A Discussion of the Application of Context Theory in English Vocabulary Teaching

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Abstract: *Vocabulary is the basis of English learning and plays a significant role in language usage and informal communication. Context plays an important part in restricting the meaning of words in sentences or passages. This paper mainly analyzes the restrictive mechanism of context on lexical meaning and the forms of restriction through giving and illustrating examples. The selected examples include both utterances and written expressions. This paper chooses some typical viewpoints on classification of context in existing theory or study, and makes analysis from three levels: the linguistic context, the situational context and the cultural context. And the three levels can be further divided into more specific aspects, from which context can be interpreted from multiple perspectives to support and enrich the whole analysis. This paper chooses to study the restriction of context on lexical meaning in order to demonstrate the importance of context and provide inspiration for English vocabulary teaching.*

Keywords: *context; restriction; vocabulary teaching*

1. Introduction

Vocabulary is the basis of English learning and plays a significant role in language usage and informal communication. The meaning of words encompasses lexical and grammatical meaning, denotative and connotative meaning, affective meaning and the like. When we understand a word, we cannot only take the literal meaning, because in some cases that will lead to misunderstanding. In usage of languages, although expressions or utterances are composed of independent words, their meaning is not the simple addition of meaning of all words. The interpretation of words depends on the meaning of the words themselves, and equally importantly, that of their surrounding words. On the one hand, lexical meaning decides the meaning of the information unit. On the other hand, the context limits the choice of meaning of words. And we can see the interplay between the context and lexical meaning. To some extent, meaning of words is largely affected by context. Lexical meaning is relatively definite, but when words are used in specific circumstances, the meaning may change or become uncertain. In the face of an individual word, we can simply list all its meaning without considering any other situation, such as its collocation, affective meaning, referential meaning and so forth. However, once it is put into context, we can not interpret its meaning in a sweeping way. And we must choose the most appropriate meaning that suits the context among all the meaning items of the word to make a reasonable interpretation.

Context plays an important part in restricting the meaning of words in sentences or passages. But in some cases context is overlooked. We should pay attention to this linguistic phenomenon and try to develop a kind of awareness of context. Understanding the restrictive mechanism of context on the meaning of words is helpful to understand and use vocabulary more accurately, and then is useful for expression and communication. In fact, context is not only very crucial in language learning and research, but also plays its role in many other aspects, such as dialogues in diplomatic occasions, cross-cultural communication, daily communication and so on. From conversations in daily life to academic research, all the examples are forceful demonstration of influence of context.

2. Classification of Context

2.1 Classification of Foreign Scholars

In the west, the germination of the idea of context can be traced back to Aristotle. But he did not put

forward the exact concept of context. The first person to explicitly come up with the concept of context is the Polish linguist Marinowski. He thinks there are two kinds of context, including the context of culture and the context of situation. The context of culture refers to the social and cultural backgrounds in which the speaker lives, and the context of situation refers to the specific situation where speech behaviour occurs [1]. Firth absorbs Marinowski's theory of the context of situation, and he thinks there are two types of context, including one that comes from within the language, that is, context of linguistic factors; and the other that is from outside the language, that is, the nonverbal context, which involves the characteristics of the participants, participants' verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Inspired by Firth's theory of context, the British linguist Halliday proposes a new concept: register. And the register is composed of field of discourse, mode of discourse and tenor of discourse. Field refers to the scope of discourse, mode refers to the way or approach used in communication, and tenor refers to the social roles of the participants and the roles played in the conversation. The American linguist Hymes made a deep study of context and developed the theory of context. Taking the word "SPEAKING" as the starting point, he elucidated the basic elements of context. "S" represents Situation, "P" stands for Participants, "E" stands for Ends, "A" stands for Act sequence, "K" stands for Key, "I" stands for Instrumentality, "N" stands for Norms of interaction and "G" stands for genre. Sperber and Wilson established the theory of cognitive context, which promoted the further development of context research [2].

