Predictive Function of Context in Simultaneous Interpretation

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Abstract

Context is crucial for discourse analysis and it also has great impact on interpretation. It is the linguistic and extra-linguistic knowledge that linguistic expressions rely on. Based on the nature of context, prediction or anticipation becomes possible in simultaneous interpretation. This paper discusses the predictive function of context in simultaneous interpretation, and it is hoped that the discussion of predictive function of context can cast some light on the training of simultaneous interpretation.

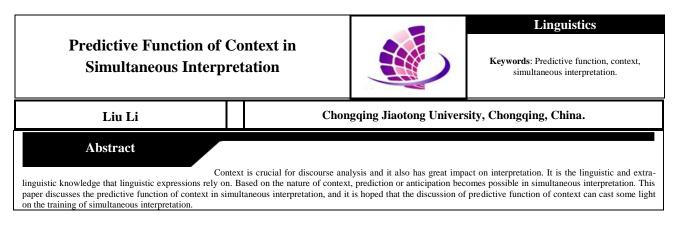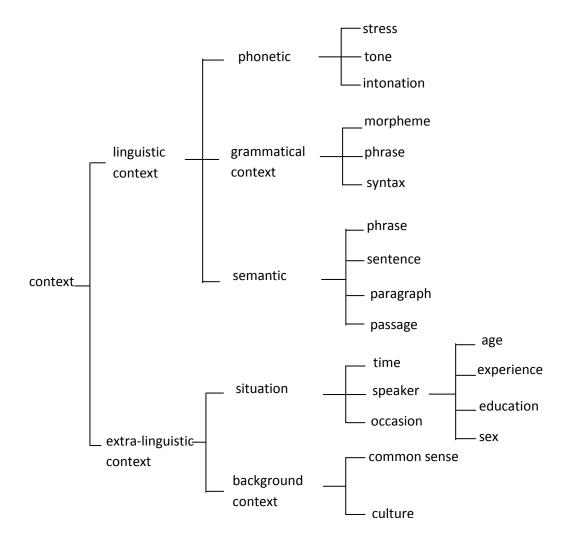### 1. Brief Introduction of Context

The usage of language cannot be separated from context, and all utterances are the products of a certain context. The modern linguists hold that context has different impacts on the two branches of language-- written language and spoken language, because of the different degree of participation of context. The important contextual factor for written language is the discourses before and after; while besides that, context of spoken language also includes situation, common life experience of the speaker, shared information and so on. Just as the famous Holland linguist Van Dijk says, to give an overall description of discourse, we cannot regard it as isolated and abstract, but analyze it by connecting discourse and context(Dijk, 1993:81).

Based on the results of context research at home and abroad, context can be defined as the sum total of linguistic knowledge and extra-linguistic knowledge on which the linguistic expressions of any natural language rely. Hence, generally speaking, context can be divided into linguistic context and extra-linguistic context. Linguistic context is the interrelationship between one linguistic unit and another, which can range from phoneme to sentences and even paragraphs. Extra-linguistic context is the sum of context of situation and context of background. The detailed classification can be illustrated in the following chart.

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                                                    ┌─ stress
                                  ┌─ phonetic ───────┼─ tone
                                  │                  └─ intonation
                                  │                  ┌─ morpheme
                  ┌─ linguistic   ┼─ grammatical ────┼─ phrase
                  │   context     │   context        └─ syntax
                  │               │                  ┌─ phrase
                  │               └─ semantic ───────┼─ sentence
                  │                                  ├─ paragraph
    context ──────┤                                  └─ passage
                  │                                              ┌─ age
                  │                            ┌─ time           ├─ experience
                  │               ┌─ situation ┼─ speaker ───────┼─ education
                  │               │            └─ occasion       └─ sex
                  └─ extra-linguistic          ┌─ common sense
                      context     └─ background ┤
                                     context    └─ culture
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The detailed classification of context shows that most contextual knowledge is gained by the accumulation in interpreters' life and study experience, which is actually maintained in interpreters' minds as pre-knowledge. In the process of interpretation, what the speaker says usually reminds the interpreter of what he has already known in his mind, i.e. his pre-knowledge, which is helpful for the anticipation of the speaker's utterance. The following explanation on the issue of context will be carried out from two aspects: linguistic context and extra-linguistic context.

2. Predictive function of linguistic context

Hella Kirchhoff explains the interpreter's ability to anticipate in his work as follows:

The construction of expectations depends on linguistic and extra-linguistic determinants. the interpreter's ability to anticipate is defined on the one hand by his linguistic competence, i.e. his knowledge of syntactic and semantic regularities in the SL and the use of information from previously processed text, and…As a rule, the certainty with which the interpreter can anticipate will increase (in other word, the subjective information value of the text will decrease) as the interpretation progresses, because it becomes easier for the interpreter to recognize and predict the performance characteristics of the sender and the subject matter (Kirchoff, 2002: 113).

