
INTERPRETATION OF MEANING IN DISCOURSE: (A GENERAL SURVEY)

By

Godwin F. Akpan

*Department of General Studies,
College of Education,
Afaha Nsit,
Akwa Ibom State.*

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to do a general survey of the interpretation of meaning in discourse. The paper identifies that a discourse may be either spoken or written and that the hallmark of any communication process is to assign meaning to objects and utterances. To effectively ascertain this stance, the paper examined some of the perspectives put forward by several linguists which could aid in the explication of meaning in language use. It also discovers that each of these approaches has some inherent faults in themselves and that an attempt to solve one problem eventually leads to another, thus, making the study of meaning cyclical in nature. Finally, the paper concludes that there is no watertight demarcation among these meaning perspective effectively study and understand meaning; the language analyst should apply a matrix of all these perspective paying particular attention to Malinoskwi's context of situation.

Long before linguistic existed as a discipline, many scholars were speculating about the nature of meaning. Linguistics was primarily concerned with the form of utterance – their sound pattern, morphological structure, and syntactic organization. But there is more to language than just form. Hence, for language to fulfill its communicative function, utterances must also convey a message; they must have content. This is the background from which the meaning of communication derives its impetus. For this reason therefore, linguists came up with a special branch of study called semantics, which studies the meaning of words and sentences. It must be stated that in every object there is inexhaustible meaning. Every word has its own meaning. Learning a new word means mastering its meaning in isolation as well as the additional meaning it may contract due to its association with other words in the sentence.

Making meaning out of any given communicative function is the hallmark of language. Language we know is many things to many people: a system of communication, a medium for thought, a vehicle for literary expression, a social institution, a matter for political controversy, a catalyst for nation building. The scope and experiences place great demand on language. Because communication is not restricted to a fixed set of topics, language must do something more than provided a package of ready-made messages. In short, human language must be creative, allowing novelty and innovation in response to new thoughts, experiences and situations. Our goal in this paper is to consider in a very general way what this work would reveal about meaning in human language.

The Nature of Meaning

It is not unusual that “meaning” presents a problem of definition to many scholars. Like many other concepts, meaning is either a vague or an ambiguous term, depending on the way one looks at it. According to palmer (1976; 2) “... Ogden and Richards were able to list not less than sixteen different meanings (of meaning) that have been favoured by reputable scholars.”

Notwithstanding the difficulty in defining meaning however, scholars have found the term indispensable in linguistic description. In linguistics, despite the problems associated with it, interpretation of utterances of various sizes – the words, phrase, clause, sentence and text – continue to be the main preoccupation. Today, scholars continue to have great difficulties in the production and interpretation of utterances due partly to the diverse procedures of meaning interpretation and also on demands at specific occasions. A fuller understanding of the nature of meaning and its roles in discourse can be got by considering some perspectives and types of meaning.

During the last decade there was a great upsurge of enthusiasm among linguists. There was a feeling of great optimism in the air and it was generally believed that many problems were being solved and a major breakthrough was imminent. Linguists then believed that the ‘new’ science of linguistics and the ‘new’ grammars that were being developed would make the teaching and learning of language easier. Rather than solve this ‘hydra’ problem of meaning, many theories were developed to understand the concept of meaning. Tomori (1977; 96) argued that rather than solve this problem, Fries, Halliday McIntosh and Streven and Chomsky have raised as many new problems as it has provided answers to problems which already existed. According to Tomori (1977; 96)

Interpretation of Meaning

These problems centre mainly round the study of semantics, the study of meaning. The most noticeable trend in linguistic studies in the late sixties and continuing into the seventies is the emphasis on the need to study semantics in order to throw more light on the problems raised by the studies of syntax.

But the truth of the matter is that linguists have always used meaning, in one way or another, in their study of phonology, morphology and syntax. The difficulty is to decide what kind of meaning they have been using and whether their use of it has been legitimate.

Grammarians and linguists in their pursuit of the explication of meaning have come up with several grammatical models such as Universal Grammar associated with the American linguists – Leonard Bloomfield; we also had Phrase Structure Grammatical Model, again, Bloomfield developed the immediate constituents model. But all of these had a bang in 1957, when Noam Chomsky came up with the Generative Grammar with all of its adaptation and variations such as the Finite State Grammar (FSG), Phrase Structure Grammar (PSG) and Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG). Also, Halliday introduced the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL).

