

## **Context and Its Significance to Pragmatics**

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**ABSTRACT:** *After examining the different expressions of context, this paper proposes that context is the interaction between all the elements about language communication activities, including the intra textual co-text, the environment in which communication occurs and the mutual interaction of the shared information, culture, background and world knowledge of the participants. Therefore, context is dynamic. Then, this paper illustrates theories of pragmatics, including the speech act theory, the indirect speech act theory, the cooperative theory and the relevance theory. Finally, it discusses about the significance of context to pragmatics from the perspectives of narrow context and narrow pragmatics, and dynamic context and generalized pragmatics.*

**Keywords:** *context, pragmatics, function*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Context is important and indispensable for the study of pragmatics. For a long time, scholars have been discussing the pragmatic meaning from the perspective of context, or studying context from the perspective of pragmatic function. With the intensive study on pragmatics, scholars have examined the concepts of context, and obtained a more profound understanding. The study of context transfers from the traditional internal and external perspective to the dynamic perspective, and exposes the dynamic process of context and dynamic pragmatic meaning, and indicates the clear path for people's correct understanding the relation of the context and pragmatics and how context controlling pragmatic meaning. This paper expounds the relationship between context and pragmatics, reveals pragmatic meaning of context and importance of pragmatic studies, and provides evidence for the research of pragmatics and pragmatic teaching.

### **II. THEORIES OF CONTEXT**

Since Malinowski, a British anthropologist, first proposed the concept of context in the early 20th century, many linguists, sociologists and anthropologists have proposed various definitions of context; however, the united and of scientific definition has not been formed due to the limitation of different disciplines and their different perspective. The definitions can be summed up as the following:

#### **1. Internal context and external context**

Some linguists divide context into the internal context and the external context of language, and they think the internal context of language refers to the co-text of the discourse, and the external context refers to the shared information of both communicators, including the background, culture and precondition.

#### **2. Cultural context and situational context**

Malinowski proposed the concepts of Cultural Context and Situational Context in the 1930s. The former refers to the cultural background of the communicative participants, and the latter refers to the objective context which is directly related to the communicative activities of language.

#### **3. Linguistic factors and non-linguistic factors**

This is Firth's point of view, who divides the context into the co-text consisting of language factors and situational co-text consisting of non-linguistic factors

#### **4. View of register**

Halliday, systemic functional linguistics school founder, regards context as register. He argues that "Register" is context, "register" includes field, tenor and mode of discourse, and these three aspects together is equivalent to the context (Halliday, 1973)[1]. In addition, the "situational context" also belongs to "register", which can be revealed by register which includes field, tenor and mode of discourse. The field of discourse refers to the content of the text, which is embodied by the concept function in the discourse. The tenor refers to the relationship between the two parties, which is embodied by the interpersonal function in the discourse. The mode is communicative approach, which is embodied by the textual function in the discourse. Thompson,1996/2000:36)[2].

### **5. Social theory**

The American linguist Hymes explains the importance of context from the perspective of communicative competence. He believes that communication is composed of the interaction between people and social environment. People's talk should comply with the rules of the language and suit the language environment. He summarizes the context content as eight aspects: "form and content, background, participants, purpose, tone, media, style and interactional regulation". British linguist Lyons divides context into six parts: the role and status the participants play, and the temporal and spatial location of participants, formal degree of communication, media for realizing communication, conversation topic, and scope and field of the topic.

### **6. Static and dynamic views**

The so-called static context is regarded as determined before communication, namely it is presupposed. Also it is just the content of traditional pragmatic context. It includes communicators' linguistic knowledge, discourse co-text, world knowledge of the participants, the communicator's social and cultural background, time and place of communication, communicators and situational factors of the speaking manner of the two sides. The context views can be classified as the static range of context.

However, in recent years, many scholars believe that "context can be seen as a static, isolated one because the static study of context cannot make an effective effect to explain and guide communication" (He &, 1997)[3]; therefore, people's research on context transfer from static to dynamic.

