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## APPROACHES TO MEANING AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR AN ESL CONTEXT

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### Abstract

*The complex nature of meaning investigation underlies this paper. It seeks, among other things, to unfold the true relationship between signs and what they stand for; whether the meanings of lexical items are, to a large extent, generated intrinsically or arbitrarily. In view of the intricacies associated with the phenomenon, diachronic and synchronic approaches of meaning relations are brought to the fore, taking time to identify the implication of convention on meaning explication in an ESL context.*

### Introduction

The power of words in relation to the corresponding referents provides a perennial source of wonder and illusion into the chain of conventionality of sign, signifier and signified (Ogden and Richard, 1972). Meaning has been looked at from different angles ranging from "essence of communication" to the inherent import which one deduces from the logical sequence of words in connected speech or writing. In consonance with Leech's (1983) proposition, meanings can best be explored not only through ideational factor but also through interpersonal and textual elements.

The inference that could be drawn here is that meaning is not a stable phenomenon. The semantic import of a word or expression is constrained by time and space. Similarly, whether lexical or sentential, meanings are arbitrarily generated. Medubi (1994:135) states that the inventory of language use within a given community should be acceptable to every member of the speech community in appropriate times. In her opinion, signs which convey meanings are culturally dependent. And since there are marked cultural differences in the world, these signs lack causal relationship with what they refer to at the levels of use and usage.

The implication here is that signs, as units of 'thought expression', are only used to convey agreed meanings based on the social and interactional functions they are meant to perform. However, the following section addresses the issue from the other side of the coin – that meaning is non-conventional.

### Non-Conventionality of Meaning

Non-conventionality of meaning is a purely Platonic stand which predated Aristotelian perception of meaning. This view was advanced by naturalists among the classical philosophers. This group maintained that there was an intrinsic connection between a word/sound and its referent. Really, there

are words and expressions whose semantic imports are relayed by the phonic and graphic rudiments which make up their structural elements. However, such a motivation may vary in degree and kind. For example, while the word 'splash' is motivated by a certain similarity between the sounds which make up the name and that referred to by the sense, the word 'totter' is motivated by some parallelism and analogy between the sounds which make up the name and the movement signaled by the sense.

This naturalists' view, deriving largely from Plato, maintains that there exists an intrinsic connection between substance and sense. Lyons (1995:13) seeks to exploit the areas of non-arbitrariness in the true expression of the nature of meaning. He cites iconicity, as an example of intrinsically motivated phenomena which exhibit inherent association of sign/signifier with signified. According to Lyons, an iconic sign is one whose form is explicable in terms of similarity between the form of the sign and what it signifies. Similarly, words which lack this quality are non-iconic. Hence, words which were hitherto traditionally classified as onomatopoeias now fall under the category of icons.

Another related kind of non-arbitrariness is indexicality. An index is a sign which is indicative of what it signifies in the immediate situation and which is a clue to the existence or presence of what it signals. For instance, smoke is an index of fire and slurred speech may be an indication of drunkenness. In each of these two cases, there is a causal connection between the index and what it stands for.

However, this approach to meaning explication is so narrow and limited that it fails to account for a large number of cases where words and expressions are deployed for use in certain contexts for stylistic ends. For instance, in *Mary is a pig*, there is no linguistic rule which guides the addressee into the understanding of the intended meaning. If language is essentially speech, and if speech is context-dependent, then convention stands as the determining factor in linguistic symbolization.

### Conventionality of Meaning

The central idea behind this concept is that there is no intrinsic connection between a word and what it refers to. Instead, except for few cases of phonetic motivation as discussed earlier, the sense associated with a particular word or expression is constrained by the mutual agreement in a speech community which sanctions what the entity is used to mean. Sheer arbitrariness is an outstanding phenomenon in an investigation into the general nature of meanings. This idea is well captured in Ullmann's (1957:85) submission as follows:

*The term 'conventional' must not of course be taken in its etymological connotation implying explicit or even tacit agreement on symbolic value; all it means is the absence of any intrinsic*

*motivation or justification, any 'natural' connection between the name and the sense... All authorities agree that there is no intrinsic reason for (a) 'arbor' to be called tree in English, and conversely, (b) not something else.*

Conventionality stands out, therefore, as a crucial phenomenon which predetermines the meanings of symbols, whether phonic or graphic. Apart from the limited cases where the naturalists' view seems tenable, the conventionalists' view, purely Aristotelian, is that the connection between a word and its referent is purely arbitrary. So, conventionality pertains to the agreement, though arbitrarily drawn, on the use of a signifier to label a signified. On this notion, Butler (1985:16) posits:

