



## Semantics in Theory and Practice

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### Abstract

The literature of pragmatics, discourse analysis and semantics reveals that several studies attempt the explanation of “meaning” within and beyond the physical properties of language. If there is any reason why language is worthy of such scholarly attention, it is because it is very meaningful to its users; language is systematic, broad and analytic. The works of early language philosophers and grammarians are the bedrocks of the study of “meaning”. As a means of human communication, language is meaning-laden. Theoretical perspectives in semantics, are instrumental in the systematic and expository presentation of the features and properties of “meaning”, and the literature of semantics corroborates this claim. Semantics is a meaning-elucidating field of language study. Language use is not arbitrary; writers and speakers deploy their knowledge of semantic universals to engage in effective communication. This paper examines issues in semantics with a view to providing rich insights on the nature of “meaning” in language. The paper concludes that “meaning” is contextual, sentence-structure-driven, literal, non-literal, reference-making, truth-conditional, speaker-based and language-specific.

**Keywords:** semantics, meaning, language, semantic theory.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Semantics is a field of linguistics, which studies meaning in language. Fodor (1977, p. 7) posits that “the study of meaning has a long history. What is original about recent linguistic approaches to the subject is the conjunction of formal description with a concern for the special peculiarities of natural language. As we have seen, this permits the formation of some quite specific research goals.” In semantics, issues in theory and practice reflect the state of research therein. The issues are front-line perspectives that anchor the “semantics of language use”. By presenting discrete perspectives on the concept of meaning, this study is an overview of the dynamics, features and scope of meaning. The communicative potentials of language imply that research on the concept of meaning is intellectually rewarding. This paper is therefore a springboard in the investigation of meaning.

## 2. Semantics

According to Ogbulogo (2005), “the term ‘semantics’ was first used by Breal in 1987 and it does not suggest that there had never been speculations about the nature of meaning.” The main objectives of semantics are: to examine as discrete entities, language users’ knowledge of their languages from their knowledge of the world; individuate concepts for studies; and study concepts that are isolated and decontextualized. This process fosters the stability and universality of meaning. William O’ Grady and Archibald (2004, p. 174) posit that “the four major topics in semantics are: (i) the nature of meaning; (ii) some of the properties of the conceptual system underlying meaning; (iii) the computation of syntactic structure to the interpretation of sentences; and (iv) the role of non-grammatical factors in the understanding of utterances.” A field of language study, semantics is gaining more attention in contemporary research. Fodor (ibid. p. 2) notes that “the study of semantics has become as widespread and is taken as seriously as the study of syntax and phonology. This may be due in part to the judgment that at least the fundamentals of syntactic and phonological structure are now understood so that attention can usefully be directed elsewhere. But even the most optimistic linguist could not

claim that we know all there is to know about phonology and syntax, and the growing interest in semantics is attributable at least as much to the realization that further progress in syntactic theory demands some understanding of semantics.”

### 3. The Concept of Meaning

Meaning is simply the sense or idea of an expression in a language. Ogbulogu (ibid. p. 18) submits extensively on the concept of meaning:

Both linguists and philosophers agree that meaning is central to semantics. However, there is considerable disparity among different scholars on the exact conception of meaning. Based on their understanding of the meaning of meaning and procedures, there are different schools of thought in relation to meaning. These are the Naturalist, the Conventionalists and the Contextualists. According to the Naturalist with Plato as the chief proponent, the meaning of a word is the entity or thing it represents. There is an intrinsic relationship between sound and meaning. The major criticism of this view is that there exist very many words in natural languages without physical entities.

To the Conventionalists, words and their meaning do not necessarily have any direct link ... Conventionalism derived from the works of Aristotle. According to J. Firth and other Contextualists, the meaning of a word derives from its usage. Each of these approaches has had a profound impact on the practice of linguistics ... Apart from focusing on the three principal approaches to the study of meaning, there are thematic, conceptual and associative types of meaning.

To understand the concept meaning, it is necessary to have proper understanding of the theories of meaning: Meaning Postulate Theory, Componential (Decompositional) Theory of Meaning, Relational Component Theory of Meaning, Generative Semantics Theory of Meaning, Speech Act Theory of Meaning (pragmatic theory), Truth Conditional Theory of Meaning and Contextual Theory of Meaning.

### 4. Semantics: Issues in Theory and Practice

In this section of the paper, we examine issues that are of theoretical and practical relevance in semantics: discrete attributes of meaning in semantics.

#### 4.1 Meaning as Context

In communicative situations, different meanings are contextualized appropriately, as a demonstration of communicative competence (the pragmatics of language use). Language users use it in real-life communication situations. The situations are essentially contexts. For every context, communicative strategies serve the purpose of effective message-delivery, which presupposes using words and stretches according to contextual nuances. The topic, place, participants and other pragmatic variables deployed in communicative events, impinge on the meaning of expressions. According to Bloomfield (1933), “the meaning of a linguistic form is the situation in which the speaker utters it, and the response which it calls forth in the hearer.”

