

The Study of Context: From Static to Dynamic

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Abstract: Context plays an important role in verbal communication. In recent years, more and more scholars have devoted themselves to the dynamic research of utterances. They hold that both communication and the generation of meaning are dynamic processes which involve contexts. This paper depicts the study of static context and point out its deficiency, and then it will expound the dynamic properties of context through the application of the Theory of Adaptation and the Relevance Theory.

Keywords: context, static, dynamic, “context of situation”, context of culture, asymmetrical process, dynamic process.

INTRODUCTION

Context is a most important notion in pragmatics. Out of various interests, researchers have initiated studies from different perspectives. Akman (2000: 745) points out that: “That context has become a favorite word in the vocabulary of cognitive psychologist and that it has appeared in the titles of a vast number of articles are well-known facts”. However, to give context an appropriate definition that covers all the domains of the research is not an easy job, “. . .context has become some sort of ‘conceptual garbage can’”(ibid.). According to *Oxford Concise Companion to the English Language* (McArthur & McArthur, 2001: 151), context is defined as follows:

CONTEXT. I. Also co-text. The speech, writing, or print that normally precedes and follows a word or other element of language. The meaning of words may be affected by their context. If a phrases is quoted out of context, its effect may be different from what was originally intended. 2. The linguistic, situational, social and cultural environment of an element of language, an action, behaviour, etc.

In another dictionary — *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary* (Sinclair, et at. 2000: 353), the prevalent meanings of the term include the following: The *context* of something consists of the ideas, situations, events, or information that relate to it and make it possible to understand it fully. If something is seen in *context* or if it is put *in context*, it is considered with all the factors that are related to it rather than just being considered on its own, so that it can be properly understood. If a remark, statement, etc is taken or quoted *out of context*, it is only considered on its own and the circumstances in which it was said are ignored. It, therefore, seems to mean something different from the meaning that was intended. The definitions above present that the explanation of words or sentences is impossible or seriously incomplete unless context is taken into account. Words and sentences in context often mean more than in isolation. This is often the case in verbal communication in which the speaker conveys to the hearer more than what he/she says literally and the hearer can infer more than the meaning of words and sentences on surface. Context in this sense bestows words and sentences with new meanings and provides the ground for their comprehension. Therefore, context is a crucial factor in verbal communication.

The following conversation offers a striking example of the importance of context in understanding utterances:

(A and B are on the telephone, talking over arrangements for the next couple of days.)

A: So can you please come over here again right now?

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B: *Well, I have to go to Sirdarya today, sir.*

A: *“Hmm. How about this Tuesday?”* (Levinson, 2001: 48)

Obviously, in order to understand this conversation, some deixis, conversational implicatures, presuppositions, and other factual and contextual conditions have to be involved in this exchange in order to make sense. For example, the time of the conversation (“today”) is understood as being different from “*this Tuesday*” (time deixis). Besides, the word “*again*” indicates that B has been to A’s present location before (presupposition).

Further more, A (being addressed as “*sir*”) seems to be in a position that allows him to give orders to B (implicature).

All these facts function as elements forming part of a context which “reflect our ability to compute out of utterances in sequence the contextual assumptions they imply:..the spacial, temporal and social relationships between participants, and their requisite beliefs and intentions in undertaking certain verbal exchanges” (Levinson, 2001: 49). It should be noted that context is not static. It is not given, immutable or pre-existing before the communication takes place. To a great extent, contexts are created by communicators through the dynamic process of the communication, and keep changing and expanding in the process as the communicators’ mutual knowledge expands. Just as Mey (2001: 39) says:

“Context is a dynamic, not a static concept. It is to be understood as the continually changing surroundings, in the widest sense, that enable the participants in the communication process to interact, and in which the linguistic expressions of their interaction become intelligible.”

Literature Review

Static Context: In the 1980s and 1990s, in the field of pragmatics, more and more scholars began to divert their attentions to the dynamic research. Thomas (1995) points out that the object of pragmatic study should be “meaning in interaction”. Both communication and the generation of meaning are dynamic processes which involve contexts. However, the traditional notion of context is mainly static and cannot reflect the dynamic properties of communication.

Firth emphasizes the abstract nature of context in situation, noting that the context of situation is not merely a setting background for the words at a particular moment, but rather includes the entire cultural setting of speech and the personal history of the participants.

Obviously, Firth’s context includes context of situation concerning linguistic factors and context of situation concerning non-linguistic factors. Descended directly from Firth’s perspective of context theory, Halliday (2001) takes a functional approach to view language as an instrument of social interaction. He introduced the term “register” to analyze context. In his theory, “register” is defined as a variety of a language, distinguished according to use. And three axes of situation are put forth as the milieu of language use: “field of discourse”, “mode of discourse” and “tenor of discourse”. “Field of discourse” refers to “what is happening to the nature of the social action that is taking” (Halliday, 2001: 12). “Mode of discourse refers to “what part the language is playing, what it is that the participants are expecting the language to do for them in that situation” (ibid.). “Tenor of discourse refers to “what is taking part to the nature of the participant, their structures and roles”(ibid.). Halliday (2001) further proposes that field, tenor and mode are interdependent and their configurative features specify the register of a text.

