

Relationship of English Context and the Function of English Grammar

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Abstract

Context is the constraint element to the communicative function of grammar and the determinative element in the structural function of it; moreover, it is also the sole standard to judge the appropriacy of the sentence structure. This paper holds a discussion on the relationship of context and the function of grammar, and puts emphasis on the essential role of context in it by giving the specific examples as well.

Key words: Context; Communicative; Function; Structural

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays there is an inappropriate way in the process of learning English grammar in that a large number of language learners cannot or more often will not reconsider the grammar they have learned from the teachers or some grammar books. The most evident disadvantage of this way of learning is that it is difficult for the students to make full use of the meaning-express function of grammar in communicating with other people; instead, they only know the rigid structure of the grammar. Under such circumstances, it is time for us to put emphasis on the communicative function of grammar and transfer the language knowledge to the real communicative ability.

1. STRUCTURAL FUNCTION AND COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTION OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR

If we make a close observation and analysis to the English grammar, we will find that actually there are two functions inter-related within the structure of grammar: the structural function as well as the communicative function. The structural function refers to its function in word-forming and sentence-making, and the communicative function refers to its function in expressing the actual communicative meaning in the real situation. From the point view of translation, sometimes these two functions are concordance, that is to say the readers can obtain the meaning of a sentence that conveys mere from the surface structure. It can be illustrated with the following examples.

Example 1: My brother is a teacher, he teaches Japanese in Pekin University.

The grammatical structure of this sentence is identical not only in English but also in Chinese with the basic sentence structure of the subject, predicate and object. However, in many cases the communicative function and structural function are not always identical. The readers cannot understand or translate the sentence according to the structure of it, that is to say the analysis of the grammatical component of a sentence cannot be substituted by the actual expressing of the sentence meaning.

Example 2: I am afraid that I cannot teach you skating. I think my little sister is a better teacher than I.

In light of the structural function of grammar, "I think my little sister is a better teacher than I" should be translated into Chinese directly as "我认为我的妹妹比我是个好老师". However, the translation is obviously against the original meaning of the sentence and the way of expressing in Chinese. On the other hand, according to the communicative function of grammar, it is easier to comprehend this sentence by transferring the part

of speech of the word “teacher” to “teach”, therefore the original sentence can be paraphrased as “It is not necessarily for me to teach you skating, I think my little sister will teach you better than I.”

The above analysis shows that the structural function of English grammar is static and rigid, for example, “teacher” is a verb but not a noun word, however, the communicative function of English grammar is dynamic and flexible, for example, “teach” can be looked on as a noun word for the sake of the proper understanding of a sentence. Under such circumstance, it is necessary for the learners and the teachers to stress both of the structural function and the communicative function of English grammar in the process of learning and teaching.

2. INTRODUCTION TO ENGLISH CONTEXT

Context is undoubtedly one of the most important factors in discourse understanding. In a broad sense, it refers to the relevant elements of the surrounding linguistic or nonlinguistic structures in relation to an uttered expression under consideration. According to Webster’s Dictionary of the English language: context means the parts of a sentence, paragraph, discourse, etc. that occur just before and after a specified word or passage, and determine its exact meaning; the whole situation, background, or environment relevant to some personality or happening. To put it simply, context means the real communication situation, the situation where the language is actually used.

2.1 Malinowski’s View on Context

The term “context” was first put forward by the great Polish-born anthropologist B. Malinowski, the father of modern anthropology, in his article *The problem of Meaning in Primitive Language* written in 1923, who stressed the need to interpret speech in its context of situation. Exactly as in the reality of spoken or written language, a word without linguistic context is a mere figment and stands for nothing by itself, so in the reality of a spoken living tongue, the utterance has no meaning except in the context of situation (Malinowski, 1923, p.307).

2.2 Firth’s View on Context

Malinowski’s view of context of situation was subsequently elaborated by Firth who is regarded by many as the founder of modern British linguistics, particularly in the paper *Personality and the Language in Society* written in 1950. In Firth’s view, all linguistics was the study of meaning and all meaning was function on a context.