2.2 Classification of Chinese Scholars

In China, the origin of the notion of context can be found in books of predecessors. Confucius in the Chunqiu Period [2], Du Yu in the Western Jin Dynasty [1], Kong Yingda in the Tang Dynasty and Liu Xie in the Southern Dynasty [1] all put forward their views on the importance of context in understanding the meaning of words and articles. Although their views are rudimentary and not systematic, they have been aware of the influence of context on language and characters at that time, which is very meaningful for research of context.

And in modern times, the studies of context in China have been progressing. Above all, Mr. Chen Wangdao's theory of "Six What" is recognized as the earliest elaboration of context by Chinese linguists. Here "Six What" refers to what reason(why), what event(what), what character(who), what place(where), what time(when) and what result(how). Later, other scholars made more research on the basis of his theory, such as Professor Zhang Zhigong, Professor Wang Dechun and so on [2]. Professor He Zhaoxiong and Professor Hu Zhuanglin divide the context into three categories. The former's classification includes background knowledge, situational knowledge and mutual understanding of both participants [3]; the latter's classification includes the context of text, the context of situation and the context of culture. Later, from a new perspective, Professor Xiong Xueliang studied the theory of cognitive context [2].

3. Restriction of Context on Lexical Meaning

3.1 Analysis Based on the Linguistic Context

Foreign and domestic scholars have their own views on the interpretation and classification of context. At present, there is no unified theory, but all the existing views have common places and are related to one another. Therefore, this paper mainly chooses the most general classification from various viewpoints to analyze the restrictive mechanism of context on lexical meaning. Context can be divided into linguistic context, and extra-linguistic context. Linguistic context can be subdivided into phonetic context, grammatical context and semantic context, and extra-linguistic context can be subdivided into situational context and cultural context [4]. This chapter will analyze the linguistic context, and other chapters will discuss the extra-linguistic context.

The linguistic context refers to the context that is connected with linguistic factors or the language itself. Linguistics encompasses a large amount of contents, in which there are many categories. And this chapter will give and illustrate some examples from three aspects: phonetics, grammar and semantics.

3.1.1 The Phonetic Context

The contents of analysis on the phonetic context mainly focus on utterances and articulation, not written language. And the following examples that will be given and analyzed are concerned with stress

and intonation.

When it comes to stress, there are two levels, that is, stress of word level and sentence level. In the first place, this paragraph will analyze the examples of word stress in the phonetic context. For instance, when the accent of the word "desert" is on the first syllable, then the meaning of it is a large area of land that has very little water and very few plants growing on it. And when the accent is on the second syllable, then the meaning of the word is to leave or go away. In this example, the meaning of the word "desert" changes with the alteration of stress. And even the parts of speech of the word changes.

In the second place, this paragraph is to make an analysis into the examples of sentence stress in the phonetic context. Take the sentence "She's wearing the red jacket." for example, stress can be put on different words and the meaning of both the word and the whole sentence will change correspondingly. When the stress is put on the word "she", the word is not only a person pronoun but also refers to that person in particular. And the emphasis of the sentence lies in "she". When the stress is on "wearing", then the word has an additional meaning that results from the tone of emphasis. And the sentence means that "she" is "wearing", not taking or draping or something else. When the stress is on "the", since "the" is a definite article, the tone of emphasis becomes much stronger. When the stress is on "red", the word does not simply represents a kind of colour, and it is a specific modifier of something. And the meaning of the sentence is that "the jacket" here is "red", not blue, white, black or something else. When the stress is on "jacket", the word is not just a word of a sort of clothes, and it explicitly refers to that designated "jacket". After analyzing the sample sentence, the change of sentence stress also influences lexical meaning, thus altering the meaning of the whole sentence.

