

COMMUNICATING MEANING: ELEMENTS OF SEMANTIC RELATIONS AND PHENOMENA

Dr Mahfouz A. Adedimeji,

Department of English,

University of Ilorin, Ilorin.

Introduction

Human beings live mainly by expressing their thoughts and communicating their feelings. They cannot do without generating and sharing meaning. As such, the subject of meaning had been a preoccupation of philosophers right from the classical period up till the contemporary times. We started generating meaning started right from our mothers' wombs and we spend as much as 75% of our entire life communicating (Tubbs & Moss, 2008).

Linguists, philosophers and rhetoricians were especially preoccupied with the subject of meaning in the nineteenth century as it was realized that “expressing meaning is what languages are all about” (Goddard, 1998, p.1). This was the time the word ‘semantics’ came into the English lexicon as the technical term used to refer to the study of meaning. Originating from the Greek verb, ‘semaineth’, which means to signify or to show, semantics is derived from ‘semantikos’ (a derivative of ‘semaineth’) meaning ‘significant’. Semantics, basically, is thus the study of meaning, meaning being the central focus of language.

The purpose of this chapter is to briefly examine the concepts of semantic relations and semantic phenomena as crucial components of semantic analysis. Lexical relations include synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy (homophony and homography) and polysemy while semantic phenomena,

otherwise known as issues of semantic interest, are ambiguity, paraphrase, entailment, contradiction, tautology, anomaly, obscurity, absurdity, idiomaticity, figurative use of language and fallacy, among others. This is done after overviewing the types of meaning generally.

Types of Meaning

Meaning can be divided into two major types: the literal/ basic and the literary/ figurative. It may also be considered to be of primary, secondary and tertiary layers, the last of which is also conceived as the master speech act layer (Adegbija, 1982). Leech (1974) identifies seven types of meaning in order to really delineate the nature of the meaning. According to him, meanings are conceptual/denotative, emotional/connotative, collocative, reflected, affective, stylistic and thematic, which are summarized by Adedimeji (2003) thus:

Denotative meaning is the literal, basic, plain or central meaning of a word. It is relatively stable and its scope is not open-ended and indeterminate. *Connotative meaning*, on the other hand, is the meaning people associate with words. It is the personal or cultural meaning which is open-ended and indeterminate. According to Odebunmi (2001, p.49), connotative meaning ultimately depends on “individual experience” and Yule (1996, p.3) affirms the essence of “speaker meaning”.

While *collocative* (from collocation or “placing together” of words or phrases) *meaning* is the sense of a linguistic form in relation to the other forms expressed with it in a given context, *reflected meaning* is the sense a word or sentence evokes in a multiple conceptual situation. In the words of Ogunsiji (2000, p.52), *reflected meaning* arises when one of the several meanings of

a word becomes directly associated with the word to the extent that we tend to forget the other uses of the word.

Affective meaning arises when language is used to reflect the personal feelings or attitudes of the speaker to the audience. This type of meaning features at the levels of politeness, indignation and rudeness. While *stylistic meaning* concerns the relation of the linguistic form to social or situational circumstances like geographical location, subject-matter, medium, sex, age, etc., *thematic meaning* refers to the manner of organising messages in terms of ordering, focus and emphasis. Examples of these meaning types are provided in literature (see, Odebunmi, 2001; Goddard, 1998; Ogbulogo, 2005)

Semantic Relations

Also known as lexical relations, meaning relations or sense relations, the concept of semantic relations refers to the associations existing between linguistic expressions. The thrust of structural linguistics is that meanings do not just exist; they exist only in relation to other of an overall system of contrasts and similarities. The knowledge of such relations is part of linguistic competence that provides insight into how expressions are used to mean. In any lexical expression, no matter how ordinary, a semanticist relates one form to another as meaning does not exist in isolation. Major semantic relations include the following:

Synonymy

This is the relationship of similarity or sameness between words. Synonyms are words that are similar in meaning, either in all their uses or in particular contexts in a language. There are many synonyms in English as a result of borrowings from other languages, especially Latin and French. Consider the following examples:

English (popular)**French (literary)****Latin (learned)**

rise	→	Mount	→	ascend
ask	→	Question	→	interrogate
goodness	→	virtue	→	probity
fast	→	Firm	→	secure
fire	→	Flame	→	conflagration
fear	→	Terror	→	trepidation
holy	→	Sacred	→	consecrated
time	→	Age	→	epoch

There are perhaps no true/absolute synonyms in English especially as no two words can absolutely mean the same. Contexts of usage and the style of speech also determine which words are appropriate. For example, both “strong” and “powerful” are synonymous but we can only talk of “strong tea” (not strong car) and “powerful car” (not strong car) meaning that words have their peculiar uses in given specific contexts.