2.3 Halliday’s View of Context

Halliday is a famous British linguist. He does not just take on his teacher’s idea, offered a more abstract

interpretation of context. Instead of the “context of situation”, he has his own technical term “register”. In Halliday’s view, “the notion of register is at once very simple and very powerful and provides a means of investigating the linguistic foundations of everyday social interaction from an angle that is complementary to the ethnomethodological one (Halliday, 1978, p.31 & p.620). The theory of register attempts to uncover the general principles which govern the ways the language people speak or write varies according to the type of situation. A register is a semantic concept. It is a configuration of meaning that is typically associated with a particular situational configuration of field, mode and tenor. It will of course include the expressions, the lexicon-grammatical and phonological features that typically accompany or realize these meaning.

As Halliday and Hasan have argued that the notions of text and context are inseparable: text is language operative in a context of situation and contexts are ultimately construed by the range of texts produced within a community... One commonsense conception is that our ideas, knowledge, thoughts and culture are all there—almost independent of language and just waiting to be expressed by it. The dichotomy between language as an expression of personal meaning and language as a reflection of the social order is already inscribed in the very way people write about text on the one hand and context on the other. It reflects the fundamental polarity of linguistic discourse that describes language use as both the creation of text and the shaping of contexts.

While studying the English language especially English grammar, learner’s need to understand that effective communication involves achieving harmony between functional interpretation and formal appropriacy by giving the learner’s tasks that dramatize the relationship between grammatical items and the discoursal contexts in which they occur. In real communication, grammar and context are often so closely related with other that appropriate grammatical choices can only be made with reference to the context and purpose of the communication.

3. CONTEXT—THE CONSTRAINT ELEMENT IN THE COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTION OF GRAMMAR

It has been acknowledged that the communicative function of grammar is important in understanding the meaning of the sentences well and appropriately. The readers can change the part of speech of certain words to analyze the sentences without caring so much of the ungrammatical mistakes for the flexibility of the grammar’s communicative function. Therefore, “It is just the constraint feature of context that determines the communicative function of a sentence.” Just as what Zhang zhenbang in his *New English Grammar Course*

says: The sentences can be classified into four categories in light of its communicative function, they are the declarative sentence, the interrogative sentence, the imperative sentence as well as the exclamatory sentence”, “and they are categorized according to the grammatical structure feature of the sentences. As far as its communicative function is concerned, it is incomplete.” Usually the function of the declarative sentence is to state a fact or show a point of view, and the function of the interrogative sentence is to raise a question, however, it is not necessarily the case when taking the context into consideration. For example:

a) It is raining. (Declarative)

There is more than one meaning in the different context. When the window is still open with the coming of the rain, this sentence is uttered for the speaker to close the window; when the speaker is visited by a guest, it means that the speaker urges the guest to stay for a while; when the child is going to go out, the parent reminds him to bring an umbrella.

b) Is that pepper over there? (Interrogative)

This sentence is a question in form, but the real situation of the speaker can be different in certain context, that is to say, it may be a question or can be a kind of requirement.

c) Is the window open? (Interrogative)

If it is uttered in a winter's day, the speaker asks the listener to close the window because of the cold weather outside. If it is in a summer's day, the real intention of the speaker is to require the listener to open the window.

From the above examples, it is safe to conclude that the same sentence structure may bear the different communicative function in various contexts; on the other hand the same communicative function can be illustrated and expressed by the distinguishable sentences structure in different context. However, there is one point needs to be attached great importance, that is the element of context is the key word required to keep in mind all the time. Without a certain context, the communicative function of the sentence will be confused and unclear. Let us take the following situation as an example.

Context: Mr. Smith is talking with his wife about the gift they are going to buy to their son—Tom for his birthday, and Mrs Smith suggests buying a box of chocolate.

Therefore here the communicative function of the sentence is to make a suggestion. Mr. Smith gives advice by giving the following sentences:

a) Buy him a box of chocolate. (Imperative)

b) I like a box of chocolate. (Statement)

c) A box of chocolate. (Noun Phrase)

d) How about a box of chocolate? (Question)

e) If I were you, I'd buy a box of chocolate. (Conditional)

The communicative function of the above example is making a suggestion that can be expressed in various

sentence structures; however, no matter what sentence structure Mrs Smith adopts, the linguistic element of context can not be neglected by both the adviser and the acceptor. In a word, context is the key word constrains the flexibility of the communicative function of grammar.

4. CONTEXT—THE DETERMINATIVE ELEMENT IN THE STRUCTURAL FUNCTION OF GRAMMAR

In addition to the communicative function of grammar, context plays an important part in the structural function of it.

