关联理论与书面语篇的语境选择

内 容 摘 要

学科专业：英语语言文学　　**研究方向**：语言学与现代英语
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语用学研究话语理解依赖语境的问题，是一门比较新的学科。它的目的就是弄清楚话语理解过程中语言的意义是如何与语境假设相互作用的。由 Sperber 和 Wilson 所提出的关联理论是语用学研究中出现的一个新理论。从认知科学的角度对语言交际进行了尝试性的探讨，关联理论不仅试图回答有关交际的哲学问题，而且还要对听话人理解过程的心理问题进行解释。本文根据关联理论的观点，从作者和读者对语境选择的不同角度，探讨书面语篇中的语境选择，阐述语境一方面制约书面中话语的生成，另一方面也影响书面语篇的话语理解。成功的书面语篇交际，是交际双方对语境的恰当选择的结果，旨在说明关联理论对深入研究书面语篇的生成和理解的重要意义。

全文由六章组成。

第一章引论。概述本文的目的与整体结构。

第二章简述关联理论。Sperber 和 Wilson 在批判的基础上继承和发展了 Grice 理论，指出传统的编码—解码过程附属于认知的推理过程。在言语交际中，说话人通过明示行为向听话人展示自己的信息意图和交际意图，为推理提供必要的理据；听话人就根据对方的明示行为进行推理，而推理就是寻找关联。所谓最佳关联是指话语既能产生足够的语境效果，又只需为此付出最小的努力。而言语交际之所以能够进行，是因为人们在交际活动中自觉遵守关联原则："每一个明示的交际行为都应设想为这个交际行为本身具备最佳的关联性"（Sperber 和 Wilson, 1986: 158）。

第三章首先讨论了不同的学者对语境的不同看法。马林诺斯基把语境分为文化

语境和情景语境。弗斯又对此进行了发展完善。韩礼德把语境因素归为三个组成部分：语场、语旨和语式。接着，阐述了关联理论的语境观不同于传统的语境概念，语境被视为一个心理结构体，由一系列假设构成，话语理解时所进行的推理就是在语境假设与新信息之间进行的，语境假设的选择受关联原则的支配。

第四章主要讨论了语境的本质及其最基本的功能制约性和解释性。没有语境的交际是不存在的，交际总是在某一特定语境中发生。语境的制约性一方面对话语生成产生制约，另一方面在理解话语时，只有结合具体语境才能有效地理解话语含义。语境的解释性能对某些语言现象进行解释和说明，帮助排除歧义，确定指称及推导暗含等。

第五章讨论了书面语篇中语境的选择。书面语篇是作者与读者进行言语交际的表现形式。根据关联理论，言语交际是一个示意—推理的认知过程。就书面语篇而言，这个示意—推理的认知过程也就是作者通过对语境的选择，以文字的形式，向作为交际对象的读者，提供关联性最大的语言信息，示意其写作意图。作者的交际意图，社会文化背景及语篇内容等影响语境选择。而读者为了理解话语，也要通过选择语境寻找关联进行推理来实现。作者已建立的语境，读者的认识环境及百科知识，社会文化知识也从不同程度上影响书面语篇的语境选择。

第六章综述本文的研究，得出结论及一些启示。对于教材编者和教师而言，在选编教材及教学过程中，应提供关联性最大的语言信息，逐步介绍目的语方面社会文化习俗，以便学习者能进行恰当语境选择，以最小的努力获得足够的语境效果。在写作方面，学习者可运用“语用移情”，逐步习惯于目的语的思维方式，进行恰当的语境选择，用目的语进行创作。就翻译而言，译者可通过补充原文作者认为其读者应具备语境假设的方式，让译文的读者通过对语境的选择寻找相关信息从而理解原文。最后指出关联理论从认知角度阐述语境的动态特征，对深入研究语篇的生成和话语理解具有重要作用。

M. A. Dissertation

Relevance Theory and Context Selection in Written Texts

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Abstract

Pragmatics, the study of the context-dependent aspects of utterance interpretation, is a relatively new discipline. The goal of pragmatics is to show how linguistic meaning interacts with contextual assumptions during utterance comprehension. With the aim to lay a foundation for a unified theory of cognitive science, D. Sperber and D. Wilson have proposed relevance theory which is a new theory in the study of pragmatics. Relevance theory is not only trying to answer philosophical matters about communication, but also explaining psychological matters during the hearer's comprehension procedure. According to the view of relevance theory, this paper makes an analysis of context selection in written texts from two aspects: one is the writer's context selection, another is the reader's context selection. On the one hand, it discusses how context constrains utterance production in written texts. On the other hand, it examines how context affects utterance interpretation in written texts. Successful communication depends on appropriate choice of context by both the writer and the reader. With the analysis, this paper concludes that relevance theory is of vital importance for further studies of utterance production and interpretation in written texts.

This paper is composed of six chapters.

Chapter One serves as an introduction to the paper. It gives a brief description of the objective and layout of the dissertation.

Chapter Two gives a survey of relevance theory. Critically inheriting and developing

Grice's theory, Sperber and Wilson indicate that the traditional encoding-decoding process is attached to the cognitive-inferential process. In communication, by ostensive behaviors, the speaker makes his informative and communicative intentions manifest to the hearer and provides necessary evidences for him to infer from; according to the speaker's ostensive behaviors, the hearer infers from these evidences in order to search for the relevance. It is called optimal relevance that the utterance will have adequate contextual effects for the minimum necessary processing effort. Communication can be achieved because people consciously obey the principle of relevance when communicating—"Every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance" (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 158).

Chapter Three points out that different scholars hold different opinions to context. Malinowski classified context into context of culture and context of situation. Firth accepted Malinowski's notion of context of situation and elaborated on it in his linguistic theory. Halliday claimed that the field, tenor, and mode of discourse are the three features of context of situation. Then, it indicates that context in relevance theory is different from the traditional conception of context. A context in relevance theory is regarded as a psychological construct, a subset of the hearer's assumptions about the world. Inference in utterance interpretation involves the interaction of contextual assumptions with new assumptions. The selection of contextual assumptions depends on the principle of relevance.

Chapter Four mainly discusses the nature, restrictive and interpretative functions of context. Communication does not exist without context, and always occurs in a certain context. On the one hand, context constrains utterance production. On the other hand, utterance interpretation can be achieved only by combining with specific contexts. Context can explain and illustrate some language phenomena such as removing ambiguity, indicating referent and deriving implicature.

Chapter Five mainly investigates context selection in written texts. The written text is a form of communication between the writer and the reader. According to relevance theory, communication is a ostensive-inferential cognition process. In regard to written texts, this cognitive process is that the writer selects contexts and supplies language messages of optimal relevance to the communicator (the reader) by means of words. The goal of the writer is to make his writing intention manifest to the reader. The writer's communicative intention, social and cultural background and the content of written texts affect context

selection. However, in order to understand utterances, the reader also needs to select contexts and search for the relevance for his inference. To a more or less degree, context selection in written texts is constrained by the writer's established context, and the reader's cognitive environment, encyclopedic memory and sociocultural knowledge.

Chapter Six offers conclusions and implications for the study. For the textbook writer and the teacher, in the process of selecting materials and teaching, they should supply language messages of optimal relevance and introduce gradually social culture and conventions of target language to the learner so that he can select appropriate contexts to obtain adequate contextual effects with the minimal processing effort. In regard to writing, the learner can use "empathy" and get familiarized with the mind model of target language. Then, by selecting appropriate contexts, he writes in target language. For the translation, the translator can supplement contextual assumptions that the writer of the original assumed the original audience to have so that the target audience, by means of context selection, seeks messages relevant to comprehend the original text. Finally, this paper indicates that relevance theory, from the perspective of cognitive science, proposes a much more dynamic view of context. It is of vital importance for further studies of utterance production and interpretation in written texts.

Acknowledgements

This M. A. dissertation is accomplished under the enlightenment and inspiration of my respected and beloved tutor Professor Chen Zhi'an. I am greatly indebted to him for kindly suggesting possible improvements throughout the different versions of this paper.

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to the School of Foreign Languages of SWCNU for offering me considerable opportunities to know, to learn, to create; to try, to fail, to succeed; to see, to feel, to think; to forget, to remember and to grow by making contact with the brilliant teachers and studious classmates.

My special thanks are also due to Professor Liu Jiarong, Professor Li Li, Professor Wu Xin, Professor Zhou Rong, and Professor Xu Anquan. Their earnest teaching and enlightening are of great help for my understanding of linguistics and for the accomplishment of the thesis.

Last, but not least, I would like to express my gratitude to my family for their unceasing supports to me, without which nothing is possible but failure.

Chapter One

Introduction

Pragmatics, the study of the context-dependent aspects of utterance interpretation, is a relatively new discipline, which has developed rapidly during the last thirty years. With the aim to lay a foundation for a unified theory of cognitive science and together with an attempt to shift the whole center of gravity of pragmatic theory to a general theory of cognition, D. Sperber and D. Wilson have proposed the relevance theory (RT) in Relevance: Communication and Cognition (1986), which has given a good indication of the origins of the whole theory and outlines a speculative psychology of inference. It is based on a few very simple assumptions. The first assumption is that every utterance has a variety of possible interpretations, all compatible with the information that is linguistically encoded. The second assumption is that not all these interpretations occur to the hearer simultaneously; some of them take more effort to think up. The third assumption is that hearers are equipped with a single, very general criterion for evaluating interpretations as they occur to them. And the fourth assumption is that this criterion is powerful enough to exclude all but at most a single interpretation. In RT, pragmatic interpretation is substantially seen as a psychological matter governed by the cognitive principle and communicative principle, thus, it has been considered the fundamentals of cognitive pragmatics with its explanatory potential and promise for the future, although it is still at an early stage of development. Controversial as some aspects of the theory are, this does not diminish the significance of RT as a whole, and it has proved to be a very powerful theory which can account for a wide range of linguistic and cognitive problems.

