The Functions of Context in Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Context is the environment that forms discourse and is one of the key factors influencing discourse comprehension. Language communication is not conducted in a vacuum but a specific language environment. Context plays a vital role in discourse analysis. This paper investigated the development and categories of context and analyzed the disadvantage of the traditional way of discourse analysis without considering the context. Based on Hu's classification of context, this paper analyzed many discourse examples from textbooks, grammar books, and articles, and concluded the functions of each type of context in discourse analysis. Linguistic context can eliminate ambiguities, indicate the reference of endophora, predict ensuing content, help guess word meaning, and supplement omitted information in discourse analysis. Situational context plays the role of understanding illogical sentences, supplementing omitted information and filling the semantic vacancy, and understanding illocutionary force and reflecting speech acts in discourse analysis. The cultural context has the functions of explaining cultural connotations, filling the semantic vacancy, and building consistency of discourse in discourse analysis. Finally, enlightenment of functions of context in discourse analysis to language teaching and learning is provided.

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1 Introduction

Discourse refers to any sample of language used for any purpose, including spoken and written language. Discourse is any flow of speech events or any arrangement of written words that connects subsequent sentences or utterances. In other words, discourse is any "coherent succession of sentences, spoken or written" (Matthews, 2014). The meaning of a discourse mainly depends on its context, and at the same time, the discourse is also a part of the context; they are interdependent but also complementary to each other. The specific pattern or structure of discourse is often formed in a specific context. Therefore, the knowledge of context can help to understand the meaning and communicative intention of a discourse. Since the concept of context was put forward in the 1920s, its meaning and related theories have been developing and enriching. Malinowski (1923), of London School came up with the term context. Firth (1957), made further research on context based on Malinowski's context theory. Halliday (1985) developed Firth's achievement to the theory of register and introduced three variables of register: field, tenor, and mode. Based on Halliday's research, Hu (1994), classified context into three types: linguistic context, situational context, and cultural context. This classification of contexts helps comprehend the meaning of discourse and the communicational intention (Dickson et al., 2003; Kirmayer et al., 1995).

The analysis of spoken, written, or sign language use, as well as any major semiotic event, can be done through discourse analysis, also known as discourse studies. There are two goals to be achieved in discourse analysis (Zhang & Chen, 2013). The first goal is at a lower level, which aims to analyze the meaning expressed by the discourse itself, the means of expression, and why it expresses that meaning. The second goal is the evaluation of discourse, which is at a high level. The former mainly reveals the polysemy, ambiguity, or metaphor of the discourse, which is an activity of describing and explaining the discourse, while the realization of the latter goal should consider the context of the discourse, exploring the relationship between the context and the discourse, which is an activity of explanation and evaluation. Therefore, discourse analysis cannot be separated from its context, and any analytical procedure or mode should be related to context (Mutana & Mukwada, 2018; Bliss et al., 1998).

However, traditional discourse analysis just pays attention to the comprehension of linguistic segments and is limited to word meaning recognition and grammar analysis, which would lead to break-off of the constant thought of the whole passage and let readers pay much attention to the form of language. This will hinder the reader's comprehension ability and the improvement of expression ability. Based on this gap, this paper aims to analyze and conclude the functions of context in discourse analysis. The research questions of this paper are as follows:

1. What are the categories of context?
2. What are the functions of each type of context in discourse analysis?

2 Context Theories and Discourse Analysis

Development and Categories of Context

Context means the environment of a language. It is a core concept in pragmatics and sociolinguistics that is the study of language structure and language use in social contexts (Yang, 2014). Language researchers study context from different perspectives and came up with different context categories. The context was originally proposed by (Malinowski, 1923). He introduced the term "context of situation" and classified context into two categories: the context of situation and the context of culture (Lan, 2004). Context of situation means the whole situation and environment of speaking one language. Context of culture means the cultural reality, life, and customs of one ethnicity in which a language is rooted. After observing the languages of the indigenous peoples of the South Pacific islands, Malinowski concluded that words without context have no meaning and represent nothing. Therefore, utterances are meaningful only in the context of the situation. He pointed out that a language is rooted in the culture, social life, and customs of the people who speak it, and it is difficult to understand the language correctly without reference to these broad contexts (Colledge & Scott, 1999; Gero & Kannengiesser, 2004).

