A CRITICAL LOOK AT SEMANTIC IMPLICATION AND ANALYSIS OF WORDS IN LANGUAGE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is to give the semantic analysis of 'word' in language study. Here is a topic which encompasses three heterogeneous linguistic concepts of semantics, word and language. This paper gives a general highlight on these contents for the purpose of explanatory adequacy. Major focus will be on words in relation meaning and how this meaning relationship affects the study of language in one way or the other. It is noteworthy to mention that the above linguistic concepts are interwoven and the study of one will entail the others. We then study the problem associated with word meaning and how such problems enhance or inhibit the study of English language.

Key Words: Semantic analysis, word, language study, explanation

INTRODUCTION

When issues connected with meaning arise in any language study, it is semantics that has the jurisdiction tom decide. Semantics, therefore, is defined as the scientific study of meanings. Therefore, to give a semantic analysis of the 'word' simply means to analyze words in relation to meaning. Words have been defined in various ways by various scholars. When we talk about language we are invariably talking about words which are small units of a language.

The meaningfulness or not of an utterance depends on the 'words (s)' that constitute the utterance. For instance; when someone says "This is a girl' the bearer will have no doubt that the speaker is talking of a young female. The statement is analytical and verifiable. This simple sentence is made up of units of language 'words'. It is also by words that meaning is assigned to the utterance. However, it is not in all cases, that words expressly reveal meaning relations. Some words can mean several things in several contexts. For instance, the statement "this is a plane" here the bearer is lost in the Limbo. Several ideas or conception will be conjured in the brain of the bearer. This is because the word meanings are sometimes elusive.

1. A Richard and C.K Ogden in their monumental work (1923: p 180-187) gave a list a list of twenty two definitions of meanings. They had hoped that science would unravel all the nuances associated with then definition of the term 'meaning'.

While the traditional grammarians regard the relationship between words and what they refer to in terms of naming (significant), the modernist see the relationship in terms of reference of label.

This has been the position of meaning from of old. As Bloomfield (1993) has rightly put it, "the problem of meaning has been the weak point of language and remains so until human knowledge advances beyond the present state.

Many scholars have postulated theories of meanings such as; referential, ideational, mentalistics, behavioural, and truth conditional theories. These theories are simply mentioned. No detailed work has been published on them so far.

ROLE OF LANGUAGE

The role of language as a major communicative medium in every human society cannot be quantified. To be precise, language is the strong hold of every society. It is a major medium of human expression.

The importance of language in human communication gives it is prominent position in the field of linguistics. It is all encompassing, touching all   aspects of human endeavours. The questions to be asked now are

a.   What constitutes a language?
b.   What makes a language comprehensible?

These questions bring us to the issue of words. Words according to Aristotle are smallest significant units of language. Words are simple referred to as the blocks of language.

The issue here is that if words are the components of a language, it stands to reason that for human language to be comprehensible and intelligible, words must have to be appreciated in relation to their meanings or what they stand for. The meaning of words has been the problem of linguistic scholars and philosophers over the years. It is the problem of the word meaning in relation to things they stand for that gave birth to semantics, the Linguistic discipline that concerns itself with the science of meaning.

The issue of meaning is a major concern in the study of language. This due to the following reasons: while some words can be meaningful in their own right, some are only meaningful in contexts of use. Some words can mean one thing in a context and a different thing in a different context. For instance, a word such as 'bank' can mean different things in different context. In another hand, some words have permanent meanings, no matter the situations. For instance, the nouns 'boy', girl, book, house, table etc. sometimes a complete sentence structure become independent to word components in realization to its meaning. For instance, expression like "Amalize is a cat', in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart". To another extent, a sentence or expression may have dual connotations and hence confusing and thereby setting in (ambiguity). For instance, "Mary's mother is washing her cloth'. This expression denies a hearer the definite person whose cloth is been washed.

NATURE OF MEANING

The issue of meaning is a semantic issued based on linguistic discipline. Great traditional grammarians such as Plato, Socrates and Aristotle worked in different capacity to put a final nail to the problem of word meaning but could not. Their successor, the earlier modern scholars like Richard, Ogden and Bloomfield also could not give the final answer to the issue of meaning. The motivating question to every serious language student is why has the issue of meaning been so elusive? What are the effect of this inconsistency of meaning to the study of human languages?