This thesis makes a tentative analysis of context selection in written texts within the framework of relevance theory. It concentrates on how context in written texts constrains utterance production by the writer and its understanding by the reader, and how successful communication depends on appropriate choice of context by both the writer and the reader. With the analysis, this dissertation aims to indicate that relevance theory is of vital

importance for further studies of utterance production and interpretation in written texts. It consists of six chapters. Chapter One serves as an introduction. Chapter Two makes a survey of relevance theory. Chapter Three points out that different scholars hold different opinions to context. Chapter Four mainly discusses the nature, restrictive and interpretative functions of context. Chapter Five deals with context selection in written texts. The last chapter offers conclusions and implications for the study and asserts the purposes of the thesis again.

Chapter Two

A Survey of Relevance Theory

2.1 Coding and Inference in Communication

How do human beings communicate with one another? From Aristotle through to modern semiotics, all theories of communication were based on a single model, which we will call the code model. According to the code model, communication involves a set of signals, a set of messages, and a code which relates the two. In verbal communication, the signals would be utterances, the messages would be the thoughts that speakers intend to convey, and the grammar of a language (perhaps supplemented by pragmatic rules) would be the code. On this approach, utterances and their meanings may be related in arbitrary ways, and understanding is a matter of unintelligent, mechanical decoding.

Recently, several philosophers, notably Paul Grice and David Lewis, have proposed a quite different model, which we call the inferential model. According to the inferential model, communication is at least partly an intelligent activity, involving an exercise of the reason and the imagination. Utterances are not signals but pieces of evidence about the speaker's meaning, and comprehension is achieved when the hearer infers this meaning from the evidence provided. An utterance is, of course, a linguistically coded piece of evidence, so that the comprehension process will involve an element of decoding. But the linguistically-encoded meaning is only one of the inputs to the comprehension process. Another major input is the hearer's contextual assumptions, which may enrich the linguistically-encoded meaning in a variety of ways.

All the communicator has to do to convey a certain thought is to get the audience to recognize his intention to convey it. In general, intentions are not decoded but inferred. Inferential intention-recognition takes place at a risk. Grice's main contribution to pragmatics is that it provides the basis for an alternative to the code theory of communication. While still assuming that the code model provides the framework for a

general theory of communication, hence for a theory of verbal communication, most pragmatists have described comprehension as an inferential process. Inferential and decoding processes are quite different. A decoding process starts from a signal and results in the recovery of a message which is associated to the signal by an underlying code. However, an inferential process starts from a set of premises and results in a set of conclusions which follow logically from, or are at least warranted by, the premises.

Perhaps the clearest cases of non-coded inferential communication are non-verbal, including pointing, mimicry, and other types of ostension or display. Grice showed that the implicit aspects of verbal communication also involve a substantial element of inference. The central goal of pragmatics is to explain how these intended implications (or *implicatures*) are inferred.

2.2 Relevance and Inference in Communication

The main defect of Grice's analysis is not that it defines communication too vaguely, but it explains communication too poorly. The code model has the merit of explaining how communication could in principle be achieved. It fails not on the explanatory but on the descriptive side: humans do not communicate by encoding and decoding thoughts. The inferential model, despite the technical problems, provides a description of human communication, which rings true.

Inferential communication succeeds when the communicator provides evidence of his intention to convey a certain thought, and the audience infers this intention from the evidence provided. Grice saw inferential comprehension as governed by a Co-operative Principle and maxims of Quality, Quantity, Relation and Manner (truthfulness, informativeness, relevance and clarity). This account of the general standards governing verbal communication makes it possible to explain how the utterance of a sentence, which provides only an incomplete and ambiguous representation of a thought, can nevertheless express a complete and unambiguous thought. To communicate efficiently, all the speaker has to do is utter a sentence, only one interpretation of which is compatible with the assumption that he is obeying the Co-operative Principle and maxims. When a maxim is apparently violated, the hearer is justified in going beyond the linguistically-encoded meaning in order to preserve the assumption that the Co-operative Principle and maxims have been obeyed. As in Grice's account of metaphor and irony, a maxim may be

deliberately and blatantly violated in order to convey a figurative implicature. Thus, maxim-violation, real or apparent, plays an important role in Grice's pragmatics.

This approach to pragmatics, though exciting and deservedly influential, leaves many questions unanswered. There are questions about the nature of the comprehension process itself. Grice described comprehension as a form of a conscious, discursive reasoning process. However, the recent work in psychology suggests that inferential processes in general are spontaneous, unconscious and automatic—"modular", in the terms of Jerry Fodor (1983). It suggests no practical procedure by which the speaker's meaning might be automatically and unconsciously found. There are questions, particular, about the nature and source of the Co-operative Principle and maxims. Is co-operation essential to communication? Do speakers really aim at truthfulness, informativeness, relevance, and clarity? What is relevance? Grice left these undefined. Where do the Co-operative Principle and maxims come from? Or are they universal? If so, are they innate? Are they culture-specific? If so, how do they vary from culture to culture, and how are they acquired?

Relevance theory began as an attempt to answer some of these questions raised by Gricean approach, but ended up looking very different. In the next section, it will outline its main content.

2.3 The Principle of Relevance

Relevance theory is based on a few very simple assumptions. The first assumption is that every utterance has a variety of possible interpretations, all compatible with the information that is linguistically encoded. The second assumption is that not all these interpretations occur to the hearer simultaneously; some of them take more effort to think up. The third assumption is that hearers are equipped with a single, very general criterion for evaluating interpretations as they occur to them. And the fourth assumption is that this criterion is powerful enough to exclude all but at most a single interpretation, that satisfies it, so that the hearer need look no further: there will never be more than one.

Based on these assumptions, Sperber and Wilson had put forward a definition of relevance and two general principles: the *Cognitive Principle* that human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance; and the *Communicative Principle* that utterances create expectations of relevance.

Cognitive principle of relevance:

Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance.

Communicative principle of relevance:

Every utterance (or other act of inferential communication) communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 158).

In Grice's approach, Grice's principle and maxims are norms which communicators and audience must know in order to communicate adequately. Communicators generally keep to the norms, but may also violate them to achieve particular effects; and the audience uses its knowledge of the norms in interpreting communicative behaviors. Compared with Grice's approach, the principle of relevance is a generalization about ostensive-inferential communication. Communicators and audience need no more know the principle of relevance to communicate than they need to know the principles of genetics to reproduce. Communicators do not "follow" the principle of relevance; and they could not violate it even if they wanted to. The principle of relevance is not the general principle, but the fact that a particular presumption of relevance has been communicated by and about a particular act of communication, that the audience uses in inferential comprehension.

2.4 Cognitive Effects and Optimal Relevance

Relevance is seen as a property of inputs to cognitive processes: utterances, thoughts, memories, actions, sounds, sights, smells, and so on. Sperber and Wilson (1986) proposed a fundamental assumption that human cognition is relevance-oriented. Every utterance starts out as a request for the hearer's attention. As a result, it creates an expectation of relevance. Different interpretations will be relevant in different ways: some will not be relevant at all; some will be fairly relevant; some will be very relevant. Which interpretation should the hearer choose? Clearly, the interpretation which best satisfies his expectation of relevance. To see how the hearer should choose, we need to know more about the nature of relevance. Relevance is defined in terms of cognitive effect and processing effort. When an input (for example, an utterance) is processed in a context of available assumptions, it may yield some cognitive effects, by modifying or reorganizing these assumptions in three ways: by strengthening an existing assumption, by contradicting and eliminating an existing assumption, or by combining with an existing

assumption to yield a contextual implication: that is, a logical implication derivable neither from the new information alone, nor from the context alone, but from the new information and the context combined. It is clear that, other things being equal, the greater the cognitive effects of a newly presented item of information, the greater its relevance for the person processing it. However, it has to be remembered that all information-processing requires effort and time—that is, a cost—and that, other things being equal, the greater the cost of processing a new item of information, the less its relevance for the person processing it. On the contrary, the smaller the processing effort required, the greater the relevance.

Here is an illustration. Peter wakes up feeling unwell and goes to the doctor. After examining him, she might make any of the following true statements:

(1) You are ill.
(2) You have a headache.
(3) You have a headache or feel a pain.

All three utterances would be relevant to Peter. However, (2) is more relevant than (1), because it has more cognitive effects: it allows Peter to derive all the consequences derivable from (1), and more besides, (2) is also more relevant than (3), because it requires less processing effort: although the same consequences are derivable from both, they are easier to derive from (2) than from (3), which requires more efforts. Thus, (2) is the most relevant utterance: it achieves the greatest effects for the smallest processing effort.

The level of relevance that will be presumed to exist takes into account the interests of both communicator and audience. Let us call it a level of optimal relevance—a presumption that the utterance will have adequate cognitive effects for the minimum necessary processing.

An utterance is optimally relevant if, and only if:

(a) It is at least relevant enough to be worth processing;

(b) It is the most relevant one compatible with speaker's abilities and preferences.

The hearer's goal in comprehension is to find an interpretation that satisfies this expectation of optimal relevance.

