Shared Situational Knowledge Exhibited in Christian Counselling Interactions: Jay E. Adams Examples

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Speech actors in Christian counselling exhibit shared situational knowledge and assumptions in constructing meaning and in the negotiation of the goal of the interaction. This is particularly helpful to the counsellor for effective counselling and as a prerequisite for the proper diagnosis of myriad of issues confronting man in addition to showing empathy to the client. Against the advocacy, from a segment of scholars, for the exclusion of context from, or, that context is only tangential to meaning, this study, based on the sociolinguistic framework provided by Dell Hymes (1962) as modified by Levinson’s (1979) ‘notion of activity type’ explores shared situational knowledge (SSK) among interactants with examples drawn from the Jay E. Adams’ counselling cases. The study concludes that SSK manifests as social, religious and emotional undercurrents in the counselling situation. This understanding is a vital tool in providing the counsellor a linguistic direction in his investigation and the subsequent advice on diverse problems that are brought to his desk.

Keywords: Speech Actors, Christian Counselling, Situational Knowledge, Interactants

INTRODUCTION

This study identifies how speech actors in the course of Christian counselling exhibit shared situational knowledge (henceforth SSK) and assumptions in constructing meaning and in the negotiation of the goal of the interaction. Interactants draw on the experience they are mutually privy to in ensuring a seamless interaction. Such mutually accessible knowledge is often taken for granted not only among the members of a speech community; it also plays a great role in the process of encoding and the decoding of sign in the counselling activity-type.

The concept of context (which is often in the literature interchangeable with SSK depending on the foci of scholars), hinged on Malinowski (1923), Firth (1957), and Halliday (1978) notwithstanding, this study focuses on the sociolinguistic framework provided by Dell Hymes (1962) as modified by Levinson’s (1979) ‘notion of activity type’ which is an improvement on Hymes’ SPEAKING mnemonics as well as adaptable for a more rewarding pragmatic analysis of context in communication.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Context refers to actual situations of utterance including those features that are culturally and linguistically relevant to the production and interpretation of utterances.
The scope of context, according to Ochis, is indeterminate as its consideration includes “the social and psychological world in which the language user operates at any given time [as well as] minimally, language users’ beliefs and assumptions about temporal, spatial, and social settings; prior, on-going, and future actions (verbal, non-verbal) and the state of knowledge and attentiveness of those participating in the social interaction at hand” (Levinson 23). The admonition of Ochis is the necessity of speech participants taking cognisance of cues that are provided by the entirety of the locale in temporal, spatial, cultural, psychological and physical terms.

Palmer’s advocacy for the exclusion of context from meaning or at best view “context as tangential to meaning” (qtd in Odebunmi 25) is contrary to Odebunmi’s position since context being the “spine of meaning … provides the background from which the meaning of a word springs” (25). Granted that words may mean in isolation, their full meanings are best realised in context. The framework developed by Dell Hymes, which provides a detailed checklist for describing speech events, is popular for describing context.

The checklist includes: ‘situation’, ‘participants’, ‘ends’, ‘act sequences’, ‘key’, ‘instrumentalities’, ‘norms’, and ‘genre’. The list captures in varying degree components characterising speech activities in a given situation. Hymes conceives ‘situation’ as the physical setting (e.g. an office) or an abstract setting (e.g. a conversation by the walkway) whereas ‘instrumentalities’ encompasses the channel or mode (spoken, written, face-to-face or electronic mode) of language delivery, and so on.

The inadequacy of Hymes’ sociolinguistic framework (which was originally designed for highly ritualized events, such as weddings, funerals, cult initiation and other stereotyped speech events) to pragmatics is captured by Thomas Jenny who insists that ‘it is not necessarily the case that less formal, rigid, or predictable events, such as ‘a university admissions interview’, ‘a visit to the doctor’s’, ‘a dressing down by the headmaster’ are well handled within this framework and casual conversations certainly are not’ (188). The model is in her opinion too broad based and can only yield a generalised result and is incapable of accounting for “why one person performs very differently from another in the same linguistic situation … and [in] showing how one speaker successfully exploits a situation to achieve his or her goals, while the other fails dismally” (189).