It must be stated that these theories had some limitations in themselves and rather than give the much needed solution to the problem, compounded them. That explains the reason why linguists are still grappling with the problem of meaning as it were. Fries (1952) made these clear when he stated

To assert that any present linguistic study is “based on meaning” is tantamount to impeaching the scientific integrity of the author of that study. The wholesale and uncritical repudiation of all bearing of “meaning” upon the work of linguists seems to have become a conventional attitude of some who counted among some linguistic scholars.

Fries then goes on to say that he, himself has not “repudiated” all uses of meaning in linguistic analysis.

Perspectives of Meaning

Because of the slippery nature of meaning, language users and analysts have tried to come up with several perspectives of making meaning out of a discourse. For example, Malinowski (1923), Bloomfield (1933) and Wittgenstein (1953) defined meaning in terms of the extra linguistic world. Bloomfield defines meaning in terms of the speech situation and learner’s response. For Malinowski it is the purpose of language

Academic Excellence

in a situational context and Wittgenstein defines it in terms of different instances of language use. All of these have relevance in interpretation of meaning.

Another perspective is that which accounts for meaning within the linguistic structure and not in terms of the outside world experience. Katz and Postal (1964) claim that the semantic interpretation of lexical items is facilitated by the existence of a dictionary component and a project rule component. Chomsky (1965) assigned an interpretative role to semantics and a generative role to grammar; some other scholars like Lakoff, McCauley and Chafe argue otherwise that sentences, at the first instance are generated as semantic entities before they are described synthetically and phonologically.

A third perspective of semantic description recognizes semantic as an ubiquitous term which applies to all levels of language description, both formal and non-formal. At the formal linguistic level are recognized phonological, graphological, syntactic or grammatical and lexical meanings, while at the non-formal (extra-linguistic) level is recognized the situational meaning. Another kind of meaning recognized here is the contextual meaning (Firth, 1962 and Berry, 1977), which relates to both the formal and non-formal meanings of language. Two kinds of contextual meaning, namely: the context of culture and context of situation have deep influence on language analysis. The conditions of meaning in a situational context specify relevant features of immediate and wider experiences of the specific participants, in addition to the conventional rules. Contextual generates the concept of “stylistic meaning” which describes relations between linguistic forms and features of situational contexts, while it also includes “co-textual” meaning which relates particular linguistic features to one another in the linguistic environment.

But Fries (1952) in talking about meaning refers to “lexical meaning”, “Structural meaning” and “social meaning”. According to him, the first two combine to give “linguistic meaning” and this combines with “social meaning” to give us “total meaning.”

However, Fries came under serious criticism. Tomori (1977) argued that Fries’ use of word “total” is unfortunate. According to him, “it might suggest that there are no other possible kinds of meaning except those found in language (p. 99). He argued further that Fries’ schema suggests that the message depends entirely on linguistic meaning plus social meaning and that no other factors are involved. This is totally untrue and fallacious.

Interpretation of Meaning

Another perspective of semantics is the one observed in the proposal of a “semiotic” dimension of language study (Morris, 1946). A semiotic description subsumes three interrelated types of relations, namely, the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic relations. While syntax relate signs to their real objects and pragmatic relates sign to the users of the language. Deriving from this perspective is the concept of “pragmatics” which has proved very useful in discourse studies especially as it pertains to the interpretation of discourse in context.

Also contributing to the concept of meaning, Dellinger (1995, 1) explains that the comprehension of meaning:

... lies not in the text itself but in the complex interaction between the author’s intent and his/her performance ability to encode that intent, and the receptor’s intent and his/her performative ability not only to decode the author’s intent but march his/her own intent with the author’s.

Dellinger explanation serves to clarify that meaning cannot solely be derived from the text.

Similarly, Mey (2001: 74) recognizes that utterance and their meaning interpretation are contingent on circumstances. What we say and how we say it, is influenced by who we are talking to and where and when the intervention is talking place. In Yule’s (1996) opinion, it is people who make sense of what they read and hear. These people arrive at an interpretation, which is in line with their experiences of the way the world is (p. 106).

Meaning and the Context of Situation

There are basically two forms of a text: the spoken form and the written form. The vehicle that carries a text, whether spoken or written is language. This “language” according to Palmer (1981) does not exist in a vacuum; it must function within an environment or event. It is this environment wither which language functions that we call “situation” of wich Malinoskwi (1923) evolved the term context of situation.

