

Text and Sentence

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Abstract

In the past, the sentence was considered the basic linguistic unit in describing language. But not all sentences can describe language. Because sometimes though a sentence is grammatically correct, it has no meaning in isolation. It needs to be related to other sentences and a context. Therefore, the present paper aims to expose how the sentence structure, as a linguistic unit, alone cannot convey the meaning, and that text, a coherent set of sentences, becomes the linguistic unit that elucidates language and evinces the implied meanings.

Key words: The sentence, the text, text linguistics, discourse analysis, context.

Introduction

In the second half of the nineteenth century, modern linguistics made a shift from sentence to text as the fundamental linguistic unit of analysis. In the beginning, linguists considered sentence as the basic linguistic unit; but its limitations in linguistic studies make them change their minds. Werlich (1976) states that the sentence alone is unable to convey the whole communicated meaning in language. It needs to be related to the context in which it is used. This is why, Harris (1952) studies sentences as elements of extended texts and the relationship between text and context. Carstens (1997) asserts that studying the syntax of isolated sentences without referring to the context in which the speaker or writer constructs them is no longer useful. Therefore, linguists find that texts are the main linguistic units in describing language. Moreover, Halliday (1997) describes language as an indefinite system which produces definite texts. That is to say, the “text” is the basic linguistic unit and not the “sentence”.

Therefore, the present paper aims to explain sentence limitations in describing language, and how texts become the main linguistic units instead. Hence, the terms “sentence” and “text” will be introduced first to see the difference between the two. After that, text linguistics will be described to explain how texts work and how they can be investigated. Then, discourse analysis will be explained to demonstrate the way texts are formalized and how they are related to the context in which they are used. And finally, context will be presented to illustrate its role in understanding language.

1. The Sentence

1.1. Sentence in Grammar

1.1.1. Definition

The “sentence” is a term used in grammar to refer to one (e.g. Out!) or a group of related words (e.g. The weather is snowing.) which expresses a complete thought. It starts with a capital letter and ends with a period (.), question mark (?), or an exclamation mark (!) Downing (2006). It is considered the largest independent unit of grammar; and consists of a logical subject and a logical predicate (Allerton, 1979).

1.1.2. Sentence Parts

The components of a sentence are the subject and the predicate. The subject is conventionally defined as the agent or the doer of the action; but this does not apply to all types of sentences as the case of the passive. For example, in the sentence, “the door is opened”, the subject “the door” is not the doer of the action “opening”. (Hurford, 1994). Hence, Kolln and Funk (1998) claim that the subject is what the sentence is about, i.e. the topic of the sentence. The subject generally occurs before the verb. It can be a noun, a noun phrase, or a pronoun as it is illustrated in the following examples.

- a. **She** opens the door. (A pronoun) b. Open the door. (The implied pronoun “you”)
c. **The door** is opened. (A noun) d. **The door of the bedroom** is opened. (A noun phrase)

Concerning the predicate, it usually follows the subject and describes what the subject is or does (Huddleston & Pullum, 2006). In other words, it identifies an action or a state of being. Hale (2001) states that the predicate is everything in the sentence except the subject. It may contain only a verb as it may contain other elements as direct and indirect objects and various kinds of phrases, as it is demonstrated in the following examples.

- a. She **sings**. (Verb) b. She **bought** (verb+) **herself** (indirect object+) **a car** (direct object).

1.1.3. Sentence Types

Based on their purposes, sentences can be classified into four types: Declarative, interrogative, imperative and exclamatory. A declarative sentence is a sentence that ends with a period. It is a statement in which the verb precedes the predicate. For example, “she likes animals.”

An interrogative sentence is a sentence that ends with a question mark. So, it is a question in which the subject is located in the predicate. For example, “did she like animals? Or which animals did she like?”

An imperative sentence is a sentence that ends with a period or an exclamation mark. It expresses commands, requests, advice, or instructions. It begins with the base form of a verb as in (e.g. 1. Read!) Its subject is the pronoun “you”. It can be mentioned to be understood by the hearer (e.g. 2. You, read!) as it can be implied as in example (1).

An exclamatory sentence is a sentence that ends with an exclamation mark. It is used to express strong feelings (e.g. how nice this animal is!) Since the exclamatory sentence is not a statement, a question, or a command, its subject can be found through asking the question “what does the sentence exclaim?” (Pearson & Kirchwey, 1914). Thereby, in the previous example, the predicate is about “this animal”, so the subject is “this animal”.