Levinson’s notion of activity type, which is an alternative framework, is defined as:

… a fuzzy category whose focal members are goal-defined, socially constituted, bounded, events with constraints on participants, setting and so on, but above all on the kinds of allowable contributions. Paradigm examples would be teaching, a job interview, a jural interrogation, a football game, a task in a workshop, a dinner party and so on (370).

Granted that there are common areas of convergence and divergence in the two frameworks, the difference is that whereas Hymes sees context as constraining the way the individual speaks, Levinson sees the ‘individual’s use of language as shaping the ‘event’ (389). This is the defining line in sociolinguistic approach from that of pragmatics to the description of linguistic interaction. Instances of rigid events envisaged by the Hymesian framework include traditional festivals like Argungu Fishing, Osun Osogbo, or initiation ceremony into cult or age groups and so on where the events are well scripted and disallows “individual participant to change mind” (Thomas 189).
initiative from participants. Such contribution may indeed alter the course of event rather than being the other way round. Such scenario played out when Mark Anthony, on permission from Brutus, gave an oratory in honour of Julius Caesar. The spontaneous reaction of the audience, which was not envisaged by Brutus, led to the mass action that consumed the conspirators. A linguistic enquiry through pragmatics would make do with a theory that acknowledges the capability of speech participants to shape the context or situation of event.

An activity type as conceptualised by Levinson includes:

**The goals of the participants** which may change during the course of event. For example, the goal of a Principal in dressing down a schoolboy may be to reprimand him for a misdeed. In the course of event, however, the Principal, through the schoolboy defence, may instead encourage him or offer an apology.

**Allowable contribution** being the constraints imposed on participants by law or social norms.

The degree to which Gricean maxims are adhered to or are suspended.
The degree to which interpersonal maxims are adhered to or are suspended.
Turn-taking and topic control.
The manipulation of pragmatic parameters to increase or decrease social distance and/or formality of the situation (Levinson 382).

SSK entails anything that has to do with the immediate situation and the sociocultural background in which the language event takes place. This includes the individual experiences, beliefs, non-verbal cues, intentions as well as perceptions shared by the participants prior to or during the conversation. Odebunmi identifies two levels of beliefs: language level and situational level. In the former, meaning is only accessible where speech participants can mutually access as well as have an understanding of the same language. For the latter, participants share similar linguistic and non-linguistic codes and experience which are brought to bear in meaning construction (27-28).

Scholars based on various views have named this concept as “mutual contextual beliefs”, “shared contextual beliefs”, “shared assumptions”, and so on. These terms, though interchangeable, may also highlight the focus of the individual writer. For an instance, the usage, shared situational knowledge (SSK) is preferred for this study since it emphasises our position that the whole gamut of contextual variables and its influence in communication are shared between speaker/writer and hearer/reader. Anything otherwise is an invitation to pragmatic failure. SSK is hinged on the assumption that contextual influences that are relevant to the interaction at hand are known to the speaker as well as to the hearer. Let us consider the statement once uttered by a late colleague:

1. We are boarding.

Without a contextual hint, sentence 1 is capable of being misunderstood. Let us start from the “we”, a plural first person pronoun. The question here is how many persons including the speaker are boarding? Yet another question may be ‘boarding’ what? Is it a cab, a plane or a ship, in its simplest sense? In other to provide answer and put sentence 1 in its correct perspective, let us construct a context.

The speaker/writer was the Secretary to the Standing Committee on Private Universities (SCOPU), a body that has the mandate of midwifing the birth or abortion (as the case may be) of a proposed private university in Nigeria.
The hearer/speaker was the Chairman, Implementation Committee of the proposed University. The speaker/writer resided in Abuja where he worked with the National Universities Commission.

Similar visits had been made to Lagos where the proposed University was being sited. The mode of communication was the GSM short message service (sms) and the date was Sunday 3rd June, 2012.

With this background information which does not exclude other assumptions, the reader is expected to rescue the writer’s meaning effectively with the aid of SSK which includes:

Absence of a Sea Port in Abuja, thereby ruling out the option of boarding ship.