As noted above, every aspect of communication and cognition is governed by the search for relevance. Utterance interpretation is not a simple matter of decoding, but a

fallible process of hypothesis formation and evaluation.

The communicative principle of relevance and the definition of optimal relevance suggest a practical procedure by which this might be done. The hearer should take the linguistically-encoded sentence meaning; following a path of least effort, he should enrich it at the explicit level and complement it at the implicit level until the resulting interpretation meets his expectation of relevance.

2.5 Relevance-theoretic Comprehension Procedure

In interpreting an utterance, the hearer starts with a small initial context left over, from his processing of the previous utterance: he computes the contextual effects of the utterance in that initial context; if these are not enough effects to make the utterance worth his attention, he expands the context, obtaining further effects, and repeats the process until he has enough effects to make the utterance optimally relevant in a way the speaker could manifestly have foreseen. At that point, he has an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance, and it follows that he should stop; or at least, he is entitled to continue on his own account, but is not entitled to assume that the speaker intended to communicate anything more. In other words, all the hearer is entitled to impute as part of the intended interpretation is the minimal context and cognitive effects that would be enough to make the utterance worth his attention. Thus, the interpretation process has an in-built stopping place.

The relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure applies to every aspect of interpretation: not only to the recovery of implicatures, but to the identification of explicit content and the intended set of contextual assumptions. This increase in the scope of pragmatics opens up new areas of research. For example, based on the relevance-theoretic approach, the context for comprehension is no longer seen as fixed in advance of the utterance, but is constructed as part of the comprehension process. Moreover, explicit communication is no longer seen as purely a matter of decoding, but involves an element of inference.

The relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure also fits well with recent modular approaches to psychology. Current research in relevance theory suggests that this procedure may be part of an innate comprehension "module", with characteristic patterns of development and breakdown. This may shed new light on the acquisition of language

and communication and open up new areas for research.

The relevance-theoretic approach to pragmatics brings a question that the hearer has to answer: how is the accepted purpose of an utterance identified? Grice gives no answer to this. Like many theorists of communication, he seems to have assumed that the purpose of an utterance, like the set of intended contextual assumptions, is somehow given in advance of the comprehension process, or identifiable independently of it. In fact, it could not be identified by use of the Co-operative Principle itself, on pain of circularity to identify the purpose of an utterance by use of the Co-operative Principle, one would already have to know it. Grice's theory of communication thus rests on the assumption that the purpose of an utterance is identifiable by a process that falls outside the scope of comprehension proper, and that is never satisfactorily explained.

Relevance theory suggests that there is no Co-operative Principle, and no circularity in assuming that the purpose of an utterance can be identified, where necessary, as part of the comprehension process. The purpose of an utterance does contribute to comprehension, it is identifiable as a contextual assumption like any other, via the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance.

The paper explores some detailed implications and applications of relevance theory.

Chapter Three

A Survey of Theories of Context

3.1 The Concept of Context

It is hard to define context because the concept of context is highly ambiguous. Lexically, context in its narrowest sense consists of the lexical items that come immediately before and after any word in an act of communication. Intuitively, everything may belong to a context which could have influence on the interpretation induced in an utterance situation, such as the discourse participants in their specific roles, the spatio-temporal coordinates of the utterances, the immediate environment of the discourse participants, their individual histories, the accompaniment of the utterance by gestures, its linguistic pre-context, arbitrary remote geographical and cultural background, etc. Sometimes context refers to the syntactical environment of a sound, phoneme, letter, morpheme, word, phrase, clause, sentence, or text unit, within the text itself. Sometimes it is used in a wider sense to signify the total socio-physical envelope of utterances. In recent years, a lot of linguists have turned their eyes to the investigation of context, but unfortunately, a generally accepted and systematic theory about context standing by itself has not yet been established. This should not come as a surprise since context is a very complex phenomenon with a variety of connotations and variables. Linguistically, it is very difficult to draw an exact boundary between one kind of context and the other. Besides, scholars working in different disciplines tend to concentrate themselves on different aspects of contexts and hold diverse perspectives and approaches.

3.1.1 Malinowski's View of Context

The notion of context of situation was initiated by Malinowski, the father of modern anthropology, in his article, "The problem of meaning in primitive language" written in 1923. He distinguished three types of context: the immediate context of utterance, the general context of situation, and the broader context of culture (Butler, 1985, qtd in Yue

Meiyun, 1997) as shown in Figure 1:

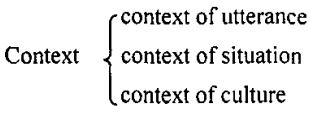

Figure 1 Malinowski's View of Context (adopted from Yue Meiyun, 1997: 268)

Before Malinowski, the word "context" had been used to refer to "co-text", i.e. the words and sentences before and after the particular word or sentence that was under consideration. Malinowski's context of utterance refers to this kind of context. However, he thought that "... on the one hand, ...the concept of context has to be broadened and on the other hand...the situation in which words are uttered can never be passed over as irrelevant to the linguistic expression" (Malinowski, 1923: 306). So he introduced the term "context of situation" to refer to a "wider idea of context" or "the general conditions under which a language is spoken" (ibid). His context of culture refers to "the reality of the culture, the life and customs of a people" in which "language is essentially rooted" (ibid: 305). In short, Malinowski found that we should not only consider the particular context of utterances but also consider the context of situation and the context of culture for the adequate understanding of utterances.

The basic notion of context proposed by Malinowski formed the basis for the later development of the concept of context.

3.1.2 Firth's Concept of Context

Firth accepted Malinowski's notion of context of situation and elaborated on it in his linguistic theory, particularly in the paper "Personality and language in society" written in 1950. As one of Malinowski's colleagues, Firth was also interested in the cultural background of language. He acknowledged his debt to Malinowski and took over Malinowski's context of situation, and built it into his own linguistic theory. He found that Malinowski's conception of the context of situation was not quite adequate for the purposes of a linguistic theory, because it was not general enough. Malinowski had been concerned with the study of specific texts and his notion of the context of situation was designed to elucidate and expound the meaning of particular instances of language use. Firth needed a conception of the context that could be built into a general linguistic

theory—one which was more abstract than that, not simply an audio-video representation of the sights and sounds that surrounded the linguistic event. He preferred to regard context of situation as part of the linguist's apparatus in the same way as were the grammatical categories that he used. In order to set up the framework for the description of the context of situation which could be used for the study of texts as part of a general linguistic theory, he therefore proposed the following categories to cover the context of situation:

(i) The participants in the situation: what Firth referred to as persons and personalities, corresponding more or less to what sociologists would regard as the status and roles of the participants;

(ii) The action of the participants: what they are doing, including both their verbal action and their non-verbal action;

(iii) Other relevant features of the situation: the relevant objects and non-verbal and non-personal events;

(iv) The effects of the verbal action: what changes were brought about by what the participants in the situation had to say.

Context of situation can be grouped and classified in this way; this is essential if it is to be part of the linguistic analysis of a language. For Firth all kinds of linguistic description, the phonology, the grammar, etc, as well as the context of situation are statements of meaning, and all the meaning is functioned in a context. Firth was concerned to embed the utterance in the "social context" and to generalize across meanings in specified social contexts.

3.1.3 Halliday's View of Context

As one of Firth's students, Halliday inherited and deepened Firth's context of situation into what is known as register theory, which is described in terms of a framework of three dimensions: (i) field, referring to the on-going social activity, or "what is actually taking place"; (ii) tenor, concerning with the role relationship of the participants involved, or "who is taking part"; (iii) mode, touching on the symbolic or rhetoric channel, i.e. "what part the language is playing" (Halliday and Hasan, 1985: 12). Halliday and Hasan (1985) developed a conceptual framework of this theory and elaborated the three components of context of situation with illustrations. Halliday summarized this theory into

five periods in the cycle of text and context:

(i) the text, as a metafunctional construct: a complex of ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings;

(ii) the context of situation: the configuration of field, tenor and mode features that specify the register of the text;

(iii) the context of culture: the institutional and ideological background that give value to the text and constrain its interpretation;

(iv) the "intertextual" context: relations with other texts, and assumptions that are carried over therefrom;

(v) the "intratextual" context: coherence within the text, including linguistic cohesion that embodies the internal semantic relationships. Halliday's concept of context is shown in Figure 2:

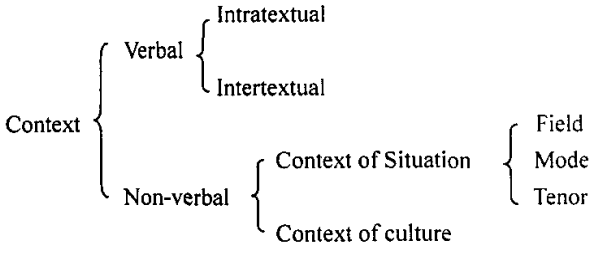

Figure 2 Halliday's View of Context (from Yue Meiyun, 1997: 271)

Halliday gives us a more specific and detailed view of context in utterance and text interpretation. He claims that the field, tenor, and mode of discourse are the three features of the context of situation and these concepts enable us to give a characterization of the nature of any texts.