Based on their structures, on the other hand, sentences can be categorized into four classes: Simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex. The simple sentence is a sentence that contains one subject-predicate pair. It is also called “independent clause”. For example, “the book is on the table”.

A compound sentence contains two or more independent clauses joined by a coordinator or separated by a semi colon (;). In the case of very short sentences, the coordinators should be preceded by a comma. The coordinators are “*FANBOYS*”: For, and, nor, but, or, yet, so. Example: “I am learning Spanish, and my friend is learning English”.

A complex sentence contains an independent clause and one or more dependent clauses. These clauses are linked by a subordinator (such as: Because, since, after, although, or, when) or by a relative pronoun (such as: That, who, or, which). Example: “Though the pupil is ill, he goes to school”.

A compound-complex sentence contains at least two independent clauses and one dependent clause. For example, “this is the exercise, if you finish in five minutes, I will bring you a present”.

1.2. Sentence in Linguistics

In the first half of the twentieth century, structural linguists emphasized on the form and structure of language and ignored the meaning. They thought that each language has its own structure which can be studied independently. Thus, they neglect the role of meaning in their structural analysis.

Chomsky (1957) considers language as a set of grammatical sentences. According to him, to discover the structure and function of language, this latter should be analyzed on the level of abstract sentences, which are considered the main linguistic units in describing language. So, he studies sentences which are out of use and context to avoid the influence of external factors as the psychological and social ones.

Culler (1976) explains Saussure’s structural view of language. He describes the dichotomies that Saussure analyzes to explain his theory of language. These are three of them.

1. Signifier and Signified

Saussure thinks that language is a structural system of signs. A “sign” is the combination of a signifier and a signified. A signifier is a phonological sequence of something. It is a sound image. A signified, on the other hand, is a concept or an idea about something. The relationship between a signifiers and a signified is arbitrary. That is to say, there is no explanation or intrinsic reason for

relating a particular concept with a given sound image rather than another. For example, there is no justification why the word “cat” (the signifier) is the name of the animal it represents (the signified) and not another animal.

2. Langue and Parole

Langue is the language system and it is represented in grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation system of the community, etc. That is, it is the shared system of rules that all people belonging to the same speech community adhere to. So, it can be used by speakers, but it cannot be changed by them since it is a corporate social phenomenon. However, parole is the individual acts of speech. It is the use of language and it differs from one person to another.

3. Synchronic and Diachronic

Synchronic is a study at a fixed period or point in time. Diachronic is a change and evolution through time. Therefore, synchronic linguistics is interested in studying language at a particular point in time; however, diachronic linguistics is interested in studying the history of language. Saussure emphasizes the synchronic view of linguistics in contrast to the diachronic view because though people do not know the history of their languages, they are still able to speak them.

Bloomfield and other structuralists consider the sentence as the largest linguistic unit in describing language. Bloomfield (1955: 170) defines the sentence as “an independent linguistic form, not included by virtue of any grammatical construction in any larger linguistic form”. That is, the sentence is an independent construction that does not need to be part of another complete one.

Later on, linguists found that the sentence as a linguistic unit is not enough to describe language. Because, sometimes a sentence cannot be understood unless it is related to previous sentences and the context in which it is used. For example, the sentence “you are really a hero!” cannot be understood alone. It is not clear why this person is considered a hero by the speaker. Is it because he saved someone from a terrible fire or from sinking in the sea, or because he gained a match in sport, etc.? So, to know the reason why this person is considered a hero, this sentence should be linked to preceding sentences. So, in saying “you are the only one who risked to save the child from sinking. You are really a hero!”, everything will be understood. Therefore, the ambiguity that may appear in understanding a sentence in isolation can disappear if this latter is completed by other sentences. This is why, in modern linguistics, the sentence is considered a dependent part of the text in which it is used. Thus, sentences are not the largest linguistic units in describing language but texts.

2. Text

A text is a unit of language in use. It is semantically and pragmatically coherent in its real-world context. It can have whatever length that form a unified whole. (Carter & McCarthy, 2006). That is, it can be only one word (e.g. a SLOW, sign of the road) as it can be a sequence of utterances or sentences (a speech, a letter, a novel, etc.). Moreover, a text is a rather independent and hierarchical structure. It indicates a complex state of real world or imaginative affairs and reflects a specific communicative intention. (Glaser, 1986). It is the actual use of language which is shaped for communicative purposes, in contrast to sentence which is an abstract unit in linguistic analysis (Widdowson, 2007).

