Reconsidering "context"

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Introduction

In communication study, "context" is an old but new theme. Among the well-known studies is that an American anthropologist, Edward Hall classified world's cultures from high-context culture to low-context culture.[1] This is his intuitive classification that Hall acquired from the actual lives and experiences in Amerindian societies, Mexico, Orient including Japan and China, Middle-east, Europe etc. This is a kind of hypothesis because it is difficult to scientifically prove.

The author tries to approach "context" from different perspective from that of researches so far. He tries in several items. Coming back to the starting point, he reconsiders definitions in dictionaries. In general they are "words in a sentence", "circumstances", "situation" etc., but it is thought that they are the definitions that neglect human beings who are the subjects in communication activities.

First he considers from the inside of a human what context is composed of. He attempts to categorize the internalized knowledge which has been accumulated inside the body since birth and to reflect context. The internalized knowledge contains not only knowledge, but also information, experiences, skill and knowhow. Furthermore he extends the framework of context from "knowledge" to "understanding" and further from "understanding" to "cognition." He once defined context as "common understanding", now but tries to extend it to "common cognition." However, some of internalized knowledge is in a different dimension beyond the usual cognition framework, and must otherwise be thought over. Further he attempts to category contexts in his own way. At last he considers what factors weaken contexts. Then in consideration of the foregoing he believes it to enable to elicit what the most effective communication is.

1. Reconsideration of definitions in dictionaries

"Context" etymologically means "con + text = together + weave." "Text" stems from the

same origin as "textile" and "texture." The term "context" is sometimes seen in communication studies, but now the author attempts to reconfirm definitions in several dictionaries below:

・*Kojien*, 5th edition, 1998

Context: words in a sentence（translation from Japanese）

・*Daijirin*, 2nd edition, 1995

Context: words in a sentence（translation from Japanese）

・*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 2000

Context: 1 words that come before and after a word, phrase, statement, etc, helping to show what its meaning is. 2 circumstances in which something happens or in which something is to be considered.

・*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 2003

Context: 1 the situation, events, or information that are related to something, and that help you to understand it better. 2 the words and sentences that come before and after a particular word, and that help you to understand the meaning of the word.

・*Webster's New World Dictionary*, second college edition, 1981

Context: 1 the parts of a sentence, paragraph, discourse, etc. immediately next to or surrounding a specified word or passage and determining its exact meaning. 2 the whole situation, background, or environment relevant to a particular event, personality, creation, etc.

The Japanese dictionaries above define context as "words in a sentence" only, but Japanese and English dictionaries generally show "words in a sentence", "situation" etc. for definitions of context. In addition to those in dictionaries, other definitions which the author has known are "background", "environments" etc. However he wonders whether they are proper definitions or not because they are the definitions which neglect human beings who play central roles in communication activities. It is necessary to reconsider context from the interior of a communicator.[2]

2. Consideration of internalized knowledge

The author calls "internalized knowledge" for the knowledge which has been acquired and accumulated inside the body since birth up to this moment through the channels of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch etc. Internalized knowledge is not just knowledge, but includes information, experience, skill and knowhow. The author tries to categorize internalized

Figure 1　Internalized knowledge

（express）　（transmit）

（a）　externalizable and transmittable knowledge
　　　　（information knowledge + experience knowledge）

（b）　unexternalizable but transmittable knowledge

（c）　unexternalizable and intransmittable knowledge
　　　　=tacit knowledge（experience knowledge）

Note: The white portion means possible, and the black portion impossible.

knowledge as below. The breakdown can be specified as in Figure 1, so the relations between internalized knowledge and communication become clear to a certain extent.

（a）　Externalizable and transmittable knowledge

　　This is externalizable and transmittable knowledge out of the knowledge which a person has acquired through information, or his or her own experiences. In this article, the knowledge acquired through information is referred to as "information knowledge" and the knowledge acquired by experience as "experience knowledge" or "body knowledge." In other words, externalizable and transmittable knowledge consists of "information knowledge" and "experience knowledge." While "information knowledge" is "externalizable and transmittable knowledge", "experience knowledge" is made up of "externalizable and transmittable knowledge", "unexternalizable but transmittable knowledge" and "unexternalizable and intransmittable knowledge."