Consider the following synonyms for ‘good’:

Good – (high quality) first class, superior, fine, excellent, first-rate (antonym: poor)

(suitable) helpful, beneficial, sound, safe, advantageous, reliable,
trustworthy, useful (antonym: useless)

	(skilled)	skillful, able, proficient, accomplished, talented, capable, clever, competent, useful (antonym: bad)
	(virtuous)	decent, respectable, moral, upright, noble, worthy, blameless, wholesome (antonym: bad)
	(enjoyable)	pleasant, nice, lovely, satisfactory, agreeable, delightful (antonym: bad)
	(obedient)	well-behaved, well-mannered, polite, well-brought-up, courteous (antonym: naughty)
	(nice)	fine, lovely, clear, mild, pleasant, fair, sunny, (antonym: unpleasant)
	(effective)	useful, valuable, right, appropriate, beneficial (antonym: unsuitable)
good	(noun)	help, advantage, usefulness, profit, gain (Lawal, 2004)

Antonymy

This is the relationship of oppositeness between a word and another word in language. Antonyms, thus, are words that are opposite in meaning. Two types of antonyms are identifiable: gradable and non-gradable antonyms.

Gradable antonyms show their oppositeness in terms of degree which makes them amenable to comparative and superlative constructions. For example, good/bad, tall/short, fat/thin, simple/complex can be expressed in comparative and superlative forms, i.e. better/best, worse/worst, taller/tallest, shorter/shortest, etc. respectively. Non-gradable antonyms, however, indicate reality in terms of contrast and complementariness. Examples of these are heaven/earth, man/woman, knowledge/ignorance, death/life, etc.

Morphologically, many antonyms can be derived by adding prefixes (*injustice, disadvantage, mismanage, unnecessary, illegal, impossible*), changing the prefixes or first syllables (ascend/descend, exterior/interior, appreciate/depreciate) or by changing the suffixes (*careful/careless, colourful, colourless, useful, useless, etc.*) (Maciver,1986).

Homonymy

This is the relationship of sameness of structure (spelling and sound) between one word and the other with different meanings. Two types of homonyms identifiable: *homophones* and *homographs*.

Homophones are words pronounced in the same way as other words but with different spellings. Examples are quay/key, sea/see, hair/hare, bear/beer, etc. Homographs on their own part are

words that are spelt in the same way but are different in meaning. Examples are sole (only)/sole (of a shoe), project (v)/project(n), good (adj)/good (n), mean (adj)/mean (verb), etc.

In standard dictionaries, homographs are indicated with the same entry occurring as entry for a number of times i.e. mean¹, mean², etc.

Hyponymy

This refers to the relationship of inclusion existing between words. Hyponyms are thus words whose meanings are both narrower than and included in the meaning of another general lexemes. This general lexeme/term is referred to as a super-ordinate term while other narrower words are co-hyponyms.

For instance, person is a super-ordinate term within which man, woman, boy, girl and child are co-hyponyms. Various levels of hyponymy can be identified, just as the following figure illustrates:

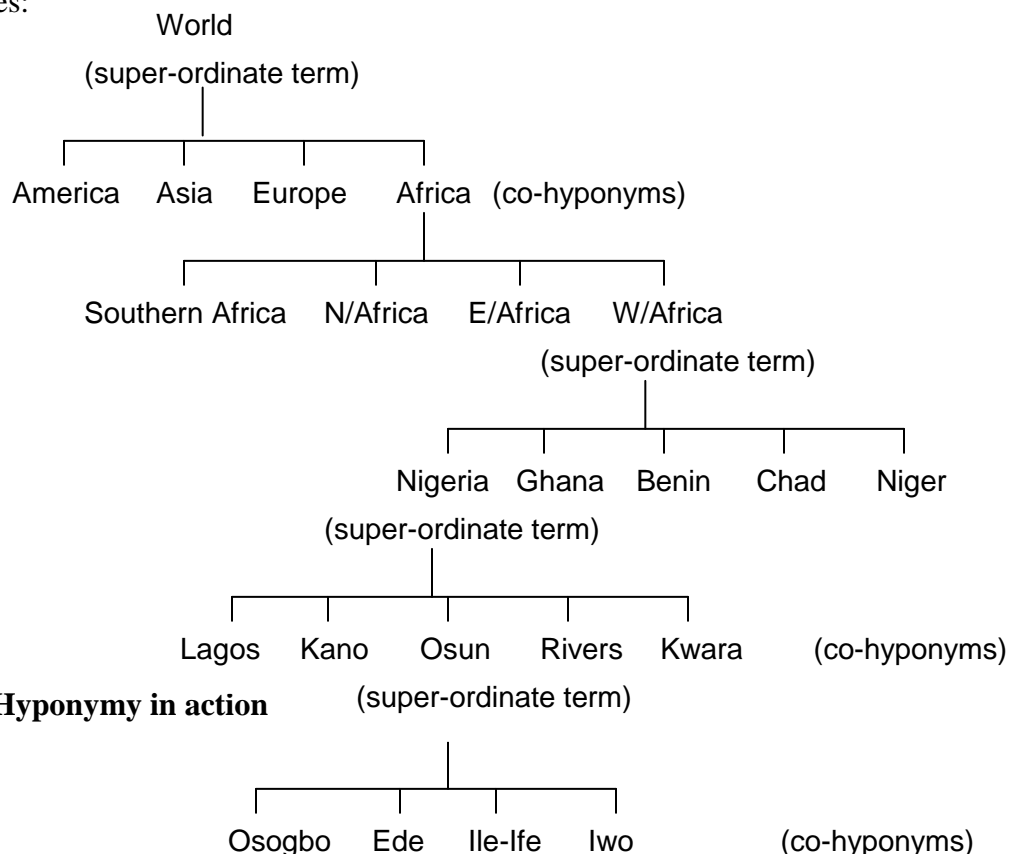


Fig. 1: Hyponymy in action

Polysemy

This refers to the situation in which a word having multiple meanings. A polysemous word has more than one sense. A word like 'good' is polysemous as exemplified previously. Another word, 'bad' has the following meanings: poor quality, unskillful, not functioning properly, incorrect, wicked, misbehaving and disobedient, angry and unpleasant towards others, offensive, harmful, rotten, injured or diseased, unwell, uneasy, more unpleasant than usual, distressing, unfavourable, just to mention a few!

In a good dictionary, a polysemous word is indicated by giving the list of a possible number of senses/meanings of a single entry or lexeme. The lexeme, unlike the case under homonymy, would not be numbered, rather it is the meanings that would be.

Semantic Phenomena

When words are combined to generate meaning, different issues arise out of such combinations. If sense or semantic relations operate at the level of word, semantic phenomena or semantic issues arise in sentences or supra-lexical constructions. Depending on the competence of the speaker, the following issues are of interest to semanticists in linguistic communication:

Ambiguity

Ambiguity refers to dual or multiple senses of interpretation. It is a phenomenon that arises when the same linguistic expression is capable of generating more than one meaning, the consequence of which is confusion about the sense actually intended. Most ambiguities occur at the supra-lexical level.

Examples of ambiguous sentences are:

I have found my wife a good cook

My father lost his glasses

Visiting strangers could be dangerous

Ambiguities can be disambiguated by modifying the expressions. For example:

I have found my wife as a good cook/I have found a good cook for my wife or I have

Found out that my wife is a cook, etc.

Paraphrase

Paraphrase is the relationship between an expression and other expressions of the same meaning.

It is considered as the most important relationship for the whole enterprise of linguistic semantics (Goddard, 1998). A paraphrase relation exists in something being said in various ways.

For example, *Folake is my sister, the young girl is my sister, that student is my sister* are all paraphrases – abstracting the sense of an expression and reforming such sense in another way.

Entailment

This is what logically follows from what is stated; what can be deducted from the given.

Entailments hold between two sentences, S1 and S2, such that if S1 is true, S2 must be true. In other words, the relationship holding between two sentences where the truth of one signals the truth of the other because of the meanings involved is known as entailment.

To say that next week is my wedding anniversary entails that I am married. The sentence, “Jonathan democratically won another term” at least has six entailments: There is a person called Jonathan. There were elections. Jonathan contested in an election. Jonathan won an election. Jonathan had won an election before. Jonathan is a leader.

Contradiction

This is a situation of contrasting senses within or between (a) sentence(s). To a large extent, it involves a sentence being false on account of the meaning involved. There is a contradictory sense in “Though he is poor, he has a billion naira.”

