Meaning and Context-Three Different Perspectives.

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ABSTRACT: *This paper involves exploring the link between meaning and context in the linguistic context from three different perspectives: communication, teaching and translation. Communicators, teachers and translators find it obviously crucial to observe the link which will serve as a significant indicator of enhancing their performance. For communicators, meaning and context go side by side to result in successful relationship with whom they address. For teachers, teaching vocabulary, reading and grammar requires intense concentration on meaning and context. For translators and interpreters, meaning and context are a key element in translation. This paper concludes that context considers a major factor at addressing meaning and meaning occupies an integral role at establishing context.*

KEYWORDS: Meaning, Context, Communication, Teaching, Translation.

INTRODUCTION

Meaning can be investigated linguistically by semantics. Meaning is the cornerstone of language, since people communicate principally to convey meaning. Meaning is more than a definition in a dictionary; it is also found in a context. Meaning and context are interdependent, i.e., meaning cannot be communicated without context, and context cannot be established without meaning. Travis, in his book *Unshadowed Thought,* affirmed that meaning is thoroughly contextual (Williams, 2004, p. 107). The meaning of a word can be inferred by context. There are different types of contexts that relate to meaning, such as nonlinguistic or situational contexts, but the majority of studies limit the meaning of contexts to the linguistic contexts of a word, i.e., the words before and after a word (Charles, 2000, pp. 506-507).

The word 'context' is used by different authors and communities for different but often interrelated and dependent notions. Linguists often refer to the context of phrase or word as the text that surrounds it. Another everyday usage of 'context' refers to a section of the real world in which some events or the discourse takes place, and is often intertwined and confused with another meaning, namely knowledge about the same thing. (Christiansen & Dahl, 2005, p. 100)

Many dictionaries were consulted to identify the meaning of context and found that context related to meaning. Any chunk of meaning is a context (Anderson, 2006, p. 28.). The meaning of a sentence affects and is affected by context (Christiansen & Dahl, 2005, p. 97). This paper attempts to investigate meaning and context from three distinct points of reference: communication, pedagogy and translation. In addition, it addresses other aspects of the relationship between meaning and context.

Context plays an important role in determining meaning in communication. Therefore, separate words and sentences alone are not sufficient for communication. Nothing better demonstrates the importance of context than the variety of definitions of a single word found

in dictionaries (Johnson, 1974, p. 18). In communication, information provided by the context and linguistic utterance are exchangeable; the more information that is provided by context, the less information is required in the utterance. Thus, information from both context and the words themselves simultaneously produces meaning (Johnson, 1974, p. 19). Context vigorously limits interpretation in advance that the actual speech stimulus is largely redundant (Dascal, 1989, p. 256). There are three key components that speakers must include when communicating: syntax, vocabulary and semantics (Gärdenfors, 1993, p. 285). Words that coincide in the same context have a syntactic and semantic relationship (Cheung & Fung, 2004, p. 254). Successful communication is assured when the hearer properly interprets two contexts: the discourse context, i.e., the information contained in the words, and the physical-social context, i.e., the hearer's knowledge of the speaker, environment, and circumstances (Kreidler, 1998, p. 23). The circumstances are "the time and place, the people involved, their background, their relationship to one another, and what they know about one another" (Kreidler, p.27).

From a pedagogically perspective, vocabulary, reading and grammar are associated with context. Graves estimated that students learn a substantial amount of vocabulary from context during a school year (Van Daalen-Kapteijns, Elshout-Mohr, & De Glopper, 2001, p. 146). "Deriving word meaning from written context is a very important source of vocabulary expansion for primary-school students acquiring their first language" (Fukkink, Blok, & De Glopper, 2001, p. 477). Reading skills involve discerning meaning from a context. The meaning of words is dynamic. As Siebert states, "word meanings are not immutable, but change all the time with the use of a context" (Seibert, 1945, p. 297). To make an educated guess as to the meaning of a word, inference is required. A study conducted by Seibert indicated that inference facilitates the derivation of the meaning of words based on context (Seibert, p.301). Clearly, inference requires practice. Seibert carried out an experiment that showed "the importance of the practice of drawing word meanings by inference from the context" (Seibert, p.305). The use of context expedites word recognition. Many readers spontaneously use context in word recognition. As students grow older, their ability to use contextual cues develops (Lynda Hamilton & McCormick, 1989, p. 91).