3.2 Sperber and Wilson's View of Context

About sixty years after Malinowski proposed the concept of context, two American linguists, D. Sperber and D. Wilson noted:

> A context is a psychological construct, a subset of the hearer's assumptions about the world. A context ...is not limited to information about the immediate physical environment or the immediately preceding utterances: expectations about the future, scientific hypotheses or

> religious beliefs, anecdotal memories, general cultural assumptions, beliefs about the mental state of the speaker, may all play a role in interpretation.
>
> (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 15-16)

It is these assumptions, rather than the actual state of the world, that affect the interpretation of an utterance. An individual forms an assumption in the expectation that he will be able to combine it with existing assumptions to derive a new assumption, which will yield what Sperber and Wilson call a "contextual effect". According to their account of contextual effects, we have identified three ways in which a new item of information may have a contextual effect:

(i) Strengthening existing assumptions;

(ii) Contradicting existing assumptions;

(iii) Combining with existing assumptions to yield contextual implications—conclusions derivable from input and context together, but from neither input nor context alone.

When an item of information has a contextual effect in a given context, Sperber and Wilson say it is "relevant" in that context. In each case establishing the relevance of a new assumption involves inference, and it involves the interaction of existing assumptions with new assumptions. The relevance of an assumption depends on the context in which it is processed. Processing information yields rewards (improvements to one's representation of world) only at a cost. Deriving contextual effects takes time and effort, and the more time and effort are expended, the less relevant the information will seem to be, and in processing information, people try to balance costs and rewards—they automatically process each new item of information in a context where it yields a maximal contextual effect for a minimal cost in processing.

It is clear that the contents of context are very rich. Any set of facts that are manifest to an individual in verbal communication belong to context. Sperber and Wilson call this set of facts "cognitive environment" of an individual, or "cognitive context". And an individual's total cognitive environment is a function of his physical environment and his cognitive abilities. It consists of not only the facts that he is aware of, but also all the facts that he is capable of becoming aware of, in his physical environment, the actual context for the interpretation of an utterance is constrained by the organization of the individual's

encyclopedic memory, and the mental activity in which he is engaged.

Sperber and Wilson's view of context is quite different from that of Malinowski, Frith and Halliday. The former is called "cognitive context" referring to a subset of the hearer's assumptions about the world, whereas the later refers to a social and cultural construct since it includes elements that are defined objectively, and independently of the speaker and hearer.

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Chapter Four

The Nature and Function of Context

4.1 The Nature of Context

Communication is the process of understanding another's perceptions and meanings, involving the ideas or experiences to be communicated and the signs or symbols conveying the ideas and experiences. Communication does not occur in vacuum but always in certain context which helps us in interpreting an utterance. Understanding an utterance, then, involves answering three main questions: (a) what did the speaker intend to say; (b) what did the speaker intend to imply; and (c) what was the speaker's intended attitude to the propositions expressed and implied? It is obvious that context or background assumptions play a crucial role in answering these questions. "Context" here, means not simply the preceding linguistic text, or the environment in which the utterance takes place, but the set of assumptions brought to bear in arriving at the intended interpretation. These may be drawn from the preceding text, or from the observation of the speaker and what is going on in the immediate environment, but they may also be drawn from cultural or scientific knowledge, common-sense assumptions, and, more generally, any item of shared or idiosyncratic information that the hearer has access to at the time.

Let us consider the following examples:

(4) If you're looking for a good job, we're offering a thousand a week.

(5) I always treat other people's money as if it were my own.

(6) A. Peter: Does Viv play cricket well?

B. Mary: He plays for the west Indies.

(7) a. Peter: What will you do today?

b. Mary: I don't feel too well.

(8) I think it was when I first set eyes on his magnificent estate at Pemberley.

Selection of an appropriate set of contextual assumptions is crucial to the understanding of (4)-(8) above. With (4), the audience must have access to the assumption that jobs paying a thousand pounds a week are not handed out by advertising in the London Underground. With (5)-(7), the choice of context is crucial again: once we know what contextual assumptions we were intended to use, the intended implications follow by straightforward logical deduction. Finally, in (8), the difficulty of interpretation arises precisely because it is not clear what contextual assumptions we were intended to use: did Jane Austen in (8) mean us to assume that it was obviously ridiculous to imagine that one could fall in love with someone for his beautiful house, or did she mean us to assume that this was quite a reasonable thing to do?

Now, if contextual assumptions affect the way an utterance is understood, then in order to recognize the intended interpretation, the hearer must select and use the intended set of contextual assumptions, which adds one more question to our list of questions that the hearer has to answer: what was the intended set of contextual assumptions? And in some ways, this is the most fundamental question of all.

In most writings on communication, while it is recognized that context makes a major contribution to understanding, the problem of how the intended context is identified is not seriously addressed. The assumption is that in normal circumstances only a single set of contextual assumptions could possibly have been intended, as set forth in (9):

(9) A: Will you have a glass of brandy?
B: You know I am a good Moslem.

At least for readers, the intended interpretation of this utterance will be immediately obvious. A is intended to use the contextual assumption that since Muslims do not drink alcohol and brandy is an alcoholic drink, B will not drink the offered brandy.

Let us assume that our beliefs and assumptions about the world are organized in a sort of encyclopaedia in our minds under headings such as "brandy", "Moslem", and so on, and that in choosing a context for the interpretation of (9), the first place you will look will be under your mental heading for Moslem.

Notice, though, that most people will have a lot more information than this stored under the heading "Moslem". A might know, for example, that Moslems are the followers of religion revealed by Muhammad, with Allah as God, that Moslems do not eat porks at

table, that Moslems are not married to people not of Moslems, that Moslems do not drink alcohol, and so on. What is there to stop A adding ever more contextual assumptions to the context deriving ever more conclusions, and deciding that these were part of what B intended to imply? Notice, of course, that this is not what actual hearers would do.

It should be evident by now that understanding an utterance involves considerably more than simply knowing the language. The class of possible interpretations is determined, not only by the meaning of the sentence uttered, but also by the set of available contextual assumptions. The hearer's task is to choose the actual and intended one from among all kinds of possible interpretations.

4.2 The Function of Context

Language is not experienced in isolation. Quite on the contrary, when functioning in some environment, it becomes vigorous. In the past, too little attention was paid to the apparently rather commonplace observation that the meaning of an utterance is affected by its context. Since the beginning of the 1970s, linguists have become increasingly aware of the importance of context in the interpretation of utterances. In the following sections, two aspects of functions a context performs in communication will be discussed in detail. They are: interpretative function and restrictive function.

4.2.1 The Interpretative Function of Context

Context has an interpretative function in the sense that it helps the hearer or the reader achieve only the information intended by the speaker or the writer, rather than just the prepositional meaning provided by literal explanation.

In this section, emphasis will be put on the interpretative function of context in eliminating ambiguity, removing vagueness, indicating referent, supplying information omitted through ellipsis and deriving implicature.

Ambiguity is a common phenomenon in a natural language. It results from the fact that there is not always a one-to-one correspondence between expressions and meanings. It is often the case that meaningful relations between words or groups of words are not at all obvious because the same formal arrangement of words may have different meanings. However, in fact, in actual interaction, there are not so many ambiguities. Once an utterance is in context, ambiguity will disappear. Contextualization is the most efficient

way of eliminating ambiguity.

The existence of many homonyms, and polysemous words are elements which could cause ambiguity:

(10) They are requested not to overlook the ladies' bathing place.

(Fowler, 1965: 430)

In this sentence, "overlook" has two opposite senses: (i) "to fail to pay attention to"; (ii) "to have a view from above". Thus, there will come two conflicting interpretations. They are:

(a) They should pay close attention to the problems of ladies' bathing place.

(b) They should not look into the ladies' bathing place.

Without context, it is impossible to clarify the ambiguity by itself. Suppose we add some linguistic context by expanding sentence (10) as:

(c) They are requested not to overlook the ladies' bathing place—that is why they are working out a plan to improve the bathing conditions in the place.

(d) They are requested not to overlook the ladies' bathing place because it is a hooligan behavior.

Here, the context is informative enough to eliminate the ambiguity.

The context of situation also helps to eliminate ambiguities. Consider the sentence "pass the glass" or " pass the port" has ambiguous meaning. "Glass" may either mean a hard brittle substance (as used in windows) or vessel made of this substance used for drinking. "Port" may either mean "strong, sweet, dark-red or white wine of Portugal" or "harbor". But if the sentences are uttered in, for example, a banquet (within a context), "glass" may only mean "a vessel from which to drink".

Apart from lexical ambiguity, context can also eliminate sentential ambiguity which usually results from confusion in form or structure, To understand this kind of ambiguity, a wide context is needed:

(11) The judge needs some more convincing evidence.

The dual nature of the modifier "more" yields two different senses: (a) The judge needs some more evidence, which is convincing. (b) The judge needs some evidence

which is more convincing.

Both interpretations in the case seem to be structurally and logically reasonable in meaning. This implies that grammatical ambiguity is more difficult to eliminate by means of syntactic analysis and reassessment of the modifier deictics. Furthermore, when we speak or listen to something in everyday life, we can not possibly analyze it in our mind slowly; perhaps people can retain their own speech, but they can not retain other's. One important way they try to understand others is by context.

Language is a semiotic system which comprises phonology, vocabulary and grammar. Vagueness exists within these elements. It is difficult to delimit the connotation of words whilst, on the other hand, the denotation of words is also difficult to master. Since the 1960s, linguists have begun to study vagueness in language. Vagueness exists objectively in our lives, and plays an important role in literary works and spoken interactions. We should not avoid this phenomenon but find ways to interpret it. Since language comes from social life, it can also be interpreted in social life; since language is a sequential semiotic system, that is to say, the best way for removing vagueness in understanding is through context, both linguistic and extralinguistic.

