Ain't nothing to it. It's just a matter of timing ... getting the right follow-through. Hell, I can hit forty-three home runs right now!
- (9) CORY Not off no major league pitching, you couldn't.
- (10) TROY We had better pitching in the Negro leagues. I hit seven home runs off of Satchel Paige. You can't get no better than that!
- (11) CORY Sandy Koufax. He's leading the league in strike-outs.
- (12) TROY I ain't thinking of no Sandy Koufax.
- (13) CORY You got Warren Spahn and Lew Burdette. I bet you couldn't hit no home runs off of Warren Spahn.
- (14) TROY I'm through with it now. You go on and cut them boards.

Here, the conflict starts developing as the cognitive contexts of the two participants expressed in their beliefs and assumptions lead to a bitter clash. The difference lies in their perception of history and change. Troy constructs his

³⁷ A. Wilson, *Fences*, New York 1986.

identity based on his relation to that change, which determines his cognition. He would not be what he is and where he is, if not for the change. The problem is, as Timpane observes, that Troy constantly constructs his present “selectively out of memory (the past) and desire (the future).”³⁸ In this conversation, Troy downplays the achievements of black players (8, 12) at the same time blaming white coaches and team managers (2, 4, 6). Both strategies reveal his frustration as a great player in the Negro Leagues of the past. Troy is now too old to play on integrated teams, and feels anger that his career helped create the change which ultimately left him behind. He sacrificed himself without being aware of it. Troy must be aware of the inevitability of integration in sports: in 1957, Hank Aaron, black, led Milwaukee Braves to win the World Series against New York Yankees in the final, and subsequently won the National League Most Valuable Player Award for 1957. Cory mentions Hank Aaron (7) as well as other colored players, but Troy seems to blind himself to the changing circumstances (2, 6). The cognitive clash occurs because Troy – although “clearly aware of the facts and clearly damaged by them ... insists that history is continuous, that what was once true is still true.”³⁹ Cory, in turn, believes that what is happening now, in his present, is true. This outrages Troy, as his ‘death’ as a baseball player opens up Cory’s future as a football player. Their perception differs radically: Troy attempts to discourage Cory (6) but Cory honestly believes he can be as good as a white player. Reality has no influence on Troy’s judgment; Troy represses reality. He “bases his assumptions about reality on the facts of a prewar world.”⁴⁰ This entangles him into an internal conflict as well: Troy seems to be denying the change that he created, because he needs self-deception to survive. He is a survivor, but also a loser. In this exchange, Cory offers a number of objectively reasonable arguments (3, 5, 7, 11) that Troy does not respond to. Troy just cares about getting in with the last word; showing that he ‘knows better.’

³⁸ J. Timpane, *Filling the Time...*, p. 71.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 73.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 71.

Excerpt 2 (Act One, Scene Three)

- (1) CORY (*Pause.*) Can I ask you a question?
- (2) TROY What the hell you wanna ask me? Mr. Stawicki the one you got the questions for.
- (3) CORY How come you ain't never liked me?
- (4) TROY Liked you? Who the hell say I got to like you? What law is there say I got to like you? Wanna stand up in my face and ask me a damn fool-ass question like that. Talking about liking somebody. Come here, boy, when I talk to you.
(*CORY comes over to where TROY is working. He stands slouched over and TROY shoves him on his shoulder.*) Straighten up, goddammit! I asked you a question ... what law is there say I got to like you?
- (5) CORY None.
- [...]
- (6) TROY [...] I go out of here every morning ... bust my butt ... putting up with them crackers every day ... cause I like you? You about the biggest fool I ever saw. (*Pause.*) It's my job. It's my responsibility! You understand that? A man got to take care of his family. You live in my house ... sleep you behind on my bedclothes ... fill you belly up with my food ... cause you my son. Not 'cause I like you! Cause it's my duty to take care of you. I owe a responsibility to you! [...]
- [...] You understand what I'm saying, boy?
- (7) CORY Yessir.

