

On Roles and Features of Context in CLT

CARACTÉRISTIQUE ET IMPORTANCE DU CONTEXTE DANS L'ENSEIGNEMENT DE MÉTHODOLOGIE COMMUNICATIVE

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Abstract: Context is a dynamic concept which is treated as a variable. This thesis tries to analyze, with the “relevance theory”, the features of the context and points out the importance of context in communicative language teaching.

Key words: relevant, utterance interpretation, the selective context, the immediate context

Résumé: Le contexte est un paramètre statique. Basé sur les théories là-dessus, ce texte analyse les caractéristiques concernant le contexte et son importance dans l'enseignement de méthodologie communicative.

Mots-clés: connexité, compréhension du langage, contexte linguistique optionnel, contexte linguistique instantané

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Communicative competence was first proposed by Dell Hymes in his paper ‘Competence and Performance in Linguistic Theory’, published in 1971. The concept of communicative competence has important implications for language learning and teaching. Within the definition of communicative competence, the content of what a speaker needs to know depends on the social context in which he or she is or will be using the language and the purposes he or she will have for doing so. From this perspective, we see that understanding of the context within which the communication takes place is the most important overriding skill in improving communicative competence. Only with enough encyclopedic knowledge and awareness of context, the hearer could infer the meanings presumably intended by their authors.

2. THE DEFINITION OF THE CONTEXT

According to Sperber and Wilson (1995:15-16): The set of premises used in interpreting an utterance constitutes what is generally known as the context. A context is a psychological construct, a subset of the hearer’s assumptions about the world. It is these assumptions, of

course, rather than the actual state of the world, that affect the interpretation of an utterance. A context in this sense is not limited to information about the immediate physical environment or the immediately preceding utterance. Instead, expectations about the future, scientific hypothesis or religious beliefs, anecdotal memories, general cultural assumptions, beliefs about the mental state of the speaker, may all play a role in interpretation,

Context determines the speaker’s use of language and also the hearer’s interpretation of what is said to him. Without such knowledge, linguistic communication would not be possible, and without considering such knowledge, linguistic communication cannot be satisfactorily accounted for in a pragmatic sense. Look at the following sentences:

1st. How did it go?

2nd. It is cold in here.

3rd. It was a hot Christmas day so we went down to the beach in the afternoon and had a good time swimming and surfing.

Sentence (1) might be used in a conversation between two students talking about an examination, or two surgeons talking about an operation, or in some other contexts; (2) might be said by the speaker to ask the hearer to turn on the heater, or leave the place, or to put on more clothes, or to apologize for the poor condition of the room, depending on the situation of

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context; (3) makes sense only if the hearer has the knowledge that Christmas falls in summer in the southern hemisphere.

3. THE ROLE OF CONTEXT

Context plays a major role in the communication process, so it's an important task for pragmatic theory to explain the process. In social pragmatics, it is widely accepted that the context have a particularly crucial influence on people's use of language:

1st. The participants: their roles, the amount of power differential between them, the degree of distance—closeness between them, the number of people present.

2nd. The message content: how 'costly' or 'beneficial' the message is to the hearer and/or speaker, how face-threatening it is, whether it exceeds or stays within the rights and obligations of the relationship.

3rd. The communicative activity (such as a job interview, a lecture or a medical consultation): how the norms of the activity influence language behavior such as right to talk or ask questions, discourse structure, and level of formality.

Unfortunately, context is sometimes taken to be the concrete aspects of the environment in which an exchange takes place and that have a bearing on the communication process. But in pragmatics, a more psychological notion of context is crucial. The physical environment (the time, the place, and the objects and people present) does not impinge directly on utterance production and interpretation; it does so only indirectly via people's representations of it. For example, if you do not want your colleague in the next office to hear what you about to say, you may speak in a low voice. However, your decision to speak in this way depends not so much on whether your colleague is actually in the next office or not as on your beliefs about his or her possible presence and ability to overhear your conversation. So, I quite agree with Sperber and Wilson's definition of context as the set of assumptions used in interpreting an utterance

By identifying the contextual information I mentioned above, students can learn (explicitly or implicitly) about the influence of context on language use. In lessons following the standard 'Presentation, Practice, Production' (PPP) structure, for example, it is standard practice to present and practise the target teaching points in as authentic a context as possible. Similarly, in EFL examinations such as IELTS and PET, it is now rare for writing tasks such as 'Write an essay about friendship' to be set, where the writing purpose and target audience are unclear. Instead, writing task are normally contextualized, with quite detailed information such as 'You are----, you want-----, here are the facts----,do this'. Candidates are thereby told what

role they should assume, what their writing purposes are, and who their target audience is.

All this is essential from a pragmatic perspective. However, while it is vital to make clear this 'starting point' contextual information, it is also important to remember that context is created dynamically as an interaction proceeds. From a teaching point of view, it is probably not necessary to focus particularly on this, but when there are clear developments that have an impact on language use (such as when two people get annoyed with each other and start speaking in a different manner, for instance), it could be useful and interesting to discuss this change.