To   answer the above questions simply means engaging in research in this respect. By so doing, the works of our earlier scholars will not only   be more appreciated but opens avenues for more revelation into the mystery of word meaning.

The status of words in language can not be over emphasized. But intrinsically they do not (always) mean what they refer to. This has been the controversy surrounding word meaning. This informs the reason earlier modern grammarians such as I .A. Ricahrds and C.K Ogden perceive words as ordinary referent s and not the real meaning of what they refer to.

Korzybski, another grammarian of the same era, says, 'words are but labels to things. To traditionalists such as Plato and Aristotle, words signify, ("The view points of these re-known scholars is a pointer that the issue of meaning is highly elusive.) Chomsky we recall explored all the fields of science and art in order to raise up basic questions about words.

a.   How do words behave?
b.   Why are meanings so often frustrated?

To study the word is incomplete without a look at how words are formed (morphology). This is basically because words and meaning can not be separated from formative process.

WORDS AND MEANING

The pertinent question then; is, what is semantics all about? How did it emanate and what significant role does the field of semantics play in the study of language?

Semantics has been defined as a scientific study of meaning. It is relatively a late arrival in linguistic study. The word semantics originates from the Greek word "semainein", to signify or to "means".

Originally, scholars had been opposed to the issue of an independent discipline that would be solely concerned with the meaning of words in relation to object or concepts to   which they refer. This was not seen as relevant, since linguistic studies for instance was basically confined to the issues of morphology and syntax. Some of the early scholars who were initially opposed to the issue of a field of study concerned with interpreting meanings are; Chomsky and L. Bloomfield, they were great structuralist who saw they study of semantics as a time-wasting venture since it could as yet be subjected to the rigours of scientific enterprise.

Even in generative linguistics, semantics was generally ignored. However, this does not rule out the fact that for thousand years, human beings have been concerned with the study of meaning. During the time of Aristotle Plato, Greek philosopher had studied semantics. But the focus up to the early twentieth century was on the meaning of meaning.

To the traditional grammarians of Socrates and Plato time, "word', signifies? (Lyons 1968: 403) on the contrary, modern investigators of semantics see the relationship between the form and meaning of word as arbitrary.

To them, words refer, rather than signify. Two prominent scholars with this view are I. A. Richards and C.K. Ogden in their book "The meaning of meaning" (1923).

However, in spite of the early braze by some scholars as earlier mentioned on the need for an independent field to take care of meaning (semantics) modern scholars (linguistics) like Katz and Fodor (1977), among others saw semantics as capable of independent study free from other disciplines.

Chomsky also took a reverse decision on his earlier negligent stand against semantics. This was manifested by his acceptance of ambiguity and synonyms as basic data of linguistics. This development opened a new door for semantics and in his book. "The aspect of the theory of syntax" (1965) semantics was reorganized and incorporated as a level of linguistic analysis in generative grammar. Semantics g has been firmly established as a level of analysis to be studied (seriously) in linguistics. The role of semantic theory within generative grammar is to assign meaning to morphemes, words, phrases, and sentences generated by the rule of the language.

It is no gain emphasizing the interwoven relationship that exist between semantics, the word and language in use. Non of these linguistic notions can do without the other.

Semantics need something to interpret the 'word', which also combines syntactically to form a sentence. It is this sentence so formed that carries the useful communicative information called language. This explains why semantic theory seeks to achieve three basic principles as follows:

1. To capture for any language the nature of word meaning and sentence meaning,
2. Explain the relationship between them
3. It must also be able to predict the ambiguity in the form of the language whether in words or in sentences.

THE CONCEPT 'WORD AND DEFINITION

The notion of 'word' as a linguistics concept is a very familiar term. This is because; every human language uses 'word' to communicate. If the question; "what is a word" is posed to a non-language student, the person will in a lay man's language suggest that it is one of those things we say when we speak or write to one another.

To a language student, the concept 'word' transcends beyond this. Many scholars have attempted to define the 'word' but have failed to come up with the exact meaning of 'word'. Generally in linguistic circle, the term 'word' is regarded as the building block of a language. The quality of a building naturally depends on the quality of the elements that combine to make the building. It therefore stands to reason that in every human language, the quality and nature of words in every circumstance go long way to influence the intended meaning.

To this end, different scholars have approached the definition of the 'word' from individual points of view hoping to come closest to what the word actually stands for.

