

## Beyond Semantic Opposition: Contextual Opposites in Osundare's *The Eye Of The Earth*

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### ABSTRACT

Lexical semanticists have categorized linguistic items based on their perceived relationships and have come up with the category termed semantic oppositions to describe words that share certain contrastive features. Consequently, certain categories of semantic oppositions have been documented in the literature. The current research argues that a certain type of opposition termed contextual opposition has not been accounted for. Resting on Teun van Dijk's (2006) socio-cognitive theory of context, this paper probes into the types of opposites found in Niyi Osundare's poetry, *The Eye of the Earth* with a view to accounting for the nature of relationships existing between certain pairs of opposites. In addition to the various types of semantic opposites in the text, analysis reveals the presence of a new type of opposites termed 'contextual opposites' (opposition conferred on the linguistic items by context). Findings reveal that contextual oppositions (or pragmatic oppositions) designate a relationship in which words, phrases and larger expressions which ordinarily do not share any linguistic relationship of contrast or incompatibility are forced to appear as opposites as a result of their contextual contradictory semantics and syntactic ordering. The paper concludes that current categorisation of opposition in English should incorporate contextual oppositions rather than limiting such to the traditional lens of lexical semantics.

### INTRODUCTION

Born in 1947 in Ikere-Ekiti in southwest Nigeria, Osundare is recognized as a prolific poet, dramatist, essayist, and literary critic. Having written volumes of poetry, books of selected poems, plays, essays, and numerous articles on literature, language, culture and society, he has carved a niche for himself among world class literary artists. Osundare's oeuvre has, in recent decades, enjoyed a lot of research attention especially from literary scholars and linguists. More than in any other genre, the author has singled out himself as a versatile African poet who has churned out a huge collection of largely orally-informed poetry thematising different African experiences, as he experiments with varying poetic forms. No wonder, researchers have found his prodigious collections a ready tool for research investigations. Osundare's poetry has been widely studied from a number of research perspectives. While some researches concentrated on the philosophical, the political, the religious and the socio-cultural dimensions in those literary outputs, others focused on the literary, the political and the linguistic ethos and nuances of the works.

Some of the scholars who have investigated Osundare's works include Tamure (2003), Alu (2008), Dick (2015),

Odiye (2015), Addo (2015), Anyokwu (2015), Jimoh and Odetade (2016), Fasasi (2016) and Bamigboye (2019). For instance, Odiye (2015) examines the influence of the Yoruba cultural worldview on one of Osundare's poems, *The Eye of the Earth* and reasons that the poems in the collection are laden with features of oral traditional poetry of the Yoruba. Anyokwu (2015) agrees that the themes in Osundare's poetry can be summed up as class struggle aimed at establishing a classless communist society where the mass of common and rural beings are not discriminated. Anyokwu (2015: 11) describes features that set apart Osundare's poetry as 'limpidity of diction, multi-valence of form, the intermingling of man and nature, animist materialism, adroit deployment of stylistic 'tricks of print', neologism, wordplay, lexico-morphological innovation, sound semiotics, sprung rhythm, riddling vision, the memorial temper, innuendo, *joie de vivre*, cultivation of collectivism, an unbending commitment to revolutionary ideals and the passionate pursuit of freedom'. Dick (2015) examines the use of deviation for stylistic aesthetics in Osundare's works and concludes that the poet is one 'who is quite sensitive to language, who is prepared to exploit even the seemingly insignificant of forms to achieve stylistic significance' (2). Jimoh and Odetade (2016) attempt a socio-stylistic examination of lexical choices in Osundare's

title, 'Blues for the New Senate King', a poem satirizing the Nigerian politicians and they conclude that the poet employs common resources of language in unusual manners.

The current research takes a departure from the previous studies because it is concerned with understanding certain lexical and phrasal choices the poet has made in one of his poems, *The Eye of the Earth* with a view to determining the relations of those linguistic items to one another. Specifically, this paper is concerned with patterns of oppositeness (or antonymous relationships) of some linguistic items in the text. Scholars in the area of semantics have categorized lexical items relationally and have come up with the traditional category of opposition (antonym) and its types. However, it occurs to us from recent observation that a certain class of oppositions which we may refer to as contextual opposition has not been accounted for by scholars. The essence of this paper is therefore to account for a type of relationship existing between pairs of words and expressions that are not related in any sense whatsoever but which become opposites as a result of the environment they find themselves. We presume that words that are not opposites in any way may become opposites due to the effects of the context on them. This is the reason this paper is determined to examine the notion of contextual opposites in Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth*. It is hoped that the task will yield novel and revealing insights that will lead to a novel categorisation of opposites, one that will rely on insights from both semantic and pragmatics.