*The issue of conventionality versus non-conventionality is, I think, more crucial to the debate. Leech, correctly in my view, claims that rules define mappings which are conventional in that they are not predictable or deducible from non-linguistic entities.*

Even in the decoding of a pragmatic meaning which relies on non-conventional principles rather than conventional rules, the negotiation of the logical cognitive sense of a word forms the basis of the utterance on which 'pragmatic meaning' is superimposed. For instance, the understanding of 'she is a pig' as meaning 'a dirty girl' requires the decoder to, first of all, know how a pig looks like before the metaphorical transfer could make meaning as an utterance. In essence, the seemingly non-conventional use of language in context, based on the goals and motives of interlocutors, requires a systematic transfer of arbitrary rules to non-conventional principles.

Therefore, the relationship which exists between a word and a thing is that of 'arbitration' and convention which have been established within the structure of that linguistic expression and usage. In the light of this, a pragmatic utterance becomes a referring expression:

*What is in a name? That which we call a rose  
by any other name would smell as sweet...  
Romeo – doff thy name... which is no part of  
thee...*

The extract is culled from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet when Juliet attempts to state the insignificance of name or identity to the reality of the situation which informs the use. So, the name, a word, the referring expression which pictures the image of a concept in our minds, what one means or what is meant is based on convention, which is arbitrary, of what the language users make out of the word (s).

### A Diachronic Approach

Diachrony is the examination of structures and properties of a language in relation to the history of its growth and development. Such a study allows linguists to probe into the nature of words in relation to meaning at definite points in time. Katie Wales (1989:118-119) writes:

*Diachrony is a historical perspective for studying language, as it changes through time, in sounds, syntax, vocabulary etc... Language is never static: changes in pronunciation and vocabulary in particular take place from one generation to another. At any given moment there are obsolescent forms in circulation with innovatory ones, even though their FIELDS of use may vary.*

In essence, 'time' is a unique factor in situating a meaning which is conventional. For instance, the meaning of a conventional linguistic sign may vary at different points in time. This explains why meanings of words are best negotiated temporally. For example, the word *bread*, in the biblical time was used to refer to food generally, irrespective of kinds or classes. Now, it *means* the flour-made bread alone. This means that the meaning has been narrowed down to a single reference.

At this juncture therefore, it is pertinent to delve into the concept of meaning change. Meaning change refers to the process through which language undergoes various editions or modifications in terms of its import. It is a reflection of the diachronic metamorphosis which a given language passes through at definite points in time. Specialization, generalization, amelioration, and pejoration constitute the major processes which shall be highlighted in this paper.

**Specialization:** This is otherwise known as narrowing. It is a common type of semantic change which describes a process whereby a word which hitherto had a broad and inclusive meaning or reference begins to refer narrowly and exclusively. For example 'shroud' which was used to refer to 'garment' in the past now means a 'burial outfit worn on a corpse'. Similarly, the word 'liquor' stood for liquid generally ages earlier, the lexeme now has a narrow reference denoting 'alcohol'.

**Generalization :** This describes a changing process whereby an initially narrow meaning acquires a broadened reference. For example, 'siren' which formerly meant 'an imaginary fairy woman who caused the doom of sailors' now has an inclusive reference denoting any dangerous woman who seduces men and preys on them. Also 'salary' and 'butcher' which meant 'salt allowance' and 'goat

dealer' (alone) now mean 'regular wage paid to workers' and 'someone who slaughters animals' respectively.

**Amelioration:** This is a change which involves an elevation of meaning in a scale of values. For example, the word 'Marshall' which formerly meant 'home servant' has improved in meaning, now denoting 'the highest ranking officer in the army'. Also, 'knight' which formerly meant a 'boy' or 'youth' now means 'a respected title'. This illuminates the attempt to elevate the meaning of a word from its hitherto bad state.

**Pejoration:** This is also referred to degradation as it depicts the meaning of a word in its falling scale of values. For example, the word 'pirate' formerly meant 'an adventurer', it has depreciated in modern times to denote simply, 'sea thief'. 'Ring leader' literally meant the leader of a group. Now, it has degenerated in its quality of social meaning, referring to 'leader of a bad group'.

Overall, diachrony is an attempt to explore the possibilities of meanings based on agreement of language users, with arbitrarily drawn rules, to convey a sensibility at a particular period of time.

### A Synchronic Approach

**Synchrony:** Synchrony delves into studying language as it functions as a tool of communication at a given period of time. Much unlike the diachronic perspective, the synchronic approach examines a language in relation to the variation in its internal structures and systems without necessarily accounting for the functions of elements by an appeal to historical factors.

