EXPLORATION OF SEMANTICS AND SHADES OF ASSOCIATIVE MEANING

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Abstracts
Semantics studies the meaning of words and sentence in language. It is necessary to mention that Semantics has not enjoyed a prominent position in linguistics until very recently. Several reasons have been proposed for this neglect. One of the reasons is attributed to the nature of meaning itself. Meaning is not a suitable phenomenon. An expression can be possible of a number of interpretations depending on the speakers – hearer or context. So, a phenomenon which is as elusive as meaning cannot be easily investigated with some degree of objectivity. This work looks at the concept of meaning, the mentalist view of meaning bringing insight to the associative meaning and its subdivisions.

1.1 Introduction

Semantics is a recent addition to the English Language. It is an area of linguistics which studies the meaning of words and sentence in a language. As a discipline, thinkers were speculated about the nature of meaning. For thousands of years, this question has been considered central to philosophy. Contributions to semantics have come from a diverse group of scholars-ranging from Plato and Aristotle in Ancient Greek to Betrand Rusell in the 20th century. Philosophy, logic, psychology, Anthropology, and Linguistics have paid great attention to the study of the nature of meaning.

Each of these disciplines makes its peculiar demands on the use of meaning in a systematic and objective way. It is necessary to mention at this point that semantics has not enjoyed a prominent position in linguistics until very recently.

A number of reasons have been proposed for this neglect one of the reasons is attributed to the nature of meaning itself. Meaning is not a suitable phenomenon. An expression can be subject for a number of interpretations depending on the speaker, hearers on context. So a phenomenon which is as elusive as meaning cannot be easily investigated with some degree of objectivity meaning is a chameleon, changing the colour of effects with a change of speakers, hearers, context or setting.

Having defined semantics as a level of linguistics which studies meaning in human language but our most puzzling questions in semantics has been what is the meaning of meaning? Although the question many look simple when first encountered. The fact is that no linguist has been able to provide a precise and accurate definition of meaning. For instance, to define a particular word, we often end up using other words in that definition. If for instance, "man" is defined by such semantic property as [HUMANE, MALE, ADULT], one may further want to know the meaning of HUMANE, ADULT and MALE. So the quest of definition continuous without-end. The purpose of the study is to identify the different shades of meaning with a view to explaining them. The study will enable us know the various kinds of meaning. It will also help us to know the dimensions of meaning and the subdivision of associative meaning.

2.0 Literature Review
The Concept of Meaning

Meaning is a phenomenon that can be influenced by different things to different people depending on the background, emotion or disposition at the time the utterance is made. This is why the intended meaning of an utterance may be different from the meaning of an expression to the receiver of the message. According to Cherry 1957: 112, meaning is a harlot among words who can seduce the speaker or the writer from the path of intellectual chastity.

A meaning is not a label tied around the neck of a spoken word or phrase. It is more like the beauty of a complexion which lies altogether in the eyes of its beholder. To account for the meaning of meaning C.K. Odgen and I.A Richard in their monumental book entitled "the meaning of meaning published in 1923 presented series of definition of meaning. There are two popular ways in which the meaning of expressions have been conceived. Firstly, it has been argued that the meaning of words is a thing or entity it represents. What this means is that there is an intrinsic connection between sound and meaning. This naturalist view of the meaning of expression derives from the works of Plato. The problem with this view is that there are quite a number of words in human language where it may be difficult to see what thing or entity the word represents. A second conception of the nature of meaning which is often referred to as the conventionalist view is largely traceable to the works of Aristotle. Proponents of this view are of the opinion that the connection between sound and meaning is arbitrary and never direct. For every word there is an associated concept. It is this concept which is formed in the mind of the users of the language that links the sound associated with a word to the actual thing or entity represented by the word.

Referential Theories of Meaning

Proponents of this theory are K.C Odgen and I.A Richard. According to them, the meaning of an expression is the actual entity or object in the real world to which the expression refers. This actual object is referred to as the referent. An interesting thing about this view is that it denies a direct link between expressions and their referents. The connection between linguistic units and its referents is only possible through thought. The theory was criticized because it may not always be true that the meaning of an expression is the object it is used to represent. There are number of words in human languages that do not have physical object that they refer to. For instance, it is not certain to us what physical objects would represent the following words, yes, and, in, but etc. Again, pohysemons words pose a lot of problems to the referential theory of meaning.

