

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND THEORY OF MEANINGS IN THE STUDY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

OGBA THANK-GOD IGIRI, Ph.D

*Department of Linguistics and Literary Studies – (English Unit),
Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki,
Ebonyi State.*

Abstract

For Thousand of years Philosophers have pondered on the meaning of meaning, yet speakers of a Language can understand what is said to them and can produce strings of word that are meaningful to other speakers (Fronkin 203 p. 173). Before one can understand language, one needs to know the meaning of words and of the morphemes that compose them. The learner or user of language must also know how the meanings of words combine into phrase and sentence meanings. At the next level one must take context into consideration when determining meaning".Ogden and Richards distinguished a variety of meanings of meaning. They were concerned with problems of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. They believed this was due to the tendency to think that there is some inherent and indissoluble link between signs and what they stand for. Communication would be improved and clarity of thought facilitated if it was realized that the relationship between words and things was purely derivative. An imputed, non-casual relationship, resulting from their association in the mind of the writer and reader during the process of communication is important in determining meanings. This work however discussed the concept and theoretical framework of meanings in the Study of the English Language.

According to McGregor, (2009) 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 the speaker or writer that is encoded in language and sent to a hearer or reader who decodes it.

Language has been seen 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 seen as the study of meaning. The noun "meaning" and the verb "meaning"

like many other English words are used, in a wide range of contexts and in several distinguished sense.

For example,

a) Mary means well. This implies that Mary is well- intentioned, that she intends no harm. This implication of intention would normally be lacking in an utterance like;

b) 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 being used in accordance with a previous 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

(c) **Smoke means fire.** In both sentence Band C 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 in ordinary language do not have fixed meanings. This is a proven fact when consulting a dictionary. For example, the word “bank” means

(1) a financial institution

(2) sloping side of river

(3) an amount of something that is collected

(4) a place 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 may be combined with several meanings and on other hand, the same meaning may be combined with several word forms.

According to Wittgenstein (qtd in Akwanya 1996 p.18), for a large class of cases – though not for all- in which we employ the word “meaning” it can be defined thus “the meaning of a word is its use in the language”. A word can mean one thing in one context, and another in another context.

According to Magill, (1995)

There is no more difficult demand upon philosophers accustomed to the sign referent way of analyzing. Language demands that philosophers stop thinking of words as names for objects and start thinking of words as tools that can be used in various ways and can be understood as bringing about certain changes in behavior or in ways of looking at things (qtd in Akwanya 1996 p.18).

All natural languages have sentences which similarly have form and meanings 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, 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 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 phrase 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 2003, is the conceptual or semantic aspect of a sign or utterance that permits us to comprehend the message being conveyed. Expressing in language generally has both form, pronunciation (sounds) and meaning. It is this ordinary sense that the term meaning will be used in this paper. The fact remains that meaning of words and sentences is learned and maintained by the use to which language is put in communication situations.

So, the writer presented the work as the Conceptual Framework and Theory of meanings in the Study of the English Language. He lucidly highlighted the chosen topic with the subheadings thus:

- ❖ Sense and Reference
- ❖ Meaning interference
- ❖ Word meaning and Sentence meaning
- ❖ Meaning in relation to Context
- ❖ Linguistic Context: Discuss
- ❖ Sense and Reference:

The sentence of an expression may be defined as the set, or network of sense relations that hold between it and other expression of the same language (Lyons 1978 p.80) Yadugiri (2008) defines sense as:

“The second part of the meaning of a word, which consists of the semantic or meaning relationship that the word with other words in the language”. It is the place that a word has in the system of semantic relationships that hold between the words of the language.

Fromkin, Rodman and Hymas (2003) define it as “the inherent part of an expression’s meaning which together in context determines it’s referent, it is also referred to as intension.

Words, Phrases and Sentences generally have senses, which constitutes a part of their meaning. When a reader knows the sense of an expression, one can determine its reference. Knowledge of the meaning of certain noun phrases means knowing how to discover what objects the noun phrases refer to. The object “pointed to” is called the referent, so the noun phrase is said to have reference. A noun phrase like the President of the United State, at the time of writing may have its reference as Barak Obama, while in this time, it is Trump. It’s sense is head of state of the United States of American’. Some Proper nouns appear to have reference but no sense; other noun phrases lack a reference but have sense.

Dialectic terms have sense but require context to determine their reference. Words like you, yesterday, behind, here, etc have sense but their reference is context

dependent. The Sense of a declarative sentence is its track conditions, that aspect of meaning that allows one to determine whether the sentence is true or false. The reference of a declarative sentence, when it has one, in its truth value is either true or false.

