Word Meaning

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The Linguistic Sign

In order to discuss word meaning, at the beginning we have to describe the word as a linguistic sign.

Here we will mention Ferdinand de Saussure and his two-part model of the linguistic sign. Focusing on linguistic signs (such as words), he defined a sign as being composed of a signifier and a signified.

Contemporary authors tend to describe the signifier as the form that the sign takes and the signified as the concept to which it refers. For Saussure, both the signifier (the sound pattern) and the signified (the concept) were purely psychological.

Today, this model is commonly adopted, but signifier is now commonly interpreted as the physical form of the sign, i.e. something which can be seen, heard, touched,...
Linguistic Sign

- Therefore, we can say that the linguistic sign is a mental unit consisting of two faces, which cannot be separated: a concept, and an acoustic image. Here, the term sign is quite a general expression which can refer to sentences, clauses, phrases, words, or morphemes.
- De Saussure pointed out that an alteration in the acoustic image must make a difference in the concept and vice versa, but this view does not appear to take homonyms into account.
Arbitrariness

- Although the signifier is treated by its users as standing for the signified, Saussurean semioticians emphasize that there is no necessary, direct or inevitable relationship between the signifier and the signified. Saussure stressed the arbitrariness of the sign, more specifically the arbitrariness of the link between the signifier and the signified.

- This principle of arbitrariness of the linguistic sign was not an original conception: Aristotle had noted that there can be no natural connection between the sound of any language and the things signified. Shakespeare put it: *That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.*
Arbitrariness

- In their book *The Meaning of Meaning*, Charles Ogden and Ivor Richards criticized Saussure for neglecting entirely the things for which signs stand. Instead of Saussurian two-part model, besides several other authors, Ogden and Richards have presented their three-part model of the linguistic sign. It is known as the semiotic triangle, although they weren’t the first to offer such a solution.
Semiotic Triangle

- Their semiotic triangle consists of three terms: *symbol*, *thought or reference*, and *referent*. The broken line at the base of the triangle is intended to indicate that there is not necessarily any observable or direct relationship between the sign vehicle and the referent.
Linguistic sign

- As we have seen, according to Saussure the linguistic sign consists of a signifier and a signified; these are, more strictly, a sound image and a concept, both linked by a psychological associative bond.

- On the other hand, Ogden and Richards saw the relationship as a triangle. The symbol is, of course, the linguistic element – the word, sentence, etc., and the referent the object, etc., in the world of experience, while thought or reference is concept. According to the theory there is no direct link between symbol and referent (between language and the world) – the link is via the thought or reference, the concepts of our minds.
The word as a linguistic sign

- Since the word is a linguistic sign, a discussion of word meaning focuses on the relationship between the two faces of the sign, the acoustic image or signifier on the one hand, and concept, or signified on the other.
- Here we have to describe several terms that are usually associated with word meaning.
- These terms are denotation, reference, sense and connotation.
Denotation and reference

- Here we have to recall the term *lexeme*, considered an abstract linguistic unit with different variants.
- So, denotation of a lexeme can be defined as the relationship that holds between that lexeme and persons, things, places, properties... External to the language system
- As opposed to denotation, the relationship of reference holds between an expression and what that expression stands for on particular occasions of its utterance. Reference depends on concrete utterance, not on abstract sentences. Thus, reference is never applicable to single word forms and it is never applicable to single lexemes.
- Therefore, denotative meaning is the meaning which we usually find as a dictionary definition.
We have already defined denotation. Sense, on the other hand, can be defined as a relationship between the words or expressions of a single language. Sense is a relationship which is internal to the language system. Both individual lexemes and larger expressions have sense. However, the sense of an expression is a function of the sense of the lexemes it contains and their occurrences in a particular grammatical construction.