The time of communication was at about noon such that the distance from Abuja to Lagos could only be covered on time by flight rather than by land.

The reader had usually received the Team at the Lagos Airport and had usually provided them with accommodation.

The reader is also aware of the number of officials that make up the Committee and or this may have been communicated earlier to him in the case of this particular situation.

With other contextual layers available to the writer and reader, the interpretation of sentence 1 would among others include:

That the reader should make available the vehicle that would take them from the Lagos Airport to the hotel.

The need not to keep the Committee members waiting unduly at the Airport.

The necessity of arranging accommodation for the visitors.

A reminder for the host to fine-tune the requirements for the licensing of the proposed University.

Most significantly, this exchange provides the hearer/reader, the contextual clues for the realisation of the death of SCOPU members on board the ill-fated Dana Airline of 3rd June, 2012.

Few studies on the exhibition of context in linguistic interactions have not addressed the peculiarities of faith-based counselling discourse. Faleke and Alo, for example, examine the various ways in which interactions take place in the hospital between nurses and their clients with the observation that certain mutual knowledge exists between nurses-nurses and medical practitioners (MPs) and patients/patients' relatives in their interactions which exhibit certain forms of language. The forms of language are those unfamiliar and familiar words that nurses use when interacting among themselves, other MPs and patients/patients' relatives, respectively, in order to hide information that may stigmatise or affect the psychological state of the clients. They range from word formation, vocabulary, syntactic patterns, and paralinguistic. The nurses reportedly use acronyms, abbreviations, figures, body movements and gesticulations to communicate with patients, which some of the patients are aware of and take as part of the technical knowledge they (the nurses have) and the ethics of their profession.

Babatunde in a study examines the influence of context in religious communication; the organisation of the message and the intention behind this organisation; the possible areas of misunderstanding and communication breakdown, and how participants guide against this (breakdown); the role of the audience in influencing the message of the speaker and its presentation; and lastly, audience participation and the overall reaction of the audience to speaker and his/her message (29). This study of faith-based interaction becomes imperative since previous studies have hardly addressed the specific contextual understandings in the consideration that the notion of doxa shapes counselling interaction.
The concept of doxa, “a common knowledge and shared opinions [which] haunts all contemporary disciplines that put communication and social interaction at the centre of their concerns” (Amossy, 369) is applicable in religious discourse particularly in pastoral counselling. Faith-based counsellees are believers who, based on their understanding of the code of the Christian faith, have subscribed to the supremacy of God and His precepts through the Bible and the clergy who more often than not performs the dual responsibility of offering counselling services to the advice seekers. Humans believe in spiritual antidotes especially where orthodox medicine has failed to yield fruits. Doxa, therefore, provides the underlying context or assumption which is mutually accessible to participants in faith-based encounter.

Four counselling cases obtained by Jay E. Adams with detailed background information as well as preponderant of specific contextual clues in counselling situation have been selected for analysis. We are restricted to situational context (rather than verbal context or ‘co-text’) which has been given little or no attention in formal linguistic description of grammar and semantics. Granted that Adams’ counselling cases have been studied for theological purposes, this paper highlights how SSK manifests in the verbal performance of counselling interactors as distinct from secular engagements. Shared social, spiritual and psychological situational knowledge guide the Christian counsellor in the direction of his scripture-based services to the troubled clients.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Shared Social Situational Knowledge

Some social-cultural background information may influence the course of verbal interactions. Sociologists are in agreement on the potency of environmental factors in the shaping of the individual. It is the case that interlocutors who may be privy to one another’s background would tap into such knowledge during conversation. The interactants in case 1 share social situational knowledge including those that were obtained in the seminary:

Case 1:

Bob, a former seminary classmate, now the pastor of a conservative church in a neighbouring town, has made a lunch date with the counsellor, to discuss some serious doubts concerning the basic doctrines of Christianity.

I have to discuss some serious doubts concerning the basic doctrines of Christianity. I don’t understand exactly why but I seem to be losing my grip on everything I used to believe firmly, everything I used to hold dear.