Meaning Interference

There are certain factors that interfere with meanings- First, is that most lexical words have more than one meaning. If someone says for instance, some English words have the same spelling with identical pronunciation but different meaning for instance, bat – an animal and bat- used for base balls. They are different words, pronounced the same way but having different meanings. Such words are referred to as homonyms, Homonyms can create ambiguity. The word or the sentence in which it occurs is said to be ambiguous because it can be understood or interpreted by the reader in more than one way.

Some other words that interfere with meaning are the polysemous ones. This is a situation where a word has multiple meanings that are related conceptually or historically. Consider the word “bear” with the following meanings – to tolerate, to carry, to support, to accept, be responsible for, to show, to turn, etc. the other bear refers to the animals, which is also polysemous. The use of such words creates ambiguity and confusion.

Another related concept is heteronym. Two words are heteronyms if the Y are spelled the same way but pronounced differently and have different meanings for example lead, bow, bass, etc. homographs are words that are spelled the same but have different meanings such as “dove”- the bird and “dove” the past tense of “dive”. There are words that sound different but have the same or nearly the same meaning that also interfere with meaning thus creating ambiguity, such words are called synonyms. Fromkin (2003) maintains that there are no perfect synonyms – that is, no two words ever have exactly the same meaning. A polysemous word may share one of its meanings with another word, which is a kind of partial synonym. For example, mature and ripe – they act as synonyms when applied to fruit but not when applied to (smelly) animals. Metaphors can also create ambiguity in language learning when taken literally.

The meaning of a sentence is derived in the process of composition and is thereby determined by its lexical component and its syntactic structure. Both can give rise to ambiguity of the sentence. When a sentence contains an ambiguous lexeme, the process of composition will yield as many meanings of the sentence as the ambiguous item has. If the sentence contains more than one ambiguous lexical item, the meanings will multiply. Again where the meaning of lexical item is in principle clear enough, but is hard to decide whether or not the item can be applied to certain objects referential, vagueness occurs. For example, the lexical items “City” and “town”, even if we agree that towns can be large or small and cities are big by definition there is difficulty in taking decisions, - is Onitsha a town or city? What constitutes a forest as against a

wood, or When a mountain is merely a hill? There may be another problems where the meaning of an item seems indeterminate – example John’s book is it the book John wrote, bought, owns, or is reading? etc.

Colour terms like green have vague meanings because the range of colours is conceived as a continuum with fuzzy transitions. All gradable adjectives are vague. Vagueness may occur in combination with polysemy. For example, the meaning variants of “light” are a matter of different underlying scales of weight, difficult, etc. when viewed as opposites of heavy and difficult. These scales can be distinguished quite clearly but for each scale, the meaning of light describes just a low degree on this scale, have each meaning variant in itself is vague. The syntactic structure of a sentence may also be ambiguous. Example;

Flying planes can be dangerous (Chomsky). In this sentence the phrase flying planes can be read as – flying in planes and as planes that fly. A sentence like this constitutes ambiguity because it has two structures.

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 1996 p. 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 do not seem to be a discernible pattern among the objects to which one can 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,(2003 p.53)

“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 meaning of words in a language are interrelated”.

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 a 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 level 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 purpose of explaining word meaning so the language user does not worry what grammatical status the reference form has.

Language user package meaning into words in very different ways:

According to Sapir; (2001)

Out first impulse would have been to define the word as the symbolic, linguistic counterpart word from 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 languages cares to allow. (qtd in Saeed, 2003 p. 56).

Bloomfield (2001) defines a word,

As a free form which does not consist entirely of (two or more) lesser free forms; in brief, a word is a minimum free form which plays a very important part in our attitude towards language. For the purpose of ordinary life, the word is the smallest unit of speech (qtd in Saeed, 2003 p. 57)

This definition identifies words as independent elements which show their independence by being able to occur in isolation, to form one-word utterance. This leaves elements like a, the, my in a grey area. Many forms lie on the boarder line between words and phrases that it becomes impossible to make rigid distinction between forms that may not be spoken in absolute position.

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 relations with lexemes.

Traditionally, each entry must have some information that cannot be predicted by general rulers. This means that the different types of information will be included about what syntactic category the item is, the syntactic 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 this conceptual effect, seems 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.