Malinowski's theory of "context of situation" became the central theory to Firth's approach to linguistics and Firth (1957), established a relatively complete theory of context. He extended Malinowski's concept of context, pointing out that in addition to the co-text of language itself and the activities people engage in, context also includes the social environment, culture, belief, identity, and experience of the activity participants as well as the relationship

between them. Firth also classifies context into two types: intra-linguistic context and extra-linguistic context (Widdowson, 2019). The former type also refers to co-text. It includes the syntagmatic relationship between the components of a structure and the paradigmatic relationship between items or units within a system. The latter type of context comes from outside the language and is composed of non-linguistic factors, that is, the context of situation referred to by Malinowski. Halliday (1985), summed up the theory of register based on the theory of situational context. Context can be reflected by the register, whose variables include field of discourse, tenor of discourse, and mode of discourse. The field of discourse refers to what happened actually and the language occurring conditions, including the topic of conversation, the speaker, and activities in which other participants are involved. The tenor of discourse refers to the relationship between participants, including the participant's social status and role. The mode of discourse refers to channels or media of language communication, for example, speaking or writing, impromptu or prepared (Cabrerizo et al., 2010; Kircher et al., 2001).

Hu (1994) divided context into three types based on Halliday's framework model: 1), Linguistic context, that is co-text, refers to the internal environment of the discourse. 2), Situational context, refers to the environment where the discourse is generated, the characteristic properties of the event, and the topic, time, place, and mode of the conversation. 3), Cultural context, refers to the author's language social groups, history, culture, customs, and habits (Song, 2010). According to theories of systemic functional linguistics, context can be divided into two categories: linguistic context and non-linguistic context. The latter includes cultural context and situational context. The cultural context is the context of the whole language system which determines the meaning systems in the entire language system. Situational context is the specific use of language in context and a concrete manifestation of the cultural context. The cultural context is manifested by the numerous situational contexts while situational context determines the significance of specific communicative events in exchange through the cultural context (Diéguez-Risco et al., 2015; Stern & Lehrndorfer, 1992).

Situational context is a more general concept that can be divided into four categories namely immediate context, intratextual context, exchange context, and intertextual context. Intratextual context refers to the relationship between paragraphs above and below, that is, linguistic context or discourse context. Immediate context refers to the external environment generated by the discourse. It is a conceptual framework of three components: field, tenor, and mode. A change of any of the three parts will produce a variety of language variants, which formed the register theory of Halliday. Exchange context is a kind of context jointly established by the speaker and hearer. Intertextual context refers to the context formed by the contact and mutual influence between discourses. There are differences but also connections between intratextual context and intertextual context. The intratextual context is an objective reality, and it is visible and tangible in discourse, especially in written discourse. The intertextual context exists in the brain, also known as the cognitive context, which reflects the intratextual context and is a kind of presupposition. The intertextual context is a subjective reflection of the intratextual context of the mother tongue in the brain. When an EFL (English as a foreign language) learner leaners English but without supporting the intertextual context of an English discourse, the intertextual context of the learner's mother tongue discourse will be activated and be matched to the English language form (Bai, 2000).

Context and Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is also referred to as utterance analysis. It is a linguistic analysis of long single sentences and paragraphs. From a functional point of view, discourse analysis is the study of language in communication. It involves the relationship between language and the situational context. McCarthy (1991), argues discourse analysis is the study of the relationship between language and the context in which language is used. Discourse is generated in the context, but also is an important part of the context (Mahyuni et al., 2019; Pérez et al., 2021).

Disadvantages of Traditional Grammar Analysis in Discourse Analysis

At present, the traditional model of grammar analysis in the process of English learning remains an important position. This approach tends to be concentrated on "the analysis of the meaning of words and grammatical structure of sentences" (Huang, 1988). Its purpose is to make the reader have a thorough understanding of meaning and mastery of the rules by which words make sentences. Words must be the core of learning in the initial stages of foreign language learning. It is conducive to helping learners or readers to lay a solid language foundation and plays a positive role in improving their language skills. However, traditional grammar pays attention to understanding the language fragment, which is limited to identifying the meaning and analysis of syntax. Decontextualized analysis is

likely to cause an interruption of the continuity of the whole thinking of written discourse. That will lead learners or readers to focus only on language form but ignore the ideological content of language. Readers usually have the habit of translating a written discourse word by word or sentence by sentence, which will affect the cultivation and improvement of understanding and interpersonal skills and hinder readers' comprehension and expression capabilities.

At present, there are many grammar books in which there are only single sentences without context. Because of this, it is difficult to determine the grammatical context. A verb is put in a sentence with different verb forms that may represent different syntax context and has different meanings. For example, this is an exercise adapted from the A New English Grammar Course (Z. B. Zhang, 2017). The learners are required to fill in the blank with the right form of the given verb.