Vagueness refers to words or sentences with unclear or in concrete meaning, such as in "Mary has an animal", "animal" is a vague concept, what kind of animal? We don't know. English language contains many words with vague meanings.

Both Chinese and English have words indicating time. However, English words for time are vaguer than those in Chinese. Take "morning" for example, it not only refers to the early part of a day between dawn and noon, or, more commonly, before the midday meal, but also refers to the daytime as a whole. See the following examples:

(12)It was up at six this morning.
(13)It rained all the morning.

The most conspicuous example of vagueness of meaning, from a Chinese view, is the address form in English. In Chinese, we distinguish between shushu and jiujiu, shenshen and jiuma, yeye, nainai, and laolao, laoye, while in English, aunt refers both to the sister of one's father or mother; uncle refers both to the brother of one's father or mother. The context, in his case, defines to whom we refer.

In fact, whether a word is vague or not is only relative. For instance, teacher is vaguer

than lecturer. The removal of vagueness by context has two aspects: removal by modification of words, and removal by situation.

Removal by modification of words includes the use of modifier to remove the vagueness of the modified and vice versa, as shown in the following two sentences as examples:

(14) Charles talked to a buxom Briton peasant.
(15) My grandfather, my mother's father, died last year.

In sentence (14), the adjective "buxom" determines that the "peasant" referred to is a female. In sentence (15), the appositive "my mother's father" makes clear which grandfather is referred to. The following sentences also illustrate removing vagueness by context.

(16)My garden is flat.
(17)My ironing board is flat.
(18)At Christmas, the bird was delicious.
(19)A bird, high in the sky, invisible, sang its sweet song.

In sentence (16), the noun—garden fixes the connotation of "flat", here the surface and shape of the garden are flat; while in sentence (17), the meaning of ironing board defines that of "flat" is perfectly plane surface. In sentence (18), the bird would be understood as something like "chicken or goose"; however, sentence (19), as something like "skylark".

In the following example, it is a situation that removes vagueness.

(20)It is hot today.

Without context of situation, this sentence is also vague in meaning. But if there is a clear time or place confining the sentence, the vagueness will be removed. The meaning is different when it is said in spring and said in summer, or different when uttered in Alaska and in Hawaii.

In the language system every word has its own referential meaning. When grouped together into a sequence of meaning, because they restrict each other, every word attaches

itself to other words with one item of meaning, for example:

(21) Would you lend me some money?

Without any context, this sentence is only an imperative sentence, "money" is a material thing, and what it refers to is its denotation. But once the sentence is put into a specific context, the meaning of "money" changes. Suppose that two Chinese were in conversation, "money" probably refers to *renminbi*; if two Englishmen were in conversation, then, "money" probably refers to pounds. The object is different in each case. What it refers to is also different.

In order to avoid repetitions, people use "I, you, he, this, that, etc." in place of a nominal phrase, and use "do, can, should, etc. " in place of a verbal phrase. "Then, and there" are used in place of time and place, adverbs/adverbial phrases. Sentences involving these will not indicate referents without context. For example:

(22) A: Do you think that she will like that?

B: I don't know. Perhaps, she might.

Without context of situation, it is difficult for us to guess what the participants are talking about. In fact "will, might, ought to" can be followed with the verbal phrase "like that". To indicate referents in written language, we have to adhere to linguistic context.

(23) Betty told Mary that Jane was coming.

(a) She said it secretly.

(b) But she didn't believe her.

(c) But she didn't come.

Sentence (23) is the linguistic context of sentences in (a), (b) and (c). Without (23), we don't know who "she" and "her" refer to. Because of (23), we know "she" in (a) refers to Betty, in (b) "she" refers to Mary, "her" refers to Betty, and in (c) "she" refers to Jane.

We can also find an example in Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen.

(24) "Well", cried Elizabeth, "have it as you choose. He shall be mercenary, and she shall be foolish."

"No, Lizzy, that is what I do not choose." Mrs. Gardiner said.

(Austen, 1991: 137)

One has to read almost half of the chapter before he comes to understand that he refers to Wickham, and she refers to Miss King.

In spoken language, indication of referent depends on various factors of context of situation. Taking the following conversation as example:

(25) A: I worked here twenty years ago.

B: So did I. But my sister works here.

The indication of the referent in this sentence depends on the actual speech situation. We should make clear in what condition the dialogue takes place. If we know it happens between two friends who are standing before a map, it will be easy to identify where the two "heres" refer to.

In everyday communication, people usually omit something in order to avoid repetitions, or for rhetorical effects. This ellipsis generally does not prevent the continuity of interaction. The reason is that it is used in a context. The participants themselves know clearly what is omitted while they are trying to understand what the speaker/ writer says, thus they automatically or unconsciously infer the omitted information by contextual clues.

A typical case is the conversation of bargaining in a free market (S stands for the seller, and B, for the buyer):

(26) B: How much?

S: Dollar a bunch.

B: Too much.

S: But good quality.

B: Too wilty.

S: You say how much.

B: seventy.

S: Maybe eighty.

B: OK. Here.

(Nida, 1993: 60)

The contextual factors—the immediate setting (at the free market) and participants' relation (between seller and buyer)—provide implicit cohesion keeping the utterances in the conversation coherence, avoiding the unnecessary and possibly tedious repetitions in the conversations.

It is easy to supply information omitted through the above mentioned ellipses. People sometimes use implied ellipses in conversation. Especially in spoken language, to interpret this knid of ellipsis is relatively difficult.

(27)Tom! Geese!

(28)Tom! Champagne!

The two sentences omit subject and predicate verb, and, taken out of context, they are meaningless. But from their objects, we can infer that sentence (27) is a request for Tom to drive away the geese, and sentence (28) is a request for Tom to pass the champagne or to pour the champagne for guests. In another situation, (27) may be used to ask Tom to take care of the geese because they'll run away, (28) may be a warning to Tom not to spoil the glass of champagne. Both meanings depend on the situation in which they are uttered.

Identical utterances have different functions in different situations. Speakers do not always say what they intend to mean. For this reason, it is necessary and important to read and understand between the lines. Context can help hearers or readers correctly understand what the speaker or writer means. For example:

(29)A: Did you enjoy your holiday?

B: The beaches were crowded and the hotel was full of bugs.

In the above example, how does A understand what B really means through the sentence's literal meaning? How can we understand their real meaning? These questions can be answered in the theory of conversational implicature and speech act, both of which can provide important and functional interpretation, that is, interpretation according to context.

In deriving implication, the various elements of context may play a more or less important role. Otherwise, hearers will fail to understand speakers correctly. In the following examples, because the hearer neglects the actual speech situation, she/ he only

understands the speaker's literal meaning.

(30)T: How many times have I told you to...?

S: Seven, sir.

(31)T: Who's talking now?

S: Me, sir.

Here the teacher's intention is to convey a blame on the students for their problems in class. But the students only catch the literal meaning, and make ridiculous answers. What the students neglect is the body language of the teacher. We are sure that when the teacher says the sentences, she/ he must show her /his dissatisfaction in her/his tone or in her/his facial expression. So, in spoken language, sometimes body gestures can play a role in deriving implication, and they are clearly interpreted.

In our everyday life, we often use questions or statements to mean more than we say. How to understand this kind of implicature depends not only on body gestures but also on the concrete speech situation. For instance:

(32)Is that book over there?

(33)It is raining.

From (32) appears to be a question but, actually, it's a request. The speaker's real intention lies in the situation in which it is uttered. A sentence may take the form of statement but, in different situations, it may have different meanings and, equally the speaker's implication may be different. As for the listener's understanding also depends on the situation in which language is uttered, in (33), maybe you are required to shut the window, or warned to bring your clothes into the room, or to take an umbrella. When the situation changes, implications also change accordingly.

4.2.2 The Restrictive Function of Context

Language in the real life is highly differentiated. The diversity of English usuage depends very much on the context of situation in which the speaker is prompted to use language. Context of situation has a restrictive effect upon language. What gets said and how it gets said are always in part constrained by a variety of contextual factors. According to Halliday, context of situation consists of three factors: field of discourse,

tenor of discourse and mode of discourse. And language is also closely related with context of culture. Each culture more or less controls the way its people think as well as they talk.

Field of discourse reflects the topic and content of utterances in everyday communication. We may choose various kinds of topics, such as political thought, literature and arts, science and technology, law, education, everyday life and others. There are different styles in different topics. Style is not a matter of free choices, but is controlled by factors of context of situation. According to different purposive roles, we may have varieties of languages: technical language, non-technical language, together with such sub- languages as the language of telegram, newspaper headlines, advertisement, business and so on.

If special functions appear in a technical context, the statement may be elaborated into a report, paper, monograph, lecture or accountant's balance sheet. The recurrence of certain patterns seem to appear in scientific writing in English. For example, people tend to use the passive voice and lengthy pre-and post-modifications of nominal heads for definition. "Big words" and technical words are often employed with precision in meaning. Similarly, in the special style, religious languages, sermons, prayers and theological treatises will appear with moral statements.

Scientific research papers are also field-restricted. In some science spheres, the subject matter of a text would highly condition its grammatical patterns and vocabulary choice. That is why some technical English can be fully understood only by the specialists acquainted with that particular topic. But nowadays, with the popularization and development of education and technology, different subjects begin to mix together. Many words specific to technical fields are stepping into common people's lives accordingly. No matter whether it is technical or non-technical, English learners should pay attention to it.

It is notable that language communication is constrained both by the concrete situation and by the context of culture. When we use language to communicate, we are always facing the selection of a suitable diction, sentence or utterance as well as the way of expressing it in order to make it adapted to the immediate circumstance.