　　For example, in the definition of a dictionary, "Yogurt is a thick liquid food that tastes slightly sour and is made from milk, or an amount of this."（Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 3rd ed.）. If one has never eaten yogurt yet, he or she cannot imagine the taste of yogurt. The knowledge from a dictionary is "information knowledge." The knowledge actually acquired by eating yogurt is "experience knowledge", and the explainable portion of the body knowledge by language such as "a little sour", "slightly sweet" etc. is "externalizable and transmittable knowledge." The remaining unexplainable portion of the knowledge is classified into the following "unexternalizable but transmittable knowledge" or "unexternalizable and intransmittable knowledge."

　　"Externalizable and transmittable knowledge" is transmittable to others by expressing what one intends through language, numbers, physical movements, colors, pictures etc. "Experience knowledge" is transmittable by common experience（at the same time in the same

place or at a different time in a different place), but it is limited to externalizable knowledge. In this article "externalizable and transmittable knowledge" is sometimes referred to as just "externalizable knowledge", and it can be called also "explicit knowledge."

"Externalizable and transmittable knowledge" exists as a continuum from "knowledge transmittable with ease" to "knowledge transmittable with difficulty." Not all externalizable and transmittable knowledge can be transmitted with ease. "Externalizable and transmittable knowledge" can become composition of context by sharing common information or common experience.

(b)　Unexternalizable but transmittable knowledge

This is not knowledge just obtained through information, but knowledge based upon a person's experiences, that is to say, "body knowledge" or "experience knowledge." This knowledge is impossible to externalize but possible to transmit or share. It becomes possible to transmit if others have the same experience. In case of sight, even if it is impossible to express the face of others, animals or plants in detail by language, it becomes possible to transmit by pointing at the objects for others.[3] It can be called common experience by sight. This is so called ostensive definition. Or it is impossible to emit taste or smell as knowledge out of body, but it becomes possible to transmit or share by letting others experience the same taste or smell. The author thinks that new skills obtained by watching the master is included in this knowledge.

"Unexternalizable but transmittable knowledge" can become composition of context by sharing common experience.

(c)　Unexternalizable and intransmittable knowledge＝Tacit knowledge

Unexternalizable and intransmittable knowledge out of "experience knowledge" or "body knowledge", which a person has acquired through experiences, is "tacit knowledge." It is because tacit knowledge works that we have a good command of speaking our own language, manage to ride a bicycle, cook dishes without seeing a recipe, master sports, or acquire skills. Some of a person's proper experiences cannot exactly expressed in language or transmitted to others even though they can be comprehended by the individual. Namely, some of the knowledge or skills that a person has acquired in his or her own way is impossible to transmit to others. Individual's tacit knowledge is unique to each person, and impossible to transmit and share with others. If tacit knowledge of a genius should be shared with others completely, anybody could become a genius.

"Tacit knowledge" is the concept presented by Michael Polanyi（1891–1976）, the genius scientist, who was born in Hungary and conducted research in Germany, England, USA and Canada. Tacit knowledge is the "knowledge of untold portions which supports what is told."[4] We can know more than we can tell. It is unexternalizable and intransmittable "experience knowledge", "body knowledge", "subjective knowledge" or "personal knowledge" that a living person, not a machine or a computer, has acquired inside the body. We can recognize a certain person's face among a lot of faces, or medical doctors can identify diseases, or scientists can identify rocks, plants or animals. It is because tacit knowledge is at work.

It can be thought that Polanyi's "tacit knowledge", that is to say, "knowledge of untold portions which supports what is told" is mostly unconscious and impossible to externalize and transmit. This tacit knowledge is personal knowledge such as naturally acquired skills or routine knowledge including knowledge about how to walk straight or how to drive a car well, which is usually unconscious and quite hard to explain in detail. This is the knowledge that a body knows. The tacit knowledge of Polanyi is called "intuition" or "knack" by his collaborators and students.