**CATEGORISING SEMANTIC OPPOSITIONS IN ENGLISH**

Semanticists have categorised linguistic items in English language based on the meaning relations that exist among them. Such categorisation, no doubt, has been very useful to researchers and students of language alike as it has helped to establish various, and deeper, perspectives of meaning relationships. Consequently, semantic categories such as synonymy, polysemy, homonymy, hyponymy, oppositions (antonymy), etc, have been identified and documented by scholars at the lexical level of relationships (Löbner, 2002; Saeed, 2009; Reimer, 2010).

Semantic opposition (traditionally called antonymy) has been studied by researchers. Oppositeness has been defined by Cruse (2006: 121) as 'a special variety of incompatibility involving a binary contrast...opposite meanings represent a two-way division of some inclusive notion'. Reimer (2010: 137) maintains that antonymy 'may be characterised as a relationship of incompatibility between two terms with respect to some given dimension of contrast'. From the above submissions, it is clear that the two lexical items that are considered opposites will exhibit some incompatible features along a particular line of contrast. Viewed from some other angles, the two items may be compatible. For instance, while the pairs of *go/come*, *yesterday/tomorrow*, *live/die*, are considered opposites, they are only considered so along a certain line of contrast. Both *go* and *come* relate to the super-ordinate notion of walk/move in certain direction, just as *yesterday* and *tomorrow* are both days before and after

*today*. Again, to *live* or *die* are two states of existence.

Due to the intricate nature of opposite relations of lexical items, researchers have attempted some categorisations of semantic opposites. A number of types have therefore emerged in the literature. These categories include simple antonyms, gradable antonyms, reverses, converses and taxonomic sisters (Saeed, 2009: 66 -69); complementaries, antonyms, directional opposites, converses and reversives (Cruse, 2006: 122); and antonyms, directional opposites, complementaries, heteronyms and converses (Löbner, 2002: 87 - 93). Löbner's (2002: 93) categorisation of oppositions as presented in Table 5.1 is important.

**Types of Oppositions**

Examples	Type	Characterization	Logical relation
big/small war/peace to love/to hate	Antonyms	opposite extremes on a scale	Contraries
above/ below before/after lock/unlock	directional opposites	opposite directions on an axis	contraries
even/odd girl/boy voter/ non-voter	complementaries	either-or alternatives within a given domain	Complementaries
Monday/ Tuesday/... red/green/ blue...	heteronyms	more than two alternatives within a given domain	contraries
buy/sell wife/ husband bigger/ smaller employer/ employee	converses	the same with reversed roles (relations only)	(various logical relations)

(Löbner, 2002)

From the table above, antonyms describe two expressions 'if they denote two opposite extremes out of a range of possibilities' (Löbner, 88) but directional opposites 'are related to opposite directions on a common axis' (Löbner, 90 - 91) while complementary opposite 'denotes one out of the only two possibilities' as 'complementary opposites represent an either-or alternative' (Löbner, 91). Further, heteronyms involve more than two members in a given domain while converses refer to two expressions 'if and only if they express the same relation with reversed roles' (Löbner, 92).

From the discussion of semantic oppositions as presented above and as discussed by scholars, it is observed that all the words and expressions given above as examples of the different types of oppositions have a certain relationship connecting them, even when we see them as opposites. For example, *big* and *small* relate to size, *above* and *below* relate to direction, *girl* and *boy* relate to young human while *red*, *green* and *blue* relate to colour. This confirms that typical

oppositions, while contradictory in some sense, are usually related in certain other sense. All of the types of opposition observed and discussed by scholars from the standpoint of their semantic relations may be regarded as semantic opposition. In other words, semantic opposition describes a contrary or contradictory relation between two lexical items without recourse to context.

