Meaning and the Second Language Learner

Jane Nkechi Ifechelobi*

Abstract

Meaning is about the most elusive and controversial phenomenon in the study of language .The ambiguous nature of meaning is manifest in the fact that in almost any language, one expression can be subject to a number of interpretations depending on the speaker, the hearer and the situation where the expression is used. Meanings are ultimately determined not by words but by people [Hybels and Weaver26]. Most often the second language learner seeks to interpret word meaning without reference to the person who uses it and the community in which it is used. The concern of this paper is to bring out the complexity between meaning and the second language learner, because meaning lies on the interpreter and not on the user of the language.

Introduction

Language is a means of communication but what is normally conveyed in language use is not words and sentences but a message. The implication is that language cannot stand on its own apart from the function of conveying messages. This suggests that meaning exists elsewhere than in language. In any language use, the more important and more valuable object is the message; language is only secondary. In the study of language one is concerned more with the expression of meanings than with meaning itself. However the analysis of meaning is the message enveloped in the linguistic form. It is obvious that there is an intrinsic connection between meaning and communication such that it is impossible to account for the former except in terms of the latter.

What is Meaning?

There are several distinguishable theories of meaning which seek to provide an answer to the question, "What is meaning?" Research has shown that language communication has been dominated by these theories of meaning:

a. The referential or denotational theory: The meaning of an expression is what it refers to or denotes. This theory of meaning emphasizes the relationship between language and objects. The ability of an individual word to specify an object is best seen in proper names, because the given name specifies only one thing. Meaning already exists by reason of the bond. It is argued that the proper noun, for example, and the individual have been used as a model for the explanation of word classes. The problem of this theory of meaning is that there are many words without physical objects they refer to. Words like ugly, engineering, pride, manhood, etc. 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.

There may not be identical physical objects for items that belong to groups. It is difficult for this theory to explain the meaning of words in categories of adjectives, adverbs, prepositions and conjunctions.

b. The ideational or mentalistic theory states that the meaning of an expression is the idea or concept associated with it in the mind of anyone who knows and understands the expression. Sapir also explains meanings in terms of concepts. He sees concept as a "capsule of thought" containing many distinct experiences (Lobner 162). For Saussure, meaning is to be understood in the context of signs in general. This theory emphasizes that it is a universally acknowledged fact that language can be used to

make descriptive statements which are true or false according to whether the propositions that they express are true or false.(Saeed 12)

c. The behaviourist theory has it that the meaning of an expression is either the stimulus that evokes it or the response that it evokes, or a combination of both. A stimulus may be an object or event, an utterance or a mental experience. The exploration of this theory for the analysis of word meaning is largely the work of Bloomfield, referred to as the greatest name in twentieth century linguistics before Chomsky. Bloomfield's explanation of word meaning is in terms of the distinctive features of the situation in which the word is used, the meaning being the feature common to all instances in which the word is used. There are words whose features cannot be perceived in any concrete situation. Example: essence, environment, age, ingratitude. Bloomfield explains these as displaced uses which are derived in fairly uniform ways from its primary value and so require no special discussion. (Ullman, 59)

d. The meaning-is-use theory has it that the meaning of an expression is determined by, if not identical with, its use in the language. It is from this theory that Wittgenstein conceived his slogan "Don't look for the meaning, look for the use". This theory emphasizes the diversity of the communicative functions fulfilled by language. This is also referred to as the operationalism theory (Akwanya 19). Operationalism is a theory of meaning that grasps words in their contexts. This theory was developed by Wittgenstein. The implication of the theory is that there may be a difference between the meaning of a word taken in isolation and the uses in sentences. He is purely concerned with the content words which play the identifying role in a sentence. Just as a word-based account, meaning tends not

to pick up the semantic implications of each individual fragment of deviations, sentence-based accounts and text-based accounts tend to determine some words as crucial for the meaning of the whole .

e. The verificationist theory argues that the meaning of an expression, if it has one, is determined by the verifiability of the sentences, or propositions containing the expression.

f. The truth-conditional theory states that the meaning of an expression is its contribution to the truth-conditions of the sentences containing it.

The second language learner in his use of language to communicate ideas, events, opinions, entertainment, etc, and to assign meaning to the word-forms of which a sentence is composed must identify and understand meanings not as images or concepts but as forms of particular expressions. This expression of language falls into two categories- one which is finite in number- made up of lexically simple expressions-lexemes. These are the expressions one would expect to find listed in a dictionary- they are the vocabulary units of a language and secondly it is the lexically composite expression which are constructed by means of the syntactic and morphological rules of the language.

Concept of Meaning
According to McGregor,

> The notion of meaning in linguistics concerns that which is expressed by sentences, utterances and their components. Meaning is the content conveyed in communication by language, the message or thought in the mind of a speaker or

> writer encoded in language and sent to a hearer
> or reader who decodes it (129).

