

On the Roles of Context in Verbal Communication

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Abstract—Communication is a common phenomenon in our society and language is an important communicative media in the process of human communication. The use of verbal communication is the most basic life ability in our society. Language is a carrier of transmitting information. It's not easy for people to have successful verbal communication without the specific context. Context, which plays an important role in the communication and communicators, is a central concept in pragmatics. In the process of verbal communication, all the parts of context have close relationship between each other. So we must not only pay attention to the roles of the speech, but also focus on the language environment.

Owing to the significant role of context in verbal communication, this paper first makes a wide illustration of the definition of context from many scholars both at home and abroad. Then it introduces a complicated social phenomenon and how to carry on successful verbal communication. Finally it analyses the roles of context in verbal communication from restricting semantic meaning, resolving ambiguity, understanding language implicature and understanding deixis.

Index Terms—Context, verbal communication, utterance, role.

I. INTRODUCTION

Context has been a pop topic in modern linguistics. From Saussure to Chomsky, the research of language emphasizes the description, classification and explanation of language structure, but not lays stress on the research of language use. From the second half of the twentieth century, there is a major change on the research of linguistics which pays more attention to language use but not the research of language structure. Context, as a very important part of pragmatics, is also taken seriously by many scholars. Different scholars have different ideas about the context theory. In the process of verbal communication, context plays an important role. Many explanations of some grammatical phenomena rely on context.

The first part gives us a brief introduction of context and verbal communication. The second part mainly talks about the previous researches on context. Malinowski is the first person who proposed the definition of “context”. Firth developed his teacher’s opinion “context of situation”. Halliday proposed the notion of “register”. He divided register into three aspects: field of discourse, mode of discourse and tenor of discourse. Gradually, domestic scholars begin to pursue research in some aspects of context. Many domestic scholars such as Chen Wangdao, Wang Dechun and Yao Dianfang also make some successful studies on context. Part three gives us a brief representation of verbal

communication in our daily life. In this part we also discuss some detailed characteristics of context. It also introduces the general schema of verbal communication and successful communication in our daily life. Part four is the most important part of this thesis, with a detailed discussion on the roles of context in verbal communication from restricting semantic meaning, resolving ambiguity, understanding language implication and understanding deixis. Part five summarizes the research given above.

With the development of context and the combination of verbal communication, people pay more attention to the roles of context in verbal communication. We should make full use of the role of context in discourse and make language expression coincide with the context.

II. PREVIOUS RESEARCHES ON CONTEXT

During the previous times, many scholars, such as Malinowski, Firth and Halliday, have made some researches and developed the context theories. Their theories have great significance to linguistics studies. So it is necessary for us to have a further understanding of their theories.

A. Researches from Foreign Scholars

Malinowski ever commented that “communication is not a matter of logic or truth, but of cooperation; not of what I say, but of what I can say, give the contexts, and of what I must say, given my partner’s expectations” (May 70) [1]. From early 1920s, a group of English scholars began to have a research on linguistics from an anthropological perspective. In 1923, anthropologist Malinowski made some investigations on an island and he found that the meaning of a word largely depended on its context. He stated that the meaning of discourse does not come from the meaning of the words.

Malinowski observed that only the islander’s language is closely related to their culture, people can understand it easily. So he mentioned that the real language fact is the full utterance which contained in the context of situation. Also he believed if language cannot be closely related to their culture, we cannot have a full and comprehensive understanding of language. For example, “wood” can refer to “tree” or “canoe” in the local culture. Canoe, as a very important transportation for the islanders, plays a major role in their daily life. So the second meaning of this word (canoe) will add strong cultural coloring. Hence, it’s hard for people from other cultural backgrounds to understand the meaning of it. Moreover, he introduced the concept of “cultural context” to explain the whole cultural backgrounds. For Malinowski, “context of situation” and “cultural context” are all necessary factors to understand the text. Verschueren comments: “Malinowski’s observation can be seen as one of the necessary pillars of any theory of pragmatics” (Verschueren 75) [2].

J.R Firth is a student of Malinowski and also the founder of

London linguistics school. He developed the notion of “context of situation” which proposed by his teacher. He thought it’s necessary to put utterance in a certain cultural context and summarized its meaning. He stated: “voices should not be entirely disassociated from the social context in which they function” (Firth 226) [3]. He mentioned that language should not be completely divorced from the social context and he considered language as a social process, a life style of people, not just a set of conventional language symbols. His definition of “context of situation” includes the whole cultural backgrounds of language and the history of individuals. He proposed the notion of “typical situational context” and he also mentioned that social environment determines the role of social people play. So the typical situational context is also limited. For this reason, he thought that conversation is more like a prescribed ceremony. Once someone communicates to you, you are basically limited in a specific context. If someone talks about the weather with you, it’s hard for you to change the subject into politics. So you can’t just say what you want to say.