The encoding and decoding process of "tacit knowledge" in communication is inscrutable or unexplainable. To be exact, "tacit knowledge" is elusive and unspecifiable because the encoding and decoding process of tacit knowledge in usual communication is inscrutable. It is unspecifiable how and through which sense it is acquired. It is because it is said that tacit knowledge is arranged as multi-items and less coherent or coordinated. Anyway "tacit knowledge" is in a different dimension from usual cognition. In other words, it is beyond the usual framework of cognition.

For example, when an artisan tries to transmit his or her skill or knowhow to his or her apprentice, he or she may prepare a manual on the skill or knowhow, and the oral supplementary explanation may be added, and when necessary he or she may show by gesture etc. while the apprentice is watching. Knowledge transmitted by "manual" and "oral supplementary explanation" is "externalizable and transmittable knowledge", and knowledge transmitted by "showing by gesture etc. and watching" is "unexternalizable but transmittable knowledge." But some of the knowledge still cannot be transmitted. This is tacit knowledge.

"Tacit knowledge" is impossible to transmit directly to others because it is beyond the usual framework of cognition and it is the unique knowledge that each individual acquires for himself or herself. In general it is difficult to confirm whether the tacit knowledge is shared with others. However it would be possible that each individual develops intuition or knack for himself or herself. In this meaning tacit knowledge will be a factor to organize context to a

certain extent. But it is difficult to say clearly how much it organizes context. The author would say that tacit knowledge is in a gray zone.

3. Factors to compose context

It is required to know especially about "cognition" in communication activities because, in addition to "sense" and "perception", it involves intellectual activities including memory, judgment, reasoning, discovery of problems, problem solving, decision making etc. "Sense", "perception" and "cognition" could be clearly defined, but it is the recent tendency to think that three of them are a continuum of cognition. Let us see definitions of dictionaries.

'Senses' are generally defined as each of the special faculties connected with a body organ, by which man and other animals perceive external objects and changes in the condition of their own bodies. Usually reckoned as five senses- sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch (*OED*, 2nd ed., 1989).

"Perception" is defined as both the experience of gaining sensory information about the world of people, things, and events, and the psychological processes by which this is accomplished (Corsini, *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, 2nd ed., 1994).

"Cognition" is a general term or a "generic term used to designate all processes involved in knowing." "Cognition" comprises all mental activity or states of perception, attention, memory, imagery, language functions, developmental processes, problem solving, and the area of artificial intelligence (which lies outside the discipline of psychology) (*ibid.*).

The author once defined context as "common understanding" based upon common information or common experience (1995). Some Japanese dictionaries explain that "knowledge" is the result after knowing, that "understanding" is both the activities to know and the result after knowing, and that "cognition" is synthetic intellectual activities including understanding. Therefore it can be thought that the relation among knowledge, understanding and cognition is knowledge＜understanding＜cognition in the respect of coverage, and that "common cognition" is more comprehensive than "common understanding." Because synthetic intellectual activities including receiving and sending messages is involved in communication activities, the author attempts to extend "context" from "common understanding" to "common cognition." But there are some issues left over since some knowledge is beyond the usual framework of cognition (*supra*).

4. Classification of contexts

The author tries to classify contexts from various perspectives.

a. "information context" and "experience context"

This is a classification on which part of internalized knowledge organizes context. Common information, common experience or mixture of them can become the main factor of context as the case may be. Of course only common information or only common experience can be context.

・information context

Common cognition based upon common information out of "externalizable and transmittable knowledge" shown in table 1 becomes context. Mostly it is shared through sight or hearing.

For example, when a certain project to be carried out in the future is not experienced to any member, as much information including data as possible must be penetrated into members. Or goals to be achieved or company mind must be repeatedly informed through lectures of a president or company bulletins so that employees can share them.

Information can also be shared through dictionary, book, newspaper, magazine, manual, TV, radio, explanation, rumor etc.

・experience context

Common cognition based upon common experience out of "externalizable and transmittable knowledge" and "unexternalizable but transmittable knowledge" shown in table 1 becomes context. As it is common experience, it is possible to share through any sense, that is to say, sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, movement, balance and internal organs.

If "unexternalizable and intransmittable knowledge" composes context, it would be common experience.

b. "physical context", "time context" and "soft context"

The author tries to revise and reclassify "physical context", "socio-cultural context" and "personal context" grouped by Ishii.