Besides stress, the meaning of words and sentences is also connected with intonation. For example, in the following sentence "Jean, can you bring me the newspaper?", if the response "Sorry." has a rising intonation, then it means that "Jean" did not hear clearly what the first speaker had said. And if the response has a falling intonation, then it means that "Jean" was unable to accede to the first speaker's request. Therefore, change of intonation will alter meaning of words and sentences.

In conclusion, stress and intonation have influence on lexical meaning, and the meaning of sentences. In the phonetic context, the meaning of words is restricted by phonetic factors. Therefore even the pronunciation or articulation can affect lexical meaning.

3.1.2 The Grammatical Context

The emphasis of the discussion about the grammatical context is put on factors that are related to grammar. Grammar is a relatively broad concept and it contains many subdivided aspects, ranging from word formation and affix, tense, subject-predicate agreement, ellipsis, demonstrative pronouns, to collocation and the like.

Firstly, the formation of an individual word, especially the addition of affix, can be a good manifestation of the grammatical context. For example, the word "love" means a strong feeling of deep affection for somebody or something. When the suffix -er is added to it, the meaning of the word will be a partner in a sexual relationship outside marriage or a person who likes or enjoys a particular thing, which is a description of a kind of people. And when the suffix -ly is added to the word, the meaning is being beautiful, attractive or pleasant or kind and friendly, and even parts of speech of the word will change.

Secondly, tense has implication that is not shown in words directly. Using modal verbs in the past tense will be more euphemistic than using them in the base form. For instance, when a person is making a suggestion, he or she will say "I would suggest..." instead of "I will suggest...". It is more polite to say "Could you..." than saying "Can you..." when asking for help or making a request. The modal verbs in the two sentences are used in the past tense, and it's worth noting that the past tense here does not mean that the behaviour happens in the past, but the behaviour is performed in a more euphemistic and polite manner. The past tense of the modal verbs makes the meaning of the predicate verbs euphemistic and inoffensive.

Thirdly, in English ellipsis is manifested or supplemented in other ways, either by the logic of the context, or by reference, or by substitution. For example, although there is no subject in the sentence "Behave yourself.", we can understand the sentence and know what the subject is. With knowledge of grammar, it is clear that the subject is "you".

Fourthly, the use of demonstrative pronouns is common in English. Demonstrative pronouns can avoid or reduce repetition and redundancy. But in the meantime, to have a correct understanding requires figuring out what the demonstrative pronoun exactly refers to.

Fifthly, collocation is very important in languages, which decides the meaning of words definitely. Different collocation has different meaning and the difference may be slight or large. For example, the phrase "stop to do" means ceasing to do something in order to do other things. While the phrase "stop doing" means ceasing to do the thing that is being done.

After analyzing the examples from the above five aspects of affix, tense, ellipsis, demonstrative pronouns and collocation, it can be concluded that grammar is a clue to understanding the meaning of words or phrases and it also restricts the meaning.

3.1.3 The Semantic Context

English stresses logic as well as meaning. In addition to grammar, meaning is also a vital and indispensable component. As for the semantic context, the main focus of the illustration is on meaning itself. And the meaning here involves both the word level and the sentence level.The context around the word decides its meaning. What the phrase, or the sentence, or the whole passage exactly intends to convey is the basis of the lexical meaning. The semantic context is a critical factor to avoid uncertainty, ambiguity and vagueness of meaning of words.

3.2 Analysis Based on the Extra-linguistic Context

3.2.1 The Situational Context

The situational context belongs to extra-linguistic context. Extra-linguistic factors have the same significant influence on the interpretation of lexical meaning. The situational context refers to the comprehensive conditions in which language behaviour takes place. And then the chosen examples are to be expounded from the four aspects, including subject or topic, time, place or occasion and person, that is to say, the language user, or the subject and object of the language behaviour [5].

In different topics, the meaning of words will be different, and sometimes there might be a big difference. For example, the word "president" refers to the leader of a country in the topic of politics; it refers to the person administering an organization in the topic of business; and it refers to the head of a school or the leader of a students' organization in the topic of education.