One definition credited directly or indirectly to Aristotelian concept says: "the word is the smallest significance of language" This definition enjoyed initial acceptance in linguistic circle. The latest fact is that a 'word' is not the smallest unit of a language but the morpheme is.

This definition focuses on the semantic meaning of the word. Based on what Aristotle bore in mind, his definition is still useful. For instance; the word 'man' as a unit of language is conventionally accepted as a male adult human. Mathematically put; (+ human + male+ adult).

This same unit of word when given an "LY" inflection will become "manly" which is also one unit of language that describes the physical state of the 'man'. Both words are independent in function and class. While man is a noun, 'manly' is an adverb of condition. From the semantic point of view therefore Aristotle's definition is still valid.

Leonard Bloomfield, an American structuralist and a linguist goes beyond this. To him, a word is comprised of two types of linguistic forms. The form that cannot stand on its own in a sentence he distinguishes as bound form. In our example above, the suffix "LY' in "manly" is meaningless in isolation and hence bound. On the other hand, the form that can function independently and meaningfully is classified as free form. This is also evident in our example. 'Man' is capable of meaning on its own.

As a result of distinction, Bloomfield therefore, define the word as "the minimum free form" this definition also has it own problem since it tends to neglect the significant of the bound form.

The problems associated with the definition of the word is just a chip of the ice berg compared to inexhaustible problems associated with the meaning of the term 'word' as a concept. When the issue of word in relation to meaning is discussed linguistically the situation becomes distressful and discouraging. This is because, a lot of factors influence word meanings. Some of these influences include: syntactical, morphological, phonological, supra-segmental influences, lexical ambiguity, synonyms, hyponymy, sense relation, and transference of meaning; to mention a few.

WORD FORMATION -MORPHOLOGY

The pertinent thing to note about the linguistic concept 'word' is that at its formative stage it exhibits characteristics capable of influencing its meaning. The study of the word in relation to language use will therefore be incomplete without a fundamental knowledge of how these words are formed.

In general linguistics there are many morphological processes that explain the structure and formation of the word in different languages of the world. However, not all these processes are productive in English language. Leonard Bloomfield's definition of the word as " the minimum free form" is most evident in appreciation of the way words are formed.

As earlier mentioned, word is made up of two segmental forms, namely; the free form as can be seen some words like: man, woman, school, church, love, hate fear, boy, girl and carpenter. These words are independent and meaningful in their own right. On the contrary, the bound morphemes are dependent on the free morpheme in realizing their meanings. Or instance, the forms such as; un, il, ly, s, are not meaning anything unless in combination with the free forms.

In this case, un + important will be realized as 'unimportant', il+ legal will change to illegal, ly +proper, becomes properly while 's' when attached to a free form like 'boy' will realized a plural form 'boy'.

THE INFLECTIONAL MORPHEME

Morphological processes are essentially the origin of the diverse characteristics of the 'word' in relation to meaning. There is therefore no gain emphasizing the fact that most words if not all derive their connotations from their formations. When we take a look at the issue of inflexion for instance, it will be clear that some words refuse to accept a tradition that appears more general with other words. To realize the plurals of words inflexion morphology is basically responsible. In this case infection of the letter's' at the suffix position of certain words changes the status/state of the word from singular to plural. For instance, the word 'boy' singular is realized, as plural with an 's'   inflexion 'boys', tree is realized as 'trees; while chair is realized as "chairs".

In the same way, some words accept the inflexion of "es" to derive their plurals. These words include; 'church" which is pluralized as 'churches' match is realized as 'matches' as in football matches or sticks of matches. These few among numerous examples are inflexional realization of plural morphemes.

On the contrary, some words are averse to this process of plural word formation. Their plurals are realized by a medial change of original word.

For instance, the word 'man' instead of the addition of an 's' morpheme to become 'mans is rather pluralized by the displacement of the middle letter 'a' by an 'e' to realize 'men'. 'Woman' also takes the same process to be realized as 'women', while 'child' goes a longer way by the addition of 'ren' to realize 'children'. This process is what is called inflexional morphology.

It might also be interesting to note that certain words refuse any form of change of form in realization of their plurals. In this class of words we have 'sheep' singular and 'sheep' as plural; information is also information both singular and plural; so (also) is the word equipment which maintains its original form 'equipment' as its plural.

The characteristics of the word from inception goes a long way to pose a problem to the study of language because of the non-uniformity that could have just made it easy for someone to (just) add an 's' at the end of every word pluralization.