Observation shows that a certain class of oppositions which we encounter in Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth* has not been accounted for by scholars. This paper therefore attempts to account for a type of relationship existing between pairs of words and expressions that are not related in any sense whatsoever but which become opposites as a result of the environment they find themselves. We presume that words that are not opposites in any way may become opposites due to the effects of the context where they occur. This is the reason this paper is determined to examine the notion of contextual opposites in Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth*. By doing this, we presume that oppositions are broadly categorized into two: semantic opposition (which subsumes the different types of opposition discussed above) and contextual or pragmatic opposition which this paper makes a case for.

### THE ROLE OF CONTEXT IN MEANING MAKING

The goal of language use is to make meaning since interactants communicate mainly to convey meaning. Until the emergence of pragmatics, meaning is assumed to be solely within the purview of semantics. Meaning in interactions is now understood not to be complete until recourse is made to context as both meaning and context are interdependent. In fact, the meaning of a word and phrase can be inferred by paying close attention to context. Context has been considered a major concept in linguistics as a result of its importance in the interpretation of linguistic expressions. From Firth in the 1930s who argues that 'the complete meaning of a word is always contextual, and no study of meaning apart from a complete context can be taken seriously' (Firth, 1935: 37) to Bransford and Johnson (1972) who maintain that to understand a sentence requires our knowledge of the world in addition to our knowledge of the language, and to Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory in the 1980s, scholars have considered context as a very important ingredient in unravelling meaning. Further cognitive linguistics whose object of study is not language in its abstraction but language to mean or language in use has made a case for the integration of context into meaning. Fortunately, the goal of pragmatics is to decipher the meaning of language in use.

Context is a term used loosely by linguists to refer to the environment of an utterance. The term is employed by different authors for different but interrelated ideas. Context has been broadly categorized into two of linguistic and situational contexts. Linguistic context will include all the morphological, phonetic, syntactic and textual materials surrounding the word. This notion of context sees the context of a word as the linguistic environment of that word or phrase, that is, the words before and after that word (Charles, 2000:

506 - 507). Situational context involves factors in the immediate situation and the socio-cultural background in which the interactional event takes place. This may also involve the personal experiences, perceptions and beliefs of participants in the interaction. Situational context therefore implies the real world situation in which the interaction or discourse takes place. Closely related to this meaning of context is the knowledge of the real world possessed by the interactants which they bring to bear on the current interaction (Christiansen & Dahl, 2005: 100).

From the foregoing, it becomes clear that context is a most necessary ingredient for the understanding of meaning in expressions because words and phrases behave and mean differently in different situations. Further, context has the power to confer and to force unexpected and strange meanings on words and phrases. Therefore a proper attempt to understand any linguistic expression must make recourse to context.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Teun van Dijk's (2006) theory of context which serves as the theoretical framework for this study is a socio-cognitive approach to discourse. It is described as subject participant's construct of communicative situations since it sees context as participant construct. Context models provide an explicit theory of relevance and the situational appropriateness of discourse. The theory proposes that contexts are 'subjective participant interpretations, constructions or definitions of such aspects of the social environment' rather than an 'objective or deterministic constraints of society or culture' (van Dijk, 2006: 163). The theory perceives context as an interface between social structure and discourse and, defines context from the participant's point of view as the participant's mental constructs with which the participant is able to make a connection among the 'situational and societal structures and discourse structures' because these structures 'subjectively represent relevant aspects of situations and society and directly interfere in the mental processes of discourse production and comprehension' (163). It is therefore not the objective conceptualizations of gender, power, class or ethnicity that should be central in the production and comprehension of talks but the way the interactants interpret, represent and understand extra-textual constraints in situated interactions. Contexts, unlike talks, is not observable but only become perceived 'by their consequences on discourse, or vice versa, by the influence of discourse on social situations (van Dijk, 2006: 164).

The theory argues that participants plan communicative events, that is, participants have a foreknowledge of what to talk about, with whom, where, when and as what, even if the knowledge is vague whereas contexts are usually construed only from the beginning of the talk or text. Context influences what interactants say and how they say it. Mental models are representations of people's experiences which are subjective and may be biased in representing realities. The theory is hinged on the mental model since the theory assumed that 'the production and understanding of discourse prominently involve the formation, activation or actualization of a mental

model as a representation in Episodic Memory' (169), mental model itself being a subjective representation of events or situations around the discourse. People are able to make a sense of a talk or discourse when they are able to construct a mental model for it and they rely on schemas, moves and strategies to enhance their understanding of various discourses and situations (van Dijk, 2006: 169).

