

Dimensions of word meaning



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1. Introduction

The issue of defining and clearing the meaning of the words is by no means an easy talk. In other words, words are names or labels for things. Besides, linguists also realize the need to distinguish what a word or expression denotes from what they can be used to refer to, we will identify the difference between denotation and reference. There are many different ideas that the meaning of a word reflects reality or express human conceptualization of reality, as it were. However, we will discuss about various attempts designed to define probably one of the most difficult issues of semantics -meaning.

2. Problems

Depending on what it is understood by meaning, we can distinguish two main semantic theories:

- *the referential / denotational approach*- meaning is the action of putting words into relationship with the world;
- *the representational /conceptual approach* -meaning is the notion, the concept or the mental image of the object or situation in reality as reflected in man's mind.

The two basic types of meaning were first mentioned by S. Stati in 1971- referential definitions which analyse meaning in terms of the relation symbol- object /referent; conceptual definitions which regard the relation symbol- thought/reference.

2. 1 . Denotational /Referential Theories of Meaning .

Before describing the characteristics of these theories, a clarification of the terms used is necessary. All languages allow speakers to describe or model aspects of what they perceive. In semantics the action of picking out or identifying individuals/ locations with words is called *referring/denoting*. To some linguists the two terms, *denote* and *refer* are synonymous. J. Saeed (1997: 23) gives two examples of proper names whose corresponding referents are easily recognizable

e. g. *I saw Michael Jackson on TV last night.*

We have just flown back from Paris.

The underlined words refer to/denote the famous singer, respectively the capital of France, even if in some contexts they may be used to designate a person different from the singer, or a locality other than the capital of France.

To John Lyons the terms *denote* and *refer* are not synonymous. The former is used to express the relationship linguistic expression- world, whereas the latter is used for the action of a speaker in picking out entities in the world. In the example

A sparrow flew into the room.

A sparrow and *the room* are NPs that *refer* to things in the world.; *room*, *sparrow* *denote* classes of items. In conclusion, *referring* is what speakers do and *denoting* is a property of words. Denotation is a stable relationship in a

language, it doesn't depend on anyone's use of the word unlike the action of referring.

Returning to the problem of theories of meaning, they are called *referential/denotational* when their basic premise is that we can give the meaning of words and sentences by showing how they relate to situations- proper names denote individuals, nouns denote entities or sets of individuals, verbs denote actions, adverbs denote properties of actions, adjectives denote properties of individuals-. In case of sentences, they denote situations and events. The difference in meaning between a sentence and its negative counterpart arises from the fact that they describe two situations

e. g. *There is a book on the shelf.*

There isn't a book on the shelf.

Referential theories consider meaning to be something outside the world itself, an extra-linguistic entity. This means reducing the linguistic sign, i. e. the word to its material aspect, be it phonic or graphic.

The impossibility of equating meaning with the object denoted by a given word can be explained considering three major reasons

1. the identity meaning-object would leave meaning to a large extent undefined because not all the characteristic traits of an object as an extra- linguistic reality are identical with the distinctive features of lexical meaning;
2. not all words have a referent in the outside world; there are:

- non-referring expressions *so, very, maybe, if, not*, etc.

- referring expressions used generically:

e. g. *A murder is a serious felony.*

- words like nouns, pronouns with variable reference depending on the context:

e. g. *The president decides on the foreign policy.*

She didn't know what to say.

- words which have no corresponding object in the real world in general or at a certain moment:

e. g. *The unicorn is a mythical animal.*

She wants to make a cake this evening.

- different expressions/words that can be used for the same referent, the meaning reflecting the perspective from which the referent is viewed

e. g. *The morning star is the same thing as the evening star.*

The president of the USA/ George Bush/ Barbara Bush's husband was to deliver a speech.

Besides the referential differences between expressions, we can make useful distinctions among the things referred to by expressions- *referent* thing picked out by uttering the expression in a particular context; *extension of an expression* = set of things which could possibly be the referent of that

expression. In Lyon's terminology the relationship between an expression and its extension is called *denotation*. (Saeed 1997: 27)

A distinction currently made by modern linguists is that between *the denotation* of a word and *the connotations* associated with it. For most linguists, denotation represents the cognitive or communicative aspect of meaning (Schaff 1965), while connotation stands for the emotional overtones a speaker usually associates with each individual use of a word. Denotative meaning accounts for the relationship between the linguistic sign and its denotatum. But one shouldn't equate denotation with the denotatum. What is the denotation of a word which has no denotatum.

