Research Article

Semantics: An Overview of Critical Postulations

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Abstract

This study examines semantics in terms of discrete perspectives on the concept of meaning. Language scholars believe that semantics is immersed in the study of meaning. Language is fascinating because of its potential to accommodate variation in meaning. In this regard, language has "vitality". Variation in language use establishes meaning as a continuum. The concept of meaning is construed in different ways by scholars of language and linguistics. Indeed, the literature of semantics reveals contentious positions on the subject, "meaning". The intractable nature of meaning does not only make it intriguing, but also spurs research on the subject. The classical scholars of semantics are rooted in the philosophy and grammar of language. Their contributions to the study of meaning, remain instructive. In this study, postulations of theorists are examined to provide details on the thrust and concerns of semantics as a field of language study. On the whole, this study concludes that meaning is: compositional; not exhaustive; subject to change; idea expressed; and based on linguistic rank scale.

Keywords: language, meaning, word, sentence, semantics.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study investigates properties of meaning in language users' world. The fact that different schools of thought elucidate the concept of meaning shows that semantics is not a new field of linguistic research. So long as societal phenomena remain subject to change, the search for meaning continues. It is therefore not surprising that the lexicon does not only contain old expressions, but also new ones and their meanings in a changing world. The study of the concept of meaning in language, is known as semantics. This does not imply that meaning is not the concern of other fields of language and linguistics. In semantics, formalist perspectives of language are major concerns, but the inevitable relationship that linguistic conventions have with extra-linguistic features of communication, makes extra-linguistic properties of language partly within the purview of semantics. The semantics-related postulations examined in this study, are a reflection of the state of the literature concerning the nature and properties of meaning.

2. Language

Language is a conventional means of communication. It is composed of sounds that are comined systematically to convey meaning. Fodor (1977, p. 19) submits that "language is integrated into our behaviour and our interactions with others in an intimate way. We USE it, to give commands, to answer questions, to greet each other, to argue, and so on. Language should be viewed not as an abstract calculus but as a tool, and just like a hammer or a can opener, the proper characterization of a linguistic expression must include an account of how it is used and what it is used for." Indeed, meaning is conveyed via language. This accentuates the claim that language is an instrument of communication. Although languages of the world share universal properties, there are features that are language-specific. Charles Ogbulogo (2012, p. 7) posits extensively concerning the term "language":

> … it is often expressed that language is a system, which uses a set of symbols agreed upon by a group. These symbols can be spoken or written, expressed as gestures or drawings … the symbols employed in language must be patterned in a systematic way. Indeed, language is organized at four principal levels – sounds (that is phonetics/phonology), words (that is morphology), sentences (that is syntax) and meaning (that is semantics). Indeed, phonology and syntax are concerned with the expressive power of language while semantics studies the

meaning of what has been expressed. Knowledge of grammar is an aspect of the innate cognitive ability of human beings. The power of interpretation complements that innate ability. Interpretation is an aspect of semantics. Therefore, language acquisition or learning includes not only the knowledge of the organization of sounds and structures, but also how to associate meaning to the structures. Semantics can, therefore, be characterized as the scientific study of meaning in language.

3. Semantics

Simply put, a field of language study which is concerned with the study of meaning in language is known as semantics. To understand the meaning and scope of semantics, there is need to understand comprehensively, theories of meaning: Componential (Decompositional) Theory of Meaning, Relational Componential Theory of Meaning, Generative Semantics Theory of Meaning etc. Ogbulogo (ibid.) asserts that "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." Semantics is concerned with: language users' knowledge of their languages from their knowledge of the world; individuation of concepts for studies; and the study of concepts that are isolated and decontextualized. According to William O' Grady and Archibald (2004, p. 174), "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." On the whole, semantics is basically about the sense and ideas of expressions. The study of sense and ideas of expressions within the purview of semantics, establishes systematic and objective postulations about the concept of meaning in language.

4. Semantics: Critical Postulations

In this section of the paper, we examine critical postulations on semantics, as they apply to the concept of meaning.

