

Dynamic Context and Verbal Communication

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Abstract Various attempts have been made to examine the nature of communication and to explore ways of successful communication. This paper, which focuses on verbal communication, holds that verbal communication is contextual and dynamic Context plays an important role in the process of verbal communication. Context can constrain and explain verbal communication and contribute to the beauty of the speech both in form and expression.

Keywords Dynamic Context, Verbal Communication

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of linguistics, much greater attention has been directed to the realization of the fact that language is not an abstract or a fully static system. Language, in a sense, is context-dependent. In other words, people use language in context — in a dynamic, real-life situation. The dynamic properties of context lies in that context are generated dynamically, and that communicators take a leading position in communication.

Communicators interact dynamically to create contexts. On the one hand, communicators should adapt their linguistic behaviour to those relevant contextual elements that are consistent with the principle of relevance for the sake of optimal relevance. On the other hand, communicators can manipulate the contextual factors which are beneficial to them to achieve their communicative goals. This paper will focus on the leading position of the communicators in verbal communication to illustrate the value of context to verbal communication.

2. Verbal Communication in Terms of Context

Verbal communication is in essence the communication of meaning — thoughts or feelings communicators intend to share. Those thoughts or feelings are generally created, shaped, and affected by communicators' cognitive process. In this process, the speaker encodes thoughts or feelings

into words and actions and sends them to the hearer, and the meanings that have been encoded into words are turned back into meanings by the hearer through the decoding process. The encoding and the decoding processes are both affected by communicators' contextual assumptions. Therefore, meanings assigned by the speaker at the encoding end do not always remain the same at the decoding end when received by the hearer. Affected by contextual elements, meanings can be either shared jointly or distorted divergently in communication. The shared meaning, or the extent to which the message is effective, depends on the feedback from the hearer. For example:

(1) (a) [*Mutual knowledge. It is Saturday, A intends to invite B to go for a walk.*]

A. *How about today?*

B. *OK. Thank you very much.*

(b): [*Mutual knowledge. A knows that the boss criticized B for his lateness*]

A. *How about today?*

B. *I got there on time and I worked overtime.*

Although the literal meaning of “How about today?” is identical in different cases above, as a way of inquiry, they differ dramatically in utterance meanings in different contexts. The hearer, with the help of context, singles out the meaning intended to convey by the speaker.

The example above shows that meaning in verbal communication is greatly affected by various contextual factors in the process, and to characterize verbal communication, the consideration of meaning on its literal level is far from being enough. Therefore, both the literal and underlying meanings need to be considered simultaneously. These two types of meanings are often referred to as literal meaning and non-literal meaning. The former is context-independent while the latter is context-dependent. Literal meaning is the basic meaning of a language unit on its surface, which is static, indeterminate and is unaffected by the changes of context. However, non-literal meaning is a dynamic concept referring to the meaning of a language unit in a particular context. Non-literal meaning derives from its corresponding literal meaning and the context in which it is uttered. In this sense,

another dichotomy can be used to label these two meanings: concept meaning and contextual meaning (or communicative meaning).

3. Four Dimensions of Contextual Meaning in Verbal Communication

In verbal communication, contextual meaning is very important and the understanding of it is the key access to the recognition of the real intention of the speaker. In line with Verschueren's [1] theory, contextual meaning includes four dimensions on the account of context:

- (i) Meaning determined in a linguistic context. At this level, meaning may be determined either by the relationship of each lexical item to the others within the sentence, or from the sentence(s) that come(s) before and that come(s) after. Meaning determined at this level is related solely to the fixing of the meaning of word(s) and sentence(s). This is only the first step to the conveyance of the intention on the part of the speaker and the recognition of the speaker's intention on the part of the hearer.
- (ii) Meaning determined in a physical context. This dimension of meaning is generally attained in the immediate physical environment, such as time and space, at the particular moment of utterance. For example, if A leaves B a note like this:

(2) *Bring with you a stick this big at this time tomorrow.*

Without physical contexts, how big the stick is and what time it is when the note is written are both indeterminate. However, suppose this utterance is made at a face-to-face interaction, with the explicitness of the physical contexts when the interaction occurs and the description of how big the stick is with the company of gestures, the indeterminacy of this utterance is removed.