It is interesting to note that up to the time of Aristotle and Plato, the issue of meaning has plagued the senses, from the remote past. It was a major controversy among early Greek philosophers which resulted to the division of the philosophers into two camp. Naturalists who believe that words posses their meaning by nature, and the conventionalists who believe that words posses their meaning by tradition and convention (Hans and Marshal) (p.80).

It is no wonder that some of the early scholar who concerned themselves with the issue of word meaning in relation to things were not linguistic scholars. One of such was Korzybski a mathematician. He is reputed to have surveyed all branches of science in an attempt to find answers to two basic questions;

- How do word behave
- Why are meaning so often frustrating?

Obviously, the concerns of scholar as regards to words and meaning are not far from its importance in language and communication. The American structuralist-Leonard Bloomfield affirmed this fact when he said that the study of speech without regard to meaning is an abstraction" (Bloomfield (1933:35). The importance of word meaning in human language informs the fact that same Bloomfield in his book titled "languages" devoted a whole chapter to meaning.

The question is; what (then) is the "word", and why is the meaning so elusive? Several characteristics of the word help to mystify the issue of word meaning. One of such characteristics inform the main interest of both the traditional grammarians and the modern linguists. The relationship between words and what they stand for is arbitrary. To the philosophers of Aristotelian era, words signify meaning. They believed that the meaning of an object or concept is the word –the signification. On the contrary the modern grammarians or scholars attached to objects or concepts for the purpose of identification. Kozbybski also is of the opinion that names of things are simply labels.

These three scholars therefore agree on two basic problems of a language

- Identification of words with things
- The misuse of abstract words

One popular analogy used to buttress this stand point is the word "dog" "Dog" is obviously a domestic animal. To an English man, this animal is called dog. But in some other languages of the world, this same animal is called by different names. The Germans for instance call it "hund", while Spaniards call it "pero" the French "chien' and Yoruba 'Aja'. It stands to reason that if any English man visit a German friend who calls his pet "hund" the English man will obviously be lost. This is because, even though he (the English man) may be looking at the object (dog) in question, the name "hund" is strange to him.

These different names to one animal interestingly does not change the form of the animal. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the names: dog, hund, pero, chien and Aja are just mere label or symbol conventionally accepted as an identification of the animal by each speech community. The label is by no means the animal.

THE WORD AS A UNIT OF MEANING

Apart from the complexities associated with word meaning in terms of double connotation and relation to references, "word" as a unit of meaning is no less complex.

Aristotelian definition of the word as "the smallest unit of language" looses its authenticity based on the practical reality that words could be split into other smaller forms called morphemes. The smaller units of the word combine to give different shades of meanings to what a unit "word" stands for. Since it is noted that words are splitable into the free forms meaningful on their own right as in then word "table, bound forms are not meaningful independently. The letter "s is bound in isolation but meaningful when it works together with the free form "table. When this happens, table which is hitherto a singular word becomes pluralized by the inflexion of the letter "s" to become "tables".

The following sentence will throw more light on the "word" as a unit of meaning.

"John treats his older sister nicely". The latest standard book on structural linguistics, distinguishes no less than thirteen morphemes in that sentence as follows:

1. John (2) treat (3)-s (4)hi; (5)-s; (6) old;- (7) –er; (8) sister, (9)-s; (10) very, (11) nice; (12)-ly (13) the intonation of the sentence

The above analysis reveals five different types of morphemes:

1. Independent words; John, treat, old sister, very, nice;
2. A stem which is not independent; hi;
3. A derivational suffix (- ly);
4. Inflectional suffix which are three different types;

a.   Verbal (the s in treat)
b.   Nominal and pronominal
c.   The possessive – ('s' in 'his and the plural – 's' in sisters)

   Adjectival (the –'er' in older) and finally the intonation which can at best be imagined but yet adds to the meaning of the sentence. The heterogeneous nature of the morphemes are therefore more apparent than real. The above analysis reveals two classes of morphemes; the dependent and independent morphemes.

The second class comprises intonation and inflexional elements of various kinds which concerns not only single words but grammatical relations and structure of the sentence as a whole. This gives the 'word' a key position in the hierarchy of linguistic structure.