Halliday compares the collocation patterns of two adjectives strong and powerful which might seem to have similar meanings—one can use both for some items, example: Strong argument, else where, there are collocation effects. For example one can talk of strong tea but not powerful tea. These collocations can undergo a fossilization process until they become fixed expressions like hot and cold running water, husband and wife etc. Conceptual effects can also pull word meanings in other directions towards creativity and semantic shifts. For example, in different contexts a noun like run can have different meanings.

Example:

- (a) I go for a run every morning
- (b) The tail – end batman added a single run before lunch.
- (c) The ball – player hit a home run
- (d) We took the new car for a run
- (e) He built a new run for his chickens
- (f) There's been a run on the dollar
- (g) The bears are here for the salmon run. (Curved from Saeed, 60).

The problem is how to view the relationship between these instances of **run**. Are these seven different senses of the word **run**? Or are they examples of the same sense influenced by different contexts? Is there some sketchy common meaning that can

be made to fit the different contexts provoked by the words like *batsman*, *chickens* and the *dollar*?

Sentences a, b, c seem more closely related than others. This has been described in terms of ambiguity and vagueness. Each of the meanings of **run** in the above sentence is of a different sense, so **run** is seven ways ambiguous. But if the sentences are seen to share the same sense, then **run** is merely vague between these different uses. The basic idea is that in cases of vagueness the context can add information that is not specified in the sense but in cases of ambiguity the context will cause one of the senses to be selected.

Phrases and Sentences also have meanings but an important difference between word's meaning or the other has to do with productivity. It is believed that one of the generative grammar's most important insight is that a relatively small number of combinatory rules allow speakers to use a finite set of words to create a very large, infinite number of sentences. This means that the rules for sentence formation must be recursive, allowing repetitive embedding or coordination of syntactic categories.

A compositional rule, for example, elements in parentheses are optional groups which is repeatable and will allow potential limitless expansions of **S** as below:

1. S → [s S (and S)]
- 1.1 a. [s S and S]
- b. [s S and S and S] etc.
- c. [s S and S and S and S] etc.

The idea is that one can always add another clause to a sentence or another nominal within a nominal.

- 2.1 NP → [NP NP (and NP*)]
- 2.2 a. I bought [NP a book]
- b. I bought [NP a book] and [NP a magazine.]
- c. I bought NP [NP a book] and [NP a magazine] and [NP some pens].

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 they are 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.

Meaning in Relation to Context

Context is not a vague notion since they are generated or actively constructed as choices made of the infinite range of possibilities for specific instance of language. Context plays a major role in communication and in determining meanings. Context can be defined as the set of assumptions that is mental representations capable of being true or

false that have a bearing on the production and interpretation of particular communication acts. The problem of determining the correct sense of a lexically ambiguous word in context has often been seen as primarily that of context recognition. A word being disambiguated to the unique meaning appropriate to the frame or script represents the known or newly established contexts.

Some scholars agree that every word has a distinctive meaning which constitutes its nature and that the meaning of the word is to be sought in the context of use or in terms of the kinds of operation it is used to perform. Operationalism is a theory of meaning that grasps words in their context. It is strictly a theory of interpretation. Just as a word – based account of meaning turn not to pick up the semantic implication of each and every individual fragment of derivatives, in the same way of sentence-based accounts and text-based accounts tend to determine some words as crucial for the meaning of the whole while other words are left unaccounted for. For instance the grammatical word ‘classes’ seem to be left out of the operational account since the kinds of operations they perform are largely fixed.

Wittgenstein (1994); Maintains that many words used in ordinary language do not have fixed meanings. The meaning of a word according to him, is its use in the language and is sometimes taken to signify that a word may mean one thing in one context and another thing in another context. (qtd in Akwanya, (1996 p. 18)

There is usually a difference between the meaning of a word taken in isolation and its use (s) in sentences. In a Sentence, the context-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 word comprises all these different purposes, together with the normal designation. Context influences what people say, how they say it and how others interpret what is said. Some contexts do not provide the necessary and acceptable meanings to words but most contexts provide correct meanings.

Linguistic Context: Discourse

According to Malinowskwi, (2002) “exactly as in the reality of Spoken or Written Languages, a word without linguistic context is a mere figment and stands for nothing by itself” (qtd in Verschveren, 2003 p.75). Linguistic knowledge accounts for speaker’s ability to combine phonemes into morphemes, Morphemes into words and words into sentences. Knowing a language permits combining sentences to express complex thoughts and ideas. These larger linguistic units are called discourse. The study of discourse or discourse analysis is concerned with how speakers combine sentence into boarder speech units. Discourse analysis involves questions of style, appropriateness, cohesiveness, rhetorical force, topic or sub-topic structure, differences between written and spoken discourse, as well as grammatical properties.

