Mental Lexicon

Fixed Meaning and Fuzzy Meaning Viewpoints

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- According to her viewpoint, words are precision instruments which should be used with care and accuracy. Supposedly, educated people will know exactly which word to use when, because in the course of their education they will have learnt precisely what each words means. The overall assumption is that there exists, somewhere, a basic meaning for each word, which individuals should strive to attain. We can label this the *fixed meaning* assumption.

- There is however, an alternative viewpoint, which argues that words cannot be assigned a firm meaning, and that 'Natural language concepts have vague boundaries and fuzzy edges'. Word meanings cannot be pinned down, as if they were dead insects. Instead, they flutter around elusively like live butterflies. Or perhaps they should be likened to fish which slither out of one's grasp. This alternative viewpoint can be called the *fuzzy meaning* assumption. If it is correct, then it may be extremely difficult to characterize the entries in a person's mental lexicon.
So, we can see that there are two main viewpoints, but there is no simple solution. Perhaps the notion of a fixed meaning is promoted mainly by lexicographers and schoolmasters, since their jobs would clearly be simpler if words did have precise definitions. In contrast, we might find that the *fuzzy meaning* adherents were poets and mystics. As far as the mental lexicon is concerned, we need to know whether it is possible to assign a firm definition to any word or whether words inevitably have fuzzy meanings.
Fixed Meaning Viewpoint

- The supporters of the fixed meaning viewpoint say that words have fixed meanings and they suggest that we have words filed in our brain as a series of snapshots.
- But, there are a number of difficulties with this snapshot viewpoint as a general theory of word meaning.
- One major problem is that we have usually seen the object we are talking about from different angles. For example, take the word cat. Are we talking about a cat which is awake and walking about? Or one which is curled up asleep? Or one which is licking milk from a saucer? So people would need a whole dossier of photographs for every single cat they have ever seen in every single position.
- So, problems like this one, explain why the notion that meaning involves a mental image has generally proved unsatisfactory.
Fixed Meaning Viewpoint

- On the other hand, there is also another viewpoint supported by philosophers. They argue that in order to capture the meaning of a word, one should establish a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, in other words, a list of conditions which are absolutely necessary to the meaning of the word, and which, taken together, are sufficient or adequate to encapsulate the meaning. To give an example for this viewpoint, we'll take the word SQUARE. This has four necessary conditions:

  1. a closed, flat figure; 2. having four sides; 3. all sides are equal in length; 4. all interior angles are equal.

- So, these four conditions are necessary in order for something to be a square, and when combined, they are sufficient to define and identify a square, and only a square. Presumably anyone who understands the concept of a square must be aware of these conditions, even if they could not express them in quite this way.
Fixed Meaning Viewpoint

- We may refer to this theory as a CHECKLIST theory. In brief, this theory suggests that for each word we have an internal list of essential characteristics, and we label something as cat, or square, or cow only if it possesses the criterial attributes, which we subconsciously check off one by one.

- A major problem with the checklist theory is deciding which attributes go on the list, because only a small number of words have straightforward definitions.

- Supporters of this theory have found out in their research that there is a semantic core for each word in the lexicon, but also there is an encyclopedia of general knowledge in our brain, which provides additional data to the semantic core of a word. These supporters used some tests in order to divide the semantic core of a word from encyclopaedic knowledge. One of these tests is the so-called 'That's impossible' test.
Fixed Meaning Viewpoint

- E.g. we have to analyse the meaning of the word BACHELOR, and we can do it on some sentences:
  - 1. Harry is a bachelor who has been married ten years.
     - We would probably get the response THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE, because bachelors cannot be married. This suggests that UNMARRIED is a core condition of bachelor.
  - 2. My aunt Mary is a bachelor.
     - This one is also impossible because a woman cannot be a bachelor, so MALE is another core condition of bachelor.
  - 3. My puppy is a bachelor.
     - This one is also impossible because bachelors have to be humans and adults. Therefore, HUMAN and ADULT are core conditions of bachelor.
  - So there might be some other conditions for a bachelor in minds of individual speakers, but we can conclude that these four conditions are core conditions of a bachelor.
Fixed Meaning Viewpoint

- This checklist viewpoint is faced with two critical problems. First, it is very difficult to decide what goes on the checklist, since there appears to be no obvious way to draw a dividing line between essential and non-essential characteristics. Secondly, for some words the checklist seems to be virtually non-existent, since there appear to be hardly any necessary conditions.

- This checklist theory and fixed meaning viewpoint are only one way of seeing this problem of meaning, and we cannot conclude saying it is completely correct or completely wrong.
Fuzzy Meaning Viewpoint

- The other mentioned viewpoint is the so-called fuzzy meaning viewpoint. Let's see what is it based on.
- Fuzzy meaning supporters argue that word meanings are inevitably fluid, for two reasons: the *fuzzy edge phenomenon* and the *family resemblance syndrome*. Let us illustrate these.
- Words have fuzzy edges in the sense that there is no clear point at which one word ends and another begins. This was demonstrated by the sociolinguist William Labov when he showed his students pictures of containers and asked them to label each as either a *cup*, a *vase*, or a *bowl*. The students all agreed on certain shapes.
- For example, they all considered tall thin containers without handles to be vases and low flat ones to be bowls. But they were quite confused when faced with something in between the two. Was it a vase, or a cup?
Cup-Like Objects (Labov 1973)

FIGURE 5. Series of cup-like objects.

Fuzzy Meaning Viewpoint

- One could simply have said that people's mental lexicons differ if it was just that they disagreed with one another. But it turned out that individuals were inconsistent in their own responses.

- Another reason for this viewpoint was the family resemblance syndrome. This can be illustrated by a comparison of games. For example, what is it that defines a game.

- There are many different kinds of games, but if you look at them you will see similarities, relationships, but there aren't many things that will be common to all games.

- In most games there is the factor of amusement. In some of them there is winning and losing, but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, there is no winning, but it is a game....
To conclude, we can say that there are a small number of words such as square or bachelor which appear to have a fixed meaning; that is, they are words for which we can specify a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. The majority of words, however, do not behave in this way.

They suffer from one or more of the following problems:
- it may be difficult to specify a hard core of meaning at all.
- it may be impossible to tell where true meaning ends and encyclopedic knowledge begins.
- the words may have fuzzy boundaries, in that there may be no clear point at which the meaning of one word ends and another begins.
- a single word may apply to a family of items which all overlap in meaning but do not share any one common characteristic.
- These are insuperable obstacles to the fixed meaning viewpoint. We can conclude that, for the majority of words, meanings in the mind are fuzzy, not fixed.