

The Role of Context in Discourse Analysis

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Abstract—Discourse analysis involves many aspects, such as adjacency pairs, coherence, cohesion, and so on, among which context plays an important role. This paper intends to explore the role of context in discourse analysis on the basis of introducing different definitions and classifications of context.

Index Terms—discourse analysis, context, social environment

I. INTRODUCTION

The study of context has been gaining popularity in recent years, either in linguistics itself or in many other interdisciplinary subjects such as semantics, pragmatics, and discourse analysis as well. However, context theories are not formed overnight. They involve a long process of development, during which comparative linguistics, structural linguistics and transformational-generative linguistics all contributed to the theoretical foundations of context theories.

When we introduce context theories to the field of discourse analysis, we must take into consideration not only the discourse itself, but also the context in which the discourse takes place. Just like what Fillmore (1977, P, 119) said, “The task is to determine what we can know about the meaning and context of an utterance given only the knowledge that the utterance has occurred ... I find that whenever I notice some sentence in context, I immediately find myself asking what the effect would have been if the context had been slightly different.” (Gillian Brown & George Yule, 2000, p.35)

II. DEFINITIONS OF CONTEXT

Different linguists seek to define context from different point of view in order to answer questions encountered in their own fields, and to support their own ideas and theories.

H. G. Widdowson, when focusing his study on language meaning, thought “context” as “those aspects of the circumstance of actual language use which are taken as relevant to meaning.” He further pointed out, “in other words, context is a schematic construct... the achievement of pragmatic meaning is a matter of matching up the linguistic elements of the code with the schematic elements of the context.” (H.G. Widdowson, 2000, p.126)

When Guy Cook was studying the relationship between discourse and literature, he took “context” into consideration as well. In his definition, context is just a form of knowledge the world and “the term ‘context’ can be used in a broad and narrow sense. In the narrow sense, it refers to (knowledge of) factors outside the text under consideration. In the broad sense, it refers to (knowledge of) these factors and to (knowledge of) other parts of the text under consideration, sometimes referred to as ‘co-text’.” (Guy Cook, 1999, p. 24)

When studying reference and inference, George Yule also took “context” into account. He provided us with a somewhat general definition, “Context is the physical environment in which a word is used.” (George Yule, 2000, 128)

Although they are viewed from different perspectives for different purposes, these definitions have an important point in common: one main point of the context is the environment (circumstances or factors by some other scholars) in which a discourse occurs.

III. CLASSIFICATIONS OF CONTEXT

Opinions on how to classify context vary from one to another. Some linguists divide context into two groups, while some insist on discussing context from three, four, or even six dimensions. According to different circumstances mentioned in the above definitions, I would like to divide context into linguistic context, situational context and cultural context.

A. Linguistic Context

Linguistic context refers to the context within the discourse, that is, the relationship between the words, phrases, sentences and even paragraphs. Take the word “bachelor” as an example. We can’t understand the exact meaning of the sentence “He is a bachelor.” without the linguistic context to make clear the exact meaning of this word.

Linguistic context can be explored from three aspects: deictic, co-text, and collocation.

In a language event, the participants must know where they are in space and time, and these features relate directly to the deictic context, by which we refer to the deictic expressions like the time expressions now, then, etc., the spatial expressions here, there, etc., and the person expressions I, you, etc... Deictic expressions help to establish deictic roles which derive from the fact that in normal language behavior the speaker addresses his utterance to another person and

may refer to himself, to a certain place, or to a time.

In recent years, some linguists began to pay attention to the previous discourse co-ordinate. Levis introduces this co-ordinate to take account of the aforementioned sentences. It is the case that any sentence other than the first in a fragment of discourse, will have the whole of its interpretation forcibly constrained by the preceding text, not just those phrases which obviously and specifically refer to the preceding text. The interpretations of the words which occur in discourse are constrained by, following Halliday, their co-text.

In 1934, Porzig argued for the recognition of the importance of syntagmatic relations, between, e.g., bite and teeth, bark and dog, blond and hair, which Firth called collocation. Collocation is not simply a matter of association of ideas. Although milk is white, we should not often say white milk, while the expression white paint is common enough.

B. *Situational Context*

Situational context, or context of situation, refers to the environment, time and place, etc. in which the discourse occurs, and also the relationship between the participants. This theory is traditionally approached through the concept of register, which helps to clarify the interrelationship of language with context by handling it under three basic headings: field, tenor, and mode.

Field of discourse refers to the ongoing activity. We may say field is the linguistic reflection of the purposive role of language user in the situation in which a text has occurred. Tenor refers to the kind of social relationship enacted in or by the discourse. The notion of tenor, therefore, highlights the way in which linguistic choices are affected not just by the topic or subject of communication but also by the kind of social relationship within which communication is taking place. Mode is the linguistic reflection of the relationship the language user has to medium of transmission. The principal distinction within mode is between those channels of communication that entail immediate contact and those that allow for deferred contact between participants.

C. *Cultural Context*

Cultural context refers to the culture, customs and background of epoch in language communities in which the speakers participate. Language is a social phenomenon, and it is closely tied up with the social structure and value system of society. Therefore, language can not avoid being influenced by all these factors like social role, social status, sex and age, etc.