As far as the attitude of the speaker is concerned, denotation is regarded as neutral, since its function is simply to convey the informational load carried by a word. The connotative aspects of meaning are highly subjective, springing from personal experiences, which a speaker has had of a given word and also from his/her attitude towards his/ her utterance and/ or towards the interlocutors (Leech, 1990: 14). For example *dwelling, house, home, abode, residence* have the same denotation but different connotations.

Given their highly individual nature, connotations seem to be unrepeatable but, on the other hand, in many instances, the social nature of individual experience makes some connotative shades of meaning shared by practically all the speakers of a language. It is very difficult to draw a hard line between denotation and connotation in meaning analysis, due to the fact that elements of connotation are drawn into what is referred to as basic,

denotative meaning. By taking into account connotative overtones of meaning, its analysis has been introduced a new dimension, the pragmatic one.

Talking about reference involves talking about nominals- names and noun phrases. They are labels for people, places, etc. Context is important in the use of names; names are definite in that they carry the speaker's assumption that his/ her audience can identify the referent (Saeed, 1997: 28).

2. 2. The Relationship Between Sense And Reference

The referent of an expression is often a thing or person in the world.

The sense of an expression is not a thing at all it is an abstraction that can be entertained in the mind of a language users.

It's difficult to say what sort of entity the sense of an expression it is...it is useful to think of sense as that is a part of meaning of an expression that is left over when reference is factored out.

It's much easier to say whether or not expressions have the same sense.

3. Connotation and denotation revisited

We have discussed the meaning of a word, it helps to know the difference between denotation and connotation. These two terms are easy to confuse because they describe related concepts. Moreover, both denotation and connotation stem from the Latin word.

The connotation of a word is the additional meaning that the word has beyond its denotative meaning. It shows people's emotion and/or attitudes towards what the word refers to.

The Denotation of a word is the core, central or referential meaning of the word found in a dictionary. In English, a content word may have its denotation described in terms of a set of semantic features that serve to identify the particular concept associated with the word

For example, the words home and house have similar denotations or primary meanings: a home is "a shelter that is the usual residence of a person, family, or household," and a house is "a building in which people live." However, these terms carry different associations or secondary meanings, also known as connotations. Many people would agree that home connotes a sense of belonging and comfort, whereas house conveys little more than a structure.

The connotation of a word depends on cultural context and personal associations, but the denotation of a word is its standardized meaning within the English language.

3. The change and development of meaning

3.1 . Change of meaning

The development of vocabulary is the first of all reflected in the development of semantic structure of the words: new meanings of the words appear, some old meanings drop out of the language or coexist with the new ones. The first is extending the meanings of existing words or acquisition of new meaning

by existing words based on the occurrence of a relationship between the old and new meaning.

For example:

1. She turned a cold face to me

2. My brother is a pig

=> Semantic extensions

Occurrence of a relationship between the old and new meaning

3. 2. Causes of semantic change

The factors accounting for semantic changes may be subdivided into three main groups:

a. Extra-linguistic causes :

- various changes in the life of the speech community
- changes in economic and social structures
- changes in culture, knowledge, technology, arts
- changes of ideas, scientific concepts, way of life

b. Linguistic factors :

- Ellipsis - a change of meaning when the meaning of a word-combination is given to only one word of this combination

For example: daily

daily – “ happening every day” – a daily newspaper

daily – “ a daily newspaper”

- Discrimination of synonyms – conflict of synonyms when a perfect synonym of a native word is borrowed from other language.

For example: tide

OE tide – 1)” time” 2)” season” 3)” hour” from French – time, season, hour

Modern English tide – “ regular rise and fall of the sea caused by the moon”

c. One more linguistic cause of semantic change is called fixed context.

E. g. the word token brought into competition with the word sign and became restricted in use to a number of set expressions, such as love token, token of respect etc. and also became specialized in meaning.

3. 3. Nature of semantic change:

a. Restriction of meaning(narrowing) restriction of the types or referents denoted by the word.

It can be illustrated by the semantic development of the word hound which used to denote ‘ dog of any breed’ but now denotes only ‘ a dog used in the chase’. If the word with a new restricted meaning comes to be used in the specialized vocabulary of some limited group within the speech community it is usual to speak of the specialization of meaning.

b. Extension of meaning(widening) application of the word to wider variety of referents

It may be illustrated by the word target which originally meant ‘ a small round shield’ but now means ‘ anything that is fired at’. If the word with extended meaning passed from the specialized vocabulary into common use, the result of the semantic change is described as generalization of meaning.