Semantic contradiction could be lexical (oxymoron) or sentential (paradox). An oxymoron is a figure of speech in which two contradictory words are placed together for effect: *a little giant, a sleepless night, a cold war, an enforced peace*. A paradox is a statement that appears self-contradictory but has tenable and agreeable sense at further thought: ‘A child is the father of man’; ‘In for a penny, in a pound’ etc. Contradiction can be logical as well as figurative. While logical contradiction is undesirable, figurative contradiction has literary imports hence meaningful.

Tautology

This is the addition of needless elements in a sentence, the absence of which does not affect the meaning. Aristotle conceived tautology as a superfluous component, “upon whose removal the remainder still makes the term is being defined clear” (Goddard, 1998, p. 30)

According to Allan (1986, p.188), “it arises when a criteria part (usually the whole) of the meaning of a predicate is implicated by one of its arguments” Examples of tautology are: “My daughter is a girl”, “she is an unmarried spinster”.

Like contradiction, it is not all cases of tautology that are not informative at the deeper level of meaning. Definitions and explanations are, by design, tautologies, e.g. “a dove is a bird”.

Anomaly

This occurs when a sentence has no semantic value or is meaningless in the real life. It is a situation wherein no idea that is agreeable with the real world is suggested in the expression. The famous example of Chomsky is “colorless green grass sleep furiously”. Other anomalous expressions are: the table ate the yam, the book is dancing while the pen is beating the drum. In literature and stylistics, it is possible to invest sense in or impose meaning on anomalous sentences.

Obscurity

Obscurity concerns what is unclear, what is not explicit, what is unnecessarily turgid or inaccessible to the decoder. As Aristotle put it, “we make things known by taking not any random terms, but such as are prior and more intelligible...a man who does not define through terms of this kind has not defined at all” (cited in Goddard, 1998, p. 27). It is unmitigated obscurity that informs the definitions “fire” and “pepper” respectively as “state of combustion” and “pungent condiment obtained from dried berries of various plants either whole or ground”.

Circularity

Circularity, a major form of obscurity, is a situation in which a vicious circle is created wherein A is defined by B, B via C and ultimately through A. Circular definitions could be the

bane of prominent scholars. Aristotle is reported to have unwittingly defined “sun” as “star that appears by day” (in a way day is contingent upon the appearance of sun) while Palmer is cited to have defined salt as “the stuff we add to salty food” (Goddard, 1998).

Absurdity

What is absurd is utterly foolish and unreasonable. Absurdity is almost anomalous. Examples of absurd sentences are: The man is not as tall as he was as a baby. I shall attend the matriculation of the fresh graduates last week.

Consider the poems:

Where does a man buy a cap for his knee

Or a key for a lock of his hair?

Should his eyes be called an academy?

Because there are pupils there?

In the crown of his head, what gems are found?

Who crosses the bridge of his nose?

Can be use, if a picture requires to be hung

The nails on the ends of his toes? (Macifer, 1986, p.48)

Idiomatcity

Idiomaticity is a special collocation whose meaning is not negotiable on the basis of the individual words that make up the fixed expression. Idioms have conventional meanings, which are rigid in both form and sense. Idiomaticity underlines the meanings of the following fixed collocates: to kick the bucket (to die), to hit the jackpot (to be successful), to turn a new leaf (to have a change in behaviour) etc.

There are hundreds of idioms in English and it would be good that you are familiar with many of them.

Figurative Language

Figurative language operates on the second layer of meaning, as opposed to the literal first layer. Figurative language explores or exploits the connotative aspects of meaning. This involves sifting of meaning from what is basic and conceptual to what is idiosyncratic and emotional. Figures of speech make one's speech or writing vivid, rich and interesting (Ogunsiji 2000 p. 58).

A complete semantic analysis would account for how words are exploited for communicative purposes as operative in figurative language, even though it is observed to have a minor place in semantic analysis. Figures of speech include simile, metaphor, personification, hyperbole, irony, apostrophe, alliteration, synecdoche and many others that constitute the focus of literary discourse.

Fallacy

Fallacy is a concept of logical semantics as well as truth conditional theory. It is an erroneous, misleading or unsound sentence, incorrect in reasoning or general observation. A fallacious statement has zero truth conditions and lacks logical validity in the real world.