Verschueren's contextual concept includes two aspects: communicative context and linguistic context. Context is made of language users, the mental world, social world and the physical world. Linguistic context refers to the co-text, including three aspects: cohesion, discourse mechanism and linear sequence. Therefore, his concept of context is richer and broader in content. The most important is, he thinks the context is generated in the process of language use, and context will continuously develop and update with the development of the communication process, but it is not given before the communication occurs (Ren, 2010)[4].

### **7. Cognitive context**

The various elements (language knowledge, cultural background, communicative participants, time and space of communication) of traditional context are the important pragmatic factors which implement reasoning. However, such a contextual view cannot fully explain actual process of pragmatic inference, or reflect the cognitive state of mind of speakers and listeners while communicating.

According to relevance theory, context is a psychological construct, a series of assumptions existing in people's minds. In language communication, it is a series of assumptions, not specific situational factors that play major role in understanding discourse. Therefore, in this sense, context is not limited to non linguistic context such as the objective environment and linguistic context such as discourse itself.

Cognitive context is a cover concept, including a variety of information in cognition. It has the dynamic characteristic, that is, it is not predetermined before the listener understands the discourse, but it is the result which is constantly selected in the process of discourse understanding. Essentially, discourse comprehension involves the listener's constant selection, adjustment and adaptation of contextual assumptions (Ran, 2000)[5]. Therefore, in this sense, cognitive context is dynamic context. Cognitive context is based on the psychological process of communication, while dynamic context is based on the behavior process of communication. Actually, discourse communicative (behavior) process cannot do without the participation of psychological process. That is, the discourse does not exist without psychological activity participating.

From the above discussion, we have a clearer understanding of the context. The context includes not only linguistic context, non linguistic context, namely the internal context and external context, but also refers to the cognitive context and dynamic context. These views of context reflect the characteristics of context from different sides, they are overlapping, or they express the same content in different terms. Thus, we can say that the context is the language interaction between all elements of communicative activities related to language, which includes co-text within the discourse, the immediate environment in which communication occurs and the interaction of shared information, culture background and the world knowledge of the participants; therefore, the context is dynamic.

## **III. PRAGMATIC THEORIES**

With the deepening of pragmatics research, linguists have put forward some pragmatic theories, such as speech act theory, indirect speech act theory, the cooperative theory, and relevance theory and so on. In these theories, language scholars closely link context to pragmatic meaning and the context being regarded as an important variable element in the complex process of language communication (Huang, 2000)[6].

### **1. Speech act theory**

Speech act theory is founded by the British philosopher, who raised the suspicion of “statement” point of view of traditional philosophy of language study, namely the role of words is either to describe things, or to state a fact. The two will be one of them, not other use. And the description or representation made by statement only is true, or fallacious, and it has the function of “doing things”. Austin thought “presentation of many words just ‘pseudo statement’, many words they say seem to be statements, but their aim is not to frankly narrate or convey the information of certain fact or only partially for this purpose”. Accordingly, Austin first distinguished two kinds of discourse: constative and performative. Austin used four famous examples to illustrate this kind of discourse.

- (1) “I do.” (used in the course of the wedding ceremony)
- (2) “I name the ship Elizabeth.” (used in the naming ceremony of the ship, when the speaker throws the champagne bottle towards the stern.)
- (3) “I give and bequeath my watch to my brother.” (used in a will)
- (4) “I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow.” (for betting)

In certain circumstances, a certain person said these words actually to constitute the implementation of certain behaviors. In other words, when the speaker says these words, he is not to narrate or describe, but complete a certain action -- such as marriage, naming, bequest or bet. In addition, we can use the following method to represent the implementation behavior, such as: “I promise...”, “I warn...”, “I apologize...”, “I welcome.” and so on. When these words are said, the speaker is in the implementation of the “promise”, “warning”, “apology”, “welcome” and so on. (He, 2000:86-87) [7]

### **2. Indirect speech act theory**

The indirectness of language is universal, that is to say, people tend to use indirect ways to express themselves. This indirect language phenomenon aroused speech act theorists’ great interests, but also became one of their most important topics.

