

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

1. 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 al. 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 *into 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:

(1) (*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?*

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

A: *"Hmm. How about this Thursday?"*

(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 Thursday*” (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.”

2. 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.

2.1. A General Survey of the Traditional Research on Context

The contextual theory of meaning was initiated by Malinowski, a Polish anthropologist, and developed by Firth and further elaborated by Halliday and other scholars of the London School. Since the arising of the new discipline of pragmatics, which takes context as its indispensable part, more and more scholars have been dwelling on this issue.

Up to Malinowski’s time, the word “context” in English had meant “co-text”, namely the words and sentences before and after the particular sentence that one was looking at. It was Malinowski who first developed the basic notion of context in his work “The Problem of Meaning In Primitive Language” in 1923. Malinowski claims that language is ‘to be regarded as a mode of action, rather than as a counterpart of thought. According to him, the meaning of an utterance does not come from the ideas of the words comprising it but from its relation to the situational context in which the utterance occurs.’ (Hu Zhuanglin, 1988: 385).

Malinowski coined the term “context of situation” when he was studying the inhabitants on the Trobriand Island in the South Pacific. “Exactly as the reality of spoken or written languages, a word with linguistic context is a figment and stands for nothing by itself, so in the reality of a spoken living tongue, the utterance has no meaning except in the context of situation” (Malinowski, 1923: 307). “Context of situation” refers to the wider idea of context or the general conditions under which a language is spoken. Malinowski lays emphasis on the role of the “context of situation” in determining the meanings in language use. And he notes that “...utterance and situation are bound up inextricably with each other and context of situation is indispensable for the understanding of the words” (ibid.).

Malinowski also points out that to understand the meaning of what is said, one should not only consider the particular context of utterance but also take into account the cultural characteristics of the society as reflected in the context of situation in which particular types of utterances are typically produced and which are themselves regarded as embedded in the context of culture. “Malinowski’s observation can be seen as one of the necessary pillars of any theory of pragmatics” (Verschueren, 2000: 75).

The notion of context, especially that of “context of situation”, is taken up and further developed by Firth. He maintains that “the context of situation is not to be interpreted in concrete terms as a sort of audiovisual record of the surrounding ‘props’ but is rather an abstract representation of the environment in terms of certain general categories having relevance to a text” (Halliday, 2001: 109). 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 types 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. In case, variation of any of these three — the text, a complex of ideational and textual meanings, is

affected accordingly.

Halliday (ibid.) also touches upon the “context of culture” that is the institutional and the ideological background giving value to the text and constraining its interpretation.

Levinson is one of the pragmatists who are active on the scene of the newly arising discipline. In his book *Pragmatics* (2001), Levinson’s context does not label all the actual situations of utterance in all their multiplicity of features, but only those features are culturally and linguistically relevant to the production and interpretation of utterance.

Levinson (2001: 23) notes that the scope of context should embrace “the social and psychological world in which the language user operates at any time” and that “context includes minimally language user’s beliefs and assumptions about temporal, spatial and social settings; prior, ongoing, and future actions (verbal, non-verbal), and the state of knowledge and attractiveness of those participated in the social interaction in hand”. Of course, Levinson (2001) also emphasizes that context does not exclude features since such features often invoke relevant contextual assumptions.

All the above ingredients are taken as contextual parameters important in determining the utterance meaning. An utterance, as he defines, “is the issuance of a sentence, a sentence-analogue, or sentence fragment, in an actual context” (Levinson, 2001: 18). Context plays a role in specifying what proposition the sentence expresses on this occasion of utterance. The specification of an utterance is achieved through filling in the pragmatic parameters with specific contexts.

2.2. The Features of the Notion of Static Context

The above section presents some traditional viewpoints on context. Each of these points has its own features. Firstly, both context of situation and context of culture are something given. They are regarded as something already in place or in the environment for language. This is a typical static concept. Secondly, Halliday’s model of context (“register” study) is a global context model which is typically static, because in this model, the context is assumed constant for the text as a whole. That is, there is an assumption that the context precedes the action, and that context constraints what one can do.

To sum up, the notion of static context regards context as (i) purely a reality out there that can explain meaning that semantics cannot explain; (ii) naturally a given factor in advance of the comprehension process at any given point in a verbal communication; (iii) shared knowledge that can never be realized.

If the above are assumed to be all the features of context, communicators’ cognitive ability and their active control over contexts will be ignored, and the dynamic property of communication cannot be explained, either. Therefore, it is necessary to study the dynamic properties of context.

3. 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).

3.1. Sperber & Wilson’s Theory of Context

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.

3.1.1. Sperber & Wilson’s Cognitive Context

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. Through the participants’ thinking activities and on the basis of their experience, all these are internalized and take root in their minds in the form of conceptual representations and hence become a cognitive environment, which is the set of all the facts that communicators can perceive or infer: “all the facts that are manifest to him. An individual’s total cognitive environment is a function of his physical environment and his cognitive abilities. It consists of not only all the facts that he is aware of, but also all the facts that he is capable of becoming aware of, in his physical environment” (Sperber & Wilson, 2001: 39).