1. What is the matter? Why the train (stop)?
2. Because the signal is against us.

Judging from this example, it is difficult to determine verb forms according to the linguistic context of the sentence because of the possibility of a variety of non-linguistic contexts. The speaker may be a passenger and may also be one of the train staff. The speaker may be on the train and may also be on the platform. The train may have just stopped and may be slowing down. Thus, there are some limitations to decontextualized grammar learning.

Preferable Way for Discourse Analysis

When teaching and learning a second or foreign language, teachers and learners should not be limited to sentences themselves nor only learn the vocabulary and grammar but should go beyond the scope of the sentence to learn the role of sentences in discourse and learn the language being used to communicate. Language learning should be based on the discourse and the context. Language learning with context-based discourse analysis can overcome disjointed contradictions of language knowledge and communication skills caused by traditional grammar learning and make up for the shortage of it. The exchange of ideas or access to information is conducted in a certain environment. In other words, the use of language is always associated with a certain setting or environment. Why do people say this but not say that and use this word instead of that word? This is related to the context of the language being used. According to the categories of context analyzed above, the non-linguistic context of language being used includes both the situational context and cultural context. Learning of words as units can only complete the exchange of knowledge of the language but is powerless on other aspects of knowledge imparting. Therefore, foreign language learning should be based on word and sentence learning combined with context to develop discourse learning. Only in this way can be beneficial in developing the learner and reader's language skills and develop their verbal communication skills at the same time. Only in this way can greatly improve the efficiency of English learning and avoid the phenomenon of machinery English learning because of the absence of context and the full discourse.

Relationship Between Context and Discourse Analysis

The relationship between context and discourse is no longer a new topic but has not been conclusive. Halliday (1985), creatively put forward the corresponding relationship between the three types of contexts and three meta functions of language and established a semantic structure that corresponded to the three functions. This provided a viable theoretical model for exploring the basic relationship of mutual prediction between the context and discourse. However, Halliday did not further explore the extent. He did not realize that context and discourse can predict each other. The degree of this prediction has a certain relationship to the openness and closeness of the register. In other words, the more open the register is, the context and discourse are easier to predict, and vice versa.

3 Functions of Context in Discourse Analysis

The meaning of discourse depends on the context: discourse and context are interdependent and mutually reinforce each other. Without context, the form of language in use does not make sense. The same form of language can express different meanings on different occasions. Taking the utterance "It's very hot here" for example, if the

window is closed and there is no air conditioner when the speaker says it, the speaker intends to open the doors and windows for air circulation. If this is said in an office to installers, it may mean fitting an air conditioner in the office room. If it is said in the open air to a friend, it may describe the local weather. This shows that the same form of language in different contexts can express different meanings. The discourse was produced in the context and is an integral part of the context. Accordingly, to interpret the discourse, it is important to correctly understand and grasp the context of the discourse. Based on Hu's (1994) classification of contexts, functions of linguistic, situational, and cultural contexts in discourse analysis are analyzed and concluded in this section.

Functions of Linguistic Context in Discourse Analysis

Linguistic context is also termed co-text in discourse, and it is the direct source of discourse information. In discourse analysis, linguistic context can eliminate ambiguities, indicate the reference of endophora, and help to guess the meaning of a word.

Function of Eliminating Ambiguities

Ambiguity is a common phenomenon in natural language. It refers to a phenomenon of language unit or structure having more than one meaning. Ambiguity is often encountered in language learning and use. It produces at all levels of language use. For the convenience of the research, people generally divided ambiguity into two categories: nonlinguistic ambiguity and linguistic ambiguity. The former refers to a language ambiguity caused by external factors such as the speaker's speech, language, or communication channels. The latter refers to the ambiguity caused by the limited nature of the linguistic sign and its linear sequence of combinations. Language communication is not conducted in a vacuum but a specific language environment. Specific context often provides additional information. Such information in context can constrain, explain, and limit the ambiguity, which guides people to a proper understanding of the text.

> "Since she left, I have done the cooking and baked the cakes, but mine are never as good as hers".
> "Nonsense, my dear, I don't think Lassie's cakes were any better than yours", said Mr. Priestly loyally.

For example, in this discourse, "nonsense" by Mr. Priestly is a polysemous word, which may mean a message that seems to convey no meaning or ornamental objects of no great value. However, in this discourse, Mr. Priestly addresses the other speaker as "my dear". From this linguistic context, it can be inferred that what Mr. Priestly really mean is that "I do not think Lassie's cakes were any better than yours". In addition, the adverb "loyally" in this discourse can limit the meaning of "nonsense" here. It can be seen from this example that ambiguity elimination depends on the context and context has played a key role in the disambiguation.