The sense of the word *table* will vary in the following sentences: *Don’t put your feet on the table!* And *It was finalized under the table.*
Denotation and connotation

- According to binary distinction between denotation and connotation, denotative meaning refers to the relationship between a linguistic sign and its denotatum or referent.
- However, connotations constitute additional properties of lexemes, e.g. poetic, slang, baby language, biblical, casual, formal, humorous, legal, literary, rhetorical...
- Denotation and connotation are both important in order to determine word meaning in a given context.
Polysemy

- Polysemy refers to the situation where the same word has two or more different meanings. For instance, the noun board is said to be polysemous because it may mean:
  - 1. a long thin piece of cut wood;
  - 2. a flat surface with patterns, used for playing game on;
  - 3. a flat piece of hard material used for putting food on;
  - 4. a flat piece of hard material fastened to the wall in a public place to pin notices on;
  - 5. the cost of meals; 6. a committee or association, as of company directors or government officials...

- Similarly, the word flight is defined in at least the following ways: 1. the act of flying; 2. the distance covered or course followed by a flying object; 3. a trip by plane, 4. the aircraft making the journey, 5. a group of birds or aircrafts flying together...
Polysemy

- In most cases, only one of the meanings of a polysemous word will fit into a given context, but occasionally ambiguity may also arise.
- Since one meaning cannot always be delimited and distinguished from another, it is not easy to say without hesitation whether two meanings are the same or different. Consequently, we cannot determine exactly how many meanings a polysemous word has.
- When we refer to the difficulty in recognizing polysemy, we are dealing with the relationship between polysemy (one word with several meanings) and homonymy (several words with the same spelling and/or pronunciation).
- As a final observation, it must be said that polysemy is an essential condition for the efficiency of the language. Consequently, polysemy must be considered an invaluable factor of economy and flexibility in language.
Homonymy

- Homonymy refers to a situation where we have two or more words with the same shape. Although they have the same shape, homonyms are considered to be distinct lexemes, mainly because they have unrelated meanings and different etymologies.

- In addition to the difference in meaning, homonyms may also be kept apart by syntactic differences. For example, when homonyms belong to different word classes, as in the case of tender, which has different lexemes as adjective, verb and noun, each homonym has not only a distinct meaning, but also a different grammatical function.
Homonymy

- Because of the sameness of shape, there is a danger of homonymous conflict or clashes in the sense that two homonyms with totally different meanings may both make sense in the same utterance: e.g.

  - The route was very long.
  - The root was very long.

- However, there are at least two different safeguards against any possibility of confusion: the difference in word class and the difference in spelling, besides the difference in overall context.
Semantics

- SEMANTICS is the linguistic discipline that studies meaning.
- Semantics is a recently borrowed word, approximately from the end of the 19th century, and there weren't many linguists investigating semantics until after the WW II. One of the most famous books on semantics is *The meaning of meaning* by C.K.Ogden and I.A. Richards, published in 1923.
- The term *meaning* is, of course, much more familiar to us all. The problem with this term is that dictionaries suggest a number of different meanings of *meaning*, or more correctly of the verb *mean*. Ogden and Richards were able to list no less than sixteen different meanings of the verb *mean*.
Semantics

Some of them are:

- *This will mean the end of our regime.* (result in)
- *I mean to help if I can.* (intend)
- *Keep Off the Grass! This means you.* (refers to)
- *His losing his job means that he will have to look again.* (implies)
- *Lucky Strike means fine tobacco.* (indicates)
- *These clouds mean rain.* (are a sign of)
- *She doesn't mean what she said.* (believe)
Semantics

- In all these examples, the verb *mean* can be paraphrased by other expressions, and none of them is appropriate for our discussion on word meaning. Therefore, we will deal with the meaning as in examples:
  - *Procrastinate* means „to put things off“.
  - *In saying „It's getting late“, she meant that she should leave.*
  - These two uses of the word *mean* exemplify two important types of meaning: *linguistic meaning* (1) and *speaker meaning* (2).
Historical semantics – the study of the change of meaning in time.

A great deal of work in semantics has been of a historical kind, and the study of the change of meaning can be very interesting.

E.g. the word *money* is related to Latin *moneo* “warn”, because money was made in Rome in the temple of the goddess Juno Moneta.

Tanks (armoured cars) are called this way because of a security decision in the 1914-1918 war to deceive Germans into thinking that water-tanks were being despatched.

Change happens especially to taboo words, words used for sth unpleasant and replaced by another and that too is again replaced later. Thus: in BE privy, WC, lavatory, toilet, bathroom, and most recently loo.