・physical context

Communicators must cognize physical context as well. The author thinks it appropriate to regroup "physical context" further into "space context" and "means context."

space context

This can be exemplified as cosmos, globe, Japan, Tokyo, Chiyoda-ku, ABC university,

room #123, etc. This is a problem of extent, but communicator must share common space to communicate with each other. Furthermore, communicators can choose a proper place for the communication, such as a romantic tea room, a coast with the sun sinking into the sea etc.

means context

There is no problem in face-to-face communication, but it is a problem in case of distant communication. Communication cannot be executed if they cannot make use of the same means for communication such as letter, telephone, facsimile, cellular phone, equipment and facilities for email, etc. It can be thought this sometimes serves as supplementary means when communicators do not share space context enough.

・time context

Communicators must share also time in order to communicate with each other. Otherwise context cannot be organized. In terms of common sense, we cannot communicate with late people or future people who have not been born yet. Even if communicators share time, from time to time they cannot communicate well with each other if they are in different generations. In this meaning, it would be possible to assume "generation context" or "the same generation context."

・soft context

"Soft context" is the invisible context except physical context and time context, and includes cultural context, personal context etc. First the author will take up cultural context.

Among the definitions of culture are the classic definitions by Edward Tylor of England or by American anthropologist, Kluckhohn and British psychologist, Kelly made in the 19th century. Anyway, culture is not inherent but acquired matter, everything concerning life and what members share. In short culture is everything including knowledge, experience, belief, values, attitude, meanings, class, religion, concept of time, role play, world view, substantial property. In other words, it stipulates behavior of each member who belongs to the group and directs value consciousness from manners and custom of a social group to ethics, laws, religion and art. Human beings consider, feel and believe that their culture is right, and endeavor toward it. Everything such as language, custom, friendship, eating habits, communication manner, social behavior, economic activity, political activity, scientific technology etc. are organized according to each cultural pattern.

Concerning "socio-cultural context", the author includes society in culture because society is part of culture. In fact cultural context can further re-categorized in detail into "language context", "religious context", "non-verbal context", "ideology context", "ethnic context", "educational context" and so on.

c. "absolute context" and "relative context"

The author tries to classify contexts according to whether context organization is absolute or relative.

・absolute context

This is "physical context" and communication cannot be performed at all unless communicators share space, time or means for communication even though other contexts are established. In this meaning the physical context is absolute.

・relative context

This is "cultural context" which is integration or mixture of various soft contexts. For example, communicators can communicate with difficulty unless they share "language context", but sometimes they may be able to understand each other to a certain extent by non-verbal communication etc. And life is basically common among human beings. It is not absolutely impossible, but somewhat possible to communicate. Therefore it is relative context. Communicators can also carry out communication more or less by other contexts even without sharing "religious context" or "personal context." In this meaning they are not absolute condition but relative condition to communicate.

d. "short term context" and "long term context"

The following is classification according to how long context is kept on.

・short term context

The state of common cognition is cut off and restored with ease according to situations. Enormous space context such as globe or Japan is not cut off as far as communicators stay within the space, but relatively small context are discontinued easily when communicators leave the space or give up to share the communication means like cellular phone or facsimile equipment etc. However they can restore the context if they return to the original situation or resume to use communication means.

・long terms context

This is context which can be kept on between communicators for a long time. Cultural context is long term context. It will not be disrupted because communicators share something cultural more or less even interculturally. "Personal context", which is part of "cultural context", is not broken off as far as common information or shared experiences remain and continue.

e. "high context" and "low context"

This is not a new classification, but it is how much communicators share information or experiences. This is classification of context by state.

・high context

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This is a state in which communicators share information or experiences a lot.

・low context

This is a state in which communicators share information or experiences little.

f. "in-group context" and "out-group context"

This is classification according to whether communicators belong to the same group or not.