Linguistic Context is the language that surrounds or accompanies the piece of discourse under analysis. It is the language with which discourse is expressed. Linguistic context is also known as co-text. The co-text of a word simply means set of all other words used

in same phrase or sentence. The surrounding co-text of any word helps one, to determine the intending meaning of that word. For instance, the word, bank, as a homonym, can mean different things in different contexts. Whatever meaning that is intended is made clear by considering the linguistic context that is the set of other words which are used.

Consider this example:

- a) Chinedu pushed the boat from the bank. (Here, bank means the land along the side of a river).
- b) She has gone to the bank to cash a cheque (bank here refers to a financial institution)
- c) Did you bank that Cheque? (Bank here is used as a verb to mean putting or keeping money in a financial house).
- d) There were banks of snow at the sides of the road. (Bank – a large pile of earth, sand or snow).
- e) There was no blood in the bank. (Bank- a place where human blood is stored).

Each of the above meanings in parenthesis is derived from the co-text of the word “bank” in the expression in which it is used, in other words, from the linguistic context. There are few aspects of discourse that may influence the interpretation of linguistic meaning.

For example: Pronouns:- Pronouns may be used in place of noun phrases or may be used to refer to an entity presumably known to the discourse participants - the writer and the reader. When that presumption fails, miscommunication sets in.

Example: Wasted Trigger- happy cop kills man on **his** way to work.

Daily sun - Monday September 27, 2010. Does the word **his** refers to the cop or the murdered man?

Pronominalization occurs both in sentences and across the sentence structure and limits the choice of pronoun. The occurrence of reflexive pronouns depends on syntactic structure which also determines whether a pronoun or a noun phrase can be interpreted as co-referential. In a discourse, prior linguistic context plays a primary role in pronoun interpretation.

Example: It seems that the man loves the woman. Many people think he loves her. The most natural interpretation of her is “the woman” referred to in the first sentence but it is also possible that “her” referred to a different person. As far as syntactic rules are concerned, pronouns are noun phrases and may occur anywhere a noun phrase may occur. Semantic rules of varying complexity establish whether a pronoun and some other noun phrase in the discourse can be interpreted as co-referential. A minimum condition of co-referentiality is that the pronoun and its antecedent have the same feature values for the semantic properties of number and gender.

Often in discourse, the use of pronouns is a stylistic decision. Pronouns are used in place of phrases;

- ***Jane saw the boy with the telescope. Dan also saw him.***

“Him” has replaced “the boy with the telescope”. There are discourse rules that apply regularly such as those that determine the occurrence of the articles “the” and “a” the articles “the” is used to indicate that the referent of a noun phrase is agreed upon by the speaker or writer and the listener or reader.

Example: The man claimed that he saw the policeman. It is assumed that a certain policeman is being discussed. No such assumption comprises ‘he saw a policeman’. This is more of a description of what was seen than a reference to a particular policeman.

Often a discourse begins with the use of indefinite article and then moves on to the definite. Context helps to prevent communication or discourse from being ambiguous or vague.

Conclusion

It is thus obvious that before one can understand any language, one needs to know the meaning of words and of the morphemes that compose them. In knowing morphemes and words, one must understand those moved and combined into phrase and sentence meanings.

So, this study which is the concept and theoretical framework of meanings in the English Language exposes the relationship between words, phrases, sentences and concepts or things that are associated with them to derive their meanings.

The meaning of a sentence is derived in the process of composition and is thereby determined by its lexical components and its syntactic structure. Both can give rise to ambiguity of the sentence. So, Communication would be improved or possible and clarity of thought facilitated if it was realized. The study also highlighted and solved the problems of ambiguity in language use and the extent it creates problem to the second language learners.

References

Akwanya, A. N. (1996) *Semantic and Discourse: Theories of Meaning and Textual Analysis*. Enugu: Acena Publisher.

Chomsky (1965), *Aspect of Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge: Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Fromkin, Victoria (2003). *An Introduction to Language*. 7th Edition.
Boston: Thomson Heinle.

Lyons, John. (1978) *Semantics I*. Cambridge, Cambridge : University Press.

McGregor, William (2009) *Linguistics: An Introduction*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Saced, John. (2003) *Semantics*. Kundi: Black-well Publishing ltd,.

Verschveren, Jeff. (2003) *Understand Pragmatics*, New York : Oxford University Press,.