Dynamic Context: With the development of pragmatics, many linguists have found the deficiency of the notion of static context. This causes people to take a new look at the notion of context. The following sections will give a detailed illustration of the notion of dynamic context from the view of Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 2001) and Theory of Adaptation (Verschueren, 2000).

In 1986, Sperber & Wilson’s work *Relevance. Communication and Cognition* came off the press and made a hit in the pragmatic circle. In this work, the co-authors explicate communication from the angle



of cognition and bring forth the theory of relevance. Owing to their theory, cognition has become a new starting point and theoretic focus in pragmatic research.

According to the two authors, context is a set of assumptions derived from the communicator's cognitive environment, including not only the co-text of an utterance but also the contextual factors such as the immediate physical environment, the participants' background knowledge like all the known facts, assumptions, beliefs, and cognitive abilities.

Analysis and discussion

Under the framework of Relevance Theory, context is a part of cognitive environment, and the determination of a context is not a prerequisite of the comprehension process, but a part of it. The forming of a context is a dynamic process, and the conclusion of the preceding utterance can be the context of the next utterance. In verbal communication, significant to the interpretation of the utterance is not the immediate concrete environment but a series of assumptions that make up of the cognitive contexts. Utterance understanding is concerned with the co-ordination and computation of the old information to be understood. In the course of verbal communication, the immediate concrete environment becomes the basis of utterance understanding, and the assumptions are inferred and interpreted on the ground of the former. It is also the integration of old and new information that produces relevant information as the premise, and on the ground provided by the interaction of the two kinds of information, the hearer makes induction and deduction and eventually arrives at the intention of the speaker.

The interaction of old and new information can be illustrated in three aspects: a) New information and old information interact with each other to produce a contextual implication. For example:

2. A: *Could you have a quick look at my printer — it's not working right.*

B: *I have got only five minutes until eleven o'clock*

In this conversation, the new information provided by B interacts with the old information stored in A's cognitive environment like this:

(a) *There are only five minutes until eleven o'clock.* (b) *The printer problem is not an obvious one, but will require opening it up.* (c) *Opening up the printer will take more than five minutes.* (d).

The old information above interacts with B's new information and a contextual implication can be inferred: B is not able to have a look at the printer now.

b) New information provides further evidence to strengthen the old information. For example: 3) A: *I have a hunch that Gill is looking for a new job.*

B: *Yeah, she is studying job ads whenever she has a spare minute.*

In this conversation, B's words that "she is studying job ads whenever she has a spare time" provide an evidence to A's thought that Gill is looking for a new job so as to prove the facticity of A's words.

c) New information provides evidence against the old information, which leads to the abandonment of old information. Look at the following example:

4. A: *Would you like something to eat?*

B: *I've just had lunch.*

In this conversation, B's words contradict with A's words, but what B says is the fact, so it excludes A's old information. These three aspects show that context is constantly changing in verbal communication. In this dynamic process, old information and new information interact with each other so as to extend the context and make sure the continuous exchange of information.

It should be emphasized that the focal points in the above representation are language users — the utterer (U) and the interpreter (I), because 'be contextual aspects of the physical, social, and mental worlds do not usually start to play a role in language use until they have somehow been activated by



the language users' cognitive processes" (Verschueren, 2000: 77). It means that communicators take a leading position in verbal communication, which can be shown from the following two dialogues:

5) *Interviewer (I): Have you visited the skill center.*

Electrician (E): Yes, I did.

I: So you 've had a look at the workshops?

E: Yes.

I: You know what the training allowance is? Do you?

E: Yeah.

(10) *Interviewer (I) : Have you visited the skill center?*

Bricklayer(B): Yep, I've been there. Yeah.

I: So you 've had a chance to look around? And did you look in at the brick shop?

B: Ah yeah. We had a look around the brickshop. And it looks. OK I mean

I: All right.

B: Pretty good.

(Zhang Lei : 2004: 40)

In these two dialogues, the electrician and bricklayer apply for a training programme. Facing the same questions of the interviewer, the two people answer them in different ways. The electrician just gives a passive and brief answer such as "Yes I did", "Yes", without providing any special personal information. While the bricklayer adds some descriptive words such as "I've been there, yeah" to his affirmative answers, which shows that he is very interested in this training programme. Although his words are not very long, they can help him establish a kind of harmonious atmosphere between himself and the interviewer so as that when the bricklayer cannot find a word to express himself at the end of the conversation, the interviewer helps him. On the contrary, the electrician's restrained words make him keep a distance from the interviewer. In the end, the bricklayer gets this chance, which may attribute to his appropriate communicative strategies.

Verschueren (2000: 112) also points out that "context is the product of a generation process". In verbal communication, communicators select from a wide range of available 'realities', turning them into relevant correlates.

Additionally, both the two theories emphasize the manipulation of communicators in verbal communication. In Relevance Theory, the speaker's optional behavior and the hearer's inferential behavior are the main active forces

to the changing of the context and they are also the basis of successful communication. In the Theory of Adaptation, the speaker and the hearer are the focal points in the dynamic generation of context, which can be activated by the interaction of the two roles.

Conclusion

The discussion in this paper indicates that context is

generated in the process of language use. In order to achieve successful communication, communicators should adapt their linguistic behaviour to those relevant contextual elements that are consistent with the principle of relevance for the sake of optimal relevance. Thus, contexts are created, out of virtually infinite range of possibilities, by the dynamics of interaction between speakers and hearers.



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