 It is also clear from the above analysis that, the most formal rather than semantic definition of the 'word' is the one given by L. Bloomfield, as "the smallest free form". However, this definition is short of the inclusion of the compound words made up of independent words such as; Headmaster, penknife, candlestick, blackboard etc. these may be regarded as boarder line cases between words and phrases.

WORDS IN CONTEXT

We now focus on the character of the word combination with other words in a structure. Apart from the postulations of the early modern scholars like I.A. Richards, C.K. Ogden, Korzybski, that words are referents, words to have meaning. Language after all is the property of the society, and in human speech language comprises 'words'.

A great lexicographer, Dr. John, stated that "things are the sons f heaven and words are the daughters of earth". Hans and Marshal Semantics (19). From this observation, it is therefore correct to look at word meaning from the point of view of convention. Human societies choose word meanings as they deem suitable.

Historically, the Bible in Genesis states that human language was originally one. Then, words meant one thing for one object by convention. The dichotomy of meaning today is individualistic with every society accepting the meaning of objects by what they name the object irrespective of the scholastic view of meaning. It is this conventional relation of words to meaning that enables sentences to be constructed. The relationship that exists among words structurally combine to

give a unified meaning to as sentence. When for instance we say 'house'. This word, in English, connotes a building for people to live in; when used in isolation. In the context of other related words a lot can happen to (this simple) meaning.

An example could be discovered from this sentence "That girl's mouth houses venoms". In this context, the word 'house is used metaphorically and hence looses its original meaning of a building but a human mouth. This is one of the complex nature of the word meaning.

In another hand, when words undergo transposition in a sentence, it is discovered that the word component of one sentence remains the same yet the entire meaning of the sentence. Changes. If the sentence "the hunter killed a lion" is reconstructed to read "the lion killed the hunter", it is clear that the original meaning of the first sentence has changed through transposition process, yet the words remain the same.

This is also evident in the statement "Brutus killed Caesar, and Caesar killed Brutus". Grammatically, words and sentences are rule governed. For example: the sentence "he died yesterday", is a simple sentence wit the elements of structure (SVO). In literary circle, however, this rule is often violated, yet accepted. The most circles, however, this rule is often violated, yet accepted. The frequent syntactic sequence of subject (s) + predicate (p) + complement (c) + adjust (a). In poetry, the sentence 'he died yesterday' as seen above could be realized as 'yesterday died he' exhibiting a deviant structure of Adjust (A) + predicate (P) + subject (S). Other such deviant syntactic arrangements include "city fair" instead of "fair city". The implication of these deviances most importantly, show that words and their meanings depend on what the society agree upon.

From the above examples, it is clear that the position of the words in a sentence plays a vital role to its function and meaning. In "fair city" the word "fair" function as a modifier and the "city function as the head of the sentence. This is the opposite in the second transposition "city fair" where "city" defiantly serves as modifier to the word "fair". However, as earlier mentioned, this is acceptable in literature on account of poetic license. These few examples add to the prolific and problematic nature of word meaning in language study.

CONCLUSION.

From the evidences narrated above the study of the meaning cannot be complete. The reason is that, as human society grows politically, socially, economically and religiously, there is bound to be the birth of new words accompanying such development. These new words are associated with new meanings. This will automatically compound the problem of word and meaning and therefore introduce more headache to the study of language.

A look at American magazines such as: Life and Time gives the impression that there is a mass production of words growing day to day and that, American English is developing rapidly. While it is true that American English is not the domain of our study, the analog is a remainder that language is alive and dynamic. Languages borrow from one another, and the words borrowed sometimes retain their original meaning or assumes new meaning in their new environment.

Newspapers, studio speakers, comic strips, artists, play a great role in the production of words. Some papers seem to make it point of duty to present the public with a couple of new words in every publication. However, only a few of these words stands the test of time.

There is the case of – 'ine' – words which came in during the middle 'sos, period such words include; doctrine, chlorine dudine, kuttine, coined after heroine. These words are now obsolete if they ever acquire currency.

In the contemporary times, the vocabulary of English repertoire is with new words from recent scientific and technological inventions. The entrance of computer into the world technological circle has flooded the world with lexemes such as: yahoo, mouse, floppy disc, hardware, software, CPU etc. these new words no doubt increase the situation of meaning. 'Mouse' for instance which was originally and up-till today seem as a little 'rodent' has assumed a new meaning. And so the study of language is getting more complex. Language students should gear up to be abreast of new development in words formation and the problems they pose to language study.

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