Language has been viewed as a structured system of signs, the social aspects of the meaning-making potential of the language system in its context of use. Semantics is traditionally defined as the study of meaning. The noun 'meaning' and the verb 'mean', like many other English words, are used in a wide range of contexts and in several distinguishable senses. For example: in this sentence - Mary means well. This may imply that Mary is well-intentioned or that she intends no harm. This implication of intention would normally be lacking in an utterance like "That red flag means danger". In this sentence, one would not be implying that the flag had plans to endanger anyone but that it is used in accordance with a previously established convention to indicate that there is danger in the surrounding environment. Similar to the red-flag use of the verb 'mean' is its use in "Smoke means fire". In both sentence one and three, one thing is said to be a sign of something else: from the presence of the sign,- a red flag or smoke. Anyone with the requisite knowledge can infer the existence of what it signifies- danger or fire, as the case may be. Most English words have more than one form and may also have more than one meaning. Many words used in ordinary language do not have fixed meanings. This is a proven fact when one consults a dictionary. For example; the word "bank" means: (1) a financial institution, (2) sloping side of a river, (3) an amount of something that is collected (4) a place where something is stored ready for use. The technical term for dictionary words is lexeme. It is related to the words lexical and lexicon. When we look up words as meaningful units we realize that a single form may be combined with several meanings, and on the other hand, the same meaning may be combined with several word forms.

All natural languages have sentences which similarly have form and meaning and the meaning of a sentence is determined at least partly by the meanings of the words which it is composed of and also by its grammatical structure. There is an intrinsic connection between the meaning of a sentence and the characteristic use, not of the particular sentence but of the whole class of sentences to which the sentence belongs by virtue of its grammatical structure.

It is a generally accepted fact that words, phrases and sentences have meaning and that sentences are composed of words and phrases, the meaning of a sentence is the product of words and phrases of which it is composed. Meaning therefore connotes the thing one intends to convey, especially by language. Language of course, is a means of communication but what is conveyed in language is not words and sentences but a message. Meaning, according to Fromkin et al, is the "conceptual or semantic aspect of a sign or utterance that permits us to comprehend the message being conveyed. Expressions in language generally have both form-pronunciation (sounds) and meaning (585). It is in this ordinary sense that the term meaning will be used in this work. The fact remains that the meaning of words and sentences is learned and maintained by the use to which language is put in communicative situations.

The Meaning of Meaning
For thousands of years philosophers have pondered the meaning of meaning, yet speakers of a language can understand what is said to them and can produce strings of words that are meaningful to other speakers (Fromkin et al, 173).

Meaning can be natural but language is conventional - that is there is no immediate, natural connection between a word and what it expresses. It is worthy of note that meaning is not stable or fixed rather it is dynamically generated in the

process of using language. Words have no meaning in themselves but only when used in the language they belong. Conventionally meanings of everyday vocabulary can be derived from the dictionary.

Before one can understand language, one needs to know the meanings of words and of the morphemes with which they compose. The learner or user of language must also know how to combine words into phrases, and phrases into sentences so as to generate meanings. At the next level one must take context into consideration when determining meaning. Most language utterances whether spoken or written depends on their interpretation to a great extent on the context in which words are used. One must consider the connection between what a person means or intends and what the words used, are conventionally held to mean.

Meaning can be understood if it was realized that the relationship between words and things are purely derivative, an imputed, non-causal relationship, resulting from their association in the mind of the writer and reader during the process of communication.

Word Meaning and Sentence Meaning

Knowing a language involves knowing thousands of words. The knowledge a speaker has of the meaning of words is often compared to a mental lexicon or dictionary. According to Merleau-Ponty, "words have meaning in themselves but only when used as part of the language where they belong" (qtd in Akwanya 3). Words can be treated as useful tools by learning the definitions of words as belonging to a system of interdependent terms because they are usually combined together in certain ways and each item functions as a member of the system only when used in the accepted way. This simply means that words interrelate among themselves and all together form a system. There does not seem to be a discernible pattern among the objects to which one apply these

words which are interconnected among themselves. Meaning is bound up with the "Knowing of things" but the connection that seems to hold things and language at this level of knowing seems to be much relaxed when knowing becomes discursive. According to Saeed, the traditional descriptive aims of word meaning otherwise known as lexical semantics have been (a) to represent the meaning of each word in the language and (b) to show how the meanings of words in a language are inter related (53). The meaning of word is defined in part by its relations with other words in the language. Following the structuralist thought, one recognizes that as well as being in a relationship with other words in the same sentence, a word is also in relationship with other related but absent words. Words can be identified at the level of writing, where we are familiar with them being separated by white space, where they are called orthographic words. They can also be identified at the levels of phonology where they are strings of sounds which do not occur outside the word and syntactically distinct variants. In the sentences below, there are three different grammatical words:

> a. Emman walks like a duck.
> b. Emman is walking like a duck
> c. Emman walked like a duck

