



Sense and Reference in Perspectives

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Abstract

This study examines two crucial concepts in semantics: sense and reference. In using language to convey meaning, the systematic nature of language is demonstrated by its users. For this reason, scholars contend that linguistic semantics reveals how language organizes and expresses meaning. Essentially, sense and reference are forms of meaning in language. Charles Kreidler (1998) succinctly captures sense and reference in his claim 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 the 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.” Perspectives on sense and reference vary in the literature of semantics. The instrumentality of sense and reference in the study of meaning is worthy of scholarly attention. From the perspective of sense and reference, it is clear that language users do not use language to address non-existing entities; they deploy from their minds, linguistic conventions to address varied subjects in the universe of discourse: our real world. In conveying sense and reference, language heavily relies on words or stretches (phrases, clauses and sentences). Interestingly, at a discourse level (as in pragmatic use of language in communicative contexts), the meaning, scope and dynamics of sense and reference are unleashed to reveal the vitality of language. This study concludes that sense and reference are: logic-based, word-driven, sentence-determined, universal, context-sensitive and presupposed facts.

Keywords: Semantics, sense, reference, meaning, perspectives.

1. INTRODUCTION

A study of sense and reference is an investigation of the communicative potentials of language. According to John Locke, cited in Charles Ogbulogo (2012), “... language is a mechanism for expressing thoughts and thought is viewed as the succession of conscious ideas ...” Sense and reference convey the nature and essence of human communication. The literature of semantics reveals the different ways scholars view sense and reference. Postulations on sense and reference count in all human languages, irrespective of their linguistic peculiarities. Sense and reference are properties of meaning; in communicative situations, this claim is established. They operate as extra-linguistic underpinnings. Although meaning in language is subject to change over a period of time (language etymology), language users know what obtain(s) as the sense or reference of an expression or utterance during the period of a communicative event, and this facilitates the transaction of meaning. Noting that sense and reference can be language-driven, Acheoah (2015) evolves the term Operative Language (OL), and contends that language users’ knowledge or mastery of the linguistic norms of an Operative Language – the language that is engaged in an on-going communicative event – determines the use and interpretation of expressions/utterances in human communication. In this study, discrete perspectives on sense and reference are presented to show the nature of meaning in language.

2. Semantics

Semantics is the study of the rule-governed systems (linguistic conventions) for determining the meaning of words and linguistic stretches. Its analysis of meaning is therefore not arbitrary. According to Patrick Griffiths (2006, p. 1), “semantics is the study of the “toolkit” for meaning: knowledge encoded in the vocabulary of the language and in its patterns for building more elaborate meanings, up to the level of sentence meanings. Pragmatics is concerned with the use of these tools in meaningful communication. Pragmatics is about the interaction of semantic knowledge with our knowledge of the world, taking into account contexts of use.” Semantics is descriptive as it explains meanings of words and sentences from extra-contextual stance. This gives language users insights into the nature of the language they use in any on-going written or spoken communication. Charles Ogbulogo (ibid. p. 3) submits that “Alfred Korzybski was the first person to attempt studying semantics as a distinct discipline, separate from the discipline of philosophy. Incidentally, Korzybski was a non-linguist who was passionate about introducing a generally acceptable science of communication. Prior to the work of Korzybski, semantics has been looked at from a non-scientific perspective but Korzybski’s work was the first formal attempt at bringing in a scientific model to the study of semantics.” Providing more insights on the term “semantics”, Charles Ogbulogo (ibid.) posits that “in semantics, we study the meaning of words and sentences of languages. Linguistic semantics studies meaning in a systematic and objective way. Since meaning as a concept is not static, a great deal of the idea of meaning still depends on the context and participants in the act of communication.” Charles Ogbulogo (ibid.) reports 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 studies words as having meanings outside communicative contexts and situations. William O’ Grady and Archibald (2004, p. 174), mentions four core concepts in semantics as: (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.

3. Sense and Reference

In this study, sense and reference are viewed as having theoretical and practical links with the concept of meaning. Charles Ogbulogo (ibid. p. 9) submits that “reference relates to things, people and events in the world. It is the object or entity to which a linguistic expression relates. Thus, the referent of the word “boy” is a human being called boy. If meaning were restricted to reference, many words without obvious referent would be left out. It will be difficult to explain the meaning of prepositions, conjunctions and other grammatical units. Again, several linguistic expressions may relate to single referents. To avoid these limitations, semanticists use the word’s denotation and connotation to distinguish between meaning based on ostensiveness (that is, pointing) or reference and extension ...” To understand sense and reference within the purview of in semantics, the Referential Theory of Meaning is instructive. The theory, according to Charles Ogbulogo (ibid. p. 25), is “associated with Ogden and Richards (1922). According to the Referential Theory, the meaning of the word is the object it refers to in the external world. That actual object is the referent. The connection between the words or expressions and their referents is through the process of thought. The words or expressions are just symbols.