Furthermore, De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) assert that a text is a communicative unit which achieves the seven standards of textuality. These standards are: Cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, contextuality, and intertextuality (see text-linguistics).

3. Text-linguistics

Text-linguistics studies the text as a syntactic unit. It focuses on its main features and peculiarities and discusses different ways of its analysis. It is the study of text as a product and as a process. As a product, it studies the text cohesion, coherence, topical organization, illocutionary structure and communicative functions. As a process, on the other hand, it studies the text production, reception and interpretation (Dolník and Bajžíková, 1998).

Therefore, text linguistics is mainly concerned with the study of textuality of language used in texts, by means of seven identified principles of textuality (cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, contextuality, and intertextuality).

1. Cohesion

Cohesion describes the ways components of sentences of a text are grammatically and lexically connected. This connection can be achieved through grammatical dependences (De Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981). That is to say, words of sentences are related to each other depending on grammatical forms and conventions.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) claim that cohesion is a semantic relation between elements of the text which are important in its interpretation. Jackson (1990: 252) refers to this relation as “a band” and claims that it is “... formed between one sentence and another because the interpretation of a sentence either depends on or is informed by some item in a previous— usually the previous — sentence”. That is, understanding and interpreting a sentence needs referring to a previous one.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) assert that this semantic relationship between elements of the text is reached by use of some techniques such as repetitions, omissions, and occurrences of certain words and constructions that help in the interpretation of the passage. These techniques are five types: Reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion.

First of all, reference. It is a cohesive device used to introduce a new item in a text and the subsequent referral to this item. This method can be realized by means of nouns, determiners, personal and demonstrative pronouns or adverbs. These means can refer to an item within the text (endophoric reference), as they can refer to an item out of the text, i.e., to a real world item (exophoric reference, e.g. Can you see that?). Sometimes, references can be found by looking forward the text and in this case they are called anaphoric (e.g. Peter asks him to sign and **John** refuses). Other times, they can be found by looking backward the text and in this case they are called cataphoric (e.g. the book is very important for us. **It** contains most of our lectures). And sometimes, they can be found by looking outward the text and in this case they are called exophoric.

Second, substitution. It is a method used to avoid repetition. It is to replace a linguistic item by another one which has the same meaning instead of repeating it. It can be nominal, verbal, and clausal. For example, “do you have a pen?”, “yes, I have one”.

Third, ellipsis. It is the writer’s or speaker’s omission of some words in sentences which are referred to before, thinking that the readers or hearers are able to add the missing words by their own as they should be used by the writer or the speaker (Donnelly 1994). So here, the readers or the listeners are the ones who should create the cohesive link. For example, “I do not know how to prepare this food! I have to ask how”. Normally, it is “I have to ask how to prepare this food”, but this structure is omitted in order to avoid repetition.

Four, conjunctions. These are words which establish different types of relations between sentences such as: Additive, adversative, causal, temporal, comparative, etc. The role of these conjunctive elements is to “... reinforce and highlight the relationship between other elements of the text” (Donnelly 1994: 105). So that the reader will be able to understand how the writer links the text sentences. For example, “there are no lectures today because teachers are on strike”.

Five, lexical cohesion. It is a cohesive device that establishes semantic (through lexical devices, such as repetition, equivalence - synonymy, hyponymy, hyperonymy, paraphrase, collocation) and pragmatic (presupposition) link. It is not a chance event. The writer or speaker makes conscious choices whether to repeat or to find a synonym, etc. For example, the lexical cohesion by repetition is used to emphasize and strengthen the cohesion of the text. Synonyms and antonyms, as well, are used to help the reader or listener to stay focused on the idea being discussed.

2. Coherence

Coherence is the logical link between the elements of the text. It enables the readers and hearers to understand the writers and speakers' intentions (Neubert & Shreve, 1992). It is the glue that sticks the text together as a unit (Hatch 1992) and creates the "feeling that a text hangs together, that it makes sense, and is not just a jumble of sentences" (McCarthy 1991: 26).