4.1 Meaning as Unstable Phenomenon

As a semantic notion, meaning is in a continuous state of flux; it changes with socially realistic phenomena. The literature of semantics is replete with old and contemporary meanings of expressions. For example, Charles Ogbulogo (ibid.) submits that "as early as 1933, Bloomfield observed a system of change in the meaning of words. Instances of change in the meaning of words overtime:

1. Meat used to represent all types of food;
2. Beater derives from the metaphor of biting;
3. The meaning of astound derived from the weakened meaning of thunder;
4. The meaning of "knight" has been elevation of the concept of boy;
5. The word "money" relates to the Latin word moneo (warn or admonish) because money was made in Rome at the temple of the goddess, Junto Moneta;
6. Tanks in modern warfare derived their names from the 1914-1918 war in which the Germans were deceived into believing that the structures being moved around were just water tanks;
7. The modern word "car" originated from the word "chariot"[1]."

Changes in meaning over time are accounted for at different levels of linguistic analysis, including grammar.

4.2 Meaning as a Pluralistic Concept

It is usually the case that a particular word can have different meanings, from which language users make appropriate choices in communicative situations. It is therefore not surprising that ambiguity abounds in the literature as a sense relation. John Paul O. N. and Bada D. D. (2016, p. 38) note that "ambiguity is an attribute of any concept, idea, and statements or claims whose meaning, intention or interpretation cannot be definitely resolved according to a rule or process consisting of a finite number of steps. It is the possibility of interpreting an expression in two or more distinct ways. Ambiguity may also mean doubtfulness or uncertain meaning or intention; an unclear, indefinite or equivocal word or expression which contains more than one meaning. The concept of ambiguity is generally centralized with vagueness. In ambiguity, specific and distinct interpretations are permitted (although some may not be immediately apparent), whereas with information that is vague, it is difficult to form any interpretation at the desired level of specialty." The pluralistic nature of meaning is common knowledge. Scholars contend that in any language, referents can be referred to by many expressions.

4.3 Meaning as Idea

Meaning can be construed as the the idea represented by expressions in a language user's mind. From this point of view, meaning can be images conjured when certain words or expressions are used in written or spoken communication. Commenting on the Ideational Theory of Meaning propounded by British empiricist philosopher, John Locke, Charles Ogbulogo (ibid.) submits that "the theory explains that the meaning attached to words can be separated from the waord themselves. This means that meaning originates in the mind in the form of ideas. Words are just sensible signs for the convenience of communication. Language is therefore, a mechanism for expressing thoughts and thought is viewed as a

succession of conscious ideas. The Ideational Theory is mentalistic. Thus, the meaning of a word is the mental image or idea of the word or the expression generated in the mind of the speaker or hearer." Expressions capture thoughts, objects and feelings in language users' linguistic repertoire. Language users' understanding and responses to the objects, thoughts and feelings which expressions represent, is simply inference-making. However, scholars contend that the Ideational Theory of Meaning is unable to capture certain facts about the nature of meaning, given its abstraction[2]. Fodor (ibid.) therefore contends for an expansion of the scope of meaning that can be captured by the Ideational Theory of Meaning. This will necessitate revisiting the theoretical framework. Theories of meaning cannot adequately account for meaning as a result of the intractable nature of meaning[2]; meaning is not exhaustive. Thomas Carlyle, cited in William O' Grady (ibid. p. 174) posits that "in every object there is inexhaustible meaning."

4.4 Meaning as Linguistic Rank Scale

At different levels of grammar (phoneme, morpheme, word and stretches), meaning is conveyed. A crucial point in the elucidation of grammar-unit-based meaning is that it is the product of how the units are combined or patterned. This is essentially about linguistic conventions. Language users explore their knowledge of linguistic conventions to use and interpret expressons or utterances, knowing that meaning is crucial in human communication. Even though meaning is viewed from the perspective of deep and surface structure, grammar units remain determinants of meaning (semantic component of grammar).