M. A. K. Halliday is an American linguist and he proposed the term “co-text” in 1976. Halliday made great contribution to the current development of context theories. In 1964, Halliday proposed the notion “register” and he paid much more attention to the social function of language, he classified register into three aspects: field of discourse, mode of discourse and tenor of discourse (Halliday 29) [4]. As for him, field of discourse means the thing or the event happened. It includes politics, economy, technology, culture and our daily life. To a large extent, it determines the words and vocabularies we use in our communication. Mode of discourse refers to the carrier or media of language activities. The specific way we adopt in our communication includes verbal and written or both of them. Oral language can be divided into impromptu oral and prepared oral, also written language can be divided into written language which just for reading or be available for speech. Tenor of discourse refers to the relationship between the communicators, including communicator’s status and class. What kind of person is the communicator? Is he/she a teacher or a doctor? What is the relationship between the communicators? The three factors, field of discourse, mode of discourse, tenor of discourse, are the characteristics of situational context, which determine the register.

B. Researches from Domestic Scholars

With intensive study on semantic research, more and more linguists realize the importance of context in their research. That is because meaning is not abstract, but closely related to a certain context. Our Chinese scholars have also made successful studies on context. In 1932, Mr. Chen Wangdao had put forward that context is made up of six factors: what, why, who, when, where and how in one of his books. In the 1960s, Mr. Wang Dechun once made some statements about context. According to him, context is the environment of language use. It consists of some objective factors such as time, place, scene and participants. For another, Language users’ characteristics also have an impact on the use of language. The speaker’s status, thoughts, personalities, occupation, and mood will have an influence on the

characteristics of personal speech (Wang 38) [5].

Yao Dianfang proposed, on one hand, language environment refers to the environment of language itself, such as the relation between word and word in a sentence, the relation between sentence and sentence in a paragraph, the relation between paragraph and text and so on. On the other hand, language environment refers to the social environment of language, including the characteristics of times, nation, area and society. Besides, the specific situation when we speak, the identity, occupation, education, social experience of both two sides should also be taken into account.

III. SOME STUDIES ABOUT VERBAL COMMUNICATION

A. Definitions of Verbal Communication

The process of verbal communication is very complicated which concerned the participant’s subjective factors including cognitive ways, emotion, language habits and some objective factors including time, place and so on. So in our daily life, different people say the same sentence in different place or time, the hearer may have different understanding. For example: A said to B: Go to hell. If A has a good relationship with B, we can understand that A had a joke with B. But if A is quarreling with B, we can understand that A was swearing at B.

In our daily life, we often communicate to our partners in order to share our life experience. Communication is considered as a process involves the speaker’s communicative intention and the hearer’s inference. In the process of communication, the speaker conveys his intention and thoughts to inform the hearer, the hearer tries to receive and identify what the speaker intends to tell him. So it’s very important for the hearer to get the primary ideas and information to make the communication successful.

The hearer tries to achieve his attention by expressing ideas. Zhao Yi has mentioned the general schema in the process of verbal communication. He defined the speaker’s intention as Meaning 1. Meaning 1 can also be considered as the speaker’s original idea. Then the speaker expresses what he wants to say by expressing his ideas, but Zhao Yi defined what he actually said as Meaning 2. The process from Meaning 1 to Meaning 2 is actually the process of the speaker’s expression. That is to say Meaning 2 means the message what the hearer receives. However, the meaning what the hearer actually understands is Meaning 3. So we consider the process from Meaning 2 to Meaning 3 is the process of the hearer’s understanding.

For example: A is concerned with B very much and wants to know whether B is hungry or not. That is A’s intention and we consider it as Meaning 1. So A said to B whether B wants to go out to eat. We consider it as Meaning 2. But B may misunderstand A’s intention as A is hungry and A wants B to accompany with A. We consider it as Meaning 3.

Therefore, we can learn from Zhao Yi’s general schema that meaning can be divided into three aspects: what the speaker wants to express (Meaning 1), what the hearer’s understanding (Meaning 3) and what the speaker really express (Meaning 2). If we want to make successful verbal

communication, Meaning 1 must be totally equal to Meaning 3 by Meaning 2's transmission. So if B can have a clear understanding that A is concerned with B very much and wants to know whether B is hungry or not, that is to say it achieves successful communication.

From the view of the speaker, if we want to make the language expression accurate, lively and vividly, the final purpose is to make Meaning 1 equals to Meaning 3. From the view of the hearer, if we want to have accurate understanding, the final purpose is to make Meaning 3 equals to Meaning 1. So in order to achieve the goal, the speaker's expression must take into account the hearer from every aspect.