As it is recognized by people as the common knowledge that any language has its certain linguistic rules and regulations, therefore, no matter what a speaker may say in his speech, the language he uses must follow these rules and regulations. For example, the word order in every language is not at random, but with highly "differentiated probabilities", as Gile points out, in English, the probability that an article will be followed by a noun or an adjective is high, but the probability that it will be followed by another article or a verb is low (Gile, 1995: 134). Therefore, linguistic inferences can be drawn about the verbal form of the message, its linguistic meaning, as well as about the referential component of the semantic structure of the utterance (discourse). Pronominal co-reference may serve as one obvious example of the linguistic type of inferring. Co-reference may be based on the common componential stock, for example, the term "sell" contains the semantic component "money"; hence after the appearance of the verb "sell" in discourse, the noun "money" will follow with a definite article, and its appearance in discourse will be expected. The same may be said about semantic rules, as in the following example: He left New York to Washington implies that he is no longer in New York, and that he is probably in Washington or on his way there. Any component of the semantic structure of the text could become a source of linguistic inference, as in We have been impressed by…infers that whatever impressed us must be "positive" or "good" (assessment); the linguistic inference my delegation has worked towards an outcome…must be followed by a non-factual proposition…reflecting a consensus, or …would reflect a consensus, but not by …which reflected a consensus.

Actually, in simultaneous interpretation, understanding of the semantic and sense structure of the incoming message consisting of a series of interconnected utterance is a dynamic process which covers:

- the gradual, yet discrete, addition of new semantic components to those already foregrounded, effected through acts of predication and completed with the appearance of a higher order semantic configuration;

- bridging sense gaps through decomposition of surface-level sense structures of incoming utterances, their rearrangement and subsequent recomposition into higher-level semantic units;

- establishing new links and relations between the incoming and previously foregrounded semantic components and combining them into a new sense structure with fewer, more complex semantic configurations;

- Finally, fitting this semantic structure into the larger picture of the situational context and the hearer's knowledge.

The following example illustrates that foregrounded components can act as context for interpreter's anticipation.

(6) It is a long way   from   Peking to London.

北京到 伦敦 相距遥

The distance   has sometimes   seemed

远。   这个距离   有时   似乎

compounded by historical,   philosophical and

更加   扩大了， 因为 历史上、   哲学上

political   gaps in our outlooks.

和政治上，   我们的观点 差异甚大。

It is nevertheless   many years since our

然而，   很多年前 我们

two worlds   first touched.   In 1596 Queen

两个世界 就开始接触。 1596年，

Elizabeth the First wrote to Ming Emperor Wan Li

伊丽莎白一世女王 写信给明朝 的 万历皇帝，

expressing the hope that trade could be developed

表示 希望 能发展

between Britain and China.
英中之间的贸易。

In the above example, the former part talks about the geographical distance and the distance of outlooks between China and Britain. Then the word "nevertheless" reminds the interpreter that the standpoint of the speaker may shift to the opposite side: Britain and China always seek ways to cooperate despite the divergences. As expected, the speaker talks about the letter from Queen Elizabeth to Wan Li Emperor, and interpreter can anticipate "be developed …and China" when hearing the word "trade".

Besides, this process must logically result in the growing semantic redundancy of the message for the simultaneous interpreter, as long as the message continues to develop, and in facilitating the probability prediction process at all levels of generation of the internal program of plan of TL utterances.

Therefore, we can see that redundancy is also a kind of linguistic context which is a unique and powerful basis for a probability prediction mechanism in SI.

Linguistic context is rather important: the hearer makes cognitive inferences when the utterance makes sense, only when the semantic components of the utterance (or the portion of the discourse) are already produced, interacting with the listener's background knowledge. For example, in order to understand the utterance *he studied at Eton*, or *he studied at Columbia*, one must have the appropriate background knowledge about Eton College in the United Kingdom, or Columbia University in New York. In fact, the notion of the literal meaning of a sentence only has application relative to a set of background assumptions, and these background assumptions are not all and could not all be realized in the semantic structure of the sentence.

3. Predictive function of extra-linguistic context

The construction of expectations also depends on the interpreter's knowledge of the situation, especially the role of the sender and his typical behavior in that role and situation, and the interpreter's prior knowledge of the subject.

In an international organization interpreters are nowadays likely to work essentially in simultaneity. In the vast machines that these organizations have tended to become, they generally remain an anonymous voice, with little or no personal contact with the delegates they are working for. If one works regularly for the same organization, either as a member of staff or as a freelancer who prefers to take regular employment from it, then a certain amount of the work become routine: one is acquainted with the procedures, the topical issues, one may even work for a given committee or on a given specific topic on a regular basis. But such "routine" is not the general rule. As more and more questions assume an international dimension, in other words with globalization, the international organizations find they are dealing with an ever wider range of issues, and consequently interpreters must cope with them too.