The connotational meaning may be changed in two ways as follows:

Amelioration (elevation) of meaning implies the improvement of the connotational component of meaning, e. g. the word minister originally denoted ‘ a servant’ but now – ‘ a civil servant of higher rank, a person administering a department of state’.

Deterioration (degradation) of the meaning implies the acquisition by the word of some derogatory emotive charge, e. g. the word boor was originally to denote ‘ a peasant’ and then acquired a derogatory connotational meaning and came to denote ‘ a clumsy or ill-bred fellow’.

4. Transference of meaning

4. 1. Definition of metaphor:

The other perspective from which we can approach semantic change is the nature of the change or the connection between the new and the old meaning. We also call this feature a transfer. The meaning can be transferred from the original to the new position via three main types of association:

Metaphor is the semantic change based on the association of similarity between referents – the meaning is transferred on the basis of the fact that the two referents resemble one another. The basic structure of the metaphor is very simple. There is a thing we are talking about and that to which we are comparing it.

The transference may be based on similarity of

- Shape. E. g: head of a cabbage, crane bulb, the teeth of a saw
- Position. E. g: the foot of mountain
- Movement. E. g: caterpillar of a tank.
- Function. E. g: the key to the mystery
- Colour. E. g: orange, rose.
- Size. E. g: midget, elephantine
- The names of the parts of human body are transferred to other objects (the nose of a plane, the leg of the table)
- The names of animals are also often transferred to the human beings (A cunning person is a fox, a spiteful person is a snake, a rude person is a bear, a hard-working person is a bee or a beaver, bird's view, crocodile tears)
- Proper names transferred to common ones(a jealous person is called an Othello, an eloquent speaker is a Cicero.)

4. 1. 2. The differences between similes and metaphors

Both compare things that are essentially unlike.

Metaphor implies the comparison – hidden comparison (no formal element of comparison)

Simile expresses the comparison by the use of some word or phrase- like, as, than, similar to, resembles, seems.

For example

My love is a rose -> metaphor

My love is like a rose -> comparison

4. 1. 3. The classifications of metaphor

- Living (poetic, individual) when a word is used in unusual meaning and metaphor is felt

E. g: Peace is our fortress.

- Faded (trite) metaphor is one which lost its freshness because of long use and became habitual

E. g: Fruitful effort, golden youth, to fall in love

- Dead metaphor - where metaphoric sense is not felt. Dead metaphor are words which lost their direct meaning and are used only figuratively

E. g: To ponder originally meant " to weigh", but it is used now only in the meaning " to mediate, to consider thoughtfully"

4. 2. Definition of metonymy

Metonymy (contiguity of meaning) – the name of an attribute of a thing is used instead of the thing itself. In other words, metonymy can be defined as the substitution of one word for another with which it is associated.

For example

Hollywood” is used as a metonym (an instance of metonymy) for American cinema, because of the fame and cultural identity of Hollywood, as the historical center of movie studios and movie stars. Proper names as metonymy can be illustrated by : read Shakspeare, listen to Mozart, it was a Waterloo...

Major cases of metonymy:

1. Use the name of container instead of the thing contained: E. g: to drink a glass, ...
2. Names of parts of human body may be used as symbols
E. g: clever head, kind heart,...
3. The concrete is used instead of abstract
E. g: Let me give you a hand; to go to bed
4. The materials are used for the things is made of the materials
E. g: glass
5. The name of the author is used for his works.
E. g: Picasso, Ampere, Watts
6. Part is used for the whole and vice versa
E. g: We all live under the same roof.

She is wearing a fox.

7. The instrument which the doer uses in performing

E. g. she is a good piano,

8. Other types:

E. g: He always running after the skirt. (a woman or girl)

Other types of meaning tranfer are:

Eponymy (functional change) – common words are derived from proper nouns, e. g.: sandwich, china, rugby, White House (American government).

Personification – assigning human qualities to things, e. g.: the paper says...

Euphemisms – the need for a less expressive word, substitution of words which can be harmful for words with milder connotations, e. g.: restroom (toilet), pass away (die), sleep with ... (have a sexual intercourse with...)

Hyperbole – exaggeration of meaning, statement not to be taken literally, e. g.: wait for ages, weight a ton, I'll kill him when I see him...

Litotes – the opposite of hyperbole, the understatement which can be often ironical or moderating, e. g.: It wasn't bad (in the sense of It was good), She's not stupid (She's rather smart)...

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