Changing times bring changes to languages. As for lexical meaning, there are four types of changes: extension, addition, narrowing and disappearance. In the case of extension, the extended meaning tend to be related to the original meaning. For example, the literal meaning of "glass ceiling" is the top inside surface of a room made out of glass. At present it has an additional meaning of barriers to the advancement of women in companies and organizations.

Occasion or place have influence on the interpretation of lexical meaning. As the initiators and receivers of language behaviour, people play a role in the meaning of words and sentences. In English, there are some words showing difference when applied to describing men and women.

3.2.2 The Cultural Context

Like the situational context, the cultural context is also a part of extra-linguistic context. What the cultural context means is the various cultural elements behind the language behaviour. Cultural and social backgrounds, customs and values are components of the cultural context. When it comes to cultural factors, there are many characteristic old sayings in English. Those sayings were usually established by people through long social practice and have profound historical backgrounds. In general foreign people do not understand these sayings or just know a little about them, if they didn't learn anything about that previously [6].

4. Application of Context Theory in Vocabulary Teaching

In English teaching, the scenarios used is also context. In China, when learning foreign language, students are generally lacking in a language learning environment. Therefore, in classroom teaching, teachers should strive to create a vivid language learning environment for students, and do everything possible to use the real objective environment or create scenarios to conduct English vocabulary teaching, making the students learn the vocabulary in the language environment.

In reading, context refers to the environment in which a new word is found in a neighboring word, phrase, sentence, or paragraph. With regards to these adjoining words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs, they are often used to regulate the meaning of the target word and help explain the meaning

of the target word. The method of vocabulary learning by means of context is to acquire the word by guessing its meaning through the information provided by the context [7].

For teachers, they should create an informative language environment and provide students with appropriate and real language information input so that students can have the chance to use their learned vocabulary. When carrying out language communication activities, it should be noted that the oral language training materials should be the communicative language and vocabulary knowledge in the textbook, and the activities must always be carried out focusing on the teaching objectives. In order to encourage students to take active part in, teachers should be tolerant of students' language mistakes and do not correct their mistakes every time. The activities that teachers can design include interview, discussion and debate, role play, and oral retelling. These activities can familiarize students with consolidating new vocabulary and review old ones. At the same time, it can also deepen the understanding of language materials, which is obvious in promoting students' oral expression ability and vocabulary use ability, and can also promote their listening improvement. In addition, in the process of the activity, since students must reprocess language materials, how to use the vocabulary should be considered, and the appropriate use of grammar, sentence pattern and other aspects should be also taken into account. In addition, the content expressed should be re-conceive, so that it can also promote the development of students' thinking ability [8].

For Chinese students, reading is the main form of language input. Students can accumulate vocabulary and English usage constantly by reading. In the reading and comprehension of various exams, there will be a certain number of new words, and some old words will have a new meaning in a specific context, which requires a lot of reading. Consolidating the vocabulary by reading discourse must pay attention to the source of the discourse, and the choice of reading materials should be based on the students' level and demand characteristics [9].

5. Conclusion

The linguistic, situational and cultural context have their influence on lexical meaning respectively. Through the foregoing analysis, the restrictive mechanism of context on lexical meaning is mainly manifested in the following four aspects. Firstly, it makes the meaning of polysemous and ambiguous words single and certain. Secondly, it makes vague words or expressions specific in meaning. Thirdly, it brings about the changes of affective meaning of words between commendation and derogation. Fourthly, it provides clues to the supplement of information that has been omitted or the revelation of hidden meaning.

In vocabulary teaching, to use context is conducive for students to have an understanding of the exact meaning of vocabulary, and pay attention to the specific use of vocabulary. In context, learning to memorize words and learning to flexibly communicate using the learned words appropriately can stimulate students' interest in learning English, and play a great role in improving the quality of English teaching.

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