The following example shows the variation of speech representing different levels of formality needed in different situations:

(34)(a) You will finish the work before 6 p.m..

(b) Will you finish the work before 6 p.m.?

(c) Finish the work before 6 p.m..

And to convey the message—finish the work—we have different utterances.

As for the Chinese learners of English, the critical thing is to choose the right words that fit the occasion. Yet, this is not an easy job because it needs a high degree of influency of English as well as the familiarity with the customs that govern the use of the words according to the role-relationships of those who are participating.

Language is either spoken or written. Spoken language is generally casual, brief, and loose in sentence structure, and full of false starts, interruptions, repetitions, grunts and shrieks. Written language, on the other hand, has features that do not occur in speech. Its words are elegant, sentences or passages connected closely, and punctuation is used. Face-to-face speech, telephone talk, scientific article and research paper are all different channels, and each controls the choice of expression in particular ways. For example, English has a different range of expressions in contact with people for each of these channels. In face-to-face speech we use the greetings like:

(35)A: Hi, Betty.

B: Good morning, Professor Wang.

But a written research paper frequently begins with

This paper is devoted to ...

This chapter focuses on ...

to draw the reader's attention to the content of the paper.

In spoken conversations, context of situation plays a critical role in constraining choice of style and arriving at a meaning, while in written language, discourse context becomes more important. It provides a well-grounded basis for creating a text. In the scope of discourse context, two aspects are crucial for governing texture. One is discourse theme, the other is discourse genre.

Discourse theme, also regarded as the subject matter or topic of a written text, is more a semantically grounded notion than a structurally based one. It also serves as an important contextual factor to influence functional relationship between sentences and to

control texture. For example, if the topic of a passage is "I Like Spring", the passage probably contains such functions as "explaining", "explicating", "exemplifying", and "concluding". Discourse genre, the type of a text, also exerts an influence upon texture. Certain kind of discourse genre must match certain functional pattern adapted to the discourse context. For instance, in a letter of apology, the texture has chiefly the following functional pattern: (a) making an apology; (b) explaining the reason; (c) making a pledge. While in a scientific research paper, the texture is completely different.

In actual interaction, if one element of context of situation changes, language use will change accordingly. The above mentioned examples are only used to justify the role of these factors. For the language user, both linguistic context and context of situation are significant for a successful communication. Good awareness of linguistic context is the basis of communication, and that of context of situation can, to a great extent, improve the result of communication.

Chapter Five

Context Selection in Written Texts

5.1 Context and Communication

Communication is the process of understanding another's perceptions and meanings, involving the ideas or experiences to be communicated and the signs or symbols conveying the ideas and experiences. Communication does not occur in vacuum but always in certain context (the situation, the time of day, the persons interacting), which helps us in interpreting a message. Communication is not devoid of external influence: all human interaction is influenced to some degree by the social, physical, and cultural settings in which it occurs. This is known as the communication context. Context provides us prescription that indicates what behavior is obligated, preferred, or prohibited.

Communication is context dependent. The communicative goals cannot be achieved without considering the context. In an employment interview, we might frequently use the respectful words *sir* or *ma'am* when responding to our potential employer. At a basketball game, our language would be less formal, incorporating slang phrases and possibly derogatory remarks about the opposing team or the officials. At an interview, we would probably shake hands with our prospective employer, but at the basketball game, we might hug our friends, or slap them on the back as a form of greeting.

Context of culture is prominent in communication as culture lays down the basic principles and standard based on which people act in communication. This is why Hall (1976), divides communication into high-context (HC) and low-context (LC) communication. The former refers to communication in which most of the information conveyed is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicitly transmitted part of the message (e. g. in Chinese culture). A LC communication is just the opposite, i.e. the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code (e.g. in American culture). "The level of context determines everything about

the nature of the communication and is the foundation on which all subsequent behavior rests, including symbolic behavior" (Hall, 1976:92). For example, when doing business in Turkey, your Turkish partners will insist on paying for all the entertainment. Turkish hospitality is legendary and you will not be allowed to pay for even part of the meal. In the United States, the rules for business entertaining are very different. The cost of the meal or entertainment can be shared. Therefore, different context of culture drives people to act differently in communication.

Language and communication are often seen as two sides of a single coin. Language is an essential tool for the processing and memorizing of information. Every language is intrinsically bound up with the whole life experiences of native users of that language. People thus bring in communication their life experiences and knowledge together with the context of situation to form the context of communication. If the communication will be successful, the participants must have a good understanding of the context. Context is indispensable for successful communication.

5.2 Written Texts as Communication Between Reader and Writer

It is hard to think of many human activities that do not involve communication. We communicate with friends and with strangers, at work and at play, in public and in private. We communicate our knowledge and our ignorance, our anger and our pleasure, our needs and our intentions. Just as communication serves a variety of purposes, it assumes a variety of forms. The written text is a form of communication between the reader and the writer. Reading process is a constant interaction between them. In this interaction, the writer composes the content and wording of the text in service of his social and communicative goals, while the reader attempts to recover and reconstruct the intended message and the writer's goals during comprehension. Reading written texts is thus an interactive, active process of communication, involving encoding in which the writer translates or encodes a thought, idea or message into written symbols, and decoding in which the reader decodes or reconstructs the message encoded graphically by the writer.

Communication and negotiation take place in reading written texts, though the reader and the writer cannot work together in directing the course of the communication face to face. Widdowson (1990: 108) argues the writer is engaged in a kind of vicarious interaction with a presumed reader and anticipates and provides for likely reactions while

the reader for his part is drawn into the discourse role that the writer has cast him in. If the reader has more knowledge than the writer has supposed, he will tend to disregard the discourse that has been plotted in the act of writing and simply take from the text whatever best suits his purpose. If the reader knows less of the writer's world than supposed, he will have to draw on contextual knowledge to furnish the necessary clues to understand the text. "Written texts are also dependent on their immediate context to a greater or lesser degree" (McCarthy, 1991: 149). Let us consider one example:

(36)The major asked the police to stop drinking.

This sentence is highly context-dependent: it may mean "The major requested that the police should not drink", or perhaps "The major requested that the police should not allow other people to drink," its interpretation depends on where the speech is made.

Readers use context to help their perceptions and then achieve the writer's communicative goal in reading. Encoding and decoding in reading describe the interaction between the reader and the writer. As readers do not see the object, person, or experience of which the author writes and their eyes are in contact with the written texts, they must use context to help their perceptions—their prior experiences or knowledge that they have had with those objects or events for which the symbol stands, background knowledge of the author, the immediate context of the reading material, co-text (the preceding or following parts), etc. "Good readers are gatherers, processors, and consumers of information rather than simple reactors to stimuli"(Dechant, 1982: 28). Their brains are constantly processing information, and incoming information is being examined and reorganized with prior experiences and other contextual elements. Readers and writers interact in the whole process of reading until comprehension or writer's communicative goal is achieved, for example:

(37)Her mind was less difficult to develop. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news. (Austen, 1991: 3)

The writer encodes her intention—"the character of Mrs. Bennet" in the form of brief

and short sentences. She wants the others to understand and fulfill her intention. When the reader reads the text, he uses context, linguistic and nonlinguistic context in the text, together with his prior experience and knowledge (e. g. impressions of middle-aged woman) to reach the writer's communicative goal.

5.3 Writer's Context Selection

Communication is the act of understanding or the capacity to understand, and understanding a written text means extracting the required information from it as efficiently as possible. Understanding is making sense of the written text because it means going beyond the text, and relating written language to what we know already and to what we want to know. In other words, the reader makes sense of a text by interpreting it in context. D. Sperber and D. Wilson noted:

> A context...is not limited to information about the immediate physical environment or the immediately preceding utterances: expectations about the future, scientific hypotheses or religious beliefs, anecdotal memories, general cultural assumptions, beliefs about the mental state of the speaker, may all play a role in interpretation.
>
> (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 15-16)

When the writer creates a written text, his intention, his social and cultural background and the content of written texts affect the reader's context selection. In other words, they will influence the reader's comprehension process.

5.3.1 Writer's Communicative Intention to Context Selection

Most human communication is intentional, and it is intentional for two good reasons. The first reason is the one suggested by Grice: by producing direct evidence of one's informative intention, one can convey a much wider range of information than can be conveyed by producing direct evidence for the basic information itself. The second reason humans have for communicating is to modify and extend the mutual cognitive environment they share with one another. By making his informative intention mutually manifest, the communicator creates the following situation: it becomes mutually manifest that the fulfillment of his informative intention is in the hands of the audience. If the assumptions that he intends to make manifest to the audience become manifest, then he is

successful; if the audience refuses to accept these assumptions as true or probably true, then he has failed in his informative intention. In written texts, the writer makes his intention manifest to the presumed reader by means of all kinds of styles. The author's intent to write will necessarily involve some notion of genre (poem, novel, detective story, etc.) and he will most probably employ the conventions of his chosen genre to help the reader assign the proper interpretation. In some science spheres, a text would highly condition its grammatical patterns and vocabulary choice. That is why some technical English can be fully understood only by the specialists acquainted with that particular topic, as in (38):

(38)In electron microscopy (EM), for example, the most popular immunolabel today employs a colloidal gold-labeled antibody. Colloidal gold can be made reliably in the 3-150nm range, but smaller sizes usually give a wide range of particle diameters.