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:

(i) 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.

(ii) 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.

(iii) 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.

3.1.2. The Selection of Context

In the eyes of Sperber & Wilson (2001), communicators not only access the relevance of the newly-presented information but also try to obtain from the newly-presented information as great a contextual effect as possible within as short a period of time and for as small a processing effort as possible. Thereupon, they propose a completely reverse model: first, relevance is determined, otherwise, it will be unnecessary to process an utterance, and then the communicators try to select a context which justifies the existence of relevance. So, "in verbal comprehension in particular, it is relevance which is treated as given, and context which is treated as a variable" (Sperber & Wilson,

2001: 142).

Communication requires some degree of co-ordination between the speaker and the hearer on the choice of a code and context. The co-ordination is an asymmetrical process in which the speaker takes the lead and the hearer follows. The roles of communication as the speaker and the hearer switch constantly during communication.

And what the speaker needs to do is to make correct assumptions about the codes and contextual information that the hearer will have access to and be likely to use in a comprehension process. The responsibility for avoiding misunderstanding also lies in the speaker, so that all the hearer has to do is to go ahead and use whatever codes and contextual information that come most easily to hand. Hence communication is a process of selecting appropriate context from our mind in order to obtain optimal relevance.

The interpretation of the previous utterance makes communication continuous and successful, and constitutes an immediately given context in which both the speaker and the hearer process the next turn of communication. In order to construct a complete context, communicators must extend this immediately given context in the following three directions: (i) 'going back in time' and adding to it assumptions used or derived in previous deductive processes; (ii) adding to it the encyclopedic entries (or possibly smaller chunks of encyclopedic information, taken from these entries) of concepts already present either in the context or in the assumption being processed; (iii) adding to it information about the immediately observable environment (Sperber & Wilson, 2001: 140-141). Consider the following examples:

(5) *A: We will all miss Dick and Jane.*

B: Well, we 'll all miss Dick.

In order to understand B's utterance, the information provided by A should be added. A wants B to approve his point that "we 'll miss Dick and Jane", but B just approves part if it.

(6) *A: I have run out of petrol.*

B: There is a garage around the corner.

In order to understand B's utterance, B should be acquainted with the encyclopedic knowledge that petrol can be bought in a garage, or A cannot understand what B means.

(7) *(It suddenly starts raining.) What shall we do now?*

In order to understand this utterance, the hearer should add the immediate observable environment that it suddenly starts raining to his/her cognitive context, otherwise, the hearer cannot infer the speaker's meaning as follows:

(8) *What shall we do now that it is raining?*

The extension of contextual assumptions is not infinite. If it is so, communication will frequently be discontinued because the hearer will expend too much time and too many efforts in comprehending the utterance. What the hearer does is to choose the minimal set of contextual assumptions that make the utterance worth processing. Relevance is a relative concept which simply means the degree (or extent) to which the hearer's interpretation is

relevant to what the speaker intends to convey. In this process, the hearer tries all means to choose a context that he/she thinks appropriate to fix in with the utterance for interpretation. In communication, since the choosing of the context never stops, the context keeps expanding and therefore is not stable but dynamic.

From the illustration above, it can be seen that Sperber and Wilson's consideration of cognitive context differs dramatically from the traditional views on context which used to think that context keeps constant and exists in the minds of the communicators in advance. According to Relevance Theory, verbal communication is a process where context can be dynamically selected. This kind of dynamic view on context explains how communicators organize the contextual factors according to relevance and draw a logical conclusion on the ground provided by the interaction of old and new information. It can explain not only the phenomena of misunderstanding but also how communication is successful. In this way, Sperber & Wilson provide us with a new angle of investigation in context and pragmatics.

3.2. Verschueren's Theory of Context

Verschueren is an important pragmatist who defines pragmatics as "a general cognitive, social and cultural perspective on linguistic phenomenon in relation to their usage in forms of behavior" (Verschueren, 2000: 7). Unlike other pragmatists, Verschueren does not consider pragmatics as a branch of linguistics alongside with phonology, syntax and semantics, nor does he consider it to be paralleled to these interdisciplinary fields, such as sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and neurolinguistics. Instead, he treats pragmatics as a general functional perspective on all aspects of language. According to Verschueren (2000), pragmatics is an approach to the study of language and language use, which takes into account the full complexity of their cognitive, social and cultural functioning.

3.2.1. Contextual Correlates of Adaptability

In his *Understanding Pragmatics* (2000), Verschueren puts forward the Theory of Adaptation. According to Verschueren (2000: 61), adaptability is "the property of language which enable human beings to make negotiable linguistic choices form a variable range of possibilities in such a way as to approach points of satisfaction for communicative needs". It can "be used as a starting point to define four angles of investigation: (i) contextual correlates of adaptability; (ii) structural objects of adaptability; (iii) dynamics of adaptability; (iv) salience of the adaptation processes' (Verschueren, 2000: 69). These four focal points are not separable and form one coherent pragmatic approach to language use. He uses one sentence to summarize the four angles:

"The general concern for the study of linguistic pragmatics is to understand the meaningful functioning of language as a dynamic process operating on

context-structure relationship at various levels of salience." (ibid.).