B. Characteristics of Verbal Communication

Firstly, communication is a dynamic process. "A context is a psychological construct, a subset of the hearer's assumptions about the world" (Sperber & Wilson 15) [6]. In our daily life, we often have communications with different people. Sometimes we communicate with our teachers and sometimes we communicate with our classmates. During these communications, we often affected by their messages and we may have some changes through their messages in some way. Maybe after the communication with our professors, we will try to change the learning attitude and develop good habits.

Secondly, communication is interactive. During our communication, we often have different topics. Also we communicate with each other because of different intentions. It goes without saying that communication takes place between people, but not a process the speaker said to himself. The hearer constantly adjusts himself from the speaker's expression and then they can communicate with each other.

For example:

A: How about going to the cinema this afternoon?

B: That's great! But what's movie do you want to see?

A: How about Operation Red Sea? It's an exciting action movie.

B: Really? But I don't like the action movie and I prefer comedy.

A: Okay, You may like City of Rock.

B: Okay!

So with the existence of interactivity, we must receive the message flexibly and pay attention to the speaker's facial expression and reaction in the process of verbal communication. Then we can constantly adjust our expression and receive accurate information. So in the fore-mentioned example, when A realized that B doesn't like the action movie like *Operation Red Sea*, A began to adjust his expression to adapt to the changes.

Thirdly, communication is irreversible. Once we have said something to our partner and our partner has received the message, we cannot reverse it. This circumstance has sometimes results in what is called "spilled water cannot be gathered up". In the TV play *Gentleman*, in the process of solving the problem between a husband and a wife, the psychologist suggested that the couple don't have any communication when they go back home in the following three days, especially when they have quarrels. Once they want to have a communication, they can express with their action or their motions. If they must have a communication

by language, they can write down on the paper and pass it to each other. Language is the fastest way to express one's message to their partner. But in most cases, the words which hurt someone cannot be received. Always we have some time to think when we write down what we want to say. So we may realize what should we say and what shouldn't say. This way is good enough for us to notice the irreversibility of language. Wechat, as a social software, updated the function of "recall" in recent years. You can recall the message in two minutes and re-edit it again. If the message not be received by your partner, it's a good way for us to avoid the irreversibility of communication.

IV. THE ROLES OF CONTEXT

When people communicate to each other, what they want to express is not only restricted to the words they use. Sometimes what they said has no relationship with what they want to express. Pragmatics studies specific utterance in specific context, especially studies how to understand language use language in different language environment. As Austin (1962) stated: "The type of utterance we are to consider here is not, of course, in general a type of nonsense; though misuse of it can, as we shall see, engender rather special varieties of nonsense" (4) [7].

A. Important Way of Resolving Ambiguity

Ambiguity is a very common language phenomenon. In the process of verbal communication, ambiguity refers to a linguistic phenomenon that one linguistic unit or linguistic structure has one or more than one meaning. In other words, ambiguity means the special relationship between the form of linguistic structure and its meaning. Although we cannot eliminate ambiguity fundamentally, we can try our best to resolve the negative influence of ambiguity. Providing suitable context is an important way of resolving ambiguity. In the sentence of "She can't bear children", "bear" can be understood as "put up with" or "give birth to". If we can provide a suitable context for the sentence, we can resolve ambiguity successfully.

For example:

(1) She likes children, but she can't bear one because she has been ill for ages.

(2) She can't bear children because they are too noisy.

Let's look at another example:

(3) A: Where are you going?

B: To the bank.

The word "bank" is a homograph and it consists of two meanings: "an organization that provides financial services" and "the side of a river". So if there is not a suitable context, we do not know exactly where B will go. If B goes to the bank with some papers and his briefcase, he may go to bank for money. If B goes to bank with his parents and children on a sunny day, he may have a picnic beside the bank. So it may cause ambiguity if there is no appropriate context.

B. Important Factor of Restricting Semantic Meaning

Language environment has a strong restriction in the process of language use. In verbal communication, we must obey the rule of language use, that is to say we must know

how to use language in a certain verbal communication, including how to say and how to understand it. Different contexts restrict the real meaning of the utterance.

For example:

(4) No one can be disturbed.

This sentence is ambiguous. If the sentence is said by a person who is working, it refers to that no one can disturb the speaker's work. But if the sentence is said by a teacher in the classroom, then it refers to that the naughty student can't disturb any students in the class.

(5) A: Will we eat chicken?

B: Yes, of course.

If the dialogue is happened at the table, may be they just discuss whether eat chicken (as food) or not. But if the dialogue is happened between two children who stare at their mobile game, may be they are discussing whether play *Winner Winner Chicken Dinner* game or not.

(6) Today is Sunday.

It's very easy to understand this sentence literally, but it's difficult to understand its meaning thoroughly because the sentence has different meaning in different context. Let's look at the following contexts:

(6a) The husband is devoted to his work everyday and he never has time to have a rest. His wife tells him "Darling, today is Sunday" out of concern.