- (i) Meaning influenced by the mental world (context) of communicators. The mental world includes such cognitive and emotive elements as personality traits, patterns of beliefs, emotional involvement, wishes, desires and motivations or intentions of the communicators. These factors play an important role in the process of choice making and interpretation with the speaker and the hearer. For instance, to the same utterance, communicators with introversion character might interpret it in a negative way, whereas those of optimistic nature might interpret it in another way.
- (ii) Meaning obtained in social (or cultural) context. This dimension of meaning is closely related to the social and cultural backgrounds or in Verschueren's term "social world". Different social or cultural backgrounds will give the same proposition different meanings. There is a possibility that one identical

expression means different things in different cultures (or societies). Consider the following example:

(3) *Where are you going?*

This is a typical Chinese expression often uttered when people meet each other in daily life. However, it is by no means a genuine question from the point of view of the speaker, but in essence a greeting. The answer to this "question" is in effect trivial, and the importance of it lies in that it is an expression of courtesy, indicating that the greeter is polite and does care of the one he/she is calling to. Functionally equivalent expressions can be found in English as utterances concerning weather as a means of maintaining communion relation:

(4) *It is a nice day, isn't it?*

These four dimensions of meaning are all built with context in different aspects around. In verbal communication, the successful conveyance and the understanding of contextual meaning is the key access to effective communication. Context is therefore a vital element in verbal communication and the neglect of it may lead to communicative failures.

4. The Main Values of Context in Verbal Communication

Contexts play an important role in the process of verbal communication as noted in the sections above. Without the intervention of context, communication will be impossible. In this sense, context exerts significant value on verbal communication, which will be elaborated in this section.

4.1. Constraining Verbal Communication

Context imposes constraints on the process of verbal communication so as to provide a common ground for comprehension and production. Owing to the constraints, the speaker is limited to make contextually appropriate utterances to express his or her intention, and the hearer restricts the range of meanings with contextual correlates and comes up with the real intention of the utterance. That is to say, communicators' choice should be adaptable with the contexts. This is a fundamental principle followed by communicators in communication. In the course of communication, there are endless choices of linguistic forms available for the speaker to express the same thing. However, he/she can only pick out a concrete linguistic form which is appropriate to the context. Context in this sense places restrictions on the speaker in the course of linguistic choice making.

This kind of restrictions can be shown in two aspects:

- (i) Context has influence on the choice of a language, code or style, which means that communicators should choose proper languages, codes and styles according to different contextual situations so as to achieve their communicative goals. For example,

Mandarin has been adopted and legalized as a standard national language in China, therefore it is commonly favored in national conferences. However, speaking in a large international scientific conference is usually done in a narrow range of languages of international communication, with English at the top. So if a person speaks English in a national conference or speaks Chinese in an international scientific conference, he/she cannot achieve his/her communicative goals because of the barriers of the languages.

An appropriate choice of code sometimes is a way of avoiding a social taboo. Look at the following example, which is the translation of a Moroccan Arabic joke[1]:

(5) [Context: Two flies are copulating in front of a boy and his mother]

Child: Do you know what these two flies are doing?

Mother: No.

Child: *Ills font l 'amour.* [French for "they are making love"]

Mother: OK, OK.

Child: You know if I'd said this in Arabic, you would have left the room immediately.

In this dialogue, the child shifts the code cleverly to avoid the anger of the mother. Styles vary depending on relationships of communicators, situations and other factors. The choice of appropriate styles is therefore determined by contexts in which the communication takes place. Since this kind of context keeps changing, the styles of speech should be altered in consequence. Here is another example of the miscommunication caused by the unawareness of using appropriate style[2]:

(6) *The graduate student has been sent to interview a black housewife in a low income, inner city neighborhood. The contact has been made over the phone by someone in the office. The student arrives, rings the bell, and is met by the husband, who opens the door, smiles, and steps towards him.*

Husband. So y're gonna check out ma to lady, hah?