4.5 Meaning as Compositionality

Given the fact that meaning is conceptualized as idea(s), it can be argued that meaning is compositional in nature. That is, meaning can be generated from the compositionality of linguistic structures at the levels of words and stretches. Fodor (ibid. p. 14) submits that "… to know the meaning of a word is to have a certain idea associated with it, or, on the Be/havioural Theory, that to know the meaning of a word is to be conditioned to respond to utterances of it in a certain fashion." Words are construed as composition of ideas because their components function as semantic markers. 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." Within the purview of semantics, words have signification (linguistic signs). Within the perspective of comositionality, the word "woman" means "+ female and + adult".

4.6 Meaning as a Speaker-based Notion

Speaker-based perspective of meaning accentuates the link between pragmatics and semantics. Leech (1981, p. 319) rightly notes that "semantics is the level of linguistics which has been most affected by pragmatics, but the relation between semantics (in the sense of conceptual semantics) and pragmatics has remained a matter for fundamental disagreement. The central issue is: is it valid to separate pragmatics from semantics at all?" Speaker-meaning hinges on two basic facts: the pluralistic nature of meaning; and the possibility of expressing meaning via different expressions. By acknowledging that there is difference between an utterance and a sentence, speaker-meaning is brought to the fore[3]. Unlike sentences, utterances convey extra-linguistic meanings, being products of speakers' context-driven use of language. Charles W. Kreidler (1998, pp. 26-27) submits that "an utterance is often part of a larger discourse – a conversation, a formal lecture, a poem, a short story, a business letter, or a love letter, among other possibilities. A spoken discourse is any act of speech that occurs in a given place and during a given period of time. A written discourse may be the record of something that has been spoken, or it may originate for the purpose of being performed aloud, like a play or speech, or it may exist without ever having been spoken or intended to be spoken, like most written articles and books. The linguistic context of an utterance can makes a difference of meaning, as well as the social context." Speakers use language with known illocutionary contents. This implies that speaker-meaning is an intentional act. The meaning of an expression is therefore what it refers to from the speaker's end. This is a crucial feature of meaning because it aligns with speaker-hearer shared knowledge. John T. Kearns, cited in Savas L. T. (1994, p. 50) notes that "a linguistic act, or speech act, is an intentional, meaningful act performed with an expression or expressions. Even though the word 'speech' suggests saying something out loud, I use the two expressions 'speech act' and 'linguistic act' interchangeably for acts performed with expressions, whether they are out loud, in writing, or 'in one's head'. Both speakers/writers and their audiences (when they understand the speakers/writers) perform linguistic acts." Language users simply demonstrate cognition when the encoding and decoding of utterances are facilitated by their mental states (cognitive pragmatics). Broadly, we can view members of a speech community or linguistic community as speakers who use expressions with communicative presumptions; see Bach and Harnish's (1979) speech act theory to understand the notion "communicative presumption" which is a form of shared knowledge in language users' minds. For example, in Nigeria, the expression "Business Centre" does not connotatively mean "a business shop where things are sold". Rather, it connotatively means means "a shop where computer-related services are provided" (e.g. photocopy, lamination, binding, etc.). This is a geographically restricted meaning (regional meaning) referred to as "Geoimpliature" in Acheaoh (2011). The intentional nature of speakers' use of illocutionary acts is captured by David Harrah, cited in Savas L. T. (ibid.) who notes that "most speech acts seem to be focused and directed. They are intended as coming from the agent and going to the

receivers or audience. They are intended to have a certain point, and they are intended to be construed as having a certain point."

4.7 Meaning as a Cross-disciplinary Concept

The view that meaning is cross-disciplinary means that perspectives from different domains of research, including non-language domains, define meaning. Charles Ogbulogo (ibid.p. 7) asserts that "semantics is also related to sociology and anthropology because of the connection between language and culture. The whole essence of cultural relevance in language justifies the reliance on context for the meaning of expressions. Of particular interest to semantics is the intricate system of kinship terms and colour expressions[4]."

