

Unleashing the Magic of Semantics: Exploring Basics of Language

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Abstract

Linguistics, the scientific study of human language, explores all the components of language in order to unearth the system underlying in each level of language viz, phonology, morphology, and morphophonemics, syntax, beyond sentence and semantics. In this article, we will discuss the validity of the distinction between 'cognitive' and 'emotive' below. The study of collocation, sets, synonyms, opposites and classification, polysemy, homonym enables a useful grid of internal relationships between lexical items to be drawn up.

Keywords: Language, sentence, semantics, polysemy, lexical terms

Introduction

The study of meaning and its manifestation in language is normally referred to as semantics from the Greek noun *sema* 'sign', signal; and the verb *semains* 'signal, mean, signify'. The Shorter Oxford Dictionary glosses the term semantics as 'relating to signification or meaning'. Broadly speaking, semantics is that aspect of linguistics which deals with the relations between referents (names) and referents (things)-that is, linguistic levels (words, expressions, phrases) and the objects or concepts or ideas to which they refer-and with the history and

changes in the meaning of words. Diachronic (historical) semantics studies semantic change, whereas synchronic semantics accounts for semantic relationship, simple or multiple. A semanticist would like to find how a man is able to paraphrase, transform, and detect ambiguities and why the surrounding words sometimes force him to choose one interpretation rather than another. A semantic analysis, for example of English, must also explain antonyms, synonyms, homonyms, polysemy, anomalies, contradictions, paraphrase, relations, ambiguities, implications and transformations of the language. It should give an account of semantic properties and relations. Hence to understand the meaning of a sentence and its semantic relations to other expressions, one must know not only the meaning of its lexical elements but also how they inter-relate.

Importance of Meaning

Although the structuralists tried to study language without meaning. The importance of meaning has been recognized since time immemorial. In the Vedas, meaning is treated as the essence of language, and the speech without meaning has been called ‘the tree without fruits and flowers. Ancient Indian scholars such as Katyayana, Patanjali, Vyadi, Vyas, etc. regard the relationship of word and meaning as eternal.

Study of Meaning

The problem of ‘meaning’ is quite difficult; it is because of its toughness that some linguists went on to the extent of excluding semantics from linguistics. A well-known structuralist made the astonishing statement that ‘linguistic system of a language does not include the semantics. The system is abstract, it is a signaling system, and as soon as we study semantics we are no longer studying language but the semantic system associated with language. The structuralists were of the opinion that it is only the form of language which can be studied, and not the abstract functions. Both these are misconceptions. Recently a serious interest has been taken in the various problems of semantics. And semantics is being studied not only by the linguists but also by philosophers, psychologists, scientists, anthropologists and sociologists.

Scholars have long puzzled over what words mean or what they represent, or how they

are related to reality. They have at times wondered whether words are more real than objects, and they have striven to find the essential meanings of words. It may be interesting to ask whether words do have essential meaning. For example, difficulties may arise in finding out the essential meaning of the word table in water table, dining table, table an amendment, and the table of 9. An abstract word like good creates even more problems. Nobody can exactly tell what good really means, and how a speaker of English ever learns to use the word correctly. So the main difficulty is to account facts about essential meanings, multiple meanings, and real word conditions. The connotating use of words adds further complications to any theorizations about meaning, particularly their uses in metaphoric and poetic language. Above all is the question: where does meaning exist: in the speaker or the listener or in both, or in the context or situation?

Words are in general convenient units to state meaning. But words have meanings by virtue of their employment in sentences, most of which contain more than one word. The meaning of a sentence, though largely dependent on the meaning of its component words taken individually, is also affected by prosodic features. The question whether a word may be semantically described or in isolation, is more a matter of degree than of a simple answer yes or no. It is impossible to describe meaning adequately in any other way except by saying how words are typically used as part of longer sentences and how these sentences are used. The meanings of sentences and their components are better dealt with in linguistics in terms of how they function than exclusively in terms of what they refer to.

Words are tools; they become important by the function they perform, the job they do, the way they are used in certain sentences. In addition to reference and function, scholars have also attached importance to popular historical considerations, especially etymology, while studying word-meanings. Undoubtedly the meaning of any word is casually the product of continuous changes in its antecedent meanings or uses, and in many cases it is the collective product of generations of cultural history. Dictionaries often deal with this sort of information if it is available, but in so doing they are passing beyond the bounds of synchronic statement to the separate linguistic realm of historical explanation.

Different answers have been given to the questions related to meaning. Psychologists

have tried to assess the availability of certain kinds of responses to objects, to experiences, and to words themselves. Philosophers have proposed a variety of systems and theories to account for the data that interest them. Communication scientists have developed information theory so that they can use mathematical models to explain exactly what is predictable and what is not predictable when messages are channeled through various kinds of communication networks. From approaches like these a complex array of conceptions of meaning emerges.

Lexical and Grammatical Meaning

When we talk about meaning, we are talking about the ability of human beings to understand one another when they speak. This ability is to some extent connected with grammar. No one could understand:

Hat one the the but red green on bought tried Mohan While

Mohan tried on the red hat but bought the green one causes no difficulties.