For our own study therefore, we shall limit our synchronic assessment to the arbitrariness of meanings associated with the possibilities of **synonymy**, **homonymy** and **polysemy** as 'internal properties of a given language'.

**Synonymy:** This is used to express symmetrical relation between words. Synonyms are expressions with same or similar meanings. Whether absolute or near-synonyms, there is no intrinsic connection between the structural elements and what they stand for in the outside world of reality. Let us consider the word 'anxiety'. 'Curiosity', 'eagerness', 'enthusiasm', are its near-synonyms. A point worthy of note is that each of these possible choices is not an absolute alternative as one is a shade different from another, hence, they cannot absolutely fit into the same grammatical slot on all occasions.

Let us consider the following examples.

- (i) I will quit the room for the new mistress
- (ii) I will vacate the room for her
- (iii) I will leave the room for her

In the propositions (i, ii and iii), the words 'quit', 'vacate' and 'leave' have been used as near-synonyms, each requiring distinct context for appropriation.

In addition, it should be reiterated that different contexts require different codes for their expression. So, it is a set of situational and linguistic conventions which governs meaning negotiation. In other words, it is possible that an utterance generates different meanings at different spheres of use. Therefore, a consideration of the theoretical construct offers a clue to identifying the propositional content as distinct from other possible senses which the same utterance may signal.

**Homonymy:** This is a sense relation which exists between two identical forms or signs but with different cognitions. Absolute homonymy is a relation which occurs where forms have the same orthographic and phonetic shape, yet different meanings. For instance, the word 'bark' may denote 'the outer cover of a tree' and at the same time, 'the noise of a dog'. Two other categories of homonymy are homophones and homographs. Homophones are forms with similar phonetic realization but different spellings and meanings: sum/some; sought/sort etc. On the other hand, homographs are forms with same spelling, but different meanings, e.g. sole (of a shoe), sole (one, singular); wind [ 'wind] (breeze), wind [ waɪnd] (to turn around).

Homonymy seems largely a synchronic notion. Looking at the identical forms given as example above, it is crystal clear that there is no intrinsic connection between each of the possible forms and its semantic import either in the context of speech or in the context of situation. Instead, a consideration of associative syndrome seems preponderant.

This brings us to a recast of certain principles which condition how expressions are invested with meanings. Just as Leech (1983) points out, essentially, in his 'Polite Principle', 'Co-operative Principles and other maxims as 'Tacts', the superiority of convention and arbitrariness over non-conventional consideration, as meaning negotiation processes, cannot be compromised.

**Polysemy:** This is a (meaning) relation which exists when a given form has several unique senses depending on context and usage. The lexical entries in this category have similar origins. For instance, while 'bank' is polysemous in the possible senses of 'a place where blood is stored' and 'a financial institution', 'bank' of a river can be regarded as a clear case of homonymy.

On the distinction between homonymy and polysemy, Lyons (1995:58 – 59) writes:

*Whereas homonymy (whether absolute or partial) is a relation that holds between two or more distinct lexemes, polysemy ("multiple meaning") is a property of single lexemes... The homonyms 'sole1', ("bottom of foot or shoe") and 'sole' ("kind of fish")... constitute a much quoted example... And it is metaphorical extension as a synchronic process that is at issue*

*when one refers to the related meanings of polysemous lexemes.*

Whether metaphorical or denotative, in much larger proportions, the possible meanings, senses or interpretations of a polysemous word rest on the threshold of sheer arbitrariness. In other words, there is no intrinsic motivation for ascribing different senses to a given word. Instead, the role of context (of speech and/or situation) stands supreme. At this level, the tacit agreement in linguistic symbolization is the only vital key with which the door of meaning negotiation is opened.

### **Implications for an ESL Context**

Adegbija (1988) maintains that it is not the linguistic import of a word that matters at the level of use to which it is deployed, but the meaning which the society chooses to place on it. Since the society itself is in a constant state of flux, all the elements within it exhibit a measure of dynamism in relation to differences in space and time. Hence, in a second language situation, users of the English language should understand and appreciate the fact that it is not a static phenomenon. As a matter of fact, the semantic variation in Nigerian English, as an example, should be seen as a normal development in the trend of standardization of a language.

Similarly, as identified by Alebiosu (1991:6), "localities and groups of people have their own specialized association for words that otherwise may convey broader meaning. The degree of specialization which a word exhibits depends on cultural needs of the people". He cites the much-quoted instance of the Eskimos who have several words to describe their variant types of snow "(falling snow, snow on the ground, hard snow and wind-driven flying snow)". Conversely, such distinctions are not marked in African languages because the phenomenon and the idea surrounding its various distinctions are alien to Africa. So, it is worthwhile to state that rather than probing into the meanings of words (in English as a case study) from the perspectives of the native speakers' worldview, meanings are to be negotiated and decoded from the perspective of the worldview of its users, irrespective of whether native or foreign.