3. Intentionality and Acceptability

These two principles generally work together. Intentionality includes the intentions of the text producers to receptors (Carstens, 1997). Acceptability, on the other hand, includes the receptors' desire to accept the producers' communicative texts. To achieve this relationship between the producer and the addressee and makes the communicative text successful, each of them should follow the pragmatic co-operative principle. Because, their pragmatic principles are the ones that decide the success or failure of the communicative text (De Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981).

4. Informativity

Informativity is the principle that makes a text having a communicative value. It is the informativity value of syntactic expressions. It represents the extent to which the text is expected and known by the receptors. For example, the definite expression "the long man with the blue hat" has more communicative value than using the pronouns such as he or him. Therefore, informativity is an essential system in textuality.

5. Contextuality

Contextuality is a principle that focuses on the importance of context in communication (Carstens 1997). Trask (1995) claims that in whenever language is used, the communication effectiveness is determined by the contextual knowledge the participants share. Pragmatics and sociolinguistics are the branches of linguistics which are interested in the study of context. Pragmatics considers the participants' intentions in the use of language and sociolinguistics considers the participants' role (the humans and the environment in which they operate) in the success of a communicative event.

6. Intertextuality

Intertextuality is a principle that refers to past experience. That is, the formation and understanding of a text is affected by the formation of another text which is similar to it (Carstens, 1997). In other words, interpreting a text sometimes needs information from other texts. So, if one read a text about the Second World War in the past, for example, he will not find any difficulty in understanding another text which talks about the same topic.

Hence, it can be said that text is a continued stretch of connected sentences and not a stock of isolated structures which are not in context. So, though text is made of words and sentences, it is full of meaning. This latter cannot be communicated unless it is encoded in sentences and structures.

4. Discourse Analysis

Discourse is the spoken and written language. However, discourse analysis is “the study of the relationship between the language and contexts in which it is used” (McCarthy, 1991). It focuses on the study of language use with reference to the social and psychological factors that influence communication. Brown and Yule (1983) assert that discourse analysis is the analysis of language in use (sentences, clauses or linguistic units, such as conversational exchanges or written texts).

Linguists distinguish different types of discourse depending on the aspect of language emphasized in the text. These are some examples of discourse analysis:

1. Conversation analysis: This type focuses on the ways in which language is used. For example, how people reply to spoken invitations or how they use a specific word or phrase. Conversation analysis does not usually pay attention to factors outside the text unless such factors are evident in the text as when they are referred to by the speaker.

2. Discursive psychology: This type applies the notion of discourse to psychological topics such as memory and attitudes.

3. Critical discourse analysis: This type considers the social power implications of particular discourses with an explicit aim of challenging power imbalances.

5. Context

Since the meaning of sentences is not only recognized by the literal meaning of words but also by the context in which they occur, text-linguistics focuses on how linguistic structures are encoded by the context in which they are used. That is, one may be able to understand the literal meanings of words and sentences that form a text, but still unable to understand what is meant by the language use and interpret it appropriately unless the text is related to its context. This latter is presented in some factors such as time, place and social relationship between speaker and hearer (in the spoken forms of texts). It is the surrounding conditions that decide the meaning of words and sentences (Bhagat, 2002). On this basis, it could be argued that understanding the meaning of a sentence depends on understanding the context in which it occurs.

Context is any information that can be used to characterize the situation of entities. An entity is a person, place, object, virtual object or state that is considered relevant to the interaction between a user and an application, including the user and the application themselves. (Neovius & Sere, 2009: 104).

Accordingly, one could conclude that the term “context” refers to all the circumstances and conditions related to the situation in which a text is produced. It helps in understanding the real meaning of words and sentences because their intended meaning may be different from their literal meaning. For example, (Richards & Schmidt, 2002: 117), the meaning of the question “Do you know the meaning of war?” differs according to the context in which it occurs. If it is used by a language teacher talking to his students, it may mean “the meaning of the word war” and if it is used by an injured soldier, it may mean “war produces death, injury, and suffering”.