Interviewer. Ah, no. I only came to get some information. They called from the office.

(Husband, dropping his smile, disappears without a word and calls his wife.)

Obviously, the student's interview is stiff and quite unsatisfactory, because of his failure to recognize the significance of the husband's speech style in the particular case. The style is that of a formulaic opening gambit used to "check out" strategies, to see whether or not they can come up with the appropriate formulaic reply. In fact, in order to show that he is on the husband's wave-length, he should have replied with a typically black response like "Yeah, I'm a git some info "(I'm going to get some information) to prove his familiarity with and his ability to understand local verbal etiquette and values. Instead, his Standard English reply is taken by the husband as an indication that the

interviewer is not one of them and, perhaps, not to be trusted.

(ii) Context constraints the way of uttering, which means that what is uttered should be appropriate to the contexts such as social settings and cultural factors.

All the people communicate with others in the society, so in verbal communication, communicators should choose the way of uttering in accordance with the social conventions so as to communicate appropriately. For example, death is a heavily tabooed area in people's life. If the grandmother of a friend passed away, one should say something euphemistic to show his/her sympathy. On this occasion, the utterance like the following is appropriate:

(7) (a) *I am sorry to hear about your grandma*

And if he/she says something like this:

(b) *I was very sorry to hear your grandma tripped over the cat, cart-wheeled down the stairs and brained herself on the electricity meter.*

An embarrassment and offence to the friend will be caused. [3]

Additionally, cultural factors can also constrain the way of uttering. Sometimes, one way of uttering may be appropriate in one culture but inappropriate in another.

So in verbal communication, speakers should choose appropriate ways which are accepted in the culture of the hearers to express themselves.

Look at the following utterance spoken by the headmaster of a school in a welcome meeting to an American teacher:

(8) *"Ladies and gentlemen, I'm delighted to introduce you a very pretty girl, Miss Brown. She is a very good teacher from the USA."*

Hearing this, Miss Brown was displeased and embarrassed, for the headmaster inappropriately used "pretty girl" to introduce Miss Brown. In western countries, an adult female prefers to be called "woman" and she regards "girl" as innocent and immature. Besides, "pretty" and "good" are also not appropriate. Chinese people often use approval words to introduce someone so as to show their respect, while western people prefer to use objective words when meeting someone for the first time. So on this occasion, if the headmaster introduces something about Miss Brown's identification and academic achievement objectively, things will be better.

4.2. Explaining Verbal Communication

When an utterance is organized and uttered, it contributes its meaning partly to the environment in which it is produced. Context, on the one hand, limits the range of possible interpretation, and on the other hand, supports the intended interpretation. The hearer, to make sense of the meaning of the utterance, obtains real help from the context — to make the linguistic expressions of the interaction intelligible. That is closely related to the explanatory value of context.

4.2.1. Concretizing Utterance Meaning by Means of Context.

As noted in Section 4.1, there are two kinds of meanings: literal meaning and contextual meaning. Literal meaning is static while contextual meaning is dynamic and is subject to the change of context. So sometimes, an utterance might typically have one of several different possible meanings, and that which one of these possible meanings is the one the hearer thinks the speaker is intending depends on the context in which the utterance is uttered. Consider the following exchanges:

(9) (a) [*Mutual knowledge. A and B go for a picnic and the sun shines.*]

A. *It's a lovely day for a picnic.*

B. (*happily*): *It's a lovely day for a picnic indeed.*

(b) [*Mutual knowledge. A and B go for a picnic and it rains.*]

A. *It's a lovely day for a picnic.*

B. *It's a lovely day for a picnic indeed.*

Although the literal meanings of what A and B utter are identical in different cases above, they differ dramatically in contextual meanings in different contexts. The hearer, with the help of contexts — in (a) “the sun shines” and in (b) “it rains”, singles out different meanings intended to convey by the speaker: in (a), B means it is really a fine day for a picnic, while in (b) B means it is not a fine day for a picnic.