Take the use of tense as an example. Any language learners must have been taught that one of the most difficult linguistic knowledge to grasp should be the use of the various kinds of tenses that are used in a certain period of time. Past tense and present perfect are not easy to be used in the actual application. Actually the past tense uses opposed to present perfect uses clearly shows the different conditions on the uses of these tenses. It is also interesting to note that the frequency ratio of past to present perfect is about 10:1 in written text. The reason for this disparity lies in the different overall functions of the two tenses as well as the distinguishable context they apply to.

Past tense:

a) In the 1940s, when she *trained* as a nurse in Johannesburg...

b) Thatcher came to power in 1979 she *disbanded* the Royal commission.

c) ...was again impressive yesterday as she *dispatched* Conchita Martinez.

d) Yesterday, in Tokyo, she *indicated* that she may be around...

e)...of the Olympics in Seoul. She *joined* the Boat Race squad last January.

Present Perfect

a) But his successor, Corazon Aquino, *has ruled* that out, citing concerns over.

b) ...from the United States, which *has warned* against any attempt to stem the ...

c) Marco's 20 years of corrupt rule *has produced* a psychological damage to the people.

d) Indeed, the French press *has produced* the dangerous illusion in Lebanon.

e) RAF Spitfire pilot who for 23 years *has led* an often lonely crusade for peace.

f) The issue *has divided* the country more than any other things.

g) Engel is German by birth but *has lived* in Britain for the last 20 years.

h) Like the Alice books, he *has loved* the Tempest since he was a child.

i) Besides culture as well as agriculture, she *has studied* Greek, History, and Philosophy.

j) David Lodge *has adapted* himself cleverly.

From such evident, it becomes clear for the learners that we have to associate past tense with definite past events as opposed to events in the indefinite past with the present perfect. The present perfect is used to express such notion as Recentness in a), b) Result in c), d), Duration in e), f), g) h) and Experience in i), j). The past tense is used when there is a specific, definite date or point in time given in the context.

5. CONTEXT—THE SINGLE STANDARD TO APPRECIATE THE APPROPRIACY OF THE SENTENCE STRUCTURE

As one of the necessary element in the linguistic phenomenon, context is a sole standard to judge the appropriacy of the sentence structure. For example, A raises a question to B: What is your brother going to do next Monday? B answers it as: He works in a factory. Although B's answer is grammatically accepted, it violates the relevant standard of cooperative principles, that is to say it is inappropriate in light of the theory of context.

In daily communication, people tend to believe that there is some regularity in conversation. "Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational of they did. They are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts; and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction" (Grice, 1975, p.45). In other words, people seem to follow some principle like the following: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice, 1975, p.45). This principle is known as the cooperative principle. In order to specify the cooperative principle further, Grice introduced four categories of maxims as quantity, quality, relation and manner. While in the process of actual daily communication, the use of terms principle and maxim does not mean that the cooperative principle and its maxims will be followed by every person all the time. People do violate one or more of these maxims to express some implication and intentions. Therefore, the implied meaning of the speakers would most probably be interpreted with the full consideration of context rather than analyzing the grammatical features of the sentences. Conversational implicature proposed by the Oxford philosopher Herbert Paul Grice may be summarized as a type of implied meaning can be deduced on the basis of the conventional meaning of words together with the context, under the guidance of the cooperative principle and its maxims. In this sense, implicature is comparable to illocutionary force in speech act theory in that they are both concerned with the contextual side or meaning.

Another factor needs to be noted that it is safe to say that many active voice sentences can be changed to the passive voice sentences without violence the principle of grammar, while it is not the case when a certain context is involved in. For example:

The heaven rain destroyed the crops. (Active Voice)

The crops were destroyed by the heaven rain. (Passive Voice)

Both of the two sentences are acceptable in grammar, while if we take the first sentence as the answer to the question: "What happened to the crops?" it is inappropriate with the consideration of the context: What happened to the crops. Generally speaking, the problem of structural appropriacy can only be solved with the careful attention of context.

CONCLUSION

Context is the constraint element to the communicative function of grammar and the determinative element in the structural function of it, furthermore it is also the sole standard to judge the appropriacy of the sentence structure. In a word, context is essential to the function of grammar, and it should be regarded as the important linguistic element paid great attention by the language learners.

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