One major criticism of this theory is that there are many words without physical objects they refer to. Such words as intelligent, ugly, rich, poor, and so on, which do not have the concrete qualities of nouns may not have referents. Again, polysemous words (words with more than one meaning) may have the additional problem of having more than one referent. Items that belong to group may not have physical objects that are identical. Every sub-group has specific feature. Individual members of the smallest sub-group also have their identities. Therefore, we cannot talk about absolute identification for referents. The Referential Theory may not have a way to explain the meaning of words in the categories of adjectives, adverbs, prepositions and conjunction.” Considering the fact that sense and reference have communicative features, as evident in instances of actual language use, they reveal language as a conventional instrument of communication. The sounds that form language is combined systematically to convey meaning (sense and reference).

4. Perspectives on Sense and Reference

In this section, we examine discrete perspectives on sense and reference, as they obtain in the literature.

4.1 Sense and Reference as Meaning

Expressions in any language have semantic relationship with what speakers or writers use them for in the linguistic systems of a given language. This is the case even when such expressions have synonymous equivalents. Thus, sense and reference are meanings expressed in language use. Even though sense and reference are different concepts, they express meanings at different levels: overt and abstract levels. According to James R. Hurford, Brendan Heasley and Michael B. Smith (2007, p. 31), “the referent of an expression is often a thing or a person in the world; whereas the sense of an expression is not a thing at all. In fact, it is difficult to say what sort of entity the sense of an expression is. Intuitively, it is sometimes useful to think of sense as that part of the meaning of an expression that is left over when reference is factored out. It is much easier to say whether or not two expressions have the same sense. (Like being able to say that

two people are in the same place without being able to say where they are). The sense of an expression is an abstraction, but it is helpful to note that it is an abstraction that can be entertained in the mind of a language user ...” It is clear therefore, that sense is inevitably constitutive of meaning, whereas reference may not abound in an expression. The potential of a sentence to convey meaning is inseparable from its reference-making potential. James R. Hurford, Brendan Heasley and Michael B. Smith (ibid.) contend that “most utterances contain, or are accompanied by one or more acts of referring. An act of referring is the picking out of a particular referent by a speaker in the course of a particular utterance.” In this regard, the referent of an expression is what it means – its representation.

4.2 Sense and Reference as Sentential Relation

In linguistics, meanings are conveyed by expressions through heavy reliance on stretches. Sense and reference are not conveyed in isolation because they are components of propositions which are essentially sentential. Propositions are discrete thoughts in which referents abound, and such referents are processed with other units in a sentence to work out what can be regarded as the sense of an utterance. Meaning is not just a word-based semantic relationship. It is also a sentence-based semantic relationship. The syntagmatic relationships that words have with other linguistic units in a sentence have different meanings (e.g. collocation). On the other hand, paradigmatic relationships include synonymy, antonymy, etc. As a model of linguistic analysis, Structuralism shows the meaning inputs that linguistic stretches generate. Charles Ogbulogo (ibid. p. 13) asserts that “the father of structuralism is Ferdinand de Saussure. Structuralism as linguistic theory considers the structures and systems in language. Emphasis is on the process of segmenting and classifying the features of utterances. Under structuralism, emphasis is on the analysis of sense relations that connect words and meaning. Sense is an expression of the system of semantic relationships a given word keeps with other expressions in a given language. This relationship is usually paradigmatic in terms of similarity and dissimilarity. The relationship of similarity occurs as synonymy, while the relationship of dissimilarity is referred to as antonym. Structural processes are useful in lexical relations in the study of words.” It is worthy of note that deep and surface structure analysis of linguistic stretches produce fascinating dimensions in the study of meaning, and by extension, sense. For example, Charles Ogbulogo (ibid. p. 14) submits that “Noam Chomsky is the father of Generative Grammar. According to the theory of Transformational Generative Grammar, knowledge of language is generated in the mind. A language user has a finite set of rules from which he can generate an infinite number of sentences. This power of generation is facilitated by the power of transformational rules, which convert deep structures sentence types into other various forms via transformations. At the beginning of Chomsky’s Generative Grammar, there was the assertion that syntax was autonomous and independent of semantics. It was only later in *Aspect of the Theory of Syntax* (1965) that Chomsky pointed out that the semantic component specifies the rules necessary for the interpretation of deep structures. This observation enhanced the semantic representation of sentences. Deep structures specify the original meaning of sentences before the application of transformations.” In formulating theories of meaning, semantics explores a wide range of grammar rules¹.

