

## **A Critical Assessment of Traditional Approaches to the Study Semantics**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines three traditional theories to the study of semantics. They are the referential theory, the image theory and the contextual or operational theory of meaning. The research is carried out to know how meaning is viewed, that is how the meaning of a word is portrayed. Furthermore, this research is done in order to examine and understand the three traditional theories of meaning. This study examines each theory one after the other, stating their proponders, strengths and weaknesses. From the findings in the three theories, the conclusion is that there is no particular theory of meaning that is sufficient to account for meaning. As such, there are limitations in the traditional theories to the study of semantics. In other words, meaning is not just tied to theories; referential, image and contextual. It therefore means that meaning varies, it could be universal, regional, racial, tribal, personal, and religious.*

**Keywords:** Semantics; Theories of Meaning; Theoretical Framework; Greek Philosophy.

### **Introduction**

Semantics originated from the Greek word, *semaine*, which means, ‘to reach’ or ‘to signify’ Semantics is generally the study of meaning. It is simply the study of the meaning (of any work) and meaning itself is a difficult concept to define. In an attempt to clarify the nature of meaning as the subject of semantics, the three popular traditional approaches to the study of semantics are discussed. These are the referential theory of

meaning, the image theory of meaning and the contextual theory of meaning.

These theories of meaning have different views about the meaning of a word. This means that the way one theory sees meaning is different from the perception of the other theories. Each theory has its own perception of the meaning of a word. Hence, there are limitations in the three traditional theories of meaning.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- (a) to understand that meaning is more complex than words formed in a sentence;
- (b) to understand the different types of theories of meaning;
- (c) to know the relationship between word and meaning;
- (d) to view meaning in different types of works, phrase (groups), clauses and sentences, including signs and symbols.

### **Referential Theory of Meaning**

The proponents of this approach to the study of meaning are C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richard (1923) in a book entitled, *The Meaning of Meaning* (<https://www.academia.edu>). They posit that "the meaning of an expression is the actual entity or object in the real world to which the expression refers. The actual object or entity is referred to as the referent. Referential meaning is also known as denotative meaning, descriptive meaning, it could be called conceptual meaning, or sense. It refers to logical, cognitive, or denotative content of an expression.

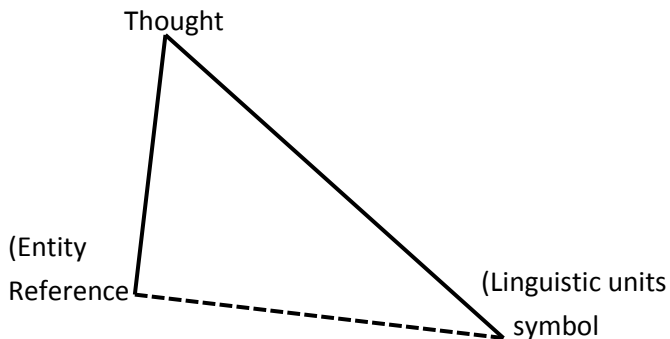
In this theory, the entity name is the meaning of its name. The dog is the meaning of a dog-the entity. The entity "chalk" is the meaning of chalk, that is the referent - the physical object signifies the meaning of word. According to Kempson in Akwanya (1996), "the relationship between a word and an object is called the relationship of reference." Reference is an extra-linguistic notion in that it relates to things or words through concepts to things. Therefore, the terms 'reference', referent,

'referential', 'referring' are used with respect to the entity on the external world to which a linguistic expression relates.

There is a close bond between language and objects, such that knowledge as grasping the nature of an object is impossible if the thing is not associated with a name (Akwanya 1996). Akwanya maintained that "to know a particular type of snake as a viper is a very useful knowledge in a society like Achebe's Umuaro, where royal pythons may be handled. And one who miscalls a viper, a python, certainly knows neither the viper nor the python.