・in-group context

This is context based upon common information or shared experiences which members have established in a certain group for a long time. Close and dense communication among members becomes possible. This is typically "fellow context" among close friends or "family context" among family members. This is "common cognition" which components share patois or secret language and the same view or thought, for example, where a company or a sports team has the same goal, philosophy, policy, strategy, climate etc. Because specific information, experiences, language, view etc. are penetrated into members, they can communicate with each other even if they do not speak out a lot. The restricted code by Bernstein is used. While the member are together, they are in a state of high-context. But when they are away from each other, they are in a state of low context with non-members around them.

It would be possible to further expand "in-group context." For example, we can assume "regional context" which habitants in the same region have common cognition including the dialect, "class context" that people of the same class have common cognition including the same dialect, or "religious context" shared by believers of the same religion.

・out-group context

This is context where communicators belong to different group. Since they are not intimate, close and dense communication is impossible. They do not share patois or argot or the like. They have to express as much as possible in order to communicate well with each other. Generally elaborated code by Bernstein is used. It is in a state of low-context.

5. Factors to weaken contexts

Noise can generally be defined as factors to decrease efficiency or reliability of communication. In other words, noise can be said to be factors to weaken context which is common base for communication. As the author has already mentioned above, context is mostly common cognition. Noise includes factors which communicators themselves weaken the degree of common cognition. Noise can be grouped into factors caused by each

communicator, that is to say, individual sender or receiver, and factors caused by that contexts are incomplete in themselves.

　（a）Factors caused by each communicator（examples）

　　The following are noise itself.

・physiological factors

　　Among physiological factors are poor physical condition, lack of sleep, headache, disease etc. However, even if one is in good shape, one cannot digest and absorb all messages coming through sense organs. Due to limit of organic capacity, one receives part of it. The more information is coming to a receiver, the stronger the tendency becomes. Therefore common cognition sometimes becomes weakened.

・technical factors on communication

　　Among technical factors on communication are vague message because of a sender who does not understand enough contents of message, situation or receiver, and wrong choice of channel or media etc. So communicators cannot set up common cognition well. Context becomes weakened.

・mental factors

　　They are factors caused by difference among communicators in desire, demand, expectation, attitude, perception etc. For example, even if it is the same message, an affirmative communicator and a negative communicator may receive it differently. One cannot perform efficient communication if he or she has prejudice, scare or distrust. If one has distrust, he or she may reject or distort messages from a sender, or may not send any message to a receiver, or dispatch distorted messages due to alertness. This is called defensive activity. Accordingly context becomes weakened.

　（b）　Factors caused by incomplete contexts in themselves

　　In short, because it is impossible for communicators to share contexts completely, contexts themselves become noise.

・physical factors

　　Physical contexts sometimes are incomplete.

・cultural factors

　　Cultural contexts are impossible to share completely, and so they are noise themselves. The author attempts to take up some typical factors.

［example 1］　linguistic factor

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Communicator must share the same language to communicate with each other well. It is almost impossible to communicate if they speak different languages. It may be a little possible to perform non-verbal communication, but not enough. Even if they speak the same language, the meaning which a sender expresses must be the same as that which a receiver understands. Meaning is composed of denotative meaning, structural meaning, contextual meaning and connotative meaning.[5]

Denotative meaning is meaning generalized for all the people who use the language, structural meaning is meaning of a language arranged in grammatical and workable manner, contextual meaning is meaning in a sentence, connotative meaning is meaning subject to the speaker and includes "vague" or "extremely personal." In communication, contextual meaning and connotative meaning are important. Actually meaning exists not in a message but inside a person. A sender sometimes cannot express enough what he or she intends due to poor vocabulary, or a receiver sometimes cannot comprehend a meaning or expression enough due to poor vocabulary. Shared linguistic cognition may become weakened partly because of incomplete nature of a language, regional dialects, class dialects, patois or argot of a group or organization, and context may be decreased.

In Japan class dialects are not recognized clearly, but in English-speaking countries, "acrolect" used by high educated, cultured and excellent people who are responsible for the society in conversation, business, technology, literature etc., "mesilect" which is in-between, and "basilect" used by uneducated people in a socially inferior state are clearly defined. If one hears the language, one can know which class the speaker belongs to.

