SECTION C: ENGLISH USAGE AND GRAMMATICAL CONCEPTS

7

Trends in Sentence Meaning: A Conceptual Review

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Abstract

Every language, regardless of its name and users, is meant to express meaning. This can be through a lexical or structural means. Lexical meanings are expressed through the various lexical relations inherent words while the structural meanings come through the ways words are manipulated to generate meaning. Both processes are language specific. This paper, therefore, focuses on one specific aspect of structural meaning known as "sentence meaning" functions in the English Language. The paper identifies three major types of meaning a sentence can generate in English, viz: conceptual meaning, associative meaning and thematic meaning. The paper argues that conceptual meaning is universal, stable and not affected by contextual colouring or emotional overtones while associative meaning open-ended, unstable and heavily influenced by the diverse historical epochs within the language. The paper goes further to argue that thematic meaning depends on how information is organised within a language. The concludes that sentence meanings depend on how lexical items in a sentence are organised and the relative interpretations that speakers of the language assign to them, any disparity between speakers or a writer's intention and what the listener or reader interprets the expression to be, will be a breakdown in communication. Thus, to avoid any breakdown in communication, all the factors which may disrupt the free flow of information between the encoder and decoder must be eliminated to make for easy flow and sequential presentation of information.

Keywords: structural meaning, conceptual meaning, associative meaning, thematic meaning

Introduction

Every language, regardless of its name and users, is meant to express meaning. This expression of meaning manifests in two principal forms – lexical and structural. Lexical meaning refers to the various forms of meaning expressed by lexical items in that it is not analysable beyond the

domain of words (Ndimele, 2007). On the other hand, structural meaning refers to the meaning that a sentence generates as a result of how lexical items within the sentence are positioned. This comes in various ways such as ambiguity, presuppositions, entailment, etc. (Saeed, 2016, p. 87). Thus, structural meaning is usually determined not by the individual meanings of the lexical items but rather the structural relationships between the words. How the words are organised determines the meaning that will be attached to the sentence. For example, the meaning of the following two sentences varies on the basis of the relative positions occupied by the lexical items:

(1) John killed the rat.

(2) The rat killed John.

Sentence (1) shows that John was the one that performed the act which resulted in the death of the rat but in (2), the reverse is the case. However, the meaning of the individual lexical items remained consistent in each case, viz:

- *John* = [+MALE, +HUMAN, +ANIMATE, etc.]
- *rat* = [±MALE, -HUMAN, +ANIMATE, etc.]
- *killed* = [+ANIMATE, +CONCRETE, +ACTION/MOTION, etc.].

The set of semantic features above combined with the position of the individual lexical items to determine the overall meaning of the two sentences such that each would elicit different reactions from the reader or listener. But nothing inherent in the words forces the particular reading or meaning attached to the sentence except their structural positions in the sentences. This explains why the semanticists insist that lexical meaning is more stable than structural meaning in that the former is fixed while the latter is decomposed. Accordingly, Saaed (2016) remarks that the semantic relations that hold between sentences are not only restricted to the words in the sentences but also depend on syntactic structure of the sentences.

Aspects and Dimensions of Sentence Meaning

Sentences generally express three major types of meaning such as conceptual meaning, associative meaning, and thematic meaning (Ndimele, 1999). Conceptual meaning refers to the cognitive, denotative, logical, primary or central meaning expressed by a word or a sentence. It is the "ordinary, basic dictionary meaning of a word [or sentence] which is stable and not affected by contextual colouring or emotional overtones of either the speaker or hearer (Ndimele, 2007). As Ndimele has rightly observed, conceptual meaning is universal in that all the speakers of the same language share this type of meaning when considering a linguistic expression. In this case, the sentence is given the same interpretation by the people who speak the same language. Hence, words like "boy" and "girl" possess the following conceptual meanings: [+HUMAN, +MALE, -ADULT] and [+HUMAN, -MALE, -ADULT] respectively and their basic meaning remains consistent and universally accessible to the users of the language.