In this moving excerpt, Troy verbalizes the affective context of the conflict. As Wilson himself observes, "he has a tremendous love for the kid. But he's not going to say 'I love you,' he's going to demonstrate it. He's carrying garbage for seventeen years just for the kid."⁴¹ Troy's personality is difficult; he cannot express his love for the family. Troy's experience of being driven out of his father's house at the age of 14 made him cultivate an internal harshness in order to survive; he "has developed a pose of emotional detachment to buffer the disappointments in his life and to help him endure the brutal routine that keeps his family fed and clothed."⁴² Troy's turns are series of challenges, in fact covering Troy's real concern. He prefers to define his little victories (keeping

⁴¹ D. Savran, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights*, New York 1998, p. 299.

⁴² C. McDonough, *Staging Masculinity. Male Identity in Contemporary American Drama*, Jefferson, North Carolina 1997, p. 147.

the family 'fed and clothed') as his responsibility, denying that they have anything to do with love. His affective states depend on social variables: Troy is not able to show empathy, because life hardened him inside. His own self-esteem is shattered, so he cannot enhance Cory's. As far as the conative context is concerned, both men throughout most of the conflict hide their real intentions. What Troy communicates as acts of impoliteness, at times is really an expression of concern. Cory, on the other hand, expresses respect for his father without meaning to. There is the necessary connection between contextual variables and perlocutionary effect of speech acts (performatives). In brief, although an act is achieved, "the lack of requisite thoughts and feelings constitutes an *abuse* of the procedure" and those acts that are done "under duress," due to "extenuating circumstances" should in fact be perceived to bring perlocutionary effect opposite to their illocutionary force.⁴³ Cory's conciliatory responses are 'void.' He 'agrees' without an intention to agree, under pressure or out of fear; he withdraws from conflict talks only to humor Troy, and pretends compromise while not quitting football practice behind Troy's back. It is connected with the external social context: Troy wields more power so Cory does not have many options of response. Such exchanges also point at the internal context relations, as there is a gap between the speaker's true intention and the hearer's perception, which undoubtedly fosters the conflict situation.

5. Conclusions

The linguistic realization of the conflict between Cory and Troy seems to be a cover for what underlies the two men's relationship. The real issues remain hidden throughout much of the conflict and can be classified as: interests / objects (the family cannot afford a TV set which Cory wants very much), beliefs / perception of facts (whether colored players are good and whether Troy could still compete with whites), rules / values (Cory has to learn a trade and has no right to oppose his father about that), values again (family is Troy's responsibility, there is no room for affection). It is only later that the real motivations are revealed: Troy's jealousy and inability to accept his son's opportunity.

⁴³ V. Lowe, "'Unhappy' confessions in 'The Crucible'. A pragmatic explanation," in P. Verdonk, J. Culpeper & M. Short (eds.), *Exploring the Language of Drama...*, p. 131.

This revelation introduces a shift in conflict dynamics as Cory's cognition changes. Realizing his father's intentions, Cory, too, detaches himself emotionally from Troy. The distance between them grows. In the case of this conflict, the assumption that intimates may more comfortably engage in disputes, as they are certain of their strong attachment, does not prove valid. Troy alienates Cory, replaying the cycle of the love-hate relationship with his own father. As Troy repeats the same mistakes that his father made, his cognition does not really evolve. Troy's cognitive-affective states are clearly dependent on external, social contextual variables.

To return to the notion of contextual embeddedness of drama, audience / readers have to make use of all the accessible contextual clues in order to infer the most likely meanings, work out implicature at the level of dialogue, and look out for implicature generated at the playwright – audience level, which may not be the same and may not appear at the same time.⁴⁴ Off-record communication between playwright and reader also employs such devices as symbols (symbolic objects, actions, names etc.) and what is known in literary criticism as implicit characterization techniques.⁴⁵ The reader interprets implicatures generated in conversations between characters (which is how we “reconstruct the inferential chains which lead us to a particular interpretation”⁴⁶). Moreover, linguistic inferences from the character-to-character level interact with our inferences drawn on the basis of our knowledge of the dramatic convention (cf. activity type). It is because of this contextual input (different levels of knowledge of the genre, time or culture) that readers sometimes arrive at different interpretations.