Some meetings may be extremely general in content, and others highly technical. For general meetings the interpreter may need no specialized vocabulary at all and perhaps no specific knowledge other than what one may easily acquire by reading the daily press. This does not mean, however, that such meetings are necessarily easy. Their very blandness can make them awkwardly elusive to the interpreter, who may have to deal with the finest nuances of meaning, so fine sometimes as to seem to exist only in the mind of the speaker. One thing the interpreter will not lack in their work is variety. The interpreter will be faced with a literally infinite range of

subject matters. The same basic skills will always be required, but the interpreter has a vast field to work in and must therefore have broad general knowledge and be intellectually curious, always seeking to widen that general knowledge. The construction of general knowledge is a part of extra-linguistic context.

In the extra-linguistic context, the situational inference about the meaning of the utterance already produced, has the communicative situation as the source of the inference. For example, from the speaker's address, *Mr. President…* an inference drawn situationally may establish a reference to the President of a country, or the president of a company, or the President of the UN Security Council, or the president of a college. Chernov has carried out an analysis of the communicative situation of SI involves eight clearly identifiable factors:

- the characteristics of the source message, or speaker, obtained from a reply to the question " Who is speaking?"
- the theme of the message: "What is he talking about?"
- the relation of the act of speech to the event that provoked it: "In what connection is he speaking?"
- the message recipient, or audience: "Whom is he addressing?"
- the place, or forum: "Where is he speaking?"
- the time: "When is he speaking?"
- the purpose of the communication: "What is he aiming at?"
- and its motive: "Why is he speaking?" (Chernov, 1994: 144)

Having a good command of the factors of communicative situation can help the interpreter do prediction. Pragmatic inference is made when the hearer draws conclusions about the speaker and his/her social role, on the basis of the semantic contents of the utterance, the background assumptions of the hearer, and the hearer's knowledge of the factors of the communicative situation. As Chernov's famous top-down prognosis describes, if the speaker is known to the interpreter, the interpreter starts immediately to work out a probability prognosis for the semantic structure and sense of the incoming message. This is possible due to the interpreter's previous knowledge about other factors in the interpreting situation. That is why the opposite direction of processing has its shortcomings. "Bottom-up" processing is to be compared with the word-for-word translation that outsiders often think interpreting is. It is used by individuals who analyze each individual word, looking for its meaning or grammatical characteristics and then simply adding up these meanings. The inefficiency to which this type of processing leads is echoed in the mistakes produced by literal translation: the meaning of any word depends on its context, and words therefore cannot be analyzed in isolation; the context is used to narrow down the range of possible meanings, and the more context is provided, the more quickly the correct meaning is established (the faster the interpreter understands the sense of an utterance); finally, bottom-up processing, analytical as it is, does not allow one to make predictions about intersentential and outer-text meaning and so slows down comprehension (the interpreter cannot anticipate and is thus left without a powerful tool).

During the processes of production and comprehension in SI, discourse processing relies on a diversified knowledge base including knowledge about linguistic means of expression and discourse conventions, general world and specialized-subject knowledge, knowledge about the communicative situation in which the discourse is embedded, mental modeling on the basis of previous discourse, and procedural knowledge related to strategic principles such as the co-operative principle, the given/new contract, or the principles of local interpretation and analogy.

The top-down processing starts from expectations and proceeds to generate cognitive projections of interpretations. The difference in processing difficulty, for instance, between sentences (1) and (2) is almost entirely due to a difference in the available top-down projection (Kohn, 1996: 38).

The dog that the cat that the girl fought scolded approached the colt.
The vase that the maid that the agency hired dropped broke on the floor.

In both sentences the center-embedded grammatical construction is equally difficult to process for the human mind. The difference is that in (2) the grammatically correct noun-verb pairs are supported by common

experience. World knowledge thus makes it possible to bypass a grammatical difficulty by an appropriate top-down projection.

It would be a mistake, however, to see top-down processing only in relation to world knowledge. Expectations of what belongs together and what is coming next can also be generated by knowledge about, e.g., grammatical dependencies, collocation links, the topic of discourse, or beliefs of the speaker. Top-down processing is usually based on a complex interaction between different types of knowledge.

To sum up, extra-linguistic context, which can be fully illustrated in top-down dimension of simultaneous interpretation, plays an important role in the prediction in SI. It covers a large range of constituents, such as background context, world knowledge, and cultural context. Among these, cultural context will be further discussed in the following chapter.

All in all, context impacts greatly on simultaneous interpretation and displays great significance. Hymes views the role of context in interpretation as, on one hand, limiting the range of possible interpretation and, on the other, as supporting the intended interpretation:

The use of linguistic form identifies a range of meanings. A context can support a range of meanings. When a form is used in a context it eliminates the meanings possible to that context other than those the form can signal: the context eliminates from consideration the meanings possible to the form other than those the context can support (from Brown, 1983: 27).

4. Conclusion

As mentioned above, context is a very crucial factor of anticipation in simultaneous interpretation. Context can be classified as linguistic context and extra-linguistic context, and both kinds are helpful and instructive for prediction. With a clear awareness of the predictive function of context, interpreters can perform better in interpretation.

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