Function of Indicating Reference of Endophora

Endophora is a phenomenon of coreference of an expression with another one within the surrounding text (Crystal, 2011; Halliday, 1976). There are personal endophora, demonstrative endophora, and comparative endophora. Personal endophora is achieved by personal pronouns (e.g., you, I, he, she, him, them, etc.), possessive pronouns (e.g., yours, mine, hers, theirs, etc.), and possessive determiners (e.g., your, my, her, his, etc.). Demonstrative endophora is realized by some demonstrative pronouns (e.g., this, that, these, those, etc.), definite article the, and some demonstrative adverbs (e.g., here, there, then, now, etc.).

> Victor met his old friend Jane yesterday. He asked her where she is going, and she said she is going to a restaurant called Tommie's for lunch. Then they went to that restaurant together and had something to eat there.

For example, several personal pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, and demonstrative adverbs appear in the above discourse: his, he, her, she, then, they, that, there. Readers or hearers can understand what they are referring to due to the linguistic context in this discourse. Comparative endophora can be realized by comparative forms of adjectives and adverbs and other words with comparative meaning, such as so, same, such, equal, differently, similar, otherwise, other, etc. For example, in the following discourse, "more slowly" is the comparative form of the adverb "slowly". It is clear to readers or hearers how slow is "more slowly" here because of its co-text "in only three minutes" before.

> Victor finished a hamburger in only three minutes, while, Jane, on the other hand, was eating more slowly.

From the above examples, it can be seen that linguistic context has the function of indicating the reference of endophora in discourse analysis.

Function of Predicting Ensuing Content

As it is shown in the last section that pronouns, determiners, articles, and adverbs have the function of indicating the reference of endophora in a discourse, conjunctions can also predict the following paragraph in discourse analysis. When analyzing a discourse, the conjunctions between sentences can help infer the content of the following part of a discourse. For example, when reading or hearing the sentence "though progress on the subway has not actually stopped", "something is wrong with the project" can be speculated according to the meaning of concessions of the adverbial clause caused by the associated word "though". Something like "It is likely that the completion of the project will be delayed" may occur hereafter. For another example, when reading or hearing the statement connected by sequential conjunctions such as "first", you can infer that at least three items are contained. Thus, emphasis on textual cohesive devices such as conjunctions in the teaching of language reading and listening can help students summarize the above and predict the following content of a discourse (Zhang & Liu, 2018).

Function of Guessing Word Meaning

When interpreting a discourse, some unfamiliar words often appear, and vocabulary clues provided in the context such as synonyms, synonyms, and hyponymy words can help to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words. For example, in the following discourse, the word "cocksure" may be an unfamiliar word to some readers or hearers, but "excessive self-confidence" in the following co-text can be seen as its synonym. Thus, it can be inferred that the meaning of "cocksure" here is "over-confident". Therefore, linguistic context can help to guess word meanings and improve the efficiency of discourse interpretation.

> Mr. Kelada was incredibly cocksure. It was this excessive self-confidence that made you want to prove him wrong when he gave an opinion.

Function of Supplementing Omitted Information

Linguistic context can also supplement the omitted information in discourse.

1. I am wondering whether you'd care to spend the evening with me.
2. I'd love to.

It can be inferred from the co-text that "spend the evening with you" is omitted after "I'd love to".

Functions of Situational Context in Discourse Analysis
Function of Understanding Illogical Sentences

Sometimes, some sentences or utterances seem illogical at first sight or listen, such as "Golf plays John". As a rule, this sentence is illogical. However, if John's technical are poor and often makes mistakes on a golf course, "Golf plays John" can be accepted as a taunt instead of "John plays golf". Therefore, situational context helps understand illogical sentences.

Function of Supplementing Omitted Information and Filling Semantic Vacancy

As it is mentioned in the last section that linguistic context can help readers or hearers supplement omitted information in discourse analysis, the situational context has this function as well.

A: What are the police doing?
B: I've just arrived.

In the above discourse, it seems that there is no connection between the two sentences: the answer does not accord with the question. However, when the situational context has been known, one can easily understand this discourse. When A came to a place and saw the police there, he did not know what they are doing, so he asked B the question: "What are the police doing?". B has just arrived there, and he does not know what the police are doing there either, so his answer is "I've just arrived". Its function is the negative responses and statements. So, the explicit expression is as follows,

A: What are the police doing?
B: (I don't know what they are doing either because) I've just arrived here.

In addition, sometimes two seemingly unrelated sentences are often seen in discourse or communication. Situational context takes a very important role in this kind of situation and can fill the semantic vacancy to let the discourse or communication understandable.

A: Where is my box of chocolates?
B: The children were in your room this morning.