Mentalistic Theory of Meaning

This is a refinement of the referential theory. Proponents of this view are of the opinion that the meaning of a word or an expression is the mental images or ideas of the words or expressions that is formed in the mind of the speaker or hearer as soon as the word or expression is uttered. Scholars like S. Gluckberg and J. Darks are strongly behind this theory as can be seen in the following quotations taken from their book entitled experimental psycholinguistics "the set of possible meanings of any given word is the set of possible feelings, images, ideas, concepts, thought and inferences that a person might produce when that word is heard" (Gluckberg and Darks 1975:50). One of the problems with this theory is that it is not clear how one can safely determine the meaning of an expression purely on the basis of mental images or ideas. As we know, ideas are often vague and therefore cannot easily be subject to any empirical investigation or test.
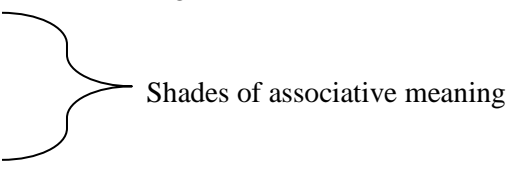
The Associative Meaning

Associative meaning is that type of meaning which a word conveys over and above its ordinary, basic or commonly shared sense. It is unstable, open ended and variable in nature. Associative meaning can be influenced by sex, the experience of the speaker or hearer, the historical epoch in which the word is used, the society or the culture. Associative meaning is not central to communication, and therefore cannot be expressed in terms of contrastive semantic features. It presents a problem to the language learner in the sense that it is peripheral and does not have any universal implication rather, it is peculiar and unique to the individual people's experience.

Miscommunication and or misinterpretation of sentences arise due to differences of individual people's feelings, attitudes, and other emotional overtones which are brought to bare upon what they communicate. In other words, it is the variability of associative meaning that creates room for mis-communication. Unlike conceptual meaning of words which are commonly shared by all the speakers within a speech community associative meaning reflects individual's differences.

Difficulty in communication arises due to this individual differences. Hence, there is not always a one-to-one correspondence between the speaker's intended meaning and the hearer's interpretation of the message. In facts, the intentions are private while meaning is for public consumption. Since intentions are private, they are only recoverable from the meaning that expression conveys. It is important to note that the associative meaning do not lye overtly in the text (weather oral or written) waiting the hearer to get at them

effortlessly. The hearer must dig laboriously through the text to get at the meaning intended by the speaker. To get at the associative meaning of expression requires that both the speaker and the hearer must share a similar background knowledge.

Barnwell (1980) and Leech (1981) have recognized five (5) sub-classes of associative meaning.

- Connotative
- Collocative
- Affective   Shades of associative meaning
- Reflective
- Stylistic /social

Connotative meaning: This is the type of meaning which an expression has by virtue of what it refers to over and above its purely conceptual contents. It is concerned with real world experience which an individual associates with an expression when he uses or hears it. It embraces both the conceptual meaning of an expression and the individual experience which he brings to bare upon what he/she communicates or experiences. So far as our experiences vary, connotative meaning can never be stable.

In discussing the connotative meaning of an expression, non-criteria or additional semantic features are employed in specifying its meaning. For instance, the criteria semantic features of 'man' are:

Man ⟶ [+ HUMANE, + MALE, + ADULT]'.

So, it somebody says "the man is a lion", he is invariably describing the fellow in question with some non-criteria or additional semantic properties which may include [+ VICIOUS, or AGGRESSIVE. Similarly, if in the traditional Nigerian setting someone says William is nothing more than a woman' the fellow may be describing William with some putative properties which may include the facts that he is gregarious, frail , clumsy, gullible cowardly, emotional and prone to tears.

The facts which emerges from the fore-going example is that connotative involves the figurative use of the language. Connotative meaning varies from individual to individual, society to society, one historical period to another or from culture to culture. In the western world for instance, the animal (fox) is often associated with negative overtones such as Cunny and deceitfulness. So to call someone a 'fox' in the western world is to associate the fellow with some negative non-criteria semantic features such as:

[+ DECEIT, + CUNNY] The equivalence of the fox in the West African context is the tortoise-a great trickster in West African mythology.

Not all speakers of a language share all the connotative meanings associated with certain expressions, so that communication will be difficult between people if they have to speak figuratively all the time.

Collocative Meaning : This is used to refer to the habitual co-occurrence of individual lexical items (crystal 1997:69). In other words, it is that meaning which a lexical item covey depending on the component in case. Certain pairs of lexical items exhibit a natural tenderly to co-occur. Lexical items which always co-occur are called collocates of each other.