Sometimes, context can make sense of the utterance which is illogical in structure. Look at the following utterance:

(10) *Golf plays John.*

This utterance violates the selectional restrictions of the words, but if it is uttered with sympathy when John fails in Golf game, it seems to be appropriate.

The explanatory power of context also reveals itself in sorting out ambiguities or vagueness of utterance. That is to say, an ambiguity or vagueness can be eliminated in a given context. Take the following sentence as an example:

(11) *She drove to the bank.*

The meaning of this sentence would be unpredictable without putting it in a certain context, for “bank” can be interpreted as “land along the side of a river or lake” or “a business that keeps and lends money”. If “bank” appears in the sentence “She drove to the bank to cash a check”, then it refers to the latter. If it occurs in the sentence “She drove to the bank to take a walk”, it refers to the former.

4.2.2. Defining the Referent

In pragmatics, referent means a kind of verbal behaviour conducted by the two parties of the communication, where speakers use some kind of language forms to make hearers recognize something or someone in utterances. Actually, this kind of recognition to the referent is closely related to the contextual factors. Look at the following examples:

(12) A: *Can I borrow your Shakespeare?*

B: *Sure, it is on the shelf.*

(13) A: *Where is the ice-cream sitting?*

B: *She is sitting in the first row.*

Generally speaking, “Shakespeare” refers to a person and “ice-cream” refers to a kind of food. However, in (12), the verb “borrow” and the noun “shelf” make “Shakespeare” mean an object (a book written by Shakespeare or about Shakespeare); In (13), the verb “sitting” makes “ice-cream” mean a person who is sitting. It is obvious that in certain context, the referent can be determined through the inference of communicators.

Sometimes, besides the context before and after the referent in the utterance, the communicators’ adjustments to contextual factors in verbal communication can also define the referent as in the following conversation:

(14) A: *The old man thinks he 's in love with his daughter.*

B: (*Appalled*) *Good God! We 're out of depth here.*

A. *No, no, no — he hasn't got a daughter — the old man thinks he 's in love with his daughter.*

B. *The old man is?*

C. *Hamlet, in love with the old man 's daughter, the old man thinks.*

D. *Ha! It's beginning to make sense! Unrequited passion!*

In this conversation, at the beginning, the referent of the pronoun “lie” and “his” is uncertain, which makes it difficult to the mutual understandings of A and B. However, with the development of communication, A and B are constantly constructing new contexts to define “he” and “his”. In the end, the conversation are intelligible to both A and B under the dynamic change of context.

4.2.3. Understanding Implicature in Context

In verbal communication, it is quite usual that one can imply by means of the utterance something other than what he/she usually says. More often than not, the ultimate intent of the speaker is hidden behind the literal meaning of what is said. The term “implicature” is proposed by Grice [4] which means what a speaker can imply, suggest or mean as distinct from what the speaker literally says. The exploitation of implicature is taken as a communicative strategy and becomes commonplace in communication. Since particularized implicature relies heavily upon contextual elements, the consideration of it therefore is typical for the verification of the explanatory value of context. Take the following conversation as an example [4]:

(15) A: *What on earth has happened to the roast beef.*

B: *The dog is looking very happy.*

It is quite obvious that B is not making description of what the dog looks but rather implicating that perhaps the dog has eaten the roast beef. In the utterance, B gives A no direct access to his intended meaning. However, in this particular context, A is still able to arrive at a specific inference from the encyclopedic knowledge, mutually known to A and B, that dogs like roast beef and that the dog in question looks very happy when it is fed. The inference of the implicature here relies on the communicators’ knowledge of the conversational principles, the ability of

inference and contexts mutually manifest to both.

Here is another example [4]:

(16) A: *Do you want some coffee?*

B: *Coffeewouldkeepmeawake.*

In this dialogue, in order to know the implicature in B's words, A should draw some contextual assumptions from A's literal meaning with relevant contextual factors and then makes a conclusion through the process of inference and judgment as follows:

a) B does not want to stay awake.

b) B does not want any coffee.

or

c) B wants to stay awake or B wants anything that will keep her awake.

d) B wants some coffee.