The theory sees contexts as the participant's mental model of communicative situations i.e. contexts are the subjective understanding of events or situations around participants as they engage in talks. Context serves as the basis for understanding discourse. Context provides the initial plans of all discourse because it is the goal of understanding interactions. Context is strategic and it dynamically controls both the production and understanding of discourse just as it controls what may vary in interactions. Therefore, it is assumed that participants share knowledge and monitor the dynamics of that knowledge in the course of the interaction. In addition to featuring personal beliefs of participants, the model embodies 'large amounts of (instantiated) socially shared knowledge and other beliefs' (van Dijk, 2006: 172).

In line with the above, we perceive contexts as situated with the participant in talks, as a product of the participant's social cognition with which s/he is able to mentally relate the various aspects of the immediate situation of the talks and the wider society with the mental process of discourse production and interpretation. In reading meanings to certain lexical items and phrases encountered in the text under study, this current work will adopt van Dijk's contextual theory as it focuses on the participant's construct of communicative situation.

### CONTEXTUAL OPPOSITIONS IN OSUNDARE'S *THE EYE OF THE EARTH*

In Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth*, we observe a novel pattern of oppositions in the author's use of words. These are opposite items that are not semantically related or contradictory in any way, except that the context has conferred oppositions on them. In the poem, 'Ours to Plough, Not to Plunder' on page 47, we observe instances of opposite lexical items that do not ordinarily share any semantic connections and cannot be referred to as semantic opposites. While the poem thematises the relationship that ought to exist between human beings and the earth, it sets forth its expectations by using opposite terms: *work* and *waste*; *man* and *maim*; *plough* and *plunder* as presented below:

This earth is  
ours to work not to waste  
ours to man not to maim  
This earth is ours to plough not to plunder.

Apparently, an innocent reader will assume that these pairs are semantic opposites because their structural appearance in the lines set them out as such, especially too when the negative marker 'not' connects each of the pair and the alliteration in the pairs become easily noticed. The negative marker in each line functionally specifies what human beings should do to the earth as against what should not be done,

thereby setting up a contradictory relationships between the pairs of non-relational terms.

However, from the view point of semantics, the opposite of *to work* is *to play*, or *to be idle (not to work)*. It will be difficult therefore to consider the verb *waste* as the opposite of the verb *work* because as lexical items, they do not share any semantic relation. Further, the semantic opposite of the verb *waste* may include *conserve*, *save* and *preserve* but not *work*. This implies that, from our knowledge of the world, the two words are not semantically related or contradictory. Any contradiction we perceive in the pair of *work* and *waste* is therefore as a result of our mental perception enhanced by their near-by appearance in that context. Contextually therefore, the meaning of *to work* may be mentally extended to include to put to (good) use, to cultivate, or to farm, since the whole idea is about how to relate with the earth. It is in the light of this extended meaning of *to work* that *to waste* becomes its opposite in this specific context as *to waste* now means not to put to good use or not to use at all. Similarly, the two words, *man* and *maim*, are not lexical opposites since the verb *to man* implies to safeguard, to take up position, to operate, to fortify while the verb *to maim* means to mutilate, to disfigure, to mangle or to destroy. Therefore, the two lexical items do not share any semantic relations and are not to be considered as semantic opposites. However, they share some meaning connections only when we take into cognition the situational, societal and discourse structures of the text. Therefore, *to man* the earth in the context of the poem may mean to safeguard the earth, to operate or cultivate the earth while *to maim* the earth in the context of the poem may imply to destroy, to abandon, neglect or abuse the earth.

In the last line of the excerpt, another two lexical items *plough* and *plunder* are placed in contradictory positions so that we may perceive them as lexical opposites. *To plough* may mean to prepare the farmland (using the plough), to cultivate or clear the land in readiness for farming. Definitely, *to plunder* is not the lexical opposite of *to plough*. *To plunder* is to pillage, to loot, to take or destroy by force. Therefore, the two items are not to be considered as semantic opposites but the context confers certain contradictory relations on the two items. If we read *ploughing* the earth as the cultivation of the earth for farming, since that is what the earth is meant for, then to plunder the earth will mean to use the earth for the wrong purpose which is akin to plundering or destroying the earth. Therefore, while the two items *plough* and *plunder* are not semantic opposites, they become pragmatic opposites in the context of the poem, a position we arrived at from our cognitive understanding of the relationship among the variables of context. It is important to note that the pairs of lexical items we have treated so far: *work* and *waste*; *man* and *maim*; *plough* and *plunder* are not semantic opposites but contextual opposites. We agree that readers mentally perceive them as opposites because of the reader's cognitive construct with which connections are made among the broad features of context. As a result, we believe that these pairs are examples of pragmatic or contextual opposites.