The counsellor remembers Bob as a staunch defender of the faith. He suspects that the problems may be complex. Wondering whether other than intellectual doubts may be part of the picture, he probes to find out how the work of the church has been progressing.

These doubts have been so disturbing I haven’t been able to do my work well – I’m behind in everything. … I can barely stay ahead in my sermon preparation. I haven’t made a visit for weeks. And to top it off I have announced a special series of messages on the Christian family, beginning next month, that I can’t get going. I’m ready to give up.

Counsellor: When did you begin to get behind?

Bob: About two months ago.
Counsellor: When did your doubts begin?

Bob: Bob’s glum look slowly changed to a thoughtful frown: I remember; I had a wedding and a funeral and four serious counselling cases all the same week. I got behind on everything because of these events. Soon after, I remember having to prepare a sermon on the inspiration of the Scriptures. But because I was so rushed, I did a very superficial job.

Counsellor: How about your regular schedule, Bob? For the family, study, worship, etc.? Are you working all day long? Are you trying to catch up?

Bob: Bob slumped deeper into his seat. Think! I’m going to speak about the family next month; and I am a failure myself. I’ve neglected everything - including my family. I’ve been sitting brooding rather than working. I even watched a soap opera on TV the other morning, in my study (Adams vii).

There are overlapping situational knowledge that is shared by Bob and the counsellor. They were seminary classmate, pastors and practising counsellors who must have been privy to certain information, including cognitive ability, attitude to work, social indulgencies, level of spirituality, to mention but a few. That the counsellor was startled on learning that Bob has to discuss some serious doubts concerning the basic doctrines of Christianity is attributable to shared knowledge of the level of Bob’s spirituality as an acclaimed staunch defender of the faith when they were in the seminary.

That knowledge propels the host clergy to probe to find out how the work of the church has been progressing. This is to satisfy the counsellor’s curiosity on whether other than intellectual doubts may be part of the picture. The response was unsurprisingly in the affirmative. Bob is depressed having been overwhelmed by the magnitude of his schedule – a situation that has adversely affected his family and spiritual concentration. Bob’s device at escaping from his condition is the television. Whereas Bob attributes his problem to the magnitude of his assignment, SSK has aided the counsellor to put things in the right perspective by aptly diagnosing Bob as suffering from depression! This conclusion comes with ease since the counsellor operates similar schedule and is privy to his situation.

**Shared Religious Situational Knowledge**

Pastoral counselling involves religious beliefs, hinged on the notion of doxa, which are taken for granted. Participants in this situation are subscribers to the Christian doctrine which are largely encoded in the Scripture. Pastoral counsellees are assumed to have acknowledged the supremacy of God and His counsel which are laid bare by the counsellor. This position is amplified through case 2:

**Case 2:**

Counsellor: So the main problem you’d like help with is depression. We’ll see what we can do about it Jim.

Jim: Good, I’m hoping to find some relief soon.

Counsellor: First of all, Jim, do you know Jesus Christ as your own personal Saviour?

Jim: Yes I do, Sir. I’ve been a Christian since I was a young child.

Counsellor: So you’ve trusted in Him for forgiveness of sins, and you know that God is your Father?

Jim: Yes, that’s right.
Counsellor: Well then, as a child of God, it’s important for you to know and meditate on the promises of God. Have you ever memorized Scripture?

Jim: I guess I know a lot of familiar verses by heart, but I’ve never conducted a conscientious program of memorization.

Counsellor: Well, I would like you to do just that. Phillipians 4:4 says, ‘Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice.’ When you start to get depressed, remind yourself of this verse. As a Christian you have plenty to be joyful about (Adams11).

The excerpt above is capable of steering certain controversy were the participants had divergent religious beliefs. Statements like Jesus being the Saviour whom is trusted for the forgiveness of sin and the counselee being adjudged as [a] child of God are controversial doctrines in interfaith discourse. Not surprisingly but based on the interactants’ mutual belief on spiritual matters, neither Jim nor the clergy could argue over the propriety of those tenets knowing that they are prescribed scriptural dosages for relief from depression among other socio-spiritual ailments.