Yet there are numerous sentences which are perfectly grammatical, but meaningless. The most famous example is Chomsky's sentence

“Colourless green ideas sleep furiously”

Similar other examples are:

- The tree ate the elephant.
- The pregnant bachelor gave birth to six girls tomorrow.
- The table sneezed.

In a sentence such as: Did you understand the fundamentals of linguistics? A linguist has to take into account at least two different types of meaning: lexical meaning and grammatical meaning. Full words have some kind of intrinsic meaning. They refer to objects, actions and qualities that can be identified in the external world, such as table, banana, sleep, eat, red. Such words are said to have lexical meaning. Empty words have little or no intrinsic meaning. They exist because of their grammatical function in the sentence. For example, and is used to join

items, or indicates alternative, of sometimes indicates possession. These words have grammatical meaning. Grammatical meaning refers mainly to the meaning of grammatical items as did, which, ed. Grammatical meaning may also cover notions such as ‘subject’ and ‘object’, sentence types as ‘interrogative’, ‘imperative’ etc. Because of its complexity, grammatical meaning is extremely difficult to study. As yet, no theory of semantics has been able to handle it properly. But the study of lexical items is more manageable.

Meaning of Meaning

There is a good number of semantic theories. Each of them defines meaning in its own manner. Ogden and I.A. Richards in their book *Meaning of Meaning* cite no less than sixteen definitions of meaning. To Ludwig Wittgenstein (Philosophical Investigations) the meaning of a word or expression is neither more nor less than its use. Usage, not meaning, is the right basis. Bloomfield defines meaning as ‘the situations in which the speaker utters it and the response which it calls forth in the hearer’ (*Language*, New York: 1933: 139). According to Harris, “the meaning of an element in each linguistic environment is the difference between the meaning of its linguistic environment and the meaning of the whole utterance. “In the opinion of J.R. Firth meaning is a group of ‘situational relations in a context of situation and in that kind of language which disturbs the air and other people’s ears, modes of behavior in relation to other elements in the context of situation.

Semantic Structure

The vocabulary of a language contains a number of lexical systems the semantic structure of which can be described in terms of paradigmatic and syntagmatic sense-relations, or name-sense relationship which can be divided into five categories:-

1. Synonymy
2. Hyponymy and Incompatibility
3. Antonymy, Complementarity and Converseness
4. Polysemy

5. Homonymy

Synonymy

One sense with several names is synonymy that is two items are synonymous when they have the same sense. Lexical items can be regarded as synonymous if they can be interchanged without altering the meaning of an utterance:

E.g. I saw a madman

I saw a lunatic

I saw a maddy

I saw a bedlamite

According to John Lyons, the term 'synonymy' has two interpretations—a stricter and a looser. The looser interpretation has been illustrated by him by means of a quotation from Roget's Thesaurus: "Suppose we take the word 'nice'. Under it we will various synonyms representing different shades of meaning of the word 'nice'". The 'synonyms' for nice are savoury, discriminative, exact, good, pleasing, fastidious and honourable. All these words and expressions are 'synonymous' with nice under the looser interpretation of the notion of synonymy.

'Total Synonymy' and 'Complete Synonymy'

Dr. Johnson once remarked, 'words are seldom exactly synonymous'. Macaulay also observed: 'Change the structure of the sentence; substitute one synonymy for another and the whole effect is destroyed'. To quote Ullmann: 'it is almost a truism that total synonymy is an extremely rare occurrence, a luxury that language can ill-afford'. "Only those words", says Ullmann, "can be described as synonymous which can replace each other in any given context without the slightest change either in cognitive or emotive import". The two conditions for 'total synonyms' are therefore (i) interchangeability in all contexts, and (ii) identity in both cognitive and emotive import. We will discuss the validity of the distinction between 'cognitive' and

‘emotive’ below. On the basis of this distinction, Lyons restricts the term total synonymy to those synonyms (whether complete or not) which are interchangeable in all contexts; and used the complete synonymy for equivalence of both cognitive and emotive sense. This scheme of classification allows for four possible kinds of synonymy:

‘Cognitive’ and ‘Emotive’ Meaning

- i. Complete and total synonymy;
- ii. Complete, but not total;
- iii. Incomplete, but total;
- iv. Incomplete, and not total.

The distinction between ‘cognitive’ and ‘emotive’ meaning is based on mental faculties such as intellect, on the one hand, and the imagination and the emotions, on the other. It is often said that by contrast with the vocabulary of scientific and technical discourse, the words of ‘everyday language’ are charged with emotional ‘associations’ or ‘connotations’, over and above their primary, purely ‘intellectual’ meaning. As cited by Ullmann, liberty-freedom, hide-conceal are cognitively synonymous. One word may be preferred to another because of its different emotive or evocative associations. But the extent to which this is of importance varies considerably from one style or situation to another. Since we are concerned with the moral general principles of semantic structure, we would not discuss various factors responsible for the acceptability of particular forms rather than with their sense or reference. Rather we would prefer to restrict the term ‘synonymy’ to ‘cognitive synonymy’.