In the poem 'Earth' on page 1, we observe a preponderance of lexical contrasts throughout the poem. We shall

attempt to discuss the observed lexical contrasts, following Löbner's (2002) classification. The poem is presented thus:

Temporary basement  
and lasting roof  
first clayey coyness  
and last alluvial joy  
breadbasket  
and compost bed  
rocks and rivers  
muds and mountains  
silence of the twilight sea  
echoes of the noonsome tide  
milk of mellowing moon  
fire of tropical hearth  
spouse of the roving sky  
virgin of a thousand offsprings

In the above poem, it appears that each of the lexical items employed has been deliberately placed in parallel contrast to certain other item. For example, *basement* and *roof* are an example of directional opposites since they represent opposite directions on an axis, the pairs of *temporary* and *lasting* and, *first* and *last* constitute antonyms because they are opposite extremes on a scale, while *clayey* and *alluvial* constitute heteronyms within the domain of soil. In the same vein, the words *twilight* and *noonsome* (although *noonsome* is a special formation by the poet) constitute other heteronyms alongside other times of the day such as dawn, mid-day and afternoon. Both pairs of *breadbasket* and *compost bed* and, *silence* and *echoes* form complementaries because they represent the alternatives as regards the state of the soil/earth. In the last two lines, *spouse* and *virgin* are converses since they are contrasted along the line of marital relation. All of these pairs have been placed in parallel contrast by the author so that readers will easily see the contrast between them and, perceive them as semantic opposites. But if the entire last two lines: *spouse of the roving sky / virgin of a thousand offsprings* are taken together since they are also

parallel constructions, then the earth is represented as being married to the sky and, at the same time, as a virgin who gives birth to a thousand offspring. The phrases therefore describe in contrast what the earth takes in (water and sun from the sky which gets the earth 'pregnant') and what the earth brings forth (crops in thousands as offspring).

Aside the above contrary lexical relationships which are all instances of semantic opposites, other lexical items which appear apparently like opposites do not easily lend themselves to be classified as such. For instance, the relationship between *sea* and *tide* is ordinarily not that of opposites but a hyponymic one where *sea* is the super-ordinate term. More specifically, the relationship between *sea* and *tide* has been described as has-relation where *tide* is only a feature of *sea* (see Griffiths, 2006: 50 – 51). Whether we see the relationship as hyponymic or has-relation type, what is very clear is that the context of the utterance necessitates us to see the two items as opposites in the same manner we are forced by the context to see *rocks* and *rivers* and, *muds* and *mountains* as opposites. Again, as individual lexical items, *milk* and *fire* do not constitute lexical opposites because there is no apparent relationship between the two words. Perhaps, the semantic opposite of *fire* is *water* and, the opposite of *milk*, perhaps, is *tea*. However from the two parallel lines, *milk of mellowing moon / fire of tropical hearth*, the intended contrast becomes noticed, especially when we are forced to make a mental connection as regards the structures of the situation, the society and the current discourse. We then read the lines figuratively and perceive the overall messages as contradictory: the first line *milk of mellowing moon* suggests a cool nourishing and calm tenderness of the earth while the second line *fire of tropical hearth* describes the harsh burning or sunny heat of the earth. Therefore, while the two lines are contradictory or opposite, they share certain connection to the earth. The oppositeness of the two expressions is definitely not as a result of the fact that the individual lexical items in the expressions are opposites but