5. Conclusion

In this study, different perspectives are presented concerning the concept of meaning. The study reveals that meaning is defined by linguistic and extra-linguistic variables. This view corroborates Charles W. Kreidler (ibid. p. 27) who submits that "the meaning of a sentence is determined by the language, something known to all people who have learned to use that language. It is the meanings of the individual words and the meaning of the syntactic construction in which they occur. The meaning of an utterance is the meaning of the sentence plus the meanings of the circumstances: the time and place, the people involved, their backgrounds, their relationship to one another, and what they know about one another. All these circumstances we can call the physical-social context of an utterance." A wide range of facts about meaning, as this study reveals, are the basis for explaining semantics as a field of language study. James R. Hurford, Brendan Heasley and Michael B. Smith (2007) contend that "the semanticist needs to be able to think in abstractions. Doing semantics is largely a matter of conceptual analysis, exploring the nature of meaning in a careful and thoughtful way, using a wide range of examples, many of which we can draw from our own knowledge." Indeed, the discrete postulations about meaning as a semantic concept, reveals that semantics is a systematic linguistic investigation of the meaning of expressions in any language.

Notes

[1.] In addition, Charles Ogbulogo (ibid. p. 4) submits that "etymology, which focuses on the discovery of the origin and earlier meanings of words, also played an important role in earlier studies in semantics. However, it should be noted that there is a challenge with etymological studies. The major one being that no one can state with certainty the origin of the meaning of any word."

[2.] For example, Charles Ogbulogo (ibid. p. 25 submits that "the Ideational Theory is perceived to be abstract or imprecise because of dependence on mental images for decoding the meaning of words. Ideas may be too vague to comprehend. There are also many words (especially the abstract once) that do not have specific physical reality, let alone mental manifestation. It is unthinkable that the mind can create an image of what sense cannot perceive. The theory may not be able to account for synonymous expressions. It may also be difficult to use the theory to explain the mental image conjured by sentences. Indeed, sentences derive their meaning more from the order."

[3.] Charles Kreidler (ibid. pp. 11-12) makes the following elaborate submission about speakers of any language:
1. Speakers know, in a general way, whether something is or is not meaningful in their language …"
2. Speakers of a language generally agree as to when two sentences have essentially the same meaning and when they do not …
3. Speakers generally agree when two words have essentially the same meaning – in a given context …
4. Speakers recognize when the meaning of one sentence contradicts another sentence …
5. Speakers generally agree when two words have opposite meanings …
6. Synonyms and antonyms have to have some common elements of meaning in order to be, respectively, the same or different. Words can have some element of meaning without being synonymous or antonymous …
7. Some sentences have double meanings; they can be interpreted in two ways. Speakers are aware of this fact because they appreciate jokes which depend on two-way interpretation …
8. Speakers know how knowledge is used when people interact. If one person asks a question or makes a remark, there are various possible answers to the question or replies one might make to the remarks …
9. Speakers are aware that two statements may be related in such a way that if ane is true, the other must also be true.
10. Speakers know that the message conveyed in one sentence may presuppose other pieces of knowledge …

[4.] In this regard, Charles W. Kreidler (ibid. pp. 2-3) submits extensively:
Three disciplines are with the systematic study of 'meaning' in itself: psychology, philosophy and linguistics. Their particular interests and approaches are different, yet each borrows from and contributes to the others. Psychologists are interested in how individual humans   learn, how they retain, recall, or lose information; how they classify, make judgements and solve problems – in other words, how the human mind seeks meanings and works with them.

Philosophers of language are concerned with how we know, how any particular fact that we know or accept as true is related to other possible facts – what must be antecedent (a presupposition) to that fact and what is a likely consequence, or entailment of it; what statements are mutually contradictory, which sentences express the same meaning in different words, and which are unrelated …

Linguists want to understand how language works. Just what common knowledge do two people possess when they share a language – English, Swahili, Korean or whatever – that makes it possible for them to give and get information, to express their feelings and their intentions to one another, and to be understood with a fair degree of success?

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