Polysemy

Polysemy or poly semantic is generally defined as “having several, often quite different, meanings, all derived from the basic idea or concept”. The lexicographer lists homonyms as different words, whereas polysemy is a term used in traditional semantics for the words having multiple meaning but given under one entry by the lexicographer. For example, ‘human head’, ‘head of department’, ‘bridge head’. Hence polysemy means that one word can have more than

one sense. The distinction between homonymy and polysemy is by and large indeterminate and arbitrary, resting upon either the lexicographer's judgement about the plausibility of the assumed 'extension' of meaning or some historical evidence that the particular 'extension' has in fact taken place. Adjectives are particularly prone to this kind of shift. For instance the different meaning of red in red link, red deer, red cabbage and Red Indian.

Specialization in milieu is another common cause of polysemy, e.g. partner, in business partner, marriage partner, partner in crime, room partner. Partner contains the basic meaning of a type of a relationship between two (or more) people. But a business partner is not what a marriage partner is.

Another, and very frequent type of polysemy, is that created by metaphor, e.g. human body, heavenly body, body politic, body (of a liquid), etc.

Collocation

While studying the structure of the vocabulary, collocation can be defined as the association of a lexical item with other lexical items. It refers to the syntagmatic, horizontal relationship of lexical items (derived from the Latin colloco to be in same place with). Ink, for example, collocates with (is found with) words such as pen, paper, letter, note-book, inkpot, blue, red, green, royal blue, etc. Red collocates with roses, blood, ink, apple, tomato etc. Sea collocates with rough, cruel, raging blue, etc. Climb collocates with mountain, hill, tree, and peak.

Collocation (Syntagmatic)

The mountaineer climbed to the top of the mountain peak.

But care should be taken while studying idioms, clichés and compound words which pose problems, and cannot be dissected satisfactorily.

Sets

The relationship of collocation enables us to group items into lexical sets. The lexical set

is formally defined as a grouping of words having approximately the same range of collocations, having the same contextual range, functioning in the same situation types. Whereas collocation refers to the syntagmatic relationship, set refers to paradigmatic, vertical relationships of lexical items. A lexical set, therefore, is 'a group of lexical items from a similar class which seem to belong together'. Each item in set is defined by its place in relation to the other members of the set. Adolescent, for example, is the stage of growth between child and adult. Cool is the temperature between cold and warm. Similarly good, bad, nice, excellent, fair are items of a set.

Baby	Toddler	Child	Adolescent	Adult
Apple	Orange	Pear	Peach	
Cold	Cool	Warm	Hot	
Excellent	Good	Fair	Nice	Bad

From the above table the impression should not be formed that a semantic field is divided up like a smooth mosaic. In fact, the items overlap, leave gaps and have fuzzy edges.

Furthermore, in two sets such as (1) dog, ran, stairs; and (2) a, the, down the, first set (dog, ran, stairs) is of content words and the second one (a, the, down) is that of structure words. The content words refer to 'things', 'actions' or 'events' in the real world, whereas the structure words do not have this quality. In the former set, all the words can be inflected; dog and stair for 'plural' (dogs and stairs) and run for past tense; (ran). But in the latter set, a, the and down cannot be inflected. Thirdly, the first set is an 'open' set whereas the second set is a 'closed set', that is words capable of taking inflections are being added to the language continually as new nouns and verbs are created in the same manner. A closed set of items is one of fixed and usually small membership: e.g. the set of personal pronouns, tense, genders, etc. An open set is one of unrestricted, indeterminately large, membership, e.g. the class of nouns or verbs in a language. Thus grammatical items belong to closed sets, and lexical items to open sets.

Difference between Collocation and Set

Collocation is outside grammar; it has no connection with the classes of the word. It is syntagmatic. Set is the closest analogy to the grammatical system; it is a set of possible terms available for choice under the same grammatical conditions. In collocation the choice is limited; in lexical set the choice is not limited. The former is an open system, the latter closed. The one is syntagmatic, horizontal; the other paradigmatic, vertical.

Componential Analysis

The study of collocation, sets, synonyms, opposites and classification, polysemy, homonymy enables a useful grid of internal relationships between lexical items to be drawn up. But there still remains a problem. How in a semantic analysis, can one account for the fact that lexical items overlap? Cow, and woman and tigress, for example, all contain some element of femaleness. Bull and cow both contain some element of boringness. Calf and puppy and baby all contain an element of non-adulthood.

Such reasoning has led to attempts to split items up into their component parts, or features. Woman, for example, is said to contain the semantic features of FEMALE, HUMAN, and ADULT. Cow has the features of FEMALE, BOVINE, and ADULT. The list of features is in exhaustive. This type of analysis is comparable to distinctive feature analysis in phonology. This technique has only been exploited recently by linguists, and is known as componential analysis.

Conclusion

In the field of linguistics, the semantics has recently been included as its role in interpreting the linguistic elements is very important. This is indeed an enigmatic subject. To understand it one must have some extra talent. Generally this field is being ignored by modern linguists as it requires a careful understanding of various theories.

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