Ogunsiyi (2000), also shares the same view with Akwanya. To him, referential theory of meaning "explains the meaning of a word in terms of the relation between the word and the object or objects to which it refers." Ejele (2003) refers to the concept as "the meaning of an expression what it refers to what it stands for." According to him, David means David" as a person's name, 'horse' means either the class of horse or the properties all horses share.

In the words of Ogden and Richards in Ndimele (1997), even if there is a close link between a word and its reference, there is no direct link. "The connection between a linguistic unit and its referent is only possible through thought." They illustrate this using a triangle, called semiotic triangle.



The above triangle explains that there is no direct link between a linguistic unit (symbol) and the entity<sup>76</sup> (referent) to which the symbol refers. This is why the triangle has a broken base (Ndimele1997). Akwanya (1996) further stipulates that the ability of an individual word to specify an object is best seen in proper names, as the given name specifies one thing and one only. To him "meaning seems to consist in this bond between the name and the thing it specifies. Akwanya insists that "the relationship thought to exist between the proper noun and the individual has been used as a model for the explanation of word classes." Just in support of reference, it has been argued that, as proper names identify specific individuals, so do 'man', 'chair', 'desk', 'book', 'bed', 'car' and other common nouns refer to sets of individuals. John Williams' is a name of a particular man, a human being. Also, man is the common name for a set, including John Williams.

Similarly, verbs are said to refer to actions, adjectives refer to properties of individuals, and adverbs refer to properties of actions.

The referential theory can be also extended to sentences. For instance, in these sentences:

1. It is cold today.
2. The road to my house is full of potholes.

The above sentences refer to states of affairs in the natural, social, or interior worlds.

Referential theory of meaning has some credits to itself, but there are some shortcomings associated in this theory, as analyzed below.

The theory is silent on the role of the mind in establishing meaning. This is so because meaning already exists by reason of the bond, and all the mind can do is to take in this fact (Akwanya, 1996). We do not also know the way the objects get their names. There are words which cannot be accounted for in the referential theory of meaning. Abstract

nouns such as "condition", "process," "love", "hate" and "faith" are not tangible in the objective world. Similarly, conjunction such as: "and", "but", and "not", "while", and "whether have no referent. Prepositions like: "on", "in", "into" "out", "of, also do not refer to anything.

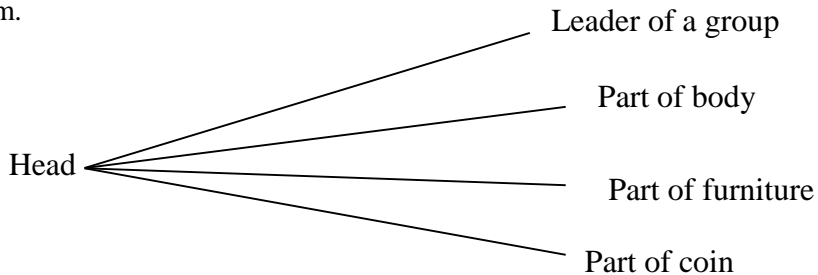
"The link between the signifier and signified is not clear. For example, what is the relationship between a name and the object. For instance, the abstract nouns like 'love and faith' which do not refer to anything in the world of object. In this regard, the theory is not a viable one of meaning. As Ndimele (1997 puts it,

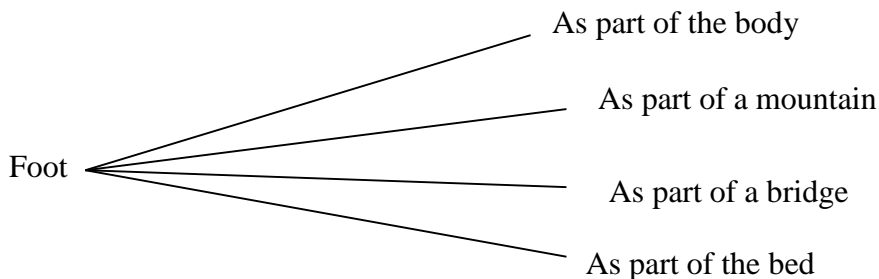
even though we admit that some words have physical objects that they represent, it is difficult to establish the physical images that expressions which are longer than the word represent. For instance, what is the actual object represented by the sentence; Good morning?