4.3. The Aesthetic Value of Context

According to Qian Guanlian [5], beauty of speech is often characterized by these two features: Firstly, the speaker adopts appropriate linguistic forms for uttering—musicality in sound and well weighed in structure. Secondly, the speaker chooses appropriate utterance in harmony with the context. These two features are in fact jointly related to beauty of speech at two levels: beauty in form and beauty in content. The following two sections will study tentatively the aesthetic value of context from these two levels.

4.3.1. Creating the Formal Beauty of Speech

Formal beauty is the charm lying in linguistic forms. Beauty at this level is contributed by the sounds pleasing to the ear and the harmonious arrangement of words in utterance. This section will discuss how context contributes to the beauty in form mainly from the beauty of sounds and beauty of structure at both the lexical level and the level of syntax and discourse.

Language is primarily vocal, and sound is one important aspect of linguistic forms. Generally speaking, a phonetically musical utterance with strong tempo, concise stress, ingenious rhythm etc. is often regarded beautiful in form. Therefore, proper consideration of cadence and the echo of sounds in verbal communication enhance the appealing of speech with its musicality and a sense of completeness. In other words, in verbal communication, communicators can achieve beauty of speech in this dimension by considering the harmonious co-occurrence of phonetic features and contexts to add greatly to the expressive function of speech by making it more musical, vivid, figurative and well balanced.

Look at the following example [5]:

(17) *(An innkeeper is soliciting for customers.)*

店主 (inn keeper): 小(xiao2)炒(chao3)小(xiao2)炒(chao3), 五(wu3)元(yuan2)吃(chi1)饱(bao3), 十(shi2)元(yuan2)吃(chi1)好(hao3), 来(lai2)呀(ya)!

(The numbers in the brackets represent the tones in Chinese)

It is a successful example of integrating the usefulness and beauty in speech in daily life. Its beauty is based on a

reliable and principled manner and that the options of sounds on the part of the speaker are determined by the co-text. In this case, taking “ao3” as the end rhyme, the inn keeper is constrained to make other ending words in the following feet coincide with it i.e. “炒(chao3)”, “饱(bao3)”, and “好(hao3)”. Besides, the utterer attains regular rhythm through the alternative arrangement of the rising tone and falling tone in succession and the parallel structure of the first two feet (i.e. “小炒、小炒”) and the following two (i.e. 五元吃好、十元吃饱”). The examples mentioned above show that in verbal communication, it is difficult but still very possible to achieve beauty of speech at the phonetic level by taking context at that level into account.

Formal beauty can also be achieved at the lexical level and the levels of syntax and discourse. At these levels, beauty in form results mainly from the harmony or balance between parts. In this sense, it means “symmetry is beauty” or “beauty lies in balance”. For instance, idioms like “safe and sound”, and “fair and square”, sentences like “I came, I saw, I conquered.” and “lie do not live to eat, but we eat to live.” etc. are all good examples related to beauty in form. And balance in utterance structure is actually a way to get realized the beauty in sounds, too. In English, antithesis, parallelism, repetition and so on are all cases of schemes built on co-text.

More such structures can be found in Chinese, especially in new year scrolls such as “九州溢彩, 五谷飘香”, “雀传喜报, 风送佳音”, “爆竹声声, 普天同庆, 金鼓咚咚, 万众欢腾” which indicates the tendency of musicalization and balance in the speech.

4.3.2. Enriching the Expressiveness of Utterance

Section 4.3.1 has discussed briefly the formal beauty of speech in co-text. This section will study the aesthetic value of context to the expressiveness of utterance characterized by their freshness, originality, aptness, brevity, clarity etc.

Beauty of speech in expression can be achieved by making use of the unique features of some sounds in accordance with the context. This point can be shown in Chinese. Chinese is a language with tones. The use of different tones is closely related with the context. Look at the following poem written by a famous poet Liu Zongyuan in the Tang Dynasty:

(18) 千山鸟飞绝, 万径人踪灭, 孤舟蓑笠翁, 独钓寒江雪.