For example, in the above discourse, B does not directly answer A's question but says something that seemingly has nothing to do with A's questioning as a response. However, A in this dialogue as well as readers of this discourse can understand the meaning of B's answer that maybe the kids ate A's chocolate. This shows that situational context can supplement omitted information and fill the semantic vacancy in discourse analysis.

Function of Understanding Illocutionary Force and Reflecting Speech Acts

Besides supplementing omitted information and filling the semantic vacancy, situational context sometimes can further help readers or hearers understand illocutionary force and reflect speech acts in discourse analysis. The illocutionary force was firstly introduced by Austin (1962), which means a speaker's intention of producing an utterance. The pragmatic meaning of a single sentence in a discourse is uncertain without context because the same one has different meanings in different situational contexts.

My recorder has been broken by someone.

For example, the pragmatic meaning of the above sentence is not only a complaint but can also be an apology or a refusal. Its meaning depends on situational context. When someone borrows the tape recorder from the speaker, this utterance may mean to apologize or refuse.

Husband: That's the phone.
Wife: I'm in the bathroom.
Husband: Okay.

In the above conversation between a husband and wife, the wife's reply seems to have nothing to do with what the husband said. It seems to violate the maxim of relation of the Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975). However, the husband and wife can understand each other's illocutionary force based on their situational context. The illocutionary force of what the husband said "That's the phone" is asking the wife to answer the phone, while the wife's reply "I'm in the bathroom" means she has no time to answer the phone and the husband should go to do so. Finally, the husband understands this and agrees to answer the phone call and performs the wife's illocutionary force.

Functions of Cultural Context in Discourse Analysis
Function of Explaining Cultural Connotations

Everyone belongs to a certain social and cultural community, and each community has formed its unique customs, religious beliefs, value standards, and idioms in the long-term development process. Whether when foreigners watch Chinese crosstalk or sketches, or when Chinese people watch foreign soap operas, they are often still indifferent to

the best part of the expression, sometimes even misunderstanding or prejudiced against it. For example, when a bus conductor and a passenger quarrel with each other, the bus conductor says, "what do you want? Bite me?!". The passenger says, "No, I am a Muslim". If someone does not understand the religious tradition of the Muslims, he or she will not understand the implied meaning of this utterance.

Function of Filling Semantic Vacancy

Cultural context can also fill the semantic vacancy in a discourse.

The candidate met his Waterloo in the national election

For example, in the above discourse, the meaning of the idiom "meet one's Waterloo" is a crushing defeat produced by the cultural context. Cultural context is essential to understanding the implicit meaning of the discourse. Grasping the cultural context can help understand the meaning of the text and its communicative purpose.

Function of Building Consistency of Discourse

Another important function of the cultural context in discourse analysis is building the consistency of a discourse.

A: Do you like rugby?
B: I am a New Zealander.

For example, the semantic meaning of these questions and answers in the above conversations are not coherent, only when the two parties of the conversation have a mutual knowledge that New Zealanders love rugby very much.

4   Conclusion

Context has been a key and core concept in Pragmatics and Systemic Functional Linguistics, and it is vital to discourse analysis. Different scholars proposed various classifications of context. Malinowski classified context into context of situation and context of culture. Firth included co-text into the category of context and classified context into intra-linguistic and extra-linguistic context, in which intra-linguistic context refers to the co-text and extra-linguistic context refers to the "context of situation" proposed by Malinowski. Later, Halliday came up with the register theory based on previous research and proposed three variables of register: field, tenor, and mode. Hu argued that there are three types of contexts: linguistic, situational, and cultural context. Discourse analysis, also known as discourse studies, means the analysis of spoken, written, or sign language use, as well as any major semiotic event. However, the traditional way of discourse analysis pays too much attention to grammar analysis but neglects the important role of context in discourse analysis. Based on Hu's classification of context, this paper analyzed many discourse examples from textbooks, grammar books, and articles, and concluded the functions of each type of context in discourse analysis. First, linguistic context can eliminate ambiguities, indicate the reference of endophora, predict ensuing content, help guess word meaning, and supplement omitted information in discourse analysis. Then, situational context plays the role of understanding illogical sentences, supplementing omitted information and filling the semantic vacancy, and understanding illocutionary force and reflecting speech acts in discourse analysis. Finally, the cultural context has the functions of explaining cultural connotations, filling the semantic vacancy, and building consistency of discourse in discourse analysis. With these functions of context, it is hoped that language teachers and learners can fully understand the importance of context in discourse analysis and consciously use and analyze the context in their course of English Reading and English Listening. Besides, language is part of the culture. The culture behind the target language should also be included in the process of language teaching and learning.

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