Searle argues that indirect language phenomenon “actually indirectly implements a kind of speech act through the implementation of another kind of speech act”. When they spoke, what people said and did is sometimes consistent and sometimes not consistent. When it is consistent, it does not involve indirect usage of language, but people don’t always use language so simply, in many cases, what people said and what they wanted to say often have a certain distance. Then, the language has two illocutionary acts: one is statement, the other is the instruction. Statement is the speaker’s means, and instruction is the real purpose. For example: the child asked: “May I go out and play football, mum?” Mother replied: “it’s raining.” obviously, this statement “in the rain” is used to instruct mother’s true purpose (not allowed to go out and play football)

### **3. Cooperation theory**

American philosopher Grice believes that in all the communicative activities in order to achieve a specific goal, between the speaker and listener there is a kind of tacit understanding, the principle should be observed by both sides, and he calls this principle as Cooperative Principle.

Cooperative Principle includes four maxims: (1) the Maxim of quantity: to make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purpose of the exchange; (2) the Maxim of quality: do not tell lies; (3) the Maxim of Relevance: speak appropriately; (4) the Maxim of Manner: speak briefly and clearly to avoid ambiguity. The first three maxims are related to “what to say”, and the last one is related to “how to say”. Following all these maxims, people will be able to communicate in the most direct and most efficient way.

### **4. Relevance theory**

Sperber and Wilson questioned the view of the communicative functions, and they think the semantic expression and interpretation must be associated with other things, which are carried out in association with things. They think, although the language has a close relationship with the communication, but not necessarily linked to each other. Language and communication connection is just a coincidence of the human natural language. They cited a vivid example: the elephant’s nose is olfactory function, also function to wrap objects, but the two functions are not necessarily relevant, and the connection is just a coincidence. Similarly, language as communication is also a kind of representation. They believe that the basic function of language is not its communicative function, involving human activities in which language is used, whose essence is cognition. Cognition is to absorb information, and obtain knowledge about the world; thus, it is necessary to store and process information. Language is a necessary tool for storing information and processing information, which is the basic function of language.

Relevance theory classifies communicative activities as cognitive activities that verbal communication is a purposeful and intentional activity; the speaker’s purpose or intention can be identified by listeners because they have a consensus on the cognitive environment. That is, a successful communication significantly depends on

whether or not the two sides can manifest and mutually manifest mutual cognitive environment.

In communication, mutual manifestness is an objective existence, but the degree of manifestness vary from individuals and the situation. Therefore, Sperber and Wilson believes that human perception of things is always to follow the principle of relevance – “any ostensive communicative activity means that the optimal relevance”. For Verbal communication, what both sides say must be relevant to the entire topic and what they say above. And it is based on information associated between the words that people understand the speaker’s intention. Sperber and Wilson define Relevance as an assumption “the relationship between P and a series of contextual assumptions”, i.e., in the process of conversation, the previous discourse and the posterior discourse and the context on which the conversation relies have certain connection in semantics and pragmatics. (He, 2000) [7]

#### **IV. IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT TO PRAGMATICS**

No matter from the linguistic perspective or from the illocutionary point of view, no matter from the static view or from the dynamic one, context has great significance to pragmatics. It can be said that, it is impossible to talk about pragmatics without context. Therefore, it is not surprising that some scholars believe that “pragmatics is the study of context.”

##### **1. Narrow context and narrow pragmatics**

The narrow context refers to the traditional view of context, or static context in the third part we mentioned before, including communicators’ language knowledge, co-text of the discourse, participants’ world, knowledge, social and cultural background, time and place of communication, and situational factors consisting of communicators’ way of speaking. Traditional pragmatics regards that pragmatics, just like phonetics, phonology, and semantics, as a branch of linguistics to study and discuss the use of language, such as deictic words, speech act, presupposition, pragmatic inference and conversational implicature, etc. Ran Yongping calls it as the narrow pragmatic view, which has been the mainstream in the study of pragmatic for a long time. See the following analysis of deixis (1, 2), conversational implicature (3, 4), the premise (5) and speech act (6).