The literal meaning of this poem is that in a cold winter day when there are few people in the hill, a fisherman is fishing alone in a fish boat. In fact, the meaning conveyed by the author is far beyond this, which can be sensed from the entering tones of “绝”, “灭” and “雪”. The entering tone sounds short, low and deep. It is used as the feet so as to make people feel lone and depressed. This kind of use of tones is in accordance with the author's suffering at that time: the author was persecuted and demoted to Yongzhou, so he felt very grief and indignant. Through this poem, the author conveys his resentfulness and aloneness and shows his unyielding character. The use of entering tones in this poem is in accordance with this kind of context to enrich

the expressiveness of the speech.

Besides the use of phonetic features, beauty in expression of the speech is also concerned with the deployment of rhetorical devices such as simile, metaphor and personification. Although each device has its own form and characteristics, and its own way of achieving effect, it is commonly bound up with context. In other words, rhetorical appeal of rhetorical devices is only achieved in appropriate context and thus verified in context. Consider the following example:

(19) 周恩来总理: "我祝愿中国和尼泊尔的友谊像联结我们两国的喜马拉雅山那样巍然永存。" (*Premier Zhou Enlai: I wish the friendship between Chinese people and Nepalese people stand rock-firm like the Himalayas that joins our two countries.*)

This is an example that the speaker makes use of immediate physical context to enhance the expressiveness of utterance. This example is a simile. In this case, The Himalayas is familiar to the Nepalese audience and is just standing within the field of vision. Therefore, by comparing the friendship between abstract and concrete images, Premier Zhou Enlai draws an apt and strikingly sharp picture in the minds of the audience thus enhances the force of his speech. However, if this utterance is slightly altered to "祝中国和尼泊尔的友谊像黄河泰山那样万古永存"(May the friendship between Chinese people and Nepalese people last as long as the Yellow River and Mount Tai exists.), then the audience won't be able to appreciate the force and beauty of the speech, since they are not really familiar with the Yellow River and Mount Tai.

This example further illustrates that, in the course of language use, on the one hand, communicators are constrained by context. On the other hand, they can play an active part in making use of context to create beauty of speech.

Apart from immediate physical context, communicators can also take advantage of the pool of shared knowledge relevant contextual factors for achieving expressiveness of utterance. These factors may be communicators' encyclopedic knowledge, life experience, cultural background and so on.

There is an advertisement from Metropolitan Life Insurance Co. The words in this advertisement, which are closely related to the picture poster, are like this:

(20) *When the sun set glow is fading away,*

The real intention of this sentence is to advise people to insure themselves because everybody will be old. However, when this company advertises in China, a picture of Great Wall which can arouse the pride of Chinese people takes place of the poster picture used in American. In this picture, there are words like this:

(21) *There also exists an invisible Great Wall in American.*

This advertisement cleverly combines its commercial intention with the cultural background and national traits of Chinese people and gets a favourable impression among Chinese people. If this company do not change its advertising strategy and use its original poster picture and

words, the expressiveness of its advertisement will be weakened. This advertisement is a good example to make use of contextual factors to enrich the expressiveness of the utterance to achieve communicative goals.

The examples and analyses above so far have illustrated that the deployment of rhetorical devices and appropriate context can be closely associated with each other to achieve beauty of speech at the second level with appropriateness and expressiveness as criteria. In verbal communication, communicators use words in non-literal sense to lend force to an idea, to heighten effect or to create atmosphere. And thus the expressiveness of speech is achieved. Of course, the expressiveness of utterances is not limited to the deployment of rhetorical devices. As noted in this section, there are other sources for this purpose. But no matter what kind of devices is used to enrich the expressiveness of utterance, it is done in virtue of appropriate contexts.

5. Conclusions

This paper has just given a brief account of main value of context in verbal communication on the part of the leading position of communicators in verbal communication. On the one hand, the contextual factors constrain the verbal communication, and the communicators should choose appropriate words or ways in accordance with contexts to express themselves. On the other hand, communicators can manipulate the contextual factors in the dynamic process of verbal communication to achieve their own goals such as enriching the beauty of speech both in form and content. The next chapter will illustrate the improvement of communicative competence from this point of view.

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