The above statement could also be applied to sentences such as good-day, good afternoon, good evening and good bye.

Furthermore, polysemous words also exemplify to the limitation of the referential theory of meaning. Polysemous words are words or single lexical items that have several but related meanings. If a word has more than one meaning, it could be that such word has more than one referent which is the physical object. It then means that a particular word can be linked to more than one object in them.

Let us examine these words, 'head' and foot", to see the several senses in them.





From the foregoing illustrations, it can be seen that the lexical items- 'head' and 'foot' have several senses, but are related. Therefore, these limit the referential approach to the study of semantics.

### **The Image Theory of Meaning**

This is a mental dimension to the study of meaning. It is an attempt to explain the meaning of words in terms of the images with which they are associated. The image or mental approach to meaning reduces the meaning of words to a question of the image the words call forth in the hearer or speaker's mind. For example, the word 'horse' is associated with some image in the mind of the speaker or hearer. The image, according to this view, with which a word can be associated, is the meaning of the word (Ogunsiji 2000). John-Locke (1632-1704), a British philosopher proposed theory as stated by Ogbuologo (2005).

The suggestion that to give a name is preceded by the derivation of the image from the object is necessary in two ways. One, it explains the theory not just in terms of natural bond between the name and the object but a connection imposed and fixed by the mind. And secondly, it connects the image and referential theories into continuum, such that they are not two but one theory (Akwanyanya 1996). Ndimele (1997) quoted Glucksberg

and Danks (1975), who are scholars in support of image theory of meaning, thus:

the set of possible meanings of any given word is the set of possible feelings, images, ideas, concepts, thoughts, and inferences that a person might produce when that word is heard.

According to Akwanya (1996), the image approach to meaning is the most misunderstood of the accounts of word meaning. For instance, Kempson in Akwanya (1996) demonstrates its absurdity by showing the crisis of thought that must result if words should be interpreted by reference to images in the mind. For example, if one should interpret the term triangle by bringing into play the image retrieved from earlier experiences, interpretation may still be difficult by the fact that there may be several shapes and types which one has not experienced (Akwanya 1996). To add to the foregoing, if a speaker utters the word "triangle" having in mind of "isosceles triangle", his hearer may conceive of an "equilateral triangle."

Just like the referential account of meaning, prepositions such as, by 'of', 'to', and conjunctions like; 'and', 'or', 'but', 'because', do not have mental representation. Also, abstract nouns have some limitations to the image account of meaning. For instance, it seems difficult to abstract an image of situation or process. It is also difficult to image 'solubility' and 'lightness' (Akwanya 1996).

Ogunsiji, (2000) stated Kempson (1975) that further problems confront the image theory of meaning and this include the fact that "one may associate more than one image and two different expressions may conjure up the same image. For instance, the expression, 'a tired farmer', may be associated with an image of a man walking sluggishly back home after a day's work at the farm, or an image of a man lying on a mat. Moreover, the expressions 'an unhappy boy', 'a tired boy' and 'an angry boy' may evoke the same image of a boy stamping his foot and screaming, or even on one that is sulking.

In addition, the word 'lecture' may have arbitrary meaning, depending on one's conception of a lecturer. The word 'lecture' may call up an image of an audience of a specific number, as in students of English in University of Delta, Agbor, staring at an individual who is presenting a seminar. It could also conjure up the image of a lecturer talking or teaching a group or large number of students in a class. For an individual who does not know anything about lecture, the image could be that of one person, who is very boring sometimes incomprehensible that may induce somebody to go to sleep.

Ndimele (1997), says, "we can only form mental images of things that have physical images". According to him, the mind cannot form images of entities that eyes have not seen or the hands have not touched. For instance, words like 'hello', 'good-bye', 'across', 'on' and 'hate' do not have physical image and therefore no mental image.