Associative meaning on the other hand, refers to the type of meaning that "a word conveys over and above its ordinary, basic or commonly shared sense" (Ndimele, 2007, p. 34). In this case, associative meaning is "unstable, open-ended and variable" because it is the type of meaning that is influenced by sex, experience, the historical epoch in which the expression is used, or the society and culture. For instance, the word "gay" in Elizabethan England meant nothing short of the state of being happy but the word has over the years acquired the meaning of a homosexual male. It is on this note that Barnwell (1980), Leech (1981), and Ndimele (2007) have all recognized five subcategories of associative meaning to be connotative, collocative, affective, reflected and stylistic meaning.

Ndimele (2007, p.36) posits that connotative meaning uses non-criteria semantic features unlike conceptual meaning. According to him, the linguistic expression is infused with both purely conceptual meaning and the individual language users' personal experience which they bring to bear on the expression. Thus, an expression like "Emeka is nothing but a woman," may contain either a positive or negative connotation depending on the context. Even an overtly negative expression may have a positive connotation depending on the context. For instance, "Jane is a bad girl" may constitute an expression of approval and endearment or that of disapproval and reprimand depending on who uses it and where it is used. Where the sentence is uttered by a fellow girl before her peers, being "bad" may mean that Jane is a very smart girl who outwits men rather than fall victim to their antics. On the other hand, if the same expression is used by an older woman, for instance, her mother, her character and moral virtues will likely be called into question. It is in this regard that Ndimele (2007, p.37) makes it abundantly clear that the major determinant of whether a sentence should be given a conceptual or associative meaning is the context in which the sentence is or has been used. He, therefore, asserts that while conceptual meaning is "determinate and non-open-ended, associative meaning is indeterminate and non-open-ended".

Accordingly, connotative meaning varies from culture to culture, society to society or even from individual to individual. For instance, "fox" is associated with cunning or deception such that if an individual is called a fox before a western audience he or she will be immediately associated with the art of deception. The same applies to tortoise in Igbo society and spider among members of the Akan tribe in Ghana. In other words, the range of possible connotations an expression may invoke in language users depends on the shared experiences of the individuals. However, unlike conceptual meaning, connotative meaning cannot be universally shared.

Collocative meaning on the other hand deals with "the habitual co-occurrence of individual lexical items" (Crystal, 2008, p. 86). It is the meaning that lexical items express within a sentence which depends solely on the company they keep. According to Ovu (2010), collocation may be viewed from both grammatical and semantic angles. From the grammatical angle, he notes that any violation of the collocational requirement of lexical items normally results in ungrammaticality although it may not affect the intended meaning of the expression. For instance, he observes that expressions like "congratulate for" instead of "congratulate on",

"shout on" instead of "shout at" etc. are all instances where the collocational restrictions of lexical items have been violated. Violation of semantic collocates, on the other hand, results in oddness rather than ungrammaticality as in the expression (3) below:

(3) The stone is now pregnant.

Leech (1981) had earlier observed that the lexical relation of synonymy shows the extent of collocational variations. For instance, while animals may "wander" human beings usually "stroll". Also, we "tremble" with fear but "quiver" with excitement. Thus, words are compulsorily bound to keep their appropriate company just like human beings do. This also helps to maintain the fine distinction between grammaticality (syntactic considerations) and acceptability (semantic considerations). Affective meaning conveys the attitude of a speaker or writer towards his or her listener or reader as well as "the subject-matter of discourse". Ndimele (2007, p.39) opines that the choice of certain words can either trigger a positive or negative emotional response based on how it is perceived. For example, while "fat" bears a neutral connotation "flabby" and "plump" have negative and positive connotations respectively. In this regard, the choice of either word depends partly on the speaker or writer's attitude and the actual shape of the individual being described. The use of interjections, according to Ndimele (1999), exemplifies the canonical instances of affective meaning in language. Again, affective meaning may run into a continuum of lexical choices such as father, dad and daddy or mother, mum and mummy used to describe one's parents.

In the case of reflected meaning, a sentence is usually given more than one conceptual meaning with one of the meanings arising out of sustained usage or metaphorical extension. According to Ndimele (2007), this type of meaning is found mainly in the use of polysemous words. Leech (1981), on the other hand, maintains that words like "ejaculation", "erection", "intercourse" and even "turgid" through constant usage have acquired some kind of reflected meaning where they are stripped of their innocent, non-sexual connotation to their current status in the English language where they conjure sexual images whenever they are mentioned. The internet and social media have also given a word like "adult" a reflected meaning where it almost unambiguously refers to pornography. Hence, "adult sites", "adult films" etc. refers to pornographic sites and films. In this regard, a man may not use the word "gay" to describe himself unless of course, he wants to acknowledge that he is a homosexual unlike what used to obtain in the past when the word simply meant "happy" or "light-hearted". Against this backdrop, Ndimele (1999, p.40) has stated that among the many shades of meaning that an expression may conjure by virtue of reflected meaning, one is usually prominent as a result of frequency of usage such that others may disappear with time.