It may be thought that the author's intention cannot be easily achieved unless the reader is knowledgeable about the immunocytochemistry. The author's intention may limit the reader's context about this passage. Therefore it means that the writer aims to achieve adequate contextual effects for the minimum processing effort. There has been considerable work in conversation analysis and anthropological linguistics on "genre as practice". Hanks (1996) demonstrates that the social role of the shaman in curing ceremonials in Mayan culture is essentially connected to his skill to recite text fragments of a particular genre, possessed by him, and appropriately called *curing chants*. Now, the shaman enacts these texts in the (ritual) context of curing, which, to a considerable extent, is built by the dynamic, socially constitutive qualities of context. Each incremental act within an interaction updates the existing context and prepares new ground for subsequent interaction.

5.3.2 The Content of Written Texts to Context Selection

Different contents of written texts lead the writer to different context selection. Let us consider irony. Irony is analysed in terms of meaning the opposite of what the sentence uttered literally means. The utterance has two meanings—a literal meaning and a figurative meaning. In irony, the writer may give the reader a clue as to the attitude he is expected to adopt or use the voice of one character in order to dissociate themselves from

the thoughts of another. For example:

(39)SHE: It's a lovely day for a picnic.

(They go for a picnic and it rains.)

With the added clue, the reader's context is constrained in the assumption of a picnic. By the minimal processing effort the reader obtains the adequate contextual effects. It is impossible to go out for a picnic when it rains. Compared with irony, written humors affect the writer and the reader in the different way. Furthermore, in a number of ways, humorous interpretation of written texts is different from that in face-to-face interaction. The features of face-to-face interaction are that within the interactions, participants are faced with the task of accomplishing understanding and, as part of this process, displaying to each other their understanding of the events in progress at a particular moment. However, in written humors, the physical absence of the reader and writer in the special communication adds a lot of difficulty and uncertainty to interpretation of humorous texts. Therefore, it is demanded on the writer's part to make full use of some linguistic context for remedy.

(a) *Introductory remarks*. The introductory remarks might suggest the characters' social parameters like age, job, sex, title, nationality as well as the actions engaged in, their attitude, mood and time or place. Usually, the introductory remarks are so brief that they include information very necessary for building up part of the contextual atmosphere and preparing the reader for manufacturing expectations in that given humor.

(b) *Subjective certainty*. It is not the case we require the same level of certainty in all cases of communication in our assessment of whether or not our understanding is adequate, let alone correct. It is always necessary to consider this issue in the context of the reader's intentions in reading, and to formulate the question as "adequate for what?" Popper points out that "subjective certainty ... depends not merely upon degrees of belief and upon evidence but also upon the situation—upon the importance of what is at stake" (Brown, 1995: 23).

The reader's context is rather elusive but not totally beyond description partly because the writer in creation of humorous texts takes into account the reader's cognitive environment in different stages of humorous interpretation. Although there is no such a definite reader under his examination, the writer projects his own feelings, attitudes and

experiences, or he believes the majority of people bear the similar feelings, attitudes and experiences. It is the writer's sympathy and confidence that predicts the reader's context of interpretation and frequently guarantees that the texts arouse the reader's humorous engagement.

5.3.3 Writer's Social and Cultural Background to Context Selection

"Only that which has entered our experience is available to aid us in interpretation" (Harris, 1988: 78). Clearly, this experience is a social and cultural construct: it is shaped and obtained by an individual growing up within the confines of a society. The culture of a country affects all aspects of the life and thought of the people living in that country. Social instructions are all cultural components that a growing child gradually absorbs. Communication is not devoid of external influence: all human interaction is influenced to some degree by the social, physical, and cultural settings in which it occurs. Let us consider the following remarks of Auster (1995: 140):

> The text is no more than a springboard for the imagination. "Once upon a time there was a girl who lived with her mother in a house at the edge of a large wood." You don't know what the girl looks like, you don't know what color the house is, you don't know if the mother is tall or short, fat or thin, you know next to nothing. But the mind won't allow these things to remain blank; it fills in the details itself. It creates images based *on its own memories and experiences—which* is why these stories [fairy tales] resonate so deeply inside us.

Auster uses considerations of the above sort to explain why his own writing style, one that is frequently devoid of descriptive passages and the background that characterize the typical novel is still able to create full-fledged worlds. Having been influenced by fairy tales (the Brothers Grimm, the Thousand and One Nights, etc.), his works communicate in the most economical way large amounts of information simply because, he thinks, the reader is able to supply the details based on her own memories and experiences, in short, "[t]he listener becomes an active participant in the story" (Auster, 1995: 140). When creating a written text, the writer's social and cultural background affect himself and the reader to a greater or less degree.

In light of these observations, it is fruitful to take social knowledge to be a significant component of contexts. In a nutshell, the "ethnography of speaking" framework has

clarified the contribution of cultural contextualization to the understanding of language. More generally, it has thrown considerable light on the relationship between language and the sociocultural order. Hudson (1980: 13) points out that the particular model of previous knowledge the individual constructs will reflect personal experience, therefore, different sociolinguistic backgrounds will lead people to construct correspondingly different models relevant to language and society. In other words, the more heterogeneous the sociolinguistic backgrounds people have, the less background knowledge they will share. In order to make sense of written texts, the reader has to take into account the writer's social and cultural background.

5.4 Reader's Context Selection

The context used to process new assumptions is, essentially, a subset of the individual's old assumptions, with which the new assumptions combine to yield a variety of contextual effects. D.Sperber and D.Wilson, state that "A context is a psychological construct, a subset of the hearer's assumptions about the world. It is these assumptions, of course, rather than the actual state of the world, that affect the interpretation of an utterance" (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 15).

Therefore, when understanding a written text, the reader's context selection should be considered. The reader's context selection is influenced by the writer's established context, the reader's cognitive environment and his encyclopedic memory and sociocultural knowledge.

5.4.1 Writer's Established Context to Reader's Context Selection

The author usually assumes that his imaginary reader has a general grasp of the relevant social institutions, customs, norms, etiquette, topical news items, and cultural and historical facts. Harris (1988: 107) notes that: "Since we also know that we don't all share the same knowledge, we constantly make judgments about how much and what sort of background information or cultural grammar persons to whom we are speaking or writing are likely to possess."

The specific dimension—in contrast to the collective dimension, which attributes knowledge to the anticipated reader—comprises elements that are specific to the situation in which a discourse occurs.

The textual dimension refers to the totality of arguments, events, actions, and so on, in the way these are given in the text. A coherent text is in fact a system of interlocking subtexts, whose interpretations against the unfolding whole make small contributions to the meaning of the complete text. The process is, borrowing T.S. Eliot's words, one with "hundred indecisions" and "hundred visions and revisions", as the following excerpt explains:

> As the text unrolls, there is not only the cumulative build-up of effect through the linking of remembered earlier elements to the new one. There is sometimes a backward flow, a revision of earlier understandings, emphasis, or attitudes; there may even be the emergence of a completely altered framework or principle of organization.
>
> (Harris, 1988: 119)

That interactional context is continually being developed with each successive action. These utterances and the social actions they embody are treated as doubly contextual. First, utterances and actions are context-shaped. This simply means that their contributions cannot be adequately appreciated unless the context in which they operate is taken into account. Second, utterances and actions are context-renewing. Every utterance will form the subsequent context for some following actions in a sequence; it will thus contribute to the contextual framework which lets one understand the next action. Additionally, each action will function to renew context, where "renewal" is understood as one or more of the process of maintaining, adjusting, altering, and so on.

An author assumes that a reader will try to obtain a coherent interpretation of his text. In order to facilitate this, he provides help as to which contextual dimensions are relevant. If there is information the reader is not presumed to have, the author makes it available using assorted devices. But in the end, we can never be certain about the authorial intention; the best we can do as a reader is to assess probabilities. The established context (whether linguistic or non-linguistic) has the effect of narrowing down the communicative possibilities of the message as it exists in abstraction from context. In fact, Leech illustrates the matter by just studying in the sentence "Shall I put ... on?" the various senses of the dictionary entry "put ... on", namely (i) "switch ... on", (ii) "put ... on oneself", and (iii) "place ... on top of something else". If we now put "the blanket" instead of "..." then there is considerable potential for our sentence to have any of the above three

senses. If "..." is replaced with "the portable radio" then the first sense overrules, although there is a considerable potential for the third sense to be applicable, and as expected, a very small possibility for the second sense. If "the lump of wood" is substituted for "..." then none of the first and second senses stand more than a minute chance and the third sense clearly overrules.

5.4.2 Reader's Context Selection Constrained by his Cognitive Environment

Reader's context selection is constrained by his cognitive environment. A famous example can illustrate this point. One day, in a street in the West End of Glasgow, when one of the authors (Anderson and Lynch) was passing an elderly female stranger, the latter smiled at him and said, "That's the University. It's going to rain tomorrow". At first the addressee could not make sense of what the old lady had said although he understood every word of it. Only after a series of gestures indicating that he should try to listen to the sound of a bell in the distance and a repetition of the same comment, did he realize what the old lady meant. To understand her underlying meaning, one needs to have the following knowledge: the wind direction affects weather condition; the University of Glasgow has a clock tower with a bell; if the wind can carry the sound of the bell striking the hour this far, then it will probably rain the next day; and so if one can hear the sound of the bell from where the addressee was, the following day will be a rainy day. All these facts must have become part of shared knowledge to the local people. The old lady must have assumed that her addressee was one of the local residents. It turned out that her assumption was wrong and the addressee happened to be a stranger to the city. Lack of cognitive environment of the local residents, the author's context selection is constrained. Thus, it results in a failure of utterance interpretation. The same will happen in written texts. So, the reader's cognitive environment constrains his context selection.