#### 4.2 Meaning as Sentence Structure

At the discourse level of communication, linguistic stretches are used as utterances with speaker or writer-based communicative intentions. They are different from isolated words because they are essentially speech acts interacting with socially realistic phenomena (social institutions). Sentences (linguistic patterning) are a source of meaning in language. Sentences contain word-classes, referring expressions that have semantic relevance. The structure of a sentence determines how these variables are used to convey discrete meanings. For example, James R. Hurford, Brendan Heasley and Michael B. Smith (2007, p. 244) opine that “the basic semantic ingredients of a common type of simple sentence ... are (1) a predicate, and (2) a number of referring expressions. The referring expressions correspond to actual things, persons, etc. in the world more or less directly, via the device of reference. The function of the predicate is to describe the specific relationship between the things, persons, etc. referred to, i.e. to describe how the things and/or people participate in the particular situation described<sup>1</sup>.” Scholars contend that thematic roles impinge on sentence meaning(s). Corroborating this view, James R. Hurford, Brendan Heasley and Michael B. Smith (ibid. p. 249) contend that “participant roles, such as Agent, Affected, and Instrument are defined semantically, in terms of the meanings of the sentences, and not grammatically, in terms of position in sentences. Grammatical positions in a sentence and the participant roles which occupy these positions are independent kinds of linguistic notions and should be kept distinct from one another. Clearly, there is some systematic relationship between the semantic roles and the grammatical positions, but it is evidently a complicated relationship.” The significance of sentence-driven thematic roles in sentence meaning spur debates on the need for more research in the proliferation of thematic roles. Word-classes are used in accordance with rules of language (linguistic conventions). James R. Hurford, Brendan Heasley and Michael B. Smith (ibid. p. 253) report that “proponents of the notion of role envisage that in the dictionary entry for each verb in the language there will be a ‘role-frame’, indicating what roles must be, and what roles may be, mentioned in connection with the verb. These role frames are considered to be part of the semantic representation of each verb.” For effective

communication of message, language users are expected to have mastery of word-order related grammar rules of a language. For example, Ogbulogu (ibid. p. 18) posits that “thematic meaning derives from the organisation of the message presented in a language. It is the arrangement of the components of communication that determines the point of emphasis. This arrangement may take the form of passivisation, topicalisation or focus. In the sentences that follow, different items have been made more prominent by merely re-ordering them:

1. Jane bought the house – normal SVO order;
2. It was Jane that bought the house – topicalised;
3. The house was bought by Jane – passivised;
4. The house, Jane painted – focused<sup>2</sup>.”

A sentence remains an effective conveyer of meaning because of its possible infinite patterns, structure and constituents. Generatively (as in Generative Semantics), deep and surface structures are used to realize surface and deep structure meanings in syntactic structures. Thus, sentence meanings are possible beyond the use of thematic roles. According to Fodor (ibid. p. 80), “once syntactic structures are allowed to contain universal semantic elements as their terminal symbols, the syntactic deep structures of sentences can serve as their semantic representations. The interpretive semantic component can be dispensed with entirety – hence the name “generative semantics”. The derivation of a surface structure begins with the generation of a semantic representation which is simultaneously a syntactic deep structure and this is then mapped by the successive application of syntactic transformations onto a surface structure. There is no LEVEL of structure, like the standard level of deep structure, which mediates the correlation of semantic representations with surface structures. The rules which operate on structures containing semantic elements are claimed to have exactly the same general formal properties as the more familiar syntactic transformations which apply at later stages of derivations<sup>3</sup>.” Bara (2012, p. 552) captures the infinite possible patterns of sentences in his submission that “the compositionality of language is guaranteed by syntax; syntax is the most important evidence of the human brain’s ability to generate recursive structures.” The fact that a single sentence can be assigned different structures, accentuates the semantically motivated underpinings of syntactic theories in linguistics.

### 4.3 Meaning as Literal or Non-literal Propositions

Sentence meaning can be overt or covert. This implies the use of literal or non-literal propositions. According to Patrick Griffiths (2006, p. 6), “the literal meaning of a sentence is based on just the semantic information that you have from your knowledge of English.” Non-literal propositions are conveyed as entailments in their semantic representations. It is arguable to construe figurative meanings as non-literal meanings in linguistic stretches. See John T. Kearns, cited in Savas L. T. (1994, p. 72) for more insights on figurative use of language.