[example 2]　religious factor

There are a lot of religions in the world, but they should be what explains death or the world after death, and mostly precepts or commandments and decorum are accompanied. Religion has universal values and ethics beyond values of a person, group or organization, which may be relative values. Religious values is broader than that of a person, group or organization, but in most cases they would not accept values of other religions and so they are not really absolute values. If the people believe their own religion and try not to acknowledge other religions, their exclusive attitude creates confrontation.

Among the world's major religions are Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism etc. Judaism, Christianity, Islam out of them are monotheic religions based upon the same Old Testament and it is worldwide well known that they are on bad terms with each other since they insist their orthodoxy and do not accept others. Christianity is further grouped into Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Church. Islam is also grouped into two sects: Sunni and

Shiʼa. Accordingly if they believe a different sect of the same religion, they may become on the bad terms. Religions are subtle and troublesome. If communicators believe a different religion or a sect of the same religion, context becomes interrupted or weakened.

［example 3］　factors by difference in world view and values

There are various items in world view and values, but the author attempts to exemplify "digital and analog."

"Digital" and "analog" cannot be strictly defined for everything, but "digital" has the meaning of "discrete, logical, and linear" and "analog" the meaning of "continuous, emotional, and curved." What if these definitions are expanded to values or world views? "Digital" means "setting up a border for everything and distinguishing portions divided by the border, or such a view." "Analog" means "regarding everything as a continuum without establishing a border, or such a view." If communicators do not share the same cognition in digital and analog, context will be made weakened.

Management style can be categorized into "mechanic management" and "organic management."[6] The former is the style in which the responsibility of each person is clearly defined, and the latter is the style in which every person bears his or her own responsibility and at the same time part of the responsibility is shared by colleagues. In the case of mechanical management, most workers have their own rooms and do not share information with colleagues, and in the case of organic management, most employers work in the same big room and share information with colleagues. Accordingly, with respect to whether workers share responsibility, space and information or not, mechanical management is digital, and organic management is analog. In actual management or studies of management, it is sometimes discussed that confrontation between more analogical Japanese and more digital non-Japanese has been caused.

（c）　Factors caused by combined elements

This is caused by both (a) and (b) above.

・organizational factor

In organizations, common information and understanding must be penetrated enough into components so that they can achieve common goal, idea, policy and strategy. Context in organizations may become weakened mainly because of structural factors and of factors in personal relations.

Conclusion

The author believes that by considering contexts from various perspectives it is possible to assume what efficient communication is.

（1） One should consider whether context should be based mainly upon common information or common experiences to perform more efficient communication although in most cases it can be set up by both of them,.

（2） One should confirm whether or not communicators share enough absolute contexts: space, time and means although it is mostly quite manifest for communicators. In case of remote communication one should consider which means must be used for the most efficient communication.

（3） One should consider which elements of "culture" are shared or not shared by communicators because it is made up of various elements. One should think of the language first, but it is not the only case.

（4） One should consider with whom one is communicating, that is to say, whether one is communicating with a close partner or a stranger. One should express as much as possible to strangers or non-close partners.

（5） One should consider what noise is caused by each individual. From time to time one should confirm it because each individual is in various environments.

Accordingly one should consider of contexts from every perspective to elicit most efficient communication .

Notes

1. Hall（1976）.

2. A cognition psychologist explains that context is information which helps perception of a certain stimulus, except the stimulus.

3. This is called ostensive definition.

4. Polanyi gives explanations from several points of view. One of them is an explanation by proximal term and dismal term, that is to say, by probe and hand. When we have knowledge of things that we cannot tell, it is knowledge as a proximal term. We learn to feel the end of a tool or a probe hitting things outside. We may regard this as the transformation of the tool or probe into a sentient extension of our body. Our awareness of our body for attending to things outside it suggests a wider generalization of the feeling we have of our body. Whenever we use certain things for attending from them to other things, just as we feel our own body in terms of the things outside to which we are attending our body, these things change their appearance. We can say that when make a thing function as the proximal term of tacit knowledge, we incorporate it in our body or extend our body to include it so that we come to dwell in it（Polanyi（1966）, p.16）.

5. Berlo（1960）, pp.190–216.

6. Hayashi（1994）.

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