Jim does not only agree with the clergy about the saving power of Jesus, he pre-empts him by professing to have been a Christian early in life. Jim cannot be adjudged to have violated the Gricean maxim of quantity or be accused of volunteering more information than is required in this situation. In the contrary, to do otherwise would have amounted to violating the Gricean maxim since Jim’s response are exactly what the counsellor aims to extract even if the latter had not made this explicitly. Relying on shared religious belief however, Jim has met the expectation of his host by volunteering information needed for the assessment of his spirituality.

This information is crucial as it provides the premise from which the clergy invokes additional shared religious knowledge. Well then, as a child of God, it’s important for you to know and meditate on the promises of God. Have you ever memorized Scripture? The subsequent response of the client manifests the cooperation which often exists among interactants, particularly those with SSK. Such co-operation helps the counsellor in the prescription of the needed spiritual therapy, exemplified in the scriptural reference, that undoubtedly brings relief to Jim.

Shared Psychological Situational Knowledge

The assessment of the client’s situation is often influenced by shared emotion which is reflective of love, joy, fear, sickness, (in)security, heartbreak, and so on. Mutually exclusive psychological factors give dimensions to the interaction and are useful for evaluative purposes as well as give direction to the clergy in his activities. Instances of shared psychological factors that are exhibited at the counselling roundtable are exemplified below:

Case 3:

Sharon and Eric are friends of one of the elders in the church pastored by the counsellor. The elder had suggested that the couple should come for help in reconciling their marriage. They have been living apart for one month, ever since Sharon found out about THE AFFAIR.

She’s frigid! What was I supposed to do? (Eric openly tells of his subsequent unfaithfulness. There had been no sexual relations for over six months prior to his adultery.

Sharon: But don’t forget to tell him about those times that you beat me … , and when you threatened my life! You were
drunk, but I got scared! Billy (their son) won’t even stay in the same room with you when you are like that. Everyone is afraid … and … fear and sex don’t mix (Sharon cries).

Counsellor: Eric, you are going to have to ask Sharon for forgiveness, and Sharon, you will have to forgive him if you expect to put this marriage together again. Moreover, we must discuss the basic matter of seeking God’s forgiveness in Christ. That’s where reconciliation and new life begin.

Sharon: I have forgiven him, but I can’t forget. Forgiveness doesn’t mean forgetting, does it? I know that I love Eric, but I don’t know whether I ever will be able to give myself to him again. You can’t have good sexual relations when you are scared to death (Adams 14)!

Marital feud with certain emotional friction is an experience which is shared by most couples. Marriages are often associated with infidelity and aggression which may induce fear and improper sexual relations. The counsellor, who normally should be married, must have had his share of ups and downs at the home-front and may have learnt from the tales of advice-seekers on issues that bother on marriage. Such experience put him at par with the parties and could be useful in resolving the dispute between Eric and Sharon.

The counsellor’s enrichment in this direction is useful in the handling of emotional issues, including infidelity, sexual denial, assault, separation, and so on, which are latent in the case before him. As husband, he could imagine the frustration of Eric on being denied of sex much as he is aware of the implication of marital unfaithfulness and God’s attitude to adultery. It is this inside knowledge that helps the clergy in admonishing Eric, rather than the woman, to apologise: Eric, you are going to have to ask Sharon for forgiveness. Experience has probably thought the clergy to balance the scale of judgement: … and Sharon, you will have to forgive him if you expect to put this marriage together again. The mediator must have been armed with the knowledge that reconciliation is mutually beneficial to both man and woman notwithstanding that Eric may have been adjudged as the aggressor in this matter.

It is shared knowledge that envisions the mediator to counsel them to turn to Christ having concluded that sin is at the root of their near marital collapse. This is made obvious with the transitory word moreover which precedes the admonition:

... we must discuss the basic matter of seeking God’s forgiveness in Christ. That’s where reconciliation and new life begin.

The advice is the needed fillip by Sharon for the commencement of the healing process which begins with an admission of forgiveness and in professing love for the husband.