Affective Meaning

Meaning becomes affective when words are chosen in particular to communicate something about the attitude or felling of the speaker towards his hearer on the subject matter of discourse. The choice of certain words can trigger positive or negative emotional response from the hearer depending on how he/she perceives the utterance of the speakers.

The primary functions of interjectional eg (oh, alas!) and vocatives (eg. sir, mummy, daddy) etc used at the beginning of sentences is to convey the emotional disposition of the speaker.

Reflective Meaning

Reflected meaning often arises in a situation where an expression has more than one conceptual meaning. In other words, reflected meaning is a feature of polysemuous words where one of the senses of a particular word becomes dominant. As time goes on, the other less dominant senses of the word are dropped. Leech (1981:17) has also rightly observed that words such as ejaculation, erection, intercourse and even turgid can never be used in their innocent senses without conforming on their sexual association or impulses. The

consequence of reflected meaning is that as a particular sense of a word continuous to gain prominence due to its frequency of use, the other less frequently employed sense continuous to disappear.

Social Meaning

This is a type of meaning which a word conveys due to the facts that it is associated with a particular pattern of speech, a language variety or a social setting. The choice which an individual makes in his/her use of words can reveal the social background, his/her regional or geographical dialects or the social distance in terms of the degree of formality between him and his hearer. Meaning is a phenomenon that can be influenced by different things to different people defending on the background, emotion or the disposition at the time the utterance is rendered. This is why the intended meaning of an utterance may be different from the meaning of an expression to the receiver of the message. As one of the dimensions of meaning, associative meaning is unstable, open ended and variable in nature. It can be influenced by sex, the experience of the speaker or hearer, the historical background in which the word is used, the society or the culture.

Data Analysis

As one of the subdivision of associative meaning, connotative meaning is concerned with read world experience which an individual associates with an expression when he uses or hears it. It embraces both the conceptual meaning of an expression and the individual personal experiences which he brings to bare upon what he communicates or experiences. Hence, the statement.

1. When it comes to hard work, our reverend father is a willing horse. The above statement does not necessarily mean that our reverend father is a horse that is willing. It rather means that our revered father is always eager to work.
2. Okeke is a lion. This means that Okeke is brave, vicious or aggressive. Here, the attributes of a lion is shifted to Okeke.
3. William is nothing more than a woman. The fellow may be describing William with some putative non-criteria semantic properties which may include the fact that William is gregarious, frail, gullible, cowardly and prone to tears.
4. Emeka is a fox. In the western world, fox is often associated with negative overtones such as cunny and deceitfulness. So to call Emeka a fox in the western world means that Emeka is cunny and deceitful. Fox is likened to tortoise in the African context. If in the African context, the above statement could be that Emeka is a tortoise.

Again, in Igbo language, consider the following statement.

Nwoke ahu bu ewu

That man is a goat/sheep. It does not really mean that the man is a goat/sheep. What it means is that the man is not wise.

Another dimension of associative meaning is the thematic meaning which is dependent on how the speaker organizes his message in terms of ordering, focus and emphasis. A speaker may decide to make one part of the sentence communicatively prominent over and above other surrounding words in the same sentence.

 Hence, the statement

1a. John kicked the ball.

1b. It was John who kicked the ball.

2a. I like rice.

2b. Rice, I like

3a. Onyinye sold the goat.

3b. The goat was sold by Onyinye.

A particular pattern of speech, a language variety or a social setting gives rise to a stylistic meaning. The choice which an individual makes in his use of words can reveal a social background, his regional or geographical dialects or social distance in terms of the degree of formality between aim and his hearer. For example:

- May I have your book (formal)
- Might I have your book (very formal & rare)
- Can I have your book (casual & less formal)

The above expressions are different ways of making request, but they differ in terms of the degree of formality.

Findings

It is rightly observed that meaning is not a label tied on the neck of individual words. The meaning of meaning has been a problem to linguists. Meaning of meaning has been conceived in various ways. It has been argued that the meaning of words is a thing or entity it represents. This is the naturalistic view of meaning propounded by Plato. The second conception of the nature of meaning is the conventionalist view traceable to works of Aristotle. Associative meaning is not central to communication and therefore cannot be expressed in terms of contrastive semantic features. It presents a problem to language learner in the sense that it is peripheral and does not have any universal implication rather, it is peculiar and unique to individual people's experience.

Conclusion

Semantics is a worthwhile discipline. The meaning of meaning cannot be over-emphasized. It is an area of linguistic that needs much research. As meaning of meaning is not a label tied on the head of individual words, researchers will undoubtedly continues to shed light on the complexity of meaning.

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