

The Function of Context in Business English

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Abstract: Business English is closely related with economy, trade, finance, public relations and marketing, and tightly combines the language context, professional knowledge and special language structure with each other. This study tries to explore the influence of the context on business English semantic understanding, to find how to use the contextual knowledge so as to solve the problems in Business English.

Keywords: Context; Business English Teaching; Function

1. Introduction

Business English refers to a kind of English language especially related to international trade. It is a part of English for Specific Purposes and can be considered as a specialism within English language learning and teaching. With China's entry into the WTO and increasing foreign trade, Business English has been the greatest and fastest growing area of English for Specific Purposes in China. As a result, recent years have seen a great demand for Business English. According to the related statistics, more than 800 colleges and universities offer courses in Business English, and more than 300 colleges and universities provide students with a major in Business English (Huang Weixin, 2005).

As the English with special purpose, Business English has its own distinct characteristics in language forms and usage, especially in the interpretation of the special business vocabulary. However, according to the previous survey, it can be found that students of this subject often face up with difficulties in the process of learning, which can negatively influence their understanding of this kind of English language, especially the use of this language in business activities, since Business English owes its special vocabularies and the ways of use. According to the author's teaching experience, in many cases, the same word can be understood correctly in other fields but it has another meaning in business field. That's to say, there exist some differences between Business English and other kinds of English, such as educational English, etc. If the meaning of Business English language is failed to be grasped, it is very easy to create ambiguousness or even communication barriers in use. Thus, how to teach and learn Business English effectively can surely be regarded as one of important research topics in the field of language teaching and learning.

According to what was mentioned above, to learn Business English well is not an easy thing for the students without experience. However, as for both teachers and students, the method and model of teaching and learning are the first question to be discussed.

2. Business English

2.1 General definitions of Business English

Business English is a branch of EOP (English for Occupational Purposes) and differs from other varieties of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) because it is often a mix of specific content and general content. Moreover, Business English can be classified into EGBP (English for General Business Purposes) and ESBP (English for Specific Business Purposes) in accordance with the different subjects concerned in Business English courses.

Business English is English language especially related to international trade. It is a part of English for Specific Purposes and can be considered a specialism within English language learning and teaching. Business English means different things to different people. For some, it focuses on vocabulary and topics used in the world of business, trade,

finance, and international relations. For others it refers to the communication skills used in the workplace, and focuses on the language and skills needed for typical business communication such as presentations, negotiations, meetings, small talk, socializing, correspondence, report writing, and so on.

2.2 Characteristics of Business English

Business English is different from general English, and it has own specific meaning in specific context, and in turn the context can guide the meaning of Business English. Dudley Evans and St John (1998) argue that the purpose in Business English is not focused on one learner who acts as an individual but as a member of a transactional world and the fundamental concern of this world is to exchange goods or services. Thus, the characteristics of Business English can be seen from four aspects as follows:

First, being a term used as subdivision of ESP books, Business English is used by a large variety of users and activities concerned with different fields of business.

Second, according to St. John (1996:15), the current situation of Business English is “a materials-led movement rather than a research-led movement”.

Third, Ellis and Johnson (1994) think that there are three important characteristics of Business English: sense of purpose, social aspects and clear communication.

Fourth, Business English can be clearly sensed in the activities under business context such as telephone calls, meetings, making presentations and discussions serve such kind of purpose. In social aspects, English is a worldwide language in business transactions, so making contacts with one another businessman is necessary and important. Thus, its role in the aspect of social context is obvious. As to communication, the business information has to be conveyed with minimum risk of misunderstanding, it is so clear and logical, and thus, a concise communication is always needed.

3. Context

3.1 Definitions of 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. But the diversity of goals and methodologies within the study of language and the lack of agreement on an adequate linguistic theory give rise to even greater diversity of opinions on what the relevant contextual factors are for an adequate linguistic analysis.

Different scholars in the history of linguistics have their own views on the concept “Context”; here will list five very important scholars who have contributed greatly to the term “context”.

Malinowski, the father of modern anthropology, stated “context” is “exactly as in the reality of spoken or written languages; a word without linguistic context is a mere figment and stands for nothing by itself.” So, context refers to the reality of a spoken living tongue in the situation. He introduced the two notions that he called “context of situation” and “context of culture”.

According to Hymes (1962), a context can support a range of meaning. In his article *Models of the Interaction of Language and Social Setting* (1967), Hymes specified a set of factors of context as follows, which are relevant to the identification of a type of speech event. The factors are (1) the form and content of the message; (2) the setting; (3) the participants; (4) the intent and effect of the communication; (5) the key (which involves evaluation---is it a good sermon, a pathetic explanation, etc.); (6) the medium; (7) the genre (a particular class of class of speech events considered by the speech community as being the same type, for example, songs, letters, and novels) and (8) the norms of interaction.

Halliday, a famous British linguist, offered a more abstract interpretation of context. Instead of the “context of situation”, he has his own technical term “register”.

In Halliday’s (1978:31,620) 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 ethno-methodological one. A register is a semantic concept, a configuration of meanings that are typically associated with a

particular situational configuration of field, mode and tenor.

From cognitive perspective, Sperber and Wilson (1986:142) adopt a new idea according to which the context of discourse is to be actively searched for. They state in verbal comprehension in particular, it is relevance which is treated as given, and context which is treated as a variable. Thus, cognitive context is not given but is chosen (1995:132-42). According to them, cognitive contexts are dynamic, not static or fixed/predetermined. This figure gives an idea of a network which consists of various cognitive models that are interrelated through multiple connections.

3.2 Classifications of context

According to the verbal or non-verbal, the context can be classified as linguistic context and extra-linguistic context.

Linguistic context refers to words, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, or the whole book in which a word appears. Linguistic context can be further divided into lexical context and grammatical context. Lexical context means that the lexemes co-occur with the word in question. The meaning of the word is affected or determined by the neighboring lexemes. For example, the word “paper” has a number of meanings in the dictionary. Grammatical context refers that in some cases, the meaning of a polysemous word may be determined by the grammatical structure (not specific words) in which it occurs. For example, the form of get + NP is typical: get a big apple; get an interesting book. The form of get + AP: get very angry; get incredibly cold; get...to do.

Extra-linguistic context refers to a particular time, space, or culture in which a word appears. The actual speech situation refers to the situation in which a word is used. In everyday life, word meaning is more often dependent on the actual situation in which a word is used. Thus, the term “context of situation” is specifically used. According to anthropologist Bronislan Malinowski (1884-1942), context of situation refers to the whole set of external-world features considered to be relevant in the analysis of an utterance. However, Lyons (1977) holds that generally context of situation is regarded as an abstract theoretical construct with captures the spatial, temporal and social framework within which linguistic encounters take place

The extra-linguistic context may extend to include the entire cultural background. That is the context of culture, which refers to the historical knowledge, the beliefs, attitudes, values shared by members of a discourse community, and that contribute to the meaning of their verbal exchanges.

4. Conclusion

As a special-purpose English, Business English language has its own distinct characteristics, especially the interpretation of the special business vocabulary. Students meet with some difficulties in the process of learning in terms of recognition, understanding and use of business English language, and they need different context to help them understand the business English semantics. In the process of business communication, the influence of context to business English semantics is more pronounced; if not grasping the core of business English communication, it is very easy for students to make ambiguousness, communication barriers or even the economic loss.

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Brief introduction:

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