Halliday and Hassan (1976) maintained that the term situation meaning the context of situation in which a text is embedded, refers to all those extra-linguistic factors which have some bearing on the text itself. Most of these extra-linguistic factors are mediated by language and language is the primary medium of communication in interactive situation. Participants in a speech event must share or have a common understanding of some assumptions about the situations. This gives rise to inter-subjectivity or how one participant has an effect on another. And, usually, it determines subject choice, code choices and even how it will be delivered. These choices are the preserve of context of meaning as context of situation. Robin (1966) proposed three

Academic Excellence

headings; field, mode and tenor and maintained that these are highly general concepts for describing how the context of situation determines the kind of meaning that are expected.

Field of discourse is the social action that is occurring, in which the text is embedded. It is interested in the issue at stake or subject of discussion; the processes involved the information to be shared. Field of discourse also deals with the institutional setting in which a piece of language occurs; as such the degree of specialization of the activity whether a conference presentation versus classroom teaching would be relevant here, since it will influence the notion of meaning and choice of language. Also, mode of discourse refers to the part that language plays in the situation. It focuses on the channel of communication adopted by the participants. It includes the choice between spoken and written discourse. Included under this is whether the language is heard or read, whether it is monologue or dialogue, whether the interaction is face to face or mediated in some way.

Furthermore, tenor refers to the linguistic and extra-linguistic role relationship of the participants. The linguistic roles are the participants' roles – speaker and hearer, and the textual roles – initiator and respondent (Halliday and Hassan, 1976). There is an interplay of these roles with other considerations such as whether the discourse is interpretational or groups, hence tenor therefore looks at the level of formality and captures the relationship between the participants.

Context is very important in the explication and interpretation of meaning, since words are not believed to exist in isolation but in relationship of text to context. Meaning of one can only be interpreted to the other. Mey (2001: 39) averred that:

Context is a dynamic, not static concept: it is to be understood as the continually changing surroundings, in the widest sense, that enables the participants in the communication process to interact, and in which the linguistic expression of their interaction becomes intelligible.

According to Mey, the context of situation is best used as suitable schematic construct to apply to language events. It is a conceptional framework for representing the social context as the semiotic environment in which people exchange meaning.

From the foregoing survey, we notice that no one model or approach can sufficiently deal with the issue of meaning. What this survey shows is that rather than solve the problem, the problem is multiplied and becomes more complex for the language user and analyst. All models examined have their inherent shortcomings and

Interpretation of Meaning

then it is safe to apply more than one approach in an attempt at interpreting the meaning of a discourse.

Conclusion

This paper attempted a brief survey of the process of assigning meaning to a discourse. The paper maintained that the concept of meaning is very abstract and vague, it discusses some perspective in the analysis of meaning. It argues that meaning of concept, utterances and discourse will still pose some problems to linguistic so long as no acceptable approach at the explication of meaning is evolved, it concludes that language analyst would have to adopt an electric approach to the study of meaning.

References

- Akpan, G. F. (2012). *A discourse-stylistic analysis of the features of news magazine reporting in Nigeria*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. University of Calabar.
- Berry, M. (1977). *Introduction to systemic linguistic 2: Levels and links*. London; Batsford.
- Bloomfield, L. (1933). *Language*. London: Allen and Unwise.
- Chomsky, n. (1965). *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. MIT Press.
- Dellinger, B. (1995). *A critical cross culture analysis of the America commercial discourse style*. Vassal: University of Wasaensis.
- Fries, C. C. (1952). *The structure of English*. London: Longman.
- Holiday, M. A. K. (2000). *Functional grammar*. London; Longman.
- Holiday, M. A. K. & Hassan, R. (1976). *Cohesion in English*, London: Longman.
- Katz, J. J. & Postal, P. M. (1964). *An integrated theory of linguistic description*. Cambridge; MIT.
- Malinowski, B. (1923). *The problem of meaning in primitive language. The meaning of Meaning*.

Academic Excellence

- MC Chantey, J. D. (196...). *The role of semantics in grammar*. New York: Holt, Rinchart and Winston.
- Mey, J. L. (2001). *Pragmatics: An introduction*. Oxford; Blackwell.
- Morris, C. W. (1946). *Signs, language and behavior*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- Palmer, F. R; (1981). *Semantics: A new outline*. Cambridge: Cup
- Tomori S. H (1977). *The morphology and syntax of present day English: An Introduction*. Ibadan: Heinemann.
- Wittgenstein, N. L. (1953). *Philosophical investigation*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.