(1) I’ll tell about it this afternoon.

(2) Please wait for me in that place tomorrow.

When we read or hear these two sentences, we must know the information of the person deictic words I, it, me, the time deictic words this afternoon and tomorrow, place deictic words that place in the specific context to understand the true meaning of the utterance. Otherwise, we can only get the literal meaning.

(3) A: Let’s climb the hill this morning.

B: We’ll have the math exam this evening.

(4) It’s cold here.

In (3), B did not directly accept or reject A’s invitation, but through presenting the implication of the information “we cannot go hiking in the morning, because there is the math exam tonight”. In (4), if the speaker is in the room, then He/she might have implied. “Close the window, please”, “Please close the door” or “Please turn on the air conditioner” and so on. If the speaker is outside, possibly, he/she have the meaning of "want to go home". If the speaker and the listener are lovers, this sentence may have the meaning of "want to hug". Obviously, these words can have different meanings in different contexts.

(5) Hi!

When the speaker issued a “Hi!”, it meant he wanted to maintain friendly relations with the listener (ACT). This gesture of friendship will undoubtedly have a certain effect on the listener. If both sides are normal, the effect may be less obvious. If the relations between the two sides are a bit strained, one says a simple “Hi!”, which may make a great changes in their relationships, because the listener may accept such a friendly gesture, and make peace with the speaker. If the listener has prejudice against the speaker, he may put the friendly way as vanity, on the contrary, a greeting makes their relationship worse. Although this is not the speaker’s intention, but this is indeed the perlocutionary act (Ren, 2010)[4].

##### **2. Dynamic context and generalized pragmatics**

Language communication is a complex and dynamic process, and communication can not be separated from the context. People’s understanding of context is also changed from static to dynamic. Here we discuss the significance of cognitive context to cognitive pragmatics.

The view on dynamic context of relevance theory puts the focus of pragmatic research to cognition, which, therefore, is known as “cognitive pragmatics” in the west. What is the cognitive pragmatics? The definition has not been recognized, but we cannot deny its existence. For example, the communicative meaning of pragmatic phenomenon such as speech acts and premise is beyond the encoded information of language, the meanings of which are generated by the cognitive effort, which all cannot do without the information processing process, and reasoning is a cognitive process. Therefore, Xiong Xueliang argues that gradually fixed relations between the symbol and communicative intention, during the diachronic process, should be taken as the “semiotic”

relationship, and this subject which studies "semiotic" relationship is cognitive pragmatics "(Xiong, 1999)[8]. We use an example to illustrate how people deal with the following words through a series of contextual assumptions:

Peter: Can we trust John to do as we tell him and defend the interests of the Linguistics Department in the University Council?

Mary: John is a soldier!

After listening to this dialogue, all of the relevant concepts of soldier in Peter's brain are activated. According to the degree of accessibility of these concepts, different interpretations of Mary words vary as follows:

- (a) John is devoted to his duty.
- (b) John willingly follows orders.
- (c) John does not question authority.
- (d) John identifies with the goals of his team.
- (e) John is a patriot.
- (f) John earns a soldier's pay.
- (g) John is a member of the military.

It is not difficult to see that in the above seven explanations, it is (d) that has the greatest degree of relevance with Mary's talk, and can make the listener Peter pay minimal processing effort to get maximum contextual effect Mary is expecting.

Evidently, pragmatics grasps the true intention of the speaker by emphasizing contextual effect and by finding the relevance between the source text and context.

## V. CONCLUSION

Context is the basis for the existence of language, and all the factors that influence and restrict existence, development and changes of language belong to the category of context. It is because of the certain context that can provide language with the particular meaning. That is, pragmatics with specific contextual meaning must rely on contextual information processing. No matter how it develops, no matter how it changes, pragmatics cannot get rid of the effect that context restrict it.

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