(6b) The husband never likes to do the housework but promise to do the housework on Sunday. However, the husband gets up at 10AM on Sunday and stares at the TV screen. His wife tells him angrily "John, today is Sunday".

(6c) The father urges his son to study hard in order to have a good future. The son wants to have a relax on Sunday and tells his father "Today is Sunday".

The first one shows the wife's advice to her husband, she suggests that he should have a rest on Sunday. The second one shows the wife's command out of anger. He must do some housework on Sunday. The third one shows the child's request, he wants to have a rest on Sunday. It follows that we must take into account the concrete context if we want to understand the real meaning of the utterance.

(7) I can't find my history book and my bag.

This may be an excuse for student who didn't want to go to school. It can also be a request of asking the teacher for help, or the student suspects that someone is playing a joke on him, or it may be a complaint. From this sentence, we can see that the meaning of discourse changes with the change of context. Since the different cognitive environment between people, the understanding of the same discourse will also have different meanings. Only in the specific context can we understand the definite meaning. In the process of verbal communication, we should not only correctly understand the literal meaning of the utterance, but also understand the pragmatic meaning. With the help of context, people can infer the pragmatic meaning of the discourse correctly by literal meaning.

C. Foundation of Understanding Implications

The second major theory in pragmatics is the theory of conversational implicature proposed by an Oxford philosopher Grice. Grice had an interesting discovery that people often do not say things directly but prefer to express

their thoughts in a suggestive way. However, the CP in itself cannot explain why people are often so indirect in conveying what they mean (Leech 80) [8]. For example, A and B are talking about their friend C who is working in a high school. Then A asks B how C is getting on, B might answer "I think he is good, he likes his friends and classmates and he never kill anyone." Though B did not make an evaluation explicitly, he certainly implied something. The cooperative principle shows that the participants must be willing to cooperate in the dialogue, otherwise it would not very easy for them to have a successful conversation. The term "implicature", according to Grice, refers to "what a speaker can imply, suggest or mean as distinct from what the speaker literally says" (Levinson 100) [9]. If people do not abide by the cooperative principle, they may produce conversational implicature. Let's look at the following example:

A: Mom, Gentlemen is on.

B: I'm doing housework.

A: Ok, mom!

The daughter told her mom it's time to watch TV, but her mother replied that she was doing housework. Literally, the mother's reply has no relationship with what the daughter said. But if we analyses the context carefully, we may realize here exists some implications. The mother means that she hasn't finished her housework at hand and has no time to watch TV. We can understand the implication only if we connect what the mother has said with the context. .

The boy said to the girl, "it's so beautiful when you don't wear glasses." the girl answered directly, "Do you mean that I am ugly when I wear glasses". Although the boy has reason to deny what the girl says is not what he wants to express, it can't completely deny the boy's words imply something (Hu 177) [10].

D. Foundation of Understanding Deixis

Just as Yule (1996) writes: "Deixis is a technical term (from Greek) for one of the most basic things we do with utterances" (9) [11]. Deixis refers to the ambiguous demonstrative words or sentences in unclear context. It links up language with certain variables (the time of communication, the place of communication) in the real world. Deixis includes personal pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, definite articles and some adverbs which concerned with time and place. We can only rely on context to understand deixis in verbal communication.

For example:

(1) She is our beautiful tour guide.

(2) There is a big park over there.

(3) I'll finish my homework the day after tomorrow.

In this example, "she" is person deixis, "over there" is place deixis and "tomorrow" is time deixis. Person deixis refers to the appellation when people convey their words. Place deixis refers to the place which involved in the communication. Time deixis refers to the time when speakers mentioned during their communication. In order to understand time deixis accurately, we must think over what kind of deixis the speaker uses, what occasion they uses and what tense should they use. The three words "she", "over there", and "tomorrow" are very ambiguous in the three examples. So we cannot make sure the certain person, place

and time. Only with suitable context can we acquire accurate message.

V. CONCLUSION

As we all know, the concept of context has been widely studied by so many scholars from both abroad and home. People must take context into consideration when they use language and try to make it cohesive and appropriate.

The importance and significance of verbal communication has been realized by human beings. Successful communication depends greatly on whether the communicators' primary communicative intention is realized or not. If their primary intention has received by the hearer, the communication is considered as a successful communication.

With the development of the study about context and its combination with communication. People pay much attention to the roles on context in verbal communication. With the help of context, we can try our best to resolve the negative influence of ambiguity, know how to use language in a certain verbal communication and understand the content of the utterance. As the subject of communication, we not only need to pay attention to the current context, but also have ability to judge the implied context which exists in communicative object. We should make good use of context and distinguish context in different situations. Let positive beneficial context make verbal communication perfect!

This paper has discussed only a very small part of the subject. However, it is hoped that this thesis will arouse more interests and further study to analyze the roles of context in verbal communication.

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