Finally, even when the claim that every word has a mental image is accepted, it may be difficult to say precisely the mental images for sentences. And this, therefore, is a limitation to the image theory of meaning.

### **Contextual Theory of Meaning**

This theory of meaning was proposed by Ludwing Wittgenstein (1953), a philosopher from Austria. His view is that it is wrong to regard meaning as entities. To him, the meaning of a word, or a sentence should be determined by the context in which it is used (<https://www.quora.com> 2024). The presupposition that for every word, there is a distinctive meaning which constitutes its nature, has been challenged by some scholars who argue that the meaning of a word should be seen in the context of use or its operation in a context. For instance, Akwanya (1996) said that Bridgman "maintains that scientific concepts should not be thought of as having hard and fixed meanings... strictly defined concepts may turn out to be useless if we try to use them to interpret the new areas of experience."



A word may mean one thing in one context, and another thing in another context. For example, when one says;

- (i) I am going to the bank to cash a cheque
- (ii) The bank is overgrown

The first statement (i) means that the speaker is going to the financial institution (bank) to make some business transaction. The speaker is going to withdraw some money in the bank (where money is kept). Also, the second sentence (ii) above is referring to the side of a river, or any watercourse. The bank of a river could be overgrown with grasses.

The proponent of this theory claim that it is nonsense to insist dogmatically that we know what a word means without it context. This claim can be illustrated with the word 'head'.

- (1) He has a good head for leadership.
- (2) Where does he head to?
- (3) He heads the ball into the net.
- (4) He is the head of the family
- (5) He has a boil on his head.
- (6) The meaning of the word 'head' varies in the above sentences.  
In a similar vein, the word 'table' varies in the following contexts.
- (7) Keep the bowl on the table.
- (8) They hold a round table conference
- (9) This is a table land
- (10) Do you know your six times table?
- (11) The child has bad table manners.

From the foregoing illustrations, it is clear that if a word has several meanings, the intended meaning of the speaker is understood on the basis of the linguistic structure.

Moreover, an utterance will be meaningful only if it is used appropriately in some actual contexts. For example, the linguistic

expression “good-morning” is timed and part of the semantic features which help in timing or locating the meaning of the expression with occurrence in relation to the particular time of day. In a normal expression one does not expect the expression to be uttered in the evening. In addition, an English speaker knows that ‘hello’ is a greeting sign. But it is abnormal for one to hear the word ‘hello’ in a lonely and dark place. This illustrates the effects of context on linguistic expressions (Ogunsiji 2000).

Because contextual theory of meaning gives words in their context, it is therefore, a theory of interpretation. It seems that the grammatical word classes are left out of this account of meaning, because the kinds of operation they perform are largely fixed (Akwanya 1996). Therefore, this becomes a limitation for the contextual or operational account to the study of meaning.

Another limitation in this theory is the difficulty of a hearer to determine the meaning of what is said by a speaker. For instance, in a sentence like; “James has gone to the bank.” How would the hearer know the speaker’s intention? ‘Bank; here, could be a river, or a financial institution. The same situation applies to head and foot when used in sentences.

## **Conclusion**

In identifying the nature of meaning, which is the subject matter of semantics. Three traditional approaches to the study of meaning have been examined. Having discussed their strength and weaknesses, it was observed that meaning remain elusive to capture.

There is no water-proof theory of meaning. That is to say that there is no theory of meaning that is sufficient in itself to account for meaning. Hence, their limitations, meaning is not only tied to these approaches to the study of semantics. Meaning of a word could be universal, racial, religious, tribal or personal. For instance, “skull” symbolizes death, and it is a universal meaning. When someone is called a ‘fox’ in the Western

world, it means that person is a trickster or is cunning, and such a person is called a 'tortoise' in Africa.

"Black" cloth is used for mourning and 'white' cloth is also used for mourning in Nigeria. White cloth is worn by some religious members when they are going to the house of worship, which signifies purity. The appearance of 'moon' may mean happiness to an individual and could be sadness to another person. The foregoing explanations show the elusive nature of meaning.

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