4.3 Sense and Reference as Verbal/Non-Verbal Communication

Sense and reference are immersed in meaning, which can be conveyed through verbal or non-verbal communication. Charles W. Kridler (ibid. p. 18) posits that “... meanings are partly communicated by the emphases and melodies that are called prosody. Vocal and gestural signs can also be the means in transmitting meanings.” Like verbal communication, non-verbal communication is context-driven. Acheoah (2015) evolves two terms to explain the communication of textual message via non-verbal means: “semiotic particulars” and “Behavioural Implicature”. In a similar vein, Acheoah (2023) examines face acts as non-verbal communication and concludes that in the communication of meanings in the form of feelings, thoughts and emotions, non-verbal communication remains potent, even though there is lack of research in that direction. Language users’ ability to convey meaning via non-verbal communication is a demonstration of pragmatic competence.

4.4 Sense and Reference as Logic

Fundamentally, the process of using and interpreting language is not arbitrary. Early language philosophers elucidate the meaning relationships of sentences through deductive reasoning (logic). Patrick Griffiths (ibid. p. 13) is in tandem with the view that sense and reference are logic-based. According to Patrick Griffiths (ibid. p. 13), “the most rigorous varieties of semantics (called formal semantics because they use systems of formal logic to set out descriptions of meanings and theories of how the meanings of different sorts of expressions; see Lappin 2001) accord importance to differences between kinds of denotation. Thus count nouns, like tree, may be said to denote sets of things (and it is the denotation being a set that is of interest rather than what things are in the set); property words, like purple, also denote sets (sets of things that have the property in question); singular names denote individuals; mass nouns, like honey, denote substances; spatial relation words, like in, denote pairs of things that have that spatial relation between them; the most straightforward types of sentences, like Amsterdam is in Holland, can be analyzed as denoting either facts or falsehoods ...” The logic that language users deploy in the interpretation of grammatical categories in context, is a product of their linguistic competence. For example, language users explore their semantic knowledge of deictic expressions in interpreting such expressions in contexts. Linguistic competence does not only facilitate the use of referring expressions,

but also facilitates the processing of expressions and propositions to determine the sense therein. Commenting extensively on logic, James R. Hurford, Brendan Heasley and Michael B. Smith (ibid. p. 150) assert:

logic deals with meanings in a language system (i.e. with propositions, etc.), not with actual behaviour, although logical calculations are an ingredient of any rational behaviour. A system for describing logical thinking contains a notation for representing propositions unambiguously and rules of inference defining how propositions go together to make up valid arguments.

Because logic deals with such very basic aspects of thought and reasoning, it can sometimes seem as if it is ‘stating the obvious’. The thing to remember is that one is not, in the end, interested in individual particular examples of correct logical argument (for, taken individually, such examples are usually very obvious and trivial), but rather in describing the whole system of logical inference, i.e. one is trying to build up a comprehensive account of all logical reasoning, from which the facts about the individual examples will follow automatically. One only looks at individual examples in order to check that the descriptive system that one is building does indeed match the facts.

Logic, with its emphasis on absolute precision, has a fascination for students who enjoy a mental discipline. Thus, in addition to its contribution to our understanding of the ‘Laws of Thought’, it can be good fun.

The crucial role of logic in the study of meaning dates back to the era of great philosophers like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Similarly, the works of classical language philosophers like J. L. Austin (1962), Searle (1969) and H. P. Grice (1975) capture logical reasoning².

4.5 Sense and Reference as Universality

Sense and reference can be viewed as universality, given the fact that presuppositions are universal perspectives or beliefs that participants of discourse hold about referents and sense conveyed via language use. There are popular beliefs not only about social system, but also about people (stereotypes). In working out sense and using referring expressions, language users demonstrate their knowledge of their immediate and larger society (universality). Patrick Griffiths (ibid. p. 83) submits that “knowledge is sometimes defined as true beliefs. Presuppositions do not have to be true: communications may depend on mutual awareness of fictions and pretenses, on ideologies, prejudices, national stereotypes that are false of many individuals, and so on. That is why presuppositions assumed to be shared between people communicating by means of language were said ... to be beliefs, preconceptions and information, rather than knowledge.”