### 4.4 Meaning as Reference-making

References are essentially the ideas or referents picked by expressions from the universe of discourse (our real world). The Ideational Theory of Meaning corroborates this claim. According to the theory, language users use expressions based on meanings already existing in their minds. In this regard, speaker-hearer shared knowledge about referents facilitates the encoding and decoding of utterances. Charles W. Kreidler (1998, p. 58) opines that “we recognize several kinds of meaning. Some pieces of language refer to something, real or fictitious, outside of language. Any such linguistic form is a referring expression and what it refers to is its referent. Some linguistic forms make comments about referents; these are predicates. In addition, there are grammatical meanings expressed by bound morphemes (affixes), by function words, and by arrangement of forms in a sentence. Referring expressions and predicates have lexical meaning while grammatical morphemes and function words express grammatical meanings. The totality of lexemes in the language constitutes the lexicon of the language, and all the lexemes that one individual knows are his or her personal lexicon<sup>4</sup>.”

### 4.5 Meaning as Truth-conditionality

Within the concept of meaning, truth conditionality is concerned with the semantic conditions for sentential constructs to be true, and how the truth of one sentence depends on the truth of another. The arguments of sentences impinge on the truth theorizing. The different arguments in a sentence perform discrete roles, thus generating varied meanings. Typology of sentences also determines meaning. In truth conditional semantics, a statement is considered as the basic function of a sentence; that is, stating the condition of things in the world (as in constatives). See Austin (1962) for insights on the differences between performatives and constatives (speech acts). Indeed, truth conditional semantics is scientific in postulations regarding the truth or falsity of sentences. Leech et al. (1981) assert that “since Austin (ibid.) described performative utterances as apparent sentences with no truth-functional meaning as such, but instead with some illocutionary act potential, semantic theory has recognized for performatives a special discourse-based type of meaning.” Meaning is “conditionality” in the sense that truth conditional semantics views the interpretation of a sentence as the condition(s) for its truth value. Kempson (1977) is quite instructive in the elucidation of truth conditionality of sentences.

#### 4.6 Meaning as Speaker-meaning

Irrespective of the formal properties (linguistic rules) of language, language users sometimes personalize the use of language for effective communication. Deviation from the norms of language is fundamentally the principle that informs the emergence of pragmatics. Pragmatics emphasizes communicative competence rather than linguistic competence. From a pragmatic point of view, the meaning of a sentence or expression is mainly speaker-based. However, speaker-hearer shared knowledge facilitates the interpretation of language use that negates the conventions of language. Speaker-meaning is simply sender-meaning. Patrick Griffiths (*ibid.* p. 7) posits that “sender meaning is the meaning that the speaker or writer intends to convey by means of an utterance. Sender meaning is something that addressees continually have to make informed guesses about. Addressees can give indications, in their own next utterance, of their interpretation (or by performing other actions ...).” Sender-meanings may be literal or non-literal (involving implicatures). Sender-meaning depends on sender’s mastery of the linguistic conventions of the language that conveys the on-going communication. Acheoah (2015) evolves the term Operative Language (OL) to refer to the language that conveys an on-going communication. An Operative Language is crucial in discourse because participants rely on their mastery of the rules (grammar and vocabulary) of a language not only to deploy implicatures, but also in making inferences.

Fodor (*ibid.* pp. 151-155) notes that “semantic markers are the elements in terms of which semantic relations are expressed in a lexical item in a dictionary entry and are intended to reflect whatever systematic relations hold between that item and the rest of the vocabulary of the language.”

#### 5. CONCLUSION

In this study, issues that anchor meaning postulations are brought to the fore. Meaning is transacted by recognizing the inevitability of processing written and spoken language use. Sperber and Wilson (1986) note that utterances have topic relevance that should be made easy to mean, by language users. This study reveals some attributes of meaning. Meaning is the context or situation that underpins the use of language. Language users do not rely on isolated expressions to convey meanings in language, even though words have their conventional or conceptual meanings. For effective communication, linguistic units are patterned as stretches, as communication expands into larger discourses. The use of language does not disregard inference-making from addressees end. Conclusively, semantics is concerned with diverse issues relating to meaning in language.

#### Notes

1. James R. Hurford, Brendan Heasley and Michael B. Smith (*ibid.* p. 247) note that “the position of a referring expression in a sentence is only very loosely correlated with the role of its referent in the situation described.”
2. Ogbulogu (*ibid.* p. 18) also adds that “the semantic component has been presented as being partially dependent on syntax and at the same time distinct. This produces a composite relationship between grammar and meaning. The deep structure is deemed to determine how sentence parts combine to make meaning for the whole. The syntactic component is the generative source of grammar. Thus, the output of syntax forms the input to the semantic component. The semantic component is perceived to operate on the structural description of sentences to provide a representation of the meaning of sentences. Grammar as used here is the totality of the mechanism and rules of language organization including meaning.”
3. Citing Chomsky, Fodor (*ibid.* p. 81) reports that “constructions which are assigned identical underlying structures in generative semantic grammars exhibit significant syntactic differences which cannot naturally be captured by a difference of transformational derivation but only by a difference of deep structure.”
4. Words or expressions are therefore linguistic signs to be perceived or construed appropriately by participants of discourse.

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