Language in Context: Selected Essays

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Natural languages all contain constructions the interpretation of which depends upon the situation in which they are used. In Language and Context, Jason Stanley presents a series of essays which develop a theory of how the situation in which we speak interacts with the words we use to help produce what we say. The reason we can so smoothly operate with sentences that can be used to express very different items of information, Stanley argues, is that there
are linguistically mandated constraints on the effects of the situation on what we say. These linguistically mandated constraints are most evident in the cases of sentences containing explicit pronouns, such as 'She is a mathematician', where interpretation of the information expressed is guided by the use
of the pronoun 'she'. But even when such explicit pronouns are lacking, our sentences provide similar cues to allow our interlocutors to determine the information expressed. We are, in the main, confident that our interlocutors will smoothly grasp what we say, because the grammar and meaning of our sentences encodes these constraints. In defending this theory, Stanley pays close attention to specific cases of context-sensitive constructions, such as quantified noun phrases, comparative
adjectives, and conditionals.

Philosophers and cognitive scientist have appealed to the dependence of what is intuitively said by a sentence on the situation in which it is uttered to argue against the possibility of a systematic theory of meaning for natural language. The theory developed in this book is a vigorous defence of the possibility of a systematic theory of meaning for natural language against these influential tendencies.

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