Grammar is also taught in context. Anderson (2006) integrated grammar and writing instruction in such a way that they worked together to achieve meaning (Anderson, 2006, p. 28). Aspects of grammar such as tense have meaning, but such meanings will not be understood unless they are presented in the context of a sentence.

From a translational point of view, both lexical items and context are related to one another. This interconnection is obvious in concordance and equivalence-chain relation. Concordance involves the reoccurrence of a lexical item in different contexts in a text and equivalence-chain relation implies the presence of diverse lexical items in similar contexts in a text (Longacre, 1958, pp. 482-483). It has been concluded that "translation is most successful in transmitting the message of a text as a whole, less successful in reproducing details of immediate context…" (Longacre, 1958, p. 491). Word co-existence information is useful for translation tasks (Cheung & Fung, 2004, p. 254).

While many researchers have demonstrated that meaning can be inferred from context, others disagree, citing the ambiguity of the context or difficulty of the text (Frantzen, 2003, pp. 168-169). Contexts can result in different interpretations of meaning. There is no ambiguity

when there is contextual variation, i.e., variation within a single meaning such as *my cousin has just had a baby* and *John's cousin is married to my sister*. Polysemy and homonymy can both lead to ambiguity. Polysemy refers to two or more distinct meanings of a word. For example, the word *lion* can have more than one meaning (*lion v. tiger/ lion v. lioness*). Homonymy means functioning as the phonetic realisation of more than one lexeme. An example is *boot*, which has two unrelated meanings: *'item of footwear' and 'luggage space of car'* (Collinge, 1990, p. 83).

Lexical ambiguities that are difficult to resolve otherwise can be handled [by] taking the current context into account, or perhaps being delayed until more context information have been collected in the subsequent discourse. We can also provide rules that activate pre-existing contexts when sufficient amount of indication is found, thus making available new vocabulary and ontology. (Christiansen & Dahl, 2005, p. 99)

To summarize, looking at words alone can lead to ambiguity, but context can provide critical information to identify the correct meaning.

Signs are any formal item that conveys meaning, especially a conventional piece of a system(Kreidler, 1998, p. 303) Conventional signs encountered during every-day life can have multiple context-dependent meanings. For example, the whistle of a policeman directing traffic, the whistle of a hotel doorman calling a taxi, and the whistle of the referee in a soccer game may all sound exactly the same; however, different contexts allow a listener to distinguish between possible meanings (Kreidler, 1998, pp. 21-22).

The meaning of an utterance requires a context:

The role of context ranges from disambiguating ambiguous expressions as in *we just got to the bank in time*, through identification of referents (who is *he*, where is *there*, *in time* for what, in *he didn't get there in time*), walking ' between the lines messages…. (Cruse, 2004, p. 13)

Two expressions can have the same or different normality, or meaning. An example of two words with the same normality is *pullover* and *sweater*. Dog and cat are examples of two words that have different normalities; '*our cat has had kittens'* is more normal than '*our dog has had kittens'*. This concept is referred to as "relative normality" and is an example of a contextual approach to meaning (Cruse, 2004, p. 41).

Knowing the goal of a context permits an appropriate interpretation of a text. General objective contexts appear as true statements, such as scientific facts. They are usually found in documents such as scientific papers and news articles. Subjective contexts include feelings, beliefs, and opinions. Probability contexts are comprehended in human inference and as a consequence of human languages. Time and space contexts occur in human reasoning and language. Domain contexts concern restrictions regarding the domain of applicability of a statement. Necessity contexts specify necessary conditions for something to happen, e.g., the verb "must". Planning contexts involve information about someone's plans or wishes. When several contexts of different types overlap or coincide, a richness in information rather than conflict is achieved (Fortu & Moldovan, 2005, pp. 171-173).

Meaning and context are interrelated in a variety of situations. Successful communication cannot be achieved without the integration of meaning and context. Teachers need to combine meaning and context to arrive at a full command of different language skills. To provide an accurate translation, translators and interpreters must carefully consider contexts. Inference, ambiguity and conventional signs are important factors when seeking to understand meaning and context. It is clear that meaning cannot be understood without context. Relative normality is a semantic concept that is related to meaning and context. A variety of aspects of contexts lead to proper interpretation or understanding of the meaning of a text.

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