5.4.3 Reader's Encyclopedic Memory and Sociocultural Knowledge to Context Selection

If we see both writing and reading as social processes, many factors contribute to the construction of meaning in written texts. Examples include the social roles and experiences of writer and reader and their respective purposes.

It is still, of course, on single occasion the individual reader who is confronted with the individual text. Finally, it is not that personal opinion and judgment are unimportant,

by that we need to locate the individual with a social context, to be aware of the whole range of sociocultural experiences. In fact the typical reader has much richer resources than is sometimes supposed, and readers from diverse linguistics and cultural backgrounds may have particularly important contributions to make to the interpretation of texts. On occasion, they may need to do harder interpretative work than readers from the same background as the writer, but this in itself can help them become more critical and reflective readers. Moreover, simply because as foreign or second language readers they are often not part of a text's model readership, they may be in a better situation to resist its positioning and to bring helpful and entirely valid interpretations to the text.

What the psycholinguistic accounts of Smith and Goodman tended to neglect was the social nature of the reading process. Consequently, later descriptions of the reading process, including Goodman's more recent work, have turned to the consideration of sociolinguistic factors, that is the way language use, in this case written language use, is affected by factors both in the immediate communicative situation between the reader and the writer and in the wider institutional and sociocultural context. For it is not just psychological, cognitive, or affective factors which influence our interpretation of texts, but social ones. Kress (1985: 44) says "so although from the individual's point of view her or his reading is "just my personal opinion", that personal opinion is socially constructed". In other words, we are never just talking of an individual response. Fish (1980) argues similarly when he talks of readers as members of "interpretative communities" echoing Smith's description of children's socialization into literacy as "joining the literacy club".

One might argue that we are all members of a variety of different interpretative communities, that is we interpret texts in the light of a range of genres and discourses encountered as members of a number of different social groups. We share ways of interpreting texts with those of a similar social class or ethnic group, or of similar religious and political beliefs. That our personal interpretations will never be identical with those of others is because we have multiple social identities, any of which may be salient in our reading of a particular text.

Different background knowledge and cultural assumptions may make it difficult to interpret texts in a way which corresponds with the writer's assumptions. Moreover, readers are not simply categorized as members of social groups but "positioned", that is invited to concur with the beliefs and world view of the producer of the text, as indicated by the dominant discourses within it.

Chapter Six

Conclusions and Implications

Communication does not occur in vacuum but always in certain context, which helps us in interpreting a message. Different scholars tend to concentrate themselves on different aspects of contexts and hold diverse perspectives and approaches. Malinowski terms context as "context of situation" and "context of culture". Firth's notion of context is characterized by covering both the situational context and the linguistic context. Halliday studies context from a functional point of view by identifying three different aspects of context: field, tenor and mode. Sperber and Wilson take psychological factors into consideration. In relevance theory, they reject the picture of context a monolithic entity that is accessible to interlocutors beforehand during interaction. Instead, they propose a much more dynamic view of context as a construct that has to be established and developed in the course of interaction in order to select the correct interpretation: "a context is a psychological construct, a subset of the hearer's assumptions about the world; more specifically, it is the set of premises used in interpreting [that] utterance" (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 15). Under this definition, context is a very wide notion that can include virtually any phenomenon entertainable by the human mind. Each new utterance, through drawing on the same grammar and the same inferential abilities as previous utterances, requires a rather different context. There would be, then, a bidirectional contextual influence speakers determine the context during interaction, but at the same time the context constrains the signification that utterances eventually acquire. For all speakers, there is an initial context. Relevance theory suggests that this context can be extended in the search for a relevant interpretation in the processing of the proposition from the interlocator's utterance. As contextual variations can increase or reduce the relevance of the proposition being processed, the goal of reaching an optimal level of relevance can condition the choice of context. Thus, the search for optimal relevance guides the hearer (or the reader) not only to the speaker-intended (or the writer-intended)

context but also to the speaker-intended (or the writer-intended) interpretation.

As the last chapter mentioned, the written text is a form of communication between the reader and the writer. Reading process is a constant interaction between them. In this interaction, the writer composes the content and wording of the text in service of his social and communicative goals, while the reader attempts to recover and reconstruct the intended message and the writer's goals. The whole communication is context dependent. Thus, the writer's context selection and the reader's context selection should be considered during this communication process. On the one hand, in written texts, the writer makes his intention manifest to the presumed reader by means of all kinds of styles. He will most probably employ the conventions of his chosen genre to help the reader with the minimal processing effort to assign the proper interpretation. As communication is not devoid of external influence, the writer's social and cultural backgrounds lead the reader to construct correspondingly the model relevant to the writer's language and society. Besides, different contents of written texts also constrain the reader's interpretation. On the other hand, the writer usually assumes that a reader will obtain a coherent interpretation of his text. He provides help as to which contextual dimensions are relevant. The established context has the effect of narrowing down the reader's context. Moreover, the reader's cognitive environment, encyclopedic memory and sociocultural knowledge may also have important contributions to make to text interpretation.

According to the optimal relevance in relevance theory, it is suggested that, in written texts, the writer provides a set of presumed assumptions to the reader so that the reader can achieve the adequate contextual effect with the minimal processing effort. And on the contrary, the reader's context, to a greater or less degree, constrains the meaning that written texts convey.

Based on the above tentative analysis of context selection in written texts, there are some implications for the textbook writer, the teacher, the writing and the translation.

For the textbook writer, the task is to design appropriate materials for language teaching and learning. To fulfill this task, the learners' needs and goals must be met. If learners take the position that language is a means of communication and learning language means learning how to communicate in that language, then the context must be taken into consideration when selecting and ordering the content of the teaching materials.

According to Hudson (1980), human knowledge can be divided into three kinds:

cultural knowledge, shared non-cultural knowledge and non-shared non-cultural knowledge. Cultural knowledge and shared non-cultural knowledge are the kind of knowledge within the same community or the world over. As children grow up, part of the first kind of knowledge, the knowledge of the native culture and society, becomes shared. Communication is not devoid of the social, physical, and cultural settings in which it occurs. The textbook writer should make use of this shared knowledge in selecting content of course books for foreign language teaching and learning. That is to say, if the intended users have the same sociolinguistic background, we can select content which reflect their own culture, and design exercises which require the learners to use their background knowledge in acquiring the new means of communication. In this way, we can make the learning task much easier: the learners do not have to learn the target language and the culture at the same time. This, of course, does not mean that foreign culture should not be taught. On the contrary, it should be taught, but introduced at a later stage.

As course book designers, we should introduce the target culture step by step in the materials we are compiling, familiarize our learners with the sociolinguistic norms and conventions associated with the target language and finally make the target culture part of their shared knowledge, which will enable them to communicate successfully with native speakers of the target language.

One of the main functions of language is to convey meaning between human beings. Teaching language as communication requires the teacher to pay more attention to the ways meaning is conveyed by language and to pay less attention to the ways of how grammatical sentences are produced. This implies that the teacher has to create situations and settings necessary for communication to take place. Moreover, the teacher may select some texts which offer high-interest contents. Clearly, there will be considerable, individual differences as well as preferences shared by groups of learners. Nonetheless it may be possible to identify texts which are inherently motivating.

Teaching language does not simply mean the teaching of the system of the target language. It must also involve the teaching of these non-linguistic rules. Only in this way will learners be able to get familiarized with the culture the target language expresses. The teacher can encourage students to reflect on and compare their roles, needs, and personal preferences as readers in their first language and in target language, highlight the existence of different literacies related to different reading experiences which students bring with

them from their own cultural context, as well as those developed in a second language context and encourage students to be aware of the intended readership of texts, and of their producers in terms of writers, publishers, and proprietors.

The culture of a country affects all aspects of the life and thought of the people living in that country. As has been noted, the writer's social and cultural backgrounds influence his writing style, content and the interpretation of the presumed reader. A good written text has to be involved in the writer's social and cultural backgrounds. A famous American proverb tells us "we should not judge another person until we have walked two moons in his moccasins." That is, we need to develop empathy —be able to see things from the point of view of others. For language learners, it is suggested that, when writing in target language, they use not only a new set of linguistic rules, but also the set of social and cultural norms and conventions. Language learners should be able to get familiarized with the culture the target language expresses so that they can express step by step their ideas in the target language instead of their native language. In other words, language learners may construct gradually a subset of assumptions about the world in the target language.

Language is the means used by a community to express facts, ideas, beliefs, rules, and so on — in short, to express its culture. It is easy to understand why a change of context can change the whole meaning of an utterance. Unfortunately, the process of translation involves this situation. How does the translator deal with this serious matter? This paper suggests that, when dealing with a problem caused by contextual differences, the translator should ask herself whether she could or even should address this problem by supplementing the translated text or whether other means need to be sought. It may thus be helpful for the translator to realize that not all the problems she encounters in translating a text are problems peculiar to translation. Once aware of the problem arising in secondary communication situations, translators can anticipate them and look for appropriate means to overcome them, which may require strategies for widening the contextual knowledge of the target audience by additional means. Thus, the target audience can obtain adequate contextual assumptions that the writer of the original assumed the original audience to have with the minimal processing effort. It leads to successful communication between the translator and the target audience.

What has been done in this paper is only a preliminary study of context selection in

written texts within the framework of relevance theory. It needs further researches. To sum up, relevance theory is of vital importance for further studies of utterance production and interpretation in written texts. It will make more contributions to researches on language and communication.

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