The postulations of classical language philosophers direct contemporary research in semantics. Such postulations reveal sense and reference as universal constructs. Language users are familiar with the referents that expressions pick from the real world. Although sense operates as an abstraction, language users rely on social institutions and value systems to probe the sense in any utterance. Thus, sense and reference operate as universal constructs. Charles Ogbulogo (ibid. p. 8) submits that “concepts mediate between the mind constructs and objects in the real world. Saussure’s sign and Ogden and Richards’ semantic triangle derive from the conceptual approach to semantics. The approach emphasizes the power of the mind to make images and to associate these images with objects and ideas. The approach is highly mentalistic, relying on the ability to associate one thing with another. This ability of association may not yield universal understanding. That explains why language experts develop dictionaries to aggregate meaning on a universal basis. Interestingly, the production of dictionaries relies heavily on denotations and connotations, two major angles to the study of meaning.”

4.6 Sense and Reference as Contextualization

In specifying sense and reference, context is interpreted accordingly by participants of discourse. Meaning is negotiated through speaker-hearer or writer-reader awareness of the contexts that underpin expressions or utterances in communicative events. Referents and the sense relations that are attached to propositions are usually context-driven. Patrick Griffiths (ibid. p. 81) opines that “context is used, not only as a foundation for inferring which referents are being talked about, and which senses of ambiguous expressions are likely to be the intended ones, but also to decide whether any meanings should be replaced to yield figurative explicatures. The reason why a particular figurative interpretation is chosen as better than other interpretations that the listener or reader can think of may be that a literal interpretation is somehow deviant (untrue, too obvious, or empty of content, instance); alternatively – or additionally – the context may be one that favours figurative usage.” The role of context in the interpretation of sense is not restricted to literal propositions. It also concerns non-literal propositions. For example, Patrick Griffiths (ibid. p. 83) notes that “more generally, utterances – whether figuratively or literally intended – are not made in a vacuum: when we interpret utterances, we use as background our best guesses about what the communicator assumes are the preconceptions and

relevant information that we can bring to the comprehension task. Such presumed-to-be-shared beliefs that are taken for granted by the speaker or writer and are expected to be used for interpreting the message are called presuppositions.”

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, sense and reference are investigated in terms of their discrete features in the literature of semantics. The repertoire of language is so vast that language users engage different referents and sense relations in communicative events. The pluralistic nature of meaning presupposes that the sense relations of expressions vary. Thomas Carlyle, cited in William O’ Grady (ibid. p. 174) rightly notes that “in every object there is inexhaustible meaning.” The participants of discourse are usually aware of the similarities and differences that operate in the use of words and sentences. They know the presuppositions that abound in linguistic constructions. In addition, they are aware of the truth-conditional principles that underpin sentences. It is also worthy of note that referents can be referred to by many expressions. Sense and reference relate to meaning in terms of being ideational; language users know the referents and referring expressions used in any ongoing communication. They know the sense relations that operate at syntagmatic axis. Sense and reference are as ideational as the concept of meaning itself. A study of sense and reference is immersed in “linguistic semantics”, which accounts for how the formal properties and rules of language elucidate the discrete sense relations of expressions and propositions. Charles W. Kreidler (ibid. p. 13) opines that “the study of meaning can be undertaken in various ways. Linguistic semantics is an attempt to explicate the knowledge of any speaker of a language which allows that speaker to communicate facts, feelings, intentions and products of the imagination to other speakers and to understand what they communicate to him or her. Language differs from the communication systems of other animals in being stimulus-free and creative. Early in life every human acquires the essentials of a language – a vocabulary and the pronunciation, use and meaning of each item in it. The speaker’s knowledge is largely implicit. The linguist attempts to construct a grammar, an implicit description of the language and the rules by which they interact. Semantics is one part of the grammar; phonology, syntax and morphology are other parts.” It is instructive that language users determine the sense and reference of expressions, For example, the referent (sense/reference) of the expression “Business Centre” in the Nigerian speech community is different from its denotative meaning, and this explains why native speakers of English do not understand the expression as used in the Nigerian context. From the perspective of sense and reference, language is a mechanism for expressing thoughts, and thought is viewed as a succession of conscious idea(s). The compositional feature of language makes sense and reference possible in any language³. It is worthy of note that there is the possibility of expanding or restricting the sense and reference of expressions⁴.

Words are construed as composition of ideas because their components function as semantic markers. Fodor (1977, 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 compositionality, the word “woman” means “+ female” and “+ adult”. Conclusively, this study reveals that the investigation of sense and reference is a study of the attributes of meaning, which is a conceptual system.

Notes

1. The process explains meaning relationships such as tautology, contradiction, ambiguity, anomaly, hyponymy, paraphrase, entailment, synonymy, etc.
2. In this regard, H. P. Grice’s (ibid.) “Logic and Conversation” is particularly instructive.
3. This implies that sense and reference can be attached or detached from expressions.
4. Theories of truth-conditions and entailments are instructive in this direction. 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.”

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