These four angles can be seen as necessary ingredients of an adequate pragmatic perspective on any given linguistic phenomenon. Thus, Theory of Adaptation can be used to trace the dynamic generation of meaning in language use.

Contextual correlates of adaptability include all the ingredients of the communicative context with which linguistic choices have to be interadaptable. Communicators select from a wide range of available 'realities', turning them into relevant correlates. Once selected, such correlates are themselves subject to variation and negotiation in interaction with aspects of the unfolding speech event in relation to which they can be seen to function. That is to say, context is dynamic and is generated in the process of communication.

Using language is a two-way and dynamic process in which the language users can make choices. That is to say, "Language users have a remarkable ability to manipulate contexts by moving in and out of what is commonly referred to as mental spaces" (Verschueren, 2000: 110). Communicators can change and create the contexts which are beneficial to them. The changing contexts further activate communicators' background knowledge and have them make new choices. This kind of manipulation reveals the dynamic relationship between language and contexts, which can be illustrated by the following figure (Verschueren, 2000:76)

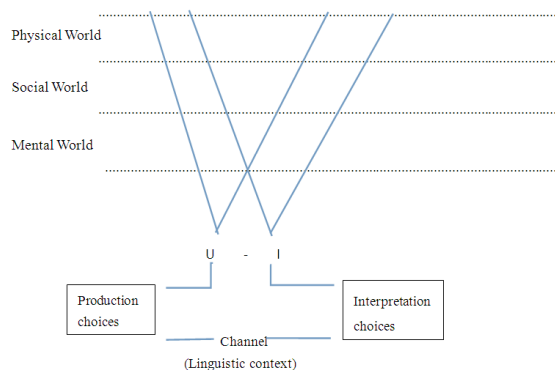


Figure 1. Contextual Correlates of Adaptability

Just as shown in the figure above, contexts are divided into two types: communicative and linguistic ("channel" in Figure 1). As for communicative context, Verschueren claims that its ingredients include the utterer (U), the interpreter (I), the mental world, the social world and the physical world. Contextual correlates may be found in the mental, social (or cultural) and physical worlds, and they also include properties of the linguistic channel that is used and the linguistic context in which the event takes place. The contextual aspects of the physical, social, and mental worlds are not strictly separated, so the broken lines are used. The lines in Figure 1, converging in U and I, form Lines of Vision. Every aspect of the context within the lines of vision can function as a correlate of adaptability to affect the production and interpretation of the language.

It should be emphasized that the focal points in the above representation are language users — the utterer (U) and the interpreter (I), because ‘the 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:

(9) 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.

3.3. The Features of Contextual Correlates of Adaptability

The concept of Contextual Correlates of Adaptability is a contribution to the research on dynamic context. This can be shown in two aspects:

Firstly, the concept of Contextual Correlates of Adaptability holds that context is generated in a dynamic process by communicators according to their community’s customs and their communicative goals. Context is both the product of communication and the start point of the next turn of communication. That is to say, context is generated in the process of communication and can be developed alongside the development of communication.

Secondly, according to the concept of Contextual Correlates of Adaptability, context is a concept based on humanism, which is different from the previous research.

Verschueren is the first linguist to propose the framework of the concept of Contextual Correlates of Adaptability which focuses on communicators. He indicates the leading position of communicators in dynamic generation of context and the equal position of the two parties in communication. The two crossing lines of vision in Figure 1. show that the communicators’ cognitive mechanisms continuously function with each other in communication and affect the communicators’ recognition to contextual varieties and the way of expression. “Just as Ran Yongping points out, emphasis on the two parties in communication and the research on the cognitive problems in comprehension and use of language is one of the main trend in pragmatics.” (Tan Xiaochen, 2002: 52)

3.4. The Features of the Notion of Dynamic Context

The study of the dynamic property of context means studying context in a dynamic process of communication. Both of the two theories illustrated in Section 3.2 hold that context is not given in advance of communication. According to Relevance Theory, communication is a process of selecting appropriate context from one’s mind in order to obtain optimal relevance. Relevance is a relative concept which simply means the degree (or extent) to which the hearer’s interpretation is relevant to what the speaker intends to convey. In this process, the hearer tries all means to choose a context that he/she thinks appropriate to fix in with the utterance for interpretation. In verbal communication, since the choosing of context never stops, the context keeps expanding and therefore is not stable but dynamic.

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. Once selected, such correlates are themselves subject to variation and negotiation in interaction with aspects of the unfolding speech event in relation to which they can be seen to function.

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.

So just as Verschueren (2000: 112) points out, “context is the product of a generation process involving both what’s out there and its mobilization and manipulation by the language users”. This is the complete definition of context. It does not deny the existence of the stable aspect of context (‘out there’), but it emphasizes the dynamic aspect of context, which means that contexts are generated in language use or in the dynamic process of communication and that communicators can actively manipulate contexts.

4. 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 infinitive range of possibilities, by the dynamics of interaction between speakers and hearers.

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