Conventionality of meaning, as the case may be, boosts the efficacy of context in meaning explication. Meanings of certain words are sometimes vague. This may arise as a result of the susceptibility of such lexical items to different interpretations. Hence, such meanings only become meaningful in certain contexts of use. For instance, the word 'deal' may denote different senses whether positively or negatively (Adegbija, 1989:175). Such possible senses are situated in the sentences that follow:

- Deal out three cards to the players (give)
- They deal in fairly used engines (buy and sell)
- Let's make a deal (unholy alliance)
- It's a deal (lucrative venture)

- I'll deal with her myself (punish/reprimand/take care of)
- The book deals with analytic stylistics (covers/focuses at)

A point worthy of note here is that it is sheer arbitrariness which allows for such extension of meaning.

From the foregoing, it is clear that changes which characterize meaning in a language have serious implications for teaching and learning in a second language situation. In consonance with the linguistic dynamism which characterizes the modern world, teachers and learners of language need to be familiar with the factors which inform the changes and the processes involved. In so doing, the understanding of linguistic conventions, both at the formal and functional levels, becomes highly significant. For example, 'patrol', 'not on seat' and 'dress' for 'patrol team', 'not in/around' and 'shift' respectively exhibit partial or total drift in meaning in the Nigerian context. Such 'variations' or 'deviations' are governed by linguistic and pragmatic conventions. Thus, language teachers and learners should see themselves as the evangelists of the language, whether native or non-native and strive to accommodate the idiosyncratic conventions into the target language.

Adegbija (1989:175) argues that one obvious implication of meaning innovations in Nigerian English is that it reduces international intelligibility, especially when there is the need for communication between a Nigerian and a non-Nigerian. However, one may not see this as an impediment to meaning explication in Nigeria as an ESL context; if one appreciates fully the fact that language (and meaning therefrom) is an inalienable property of its users. The table that follows presents English expressions which have been interpolated to express idiosyncratic Nigerian sensibilities.

| SBE                                    | NE                         |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| To catch cold                          | To have a running nose     |
| To meddle, intrude or interrupt others | To poke-nose               |
| To put on a dress                      | To dress up                |
| To do one's best                       | To try one's possible best |
| To pose for a photograph               | To take picture            |
| To visit a toilet                      | To ease oneself            |
| To be influential                      | To have long legs          |
| Black-out                              | Power failure              |
| Really free                            | Free of charge             |
| To alight/disembark from a vehicle     | To drop from a vehicle     |

Culled from:

Odumuh, A.E. (1987)

These drifts became necessary in Nigeria, as an ESL context, owing to the exigency of extending the frontiers of meanings to accommodate nuances of native sociolinguistic worldviews. The tendency to demonstrate explicitness in

accordance with the indigenous codes culminates in a seemingly excessive use of modifiers/qualifiers in such structures. So, conventionality of meaning offers English in an ESL situation its peculiar uniqueness as distinct from other variants in other contexts. This notion seems illuminating in the promotion of 'Nigerian English' in Nigeria, 'Indian English' in India, among others, as properties of their respective 'resident' users.

Overall, a clear understanding of the principles of conventionality of meaning would enable a thorough indigenization of English in a second language context. This is because, based on local convention, ESL users are able to express their indigenous concepts in a (hitherto) foreign language. It has an additional merit of facilitating the teaching and learning of the language as the users begin to see and utilize the language as a tool of shaping their (own) destiny.

### **Conclusion**

The exploration in the ocean of meaning as a volatile level of language has been of a major concern in the past few decades. Investigation into the real nature of meaning to which lexical entries refer has also been an age-long adventure to linguists. This, no doubt, has brought about divergent philosophical opinions on the explication of meaning generally.

It is worth stressing, however, that of all the views advanced, convention and 'arbitration' constitute the linguistic pool from where language users select lexical items and invest them with 'shades of meaning' as distinct from other possibilities. This is not to say that non-conventional approach to meaning explication should be totally discountenanced. What we are saying is that cases where such is tenable are quite limited.

In summary, whether intrinsically motivated or not, the meaning of a lexeme, or a larger grammatical stretch, should be sought with absolute cognizance paid to the context of use. It is based on these criteria that the ESL users are implored to explore and exploit meanings of lexical items in view of the constraints placed on the ESL user by the ESL situation where such (items) have been deployed for use.

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