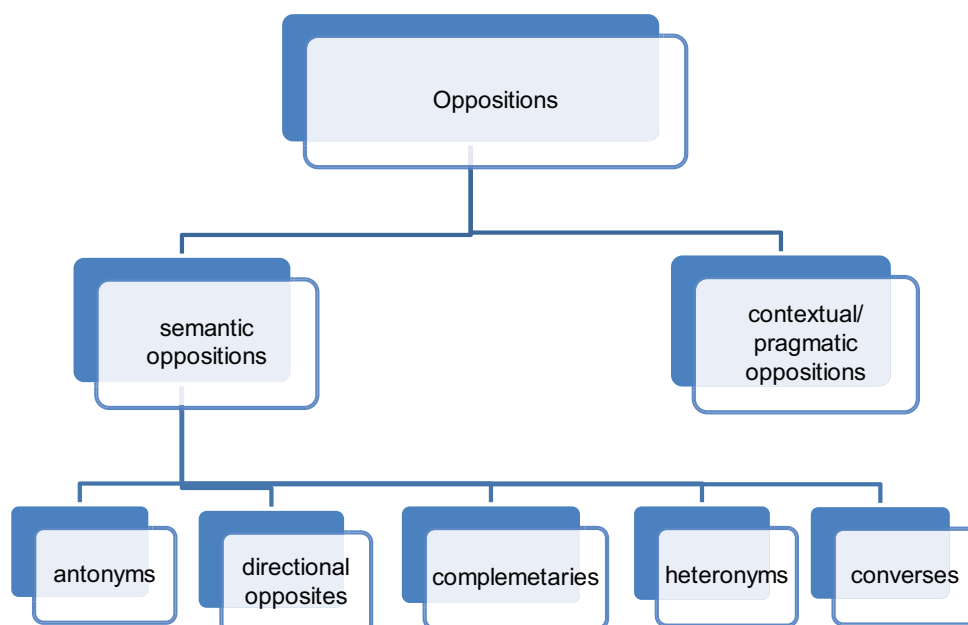


Figure 1. Categorising oppositions in english

because the contextual reading of the lines forces us to see those words which are not normally considered as opposites as such. We therefore term the above an instance of contextual opposites.

From the foregoing analysis, it becomes clear that two broad categories of opposite relationships occur among lexical items: semantic opposites and contextual opposites. While the semantically opposite relationships occur between linguistic items that share certain contrasts along a line of relations (and this occurs whether in context or not), contextual opposites designate two lexical items, phrases or larger constructions which do not normally share any linguistic relationship and are therefore not ordinarily considered as lexical opposites but which have been brought into contrast by the context of the discourse. Contextual opposites are words, phrases and larger expressions forced by the context of the discourse to appear as opposites in terms of their syntactic ordering and their contradictory semantic imports. Contextual opposites are thus realised as a result of the participant's (the reader's) mental construct, that is, the cognitive connection he makes from the relationship among situational, societal and discourse structures. Outside of the context however, contextual opposites cease to be opposites because it is context-dependent. From our discussion, it becomes clear that the pairs of *work/waste*; *man/maim*; *plough/plunder*; *spouse of the roving sky/virgin of a thousand offsprings*; *sea/tide*; *rocks/rivers*; *muds/mountains*; and *milk of mellowing moon/fire of tropical hearth* are instances of contextual opposites. Based on the current discussion and following insights from Löbner's (2002: 93) categorisation of oppositions, a new categorisation of opposition has been presented in Figure 1 above.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has examined the notion of oppositions in English language by investigating certain types of opposite relationship found in Osundare's *The Eye of the Earth*. The paper argues that oppositions in English have not been exhaustively discussed as it has only been approached from a purely semantic angle. Recent observation shows that a certain class of oppositions beyond the lexis and semantics has not been accounted for by scholars. This paper has attempted to account for a type of relationship existing between pairs of words and expressions that are not related in any sense whatsoever but which become opposites as a result of the environment they find themselves in the language. Investigation revealed a number of semantic opposites as well as a new type of opposites termed 'contextual opposites' in the text under study. The paper therefore proposes a new type of opposite relations termed contextual (or pragmatic) opposition. Contextual opposition designates two linguistic items, phrases or larger constructions which do not share any linguistic relationship of contrast or incompatibility, and are therefore not ordinarily considered as opposites but which have been brought into contrast by the context of the discourse. Contextual opposites are described as words, phrases and larger expressions forced by the context of the discourse to appear as opposites in

terms of their contextual contradictory semantics and syntactic ordering. Outside of the context however, they cease to be opposites because they only become opposites when viewed as contradictory within the context. The paper calls for a broader re-categorisation of oppositions in English to incorporate contextual oppositions.

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