Social roles are culture-specific functions, institutionalized in a society and recognized by its members. By social status, we mean the relative social standing of the participants. Each participant in the language event must know, or make assumptions about his or her status in relation to the other, and in many situations, status will also be an important factor in the determination of who should initiate the conversation. Sex and age are often determinants of, or interact with, social status. The terms of address employed by a person of one sex speaking to an older person, may differ from those which would be employed in otherwise similar situations by people of the same sex or of the same age.

IV. THE ROLE OF CONTEXT

As we can see, context plays a very important role in discourse analysis. Let's try to generalize its role as follows.

A. *Eliminating Ambiguity*

Ambiguity refers to a word, phrase, sentence or group of sentences with more than one possible interpretation or meaning. There are two kinds of ambiguities: lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity. Lexical ambiguity is mostly caused by homonymy and polysemy. For example, these four words, right, rite, write and wright, are all pronounced as [rait], but they are quite different from each other. Let's also have a look at the following sentence:

They passed the port at midnight.

This sentence is lexically ambiguous. However, it would normally be clear in a given context which can indicate the meaning of the word "port", meaning either harbor or a kind of fortified wine.

Structural ambiguity arises from the grammatical analysis of a sentence or a phrase. For example, the phrase young men and women can be analyzed as either "young /men and women/" (i.e. both are young) or "/young men/ and women" (i.e. only the men are young). Let us also examine the following sentence:

I like Bill more than Mary.

This sentence can mean "I like Bill more than Mary does." or "I like Bill more than I like Mary." In such examples, a given context can indicate what the sentence exactly means.

B. *Indicating Referents*

To avoid repetition, we usually use such words like I, you, he, this, that, etc. to replace some noun phrases, or words like do, can, should, etc. to replace verb phrases, or then, there, etc. to replace adverbial phrase of time and place. Therefore, context is of great importance in understanding the referents of such words. The following dialogue is written by the well-known linguist, Firth:

-- Do you think he will?

-- I don't know. He might.

-- I suppose he ought to, but perhaps he feels he can't.

-- Well, his brothers have. They perhaps think he needn't.

-- Perhaps eventually he will. I think he should, and I very much hope he will. (Zhang Yunfei, 2000, p.245)

Without context, we can hardly guess what the speakers are talking about since there are too many auxiliary verbs and modal verbs such as will, might, have, can't, etc. used in the dialogue. In fact, these auxiliary and modal verbs replace the verb phrase, "join the army". From this typical example, we can see the important role of context.

C. Detecting Conversational Implicature

The term conversational implicature is used by Grice to account for what a speaker can imply, suggest, or mean, as distinct from what the speaker literally says and it is deduced on the basis of the conversational meaning of words together with the context, under the guidance of the Cooperative Principle and its four maxims, i.e., Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner.

Grice also found that when people communicate with each other, they do not always adhere to the four maxims. The violation of a maxim may result in the speaker conveying, in addition to the literal meaning of his utterance, an additional meaning, which is conversational implicature. Let us look at the following example:

(The husband has just finished supper and wanted to watch TV, leaving his wife alone to clear the table and wash dishes.)

Wife: Shouldn't you help me do some housework?

Husband: I have worked for nine hours.

Superficially, the husband's answer has nothing to do with the wife's question. He violates the maxim of relevance. Actually, we must assume that the husband is adhering to the Cooperative Principle and means something more than the literal meaning. The additional meaning, namely, conversational implicature, is that he has worked for a whole day, so he is too tired to help his wife to do any housework.

Once the analysis of intended meaning goes beyond the literal meaning of an utterance, a vast number of issues have to be considered. In discourse analysis, conversational implicature is pragmatic and is partially derived from the conversational or literal meaning of an utterance, produced in a specific context, which is shared by the speaker and the hearer, and depends on their recognition of the Cooperative Principle and its maxims. Now let us see another example.

(The boss of a restaurant gives two pennies to a temporary worker who does washing for him.)

Boss: Here is your pay, boy!

Worker: I have worked for nine hours.

In this conversational fragment, we can find that the second utterance is the same as the previous example, namely, they have the same literal meaning. Besides, they both seem to be irrelevant to the utterance of the first speaker and we can also assume that the maxim of relevance is deliberately violated. Then can we conclude that the two utterances have the same conversational implicature? No. It is unreasonable for the worker to tell his boss that he is too tired to work for him, when his boss gives him the pay that does not match his nine-hour hard work. The real conversational implicature of his utterance is that the boss should have given him more pay since he had worked such a long time. We must pay attention to the changed context: the relationship of two speakers has changed from wife-husband to boss-worker; the status has changed from equal to superior-inferior; and the pre-linguistic context has changed from words for a request of doing housework to that for an action of giving pay. The conversational implicature is changed as the context changes. The perception of a conversational implicature can not let aside the specific context where the discourse occurs.

V. CONCLUSION

We have talked about the definition, classification, and role of context in discourse analysis from different aspects. However, it is certain that the list can go on as further study deepens. In a word, context plays a very important role in discourse analysis. A discourse and its context are in close relationship: the discourse elaborates its context and the context helps interpret the meaning of utterances in the discourse. The knowledge of context is a premise of the analysis of a discourse. When we study and analyze a discourse, we should bear in mind that no context, no discourse and we should not neglect the related context of a discourse.

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