Moreover, Verderber, R. F., Verderber, K. S. and Berryman-Fink (2008: 6) argue that “Context is the setting in which a communication encounter occurs, including what precedes and follows what is said [or written]. The context affects the expectations of the participants, the meaning these participants derive, and their subsequent behavior”. That is to say, contexts decide the addressee’s appropriate understanding and interpretation of the text. Context contains the following categories: Physical, social, historical, psychological, and cultural. (Verderber, R. F., Verderber, K. S., & Berryman-Fink, 2008: pp. 6-7)

1. Physical context: The physical context comprises the place where the communicative event takes place, the environmental conditions (temperature, lighting, and noise level), the distance between communicators, seating arrangements, and time. For example, the meaning discussed in a conversation may be affected and changed depending on the place where it occurs. The meaning of a conversation in a crowded street differs from the meaning of a conversation in a quiet restaurant, etc.

2. Social context: The social context refers to the social relationship that may be previously present between the contributors. The meaning conversed in a conversation is changed according to the nature of the relationship of the interlocutors. As a consequence, the shared communicated meaning is produced and interpreted differently when it occurs among family members, friends, acquaintances, work associates, or strangers. For instance, the way a person talks to his parents differs from the way he talks to his friends and differs from the way he talks to his workers or his managers in work.

3. Historical context: The historical context is the background knowledge which is already talked about in previous sentences or utterances of the text. This previous knowledge affects the current communication incidents. For example, this is a conversation between two friends “A” and “B”.

A: Tell me, did you find it?

B: Yes, it was on the table in the kitchen.

One would not be able to understand what “it” is referring to in this conversation till he refers to previous sentences in the text to know the referent of “it”.

4. Psychological context: The psychological context is represented in the moods and feelings that affect the interpersonal relationships. For instance; if one is extremely stressed and another person exaggerates in his insistence on him to take things easy and does not pay attention that he puts this person under another stress, the first person who is very kind, in his nature, may react aggressively or angrily. The reason is that the psychological context in which the second person talks to the first affects the way the first reacts.

5. Cultural context: The cultural context contains the values, attitudes, beliefs, orientations, and underlying assumptions which are widespread in societies. Culture is included in all aspects of life. It has an effect on how people think, how people converse, and how people act.

Fetzer (2007, 2010) conversely categorizes context into four categories: Linguistic context, cognitive context, social context, and sociocultural context.

1. Linguistic context: The linguistic context refers to the actual language employed in discourse, sentences and utterances that have been used. It helps in understanding the meaning without relying on intent or assumptions. For example, in the structure “our national team is training hard these days. It will have a match soon”. The linguistic context allows the reader or the listener to understand the antecedent of the pronoun “it”.

2. Cognitive context: The cognitive or epistemic context refers to the speakers’ or writers’ background information about the world; or as Fetzer (2007) claims, it is the experience and knowledge that people acquire in their lives. For example, people have some shared background knowledge either they know each other or no. This background knowledge is a part of one’s epistemic knowledge and represents the cognitive context.

3. Social context: The social context refers to the whole conception of context. It includes both the linguistic and the cognitive contexts. Its constituents are the participants, time, place, and the circumstances that surround the institution of something. It affects the way people view and interpret things.

4. Sociocultural context: The sociocultural context refers to the culture and society in which language is used. It includes

the participants of a communicative exchange, their physical and psychological dispositions, and the specific knowledge or assumptions about the persons involved, the knowledge of the language and conventions regarding appropriate use of language, the knowledge of activity-types including communicative intentions and goals, and general background knowledge (Fetzer, 2007: 14).

For example, to make an effective advertisement that can convince people, one should take into consideration their culture to be more persuasive.

Connolly (2001) categorizes context into linguistic context and non-linguistic context or situational context. Linguistic context is the linguistic environment in which a word is used within a text. It is very important in the interpretation of texts. For example, pronouns like “he” or “she” cannot be understood without being related to the relevant context (a person mentioned previously in the text). There are two types of linguistic context: Co-text and intertext. The former refers to a unit of language in the linguistic context offered in the text in which it occurs. However, the latter refers to a unit of language in the linguistic context offered in another text which is not the one in which it occurs.

Situational context, on the other hand, is the non-textual relevant aspects of the environment in which the text occurs. These aspects can be physical, temporal, spatial, social, etc. Thus, the situational context includes the text author, the purpose of its composition, and so forth.

Conclusion

This paper tries to demonstrate the shift in modern linguistics, from sentential to textual perspectives in the study of language. It aims at explaining sentence limitations in describing language and how text linguistics analyzes the way language is used to communicate. It emphasizes the role of context for the proper understanding of texts.

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