Keywords: context, mental context, interpersonal conflict, literary discourse

⁴⁴ S. Mandala, *Twentieth-Century Drama Dialogue as Ordinary Talk. Speaking Between the Lines*, Hampshire 2007, p. 86.

⁴⁵ Authorial or figural implicit characterization takes the form of: indirectly characterizing names, correspondences and contrasts to other characters (authorial), or features of physical appearance, gestures, body language, costumes, voice and language variety, register, style etc. (figural).

⁴⁶ M. Cooper, “*Implicature, convention and The Taming of the Shrew*,” in P. Verdonk, J. Culpeper & M. Short (eds.), *Exploring the Language of Drama...*, p. 58.

**AN OVERVIEW OF CONTEXTUAL VARIABLES
IN THE ANALYSIS OF CONFLICT WITH AN EXAMPLE
OF THEIR OPERATION IN LITERARY DISCOURSE**

Summary

Context and meaning are dynamic phenomena, constructed in interaction. Interactants cooperate in constructing context, which involves various social, psychological and cognitive factors that determine what is said and what is understood during an exchange. In this article, the data for analysis is a selection of two sample conflictive exchanges between father and his grown-up son presented in American play *Fences* by August Wilson. These conflicts are frequently heated, irrational spirals. Therefore, particular attention will be devoted to the mental context of the language used in these conflicts and its relation to the choice of conflict strategies. The internal (mental) context will be analyzed in terms of the participants' cognitive-affective-conative system; that is, e.g. how the interactants' knowledge, perception or attention can trigger conflict through false assumptions about each other's lives, denial of certain facts or lack of information; how the interactants' emotions, personalities, needs etc. contribute to the development of conflict when they are incompatible or mutually exclusive; and how the conflict participants' verbal behavior relates to their motivations and goals, such as instrumental or relational goals, either explicitly stated or deliberately obscured. Another important set of contextual variables are those of the external (social and historical) context such as the participants' power, distance or gender, and the spatio-temporal frame. Additionally, the multidimensional role of context in the production and reception of a literary text will be looked at, as the various contexts are in constant interaction.

**CZYNNIKI KONTEKSTOWE I ICH ZNACZENIE
DLA ANALIZY KONFLIKTU
NA PRZYKŁADZIE DIALOGÓW LITERACKICH**

Streszczenie

Artykuł jest próbą ukazania, jak ważną rolę w konstruowaniu znaczenia w interakcji odgrywa kontekst. Przyjęto założenie, że szeroko pojęty kontekst jako suma czynników społecznych, psychologicznych i mentalnych (kognitywnych) niejednokrotnie decyduje o tym, jak (błędnie) są interpretowane wypowiedzi – a to prowadzi do konfliktu. Na przykładzie dwóch fragmentów z dramatu Augusta Wilsona pt. *Fences* dokonano krótkiej analizy konfliktu między ojcem a synem, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem kontekstu mentalnego jako systemu kognitywno-afektywno-konatywnego. Poza tradycyjnym ujęciem kontekstu jako tła społeczno-kulturowego wydarzeń ukazano m.in., jak różnice w postrzeganiu i rozumieniu zdarzeń, niewiedza lub wyparcie faktów mogą wywołać konflikt, jakie znaczenie mają emocje oraz osobowość uczestników konfliktu. Artykuł zawiera również podsumowanie podejść do zagadnienia kontekstu w literaturze oraz charakterystykę oddziaływania różnych rodzajów kontekstu w tekście literackim.