In semantics, these are instances of the same lexeme (word), the verb 'walk'. One can say that the three grammatical words- walks, walking, walked share the meaning of the lexeme. This abstraction from grammatical words to semantic words is already familiar to us from published dictionaries, where lexicographers use abstract entries like-go, sleep, walk etc for purposes of explaining word meaning so the language user does not worry what grammatical status the reference form has. Language users package meaning into words in very different ways. According to Sapir, our first

impulse would have been to define the word as the symbolic, linguistic counterpart word from a functional standpoint, for the word may be anything from the expression of a single concept-concrete or abstract or purely relational (as in the case of or, by, and)- to the expression of a complete thought. In the latter case the word becomes identical with the sentence. The word is merely a form, a definitely molded entity that takes in as much or as little of the conceptual material of the whole though as the genius of the language cares to allow (qtd in Saeed, 56). The usual approach in semantics is to try to associate phonological and grammatical words with semantic words or lexemes. Several lexemes can be represented by one phonological and grammatical word:

    a. He scored with his left foot.
    b. They made camp at the foot of the mountain
    c. I ate a foot-long hot-dog.

Each of these uses has a different meaning and this is reflected by identifying the three ways of describing, this is to say that there are three senses of the word foot. This would be represented by numbering the senses:

    Foot 1: Part of the leg below the ankle
    Foot 2: Base or bottom of something
    Foot 3: Unit of length, one-third of a yard

Once the lexemes have been established, the lexicon will be a listing of them with a representation of:

    1. The lexeme's pronunciation
    2. Its grammatical status
    3. Its meaning;
    4. Its meaning relation with other lexemes

      Traditionally, each entry must have some information that cannot be predicted by general rules. This means that

different types of information will be included – about what syntactic category the item is, the semantic information that has to be there, the meaning of the lexeme and the semantic relations it has with other lexemes. In a listing of lexemes some share a number of properties. Example: the three lexemes above share the same pronunciation /fut/ and the same syntactic category (noun).Word meaning is slippery. It is easier to define a word if one is given the phrase or sentence it occurs in. these contextual effects seem to pull word meanings in two opposite directions. The first restricting influence is the tendency for words to occur together repeatedly-this is known as collocation.

Phrases and sentences also have meaning but an important difference between word meaning or the other has to do with productivity. If a speaker or writer can create novel sentences and these sentences are understood, it means they have obeyed the semantic rules of the language. The meanings of sentences are not listed in a lexicon like the meanings of words. They must be created by rules of combinations, so sentence meaning is compositional, which means that the meaning of an expression is determined by the meaning of its component parts and the way in which it is combined. Meaning therefore, can be viewed in a model grammar as a more stable body of word meaning in the lexicon and the limitless composed meanings of sentences.

There is usually a difference between the meaning of a word taken in isolation and its use(s) in sentences. In a sentence, the content-words play the identifying roles. It is impossible to determine all the possible purposes a word can be made to serve, yet the meaning of a word comprises all these different purposes, together with the normal designation. Generally context may help the reader to decipher meaning because it influences what people say, how they say it and how others interpret what is said.

Conclusion

It is impossible for a writer to express his ideas, attitudes and feelings without considering his reader/reading audience- the person that decodes his message. If he is unable to convey his intended meaning in a clear language, being very careful of his choice of words, the way and manner his thoughts are structured, taking cognizance of the fact that the meaning of his message lies with the reader, he may end up creating confusion for the reader and a misunderstanding of his message. Once a word is having different meanings and is used without clarity, various readers will have different interpretations for only ONE message that the writer wants to pass across. Every writer must endeavor to transmit his message in such a way that the intended meaning will not be misconstrued. A message or text becomes communicative if the intentions of the sender are exactly what are decoded by the receiver. Whether the information is communicated or not, rests on the possibility of choice or selection made on the part of the sender, if the sender fails to choose appropriately between two alternatives then he has not communicated. There are fundamental principles that cannot be overlooked in the matter or process of communication. The principle is that of choice or the possibility of selection between two alternatives which is frequently expressed in terms of the 'slogan' meaning or meaningfulness. This generally accepted slogan 'that meaningfulness implies choice can be interpreted from either sender's or the receiver's point of view. The sender's meaning involves the notion of intention and the receiver's meaning involves the notion of value or significance, the receiver or reader places on what he receives. Whereas writers employ language resources to encode and express meanings in messages, readers usually strive to decode and construct meanings and messages. These meanings and messages occur at the level of text or discourse. The second language learner is usually engaged in processing contextual information to

achieve an appropriate interpretation or realization of textual meanings and messages. Unfortunately, one discovers that most often the intended meaning of the writer is not the information the reader decodes. If the intended meaning is shrouded in obscurity, various forms of confusion, misinterpretation and misunderstanding of one's message will occur. So a writer must be careful in his use of language because meaning lies with the reader and not the writer.

***Jane Nkechi Ifechelobi** lectures in the Department of English Language and Literature, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

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