Fallacies include hasty generalization (conclusion based on few instances that are untypical! (e.g. Black people are lazy, women are evil) oversimplification, (attributing a single cause to what could have complex causes (e.g. our graduates are sub-standard as a result of low budgets), faulty analogy (reasoning that because two phenomena are similar in some ways, they are similar in other ways, e.g. if he resembles me, then we must have been born by the same parents).

Other fallacies include *non-sequitur*, (“it does not follow”, jumping to conclusions not warranted by premises e.g. it is true, I read it in the papers) *petitio principii*, (“begging the question” assuming the truth of what stands in need of proof. For example, that bad regime must be replaced) and ignoring the question (diverting attention from the main issue through name calling, appeal to emotion, charged language, etc. Don’t listen to him, he is a liar) (Adedimeji, 2005a).

Other possible semantic phenomena or elements of sentence meaning are vagueness (meaninglessness or what is or interpretable), analyticity (the grammatical structure and lexical meaning of a proposition make an expression to be true), presupposition (what the speaker takes for granted as part of the world knowledge; what he assumes the hearer knows already) (Ogbulogo, 2005).

Conclusion

Semantics seeks to convey and classify human experience through language (Babatunde 1999). The focus of its attention is on meaning, which has been conceived to be a “complex process akin to fishing in a river” (Adegbija, 1988, p.151). The background experiences of the various fishermen and their methods and tools as well as the depth of the river determine the types of sizes of the fish caught. The role of the semanticist is to investigate and explore the various dimensions through which words and sentences mean.

The knowledge of meaning types, semantic relations and semantic phenomena is considered crucial to the negotiation of meaning in a world like ours that solely depends on words: how to form, use, manipulate, interpret and reconstruct them to fashion out reality (Adedimeji, 2005b). The more one knows how to use language to generate meaning, the better one becomes in winning life challenges and dealing with the world in which everyone is ardent about negotiating meaning and communicating their views (Adedimeji, 2012).

References

- Adedimeji, M. A. (2003). The semantics and pragmatics of Nigerian proverbs in Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart* and Ola Rotimi's *The gods are not to blame*". *Alore: Ilorin 7 Journal of the Humanities*. 13: 54 – 79.
- Adedimeji, M. A. (2005a). Logical fallacies and thirty English proverbs: A truth conditional semantic approach. *The Abuja Communicator*. (2) 1: 122 – 143.
- Adedimeji, M. A. (2005b). Word structure in English. In Alabi, V. A. & S.T. Babatunde (Eds.) *Basic communication skills for students of Science and Humanities*(pp.1 - 21).Ilorin: Department of English, University of Ilorin.
- Adedimeji, M. A. (2006). Nonverbal semantics (Supplementary Essay Two). In A. Odebunmi, (ed). *Meaning in English: An Introductio*. (pp.157 – 172). Ogbomoso: Critical Sphere, Ladoke Akintola University of Technology.
- Adedimeji, M. A. (2012). Winning with words: The semantics of Muhammed Ali's verbal punches. Paper presented at the 13th West Africa University Games (WAUG) International Conference, University of Ilorin on March 30, 2012.
- Adegbija, E. (1982). A speech act analysis of consumer advertisements. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. Indiana University, Bloomington.
- Adegbija, E. (1988). 'My friend, where is Anini?': Decoding the meaning of utterances. *Journal of Pragmatics* 12: 151 – 160.
- Allan, K. (1986). *Linguistic meaning*. London: Routledge & Paul Plc.

Babatunde, S. T. (1999). Towards defining the scope of meaning in ESL in Nigeria. In Adegbija, E. (ed.) *The English language and literature in English* (pp. 70-80). Ilorin: MEL Department, University of Ilorin.

Goddard, C. (1998). *Semantic analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lawal, R. A. (2004). *Meaning without mean-ness*. The 74th Inaugural Lecture. Ilorin: Library and Publication Committee, University of Ilorin.

Leech, G. N. (1974). *Semantics*. England: Penguin Books.

Macifer, A. (1986). *The new first aid in English*. Rev. ed. Glasgow: Robert Gibson.

Odebunmi, A. (2001). *The English word and meaning*. Ogbomoso: Critical Sphere.

Ogbulogo, C. (2005). *Concepts in semantics*. Lagos: Sam Iroanusi Publications.

Ogunsiji, A. 2000. Introductory semantics. In Babajide, A.O. (ed.) *Studies in English language*. (pp. 43 – 59). Ibadan: Enicrownfit Publishers.

Tubbs, S.L. & S. Moss (2008). *Human communication: Principles and contexts*. New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies.

Yule, G. 1996. *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.