COMBINATION OF SHARED SOCIAL, RELIGIOUS AND EMOTIONAL SITUATIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Interactants often combine more than one of the shared social, religious and emotional knowledge in one case. The co-occurrence of these knowledge is demonstrated in the next example.

Case 4:

Eight days after Christmas Phyllis announced to Frank, her husband:

Phyllis: I am leaving you; I waited to tell you so I wouldn’t spoil your holiday. The announcement struck him like lightning out of the blue.
But Pastor why? Until this very moment I thought we have an ideal marriage. We rarely argue; I am easy going and asked little more of her than to make meals, wash the clothes, and keep house.

*He didn’t run around – every night in the week you could find him at home domestically reading the newspaper or watching TV. They were both Christians; went to church regularly. He loved her deeply. They had raised three children successfully (after all, Franklin Jr. had just left home for his second semester at Christian University, and Betty and Joan were already married to Christian husbands and had begun to raise their families).*

What could have happened to Phyllis?

*He asked himself in disbelief. But Phyllis wouldn’t talk about it.*

Pastor, help me. I don’t want to lose Phyllis. I love her! What happened? Where did things go wrong (Adams 6)?

This extract is latent with socio-religious and emotional situations which all the parties are privy to. Marriage is a social institution with its axiomatic norms. An ideal marriage is a social knowledge which is constructed by Frank and further espoused through the accompanied background information. This knowledge is most likely shared by the other participants. The knowledge helps the Counsellor for instance to put the real reason behind Phyllis’ call for divorce in the right perspective.

Since Frank is an ideal husband, the woman’s request for divorce may have been fuelled by reasons other than her dissatisfaction with Frank’s conduct. This understanding has guided the counsellor to probe further for the real reason behind Phyllis’ action more so that she does not adduce any reason for her action. Her silence is however an additional pointer to the suspicion that she is probably depressed since it is common knowledge that aggrieved women who are poised for divorce would speak out rather than keep mute in a counselling context.

The shared religious knowledge is unveiled through the emphasis on the couple’s Christian activities and on those of their children.

*They were both Christians; went to church regularly. He loved her deeply. They had raised three children successfully (after all, Franklin Jr. had just left home for his second semester at Christian University, and Betty and Joan were already married to Christian husbands and had begun to raise their families).*

Consistent leanings, by the Frank family, to the counsel of God have no doubt met the expectation of the clergy in their identification as ideal Christians. But why is such family plagued with the threat of divorce? Anyone in the shoes of the Counsellor would be confounded. Indeed, Frank had asked a similar question in disbelief:

*What could have happened to Phyllis?*

The emotional pains and frustration of the husband is shared by the Counsellor. There is no doubting that Frank is committed and loves his wife deeply. Humans are capable of loving whereas many are victims of love including the clergy who is bound to show empathy particularly when faced by a near-perfect man who is trying, frantically, to save his marriage.

*Pastor, help me. I don’t want to lose Phyllis. I love her! What happened? Where did things go wrong?*

The mediator could imagine the impending loneliness which the client is aiming to avoid. Any married man who has had to
contend with domestic chores on the absence of the woman from home for whatever reason would appreciate the apprehension of Frank. With the knowledge that Phyllis’ action is hardly justifiable the Man of God to empathisewith Frank and explores every means atresolving the mystery behind Sharon’s request. The resolution could be fast-tracked with the inside knowledge of the socio-religious and psychological situations that are involved. This is bound to lead the clergy to a proper diagnosis away from the issues that are on the surface of the couple’s narratives.

3.0 Conclusion

Empathy, as a professional requirement for effective counselling and a prerequisite for the proper diagnosis of myriad of issues confronting man, has through this study manifested in the form of SSK which is enacted as social, religious and emotional undercurrents in the parties situation. This understanding is a vital tool that provides the counsellor a linguistic direction in his investigation and the subsequent advice on diverse problems that are brought to his desk. The counsellor’s shared knowledge of the situational nuances that underlie his client’s problems is rewarding in the prescription of scriptural advice to his clients who sees spiritual solutions as the last hope of the common man.

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