4. THE FEATURES OF CONTEXT

I noted the importance and the role of the context in language teaching above. Here I want to mention it's also important for both the teacher and the learner to know the feature of context. The more the analyst knows about the features of context, the more likely he is to be able to predict what is likely to be said. (Yule: 1983: 40). Generally speaking, context is a dynamic, not a static concept. It is to be understood as the continually changing surrounding, in the widest sense, which enable the participants in the communication process to interact, and in which the linguistic expressions of their interaction become intelligible. (Mey, 2001:39). Here I want to explain the features of context from the following two aspects.

4.1 The Selective Context

Writing of context, Sperber and Wilson say that 'It is relevance which is treated as given and context which is treated as a variable' (1995: 142). As I mentioned above, context is a subset of mentally represented assumptions which interacts with newly impinging information (whether received via perception or communication) to give rise to 'contextual effects.' In ostensive communication, this set is not pre-given but is selected by the hearer on the basis of the utterance and his bid for an interpretation consistent with the second principle of relevance, that is: every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance.

It is important to stress here that we are not restricting the context either to the immediate physical environment or to the immediately preceding text or discourse. As I have said, the context is defined here in psychological terms as a subset of the hearer's beliefs and assumptions about the world. These may be derived from such sources. But we have also seen that the interpretation of an utterance may depend on the hearer's ability to supply certain assumptions from memory. These range from strongly evidenced assumptions derived through perception to guesses and

hypotheses. They include memories of particular occasions and about particular individuals, general cultural assumptions, religious beliefs, knowledge of scientific laws, assumptions about the speaker's emotional state and assumptions about other speakers' perception of your emotional state. These differences in belief and assumptions must lead to different interpretations of the same event. Surely, communication can succeed only if the context that the hearer brings to bear is identical to the one envisaged by the speaker, and the contents of people's memories are highly idiosyncratic.

Up to now, we have accepted the widely held views: context is a set of assumptions; context is not fixed in advance of the comprehension process; context in which a given assumption is to be interpreted is uniquely determined.

A hearer has in principle access to an enormous amount of background information, and in principle any of this could be used in the interpretation of an utterance. But hearers do not interpret utterances in just any context. As we have seen, relevance theory is predicated on the notion that every utterance has a single most relevant pragmatic meaning, so successful communication depends on the hearer selecting the right assumptions-----the ones that yield the intended interpretation.

In addition, as Yule (1983:240) points out, not all the information in a frame is relevant for the interpretation of a particular utterance. For example, a restaurant frame might include not only information about waiters, but also information about the people who prepare and cook the food, the furniture, menus and the cost of meals, etc. This problem further illustrates successful communication depends on the hearer's ability of correctly choosing the context.

There are three main crucial steps in the process of selecting the context: supporting and so strengthening existing assumptions, contradicting and eliminating assumptions, combining inferentially with them to produce new conclusions. Contextual implication is finally inferred on the basis of a set of premises consisting of both contextual assumptions and new assumptions derived from the incoming stimulus (for instance, the 'proposition expressed' by an utterance) and not derivable from either of these alone.

4.2 The Immediate Context

According to Sperber and Wilson, context is treated as a variable especially in verbal communication. Due to the dynamic feature of the context, the selection of the context and the process in understanding the utterance should occur at the same time.

Obviously, communication does require co-ordination between speakers and hearers especially when there is a mismatch between the context envisaged by the speaker and the one selected by the hearer. But this is not to say that speakers and hearers do not proceed until they can guarantee that communication will succeed. Actually the mutual cognitive environment can be finally shared by both the speaker and the hearer after several turns of mutual manifestness between them.

Let's take a following dialogue as an example:

(A's assumption: B can help him to get a passport)

A: Isn't it strange that you always happened to be fighting on the side of the underdog?

(B made a response and offered a newly stimulus.)

B: Yes, I found that an expensive hobby, too. But then I never was much of a businessman.

(A thought his original assumption was wrong so he made a new assumption: B wanted money)

A: Are you enough of a businessman to appreciate an offer 10,000 francs.

(B didn't accept it and offered another newly stimulus).

B: I appreciate it but I don't accept it.

(A went on adjusting his contextual assumption: B thought the money was not enough.)

A: I'll raise it to 20,000.

(B still didn't accept it and made a further stimulus to maintain the conversation)

B: My friend, you can make it a million francs or three. My answer would still be the same.

The example above clearly shows that in the verbal communication the context is a dynamic, not a static process. It keeps changing all the time. Any assumption that the context is determined in advance of the comprehension process will lead to the failure of communication.

5. CONCLUSION

As explained above, context is a crucial factor in pragmatic analysis---it influences what people say, how they say it, and how others interpret what they say. So, when designing language teaching materials and language learning activities, it is vital to clearly identify the roles and features of context so that both teachers and students can recognize the influence of context on language use.

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