Stylistic meaning refers to the associated pattern of word or sentence usage which makes it suitable to a given communicative situation. Variations in stylistic meaning are usually captured even in the dictionary entries for words with labels like "rare," "formal," "informal", "popular", "written", "spoken", "colloquial", "taboo", etc. in order to guide the language users

towards understanding suitability of the relevant words to a given discourse situation. Thus, Ndimele (2007, p.40) illustrates stylistic meaning using simple requests in English as in the following examples:

(4) Might I have your book? (Very formal or rare)

(5) May I have your book? (Formal)

(6) Can I have your book? (Casual or less formal)

Thus, while "offspring", "children" and "kids" may refer to the same concept their stylistic meanings vary such that their usage is dictated by the communicative or discourse situation.

Apart from conceptual and associative meanings which have been explored hitherto, there is also another kind of meaning known as thematic meaning. This type of meaning depends on how a speaker organises his message to indicate focus or emphasis. Thus, thematic meaning shows whether the message is new or given and what part of the sentence is emphasised above others. Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) and Radford et al (2009) have all observed that thematic meaning is enhanced by the speaker using such grammatical devices like clefting, passivisation, topicalisation which result in structural paraphrase (Ogbulogo, 2005).

Furthermore, Ogbulogo (2011, pps. 34-35), has identified various ways in which sentence meaning can be analysed such as paraphrase; ambiguity; vagueness; tautology; presupposition; entailment; anomaly; contradiction and analyticity. According to him, paraphrase occurs when two superficial structures possess the same underlying meaning. Hence, he states that "paraphrase is to sentence what synonym is to words". In this case, paraphrase may be lexical and structural paraphrases. Lexical paraphrase can be seen in the sentences below:

(7) Mary is a spinster.

(8) Mary is unmarried.

In (7) and (8), *spinster* and *unmarried* are synonymous thereby making it possible for the two sentences to contain the same underlying meaning. The difference in meaning between the two sentences lies in the substitution of *spinster* with *unmarried*. On the other hand, structural paraphrase is achieved through some transformational processes like *clefting*, *pseudo-clefting*, *topicalisation*, *passivisation*, etc., where the arrangement of the original sentence is altered. This can be illustrated in sentences below, where (9) is the basic and the rest (10-13) represent the various transformations (paraphrases) of the basic sentence:

(9) John bought a blue car. [Basic]

(10) It was a blue car that John bought. [Clefting]

(11) What John bought was a blue car. [Psuedo-Clefting]

(12) A blue car was what John bought. [Topicalisation]

(13) A blue car was bought by John. [Passivisation]

Ndimele (2007), however, distinguishes between paraphrase and ambiguity. According to him, in a paraphrase two sentences have one underlying meaning while in ambiguity, one sentence contains two or more meanings. Supporting him, Crystal (2008,p. 22) observes that ambiguity refers to a situation where a word or construction "expresses more than one meaning". Thus, an ambiguous word or structure has more than one possible interpretation. Again, linguists generally differentiate between lexical and structural ambiguities (Jackson & Amvèla, 2001; Akmajian, Demers, Farmer, & Harnish 2004; Ndimele, 1999; Saeed, 2016; Crystal, 2008; Umera-Okeke, 2008). According to Akmajian et al. (2010: 242), lexical ambiguity is caused by the presence of one word which may be interpreted in two or more different ways within a single construction while structural ambiguity takes place when no particular word is ambiguous, rather the "ambiguity is due to structural relations in the sentence. Hence, the use of **bank** as in (10) below illustrates lexical ambiguity.

(14) I saw the **bank** this morning.

In (14) above, the ambiguity in the sentence comes from the word **bank** which has several meanings. A dictionary entry for **bank** contains different meanings like *financial institution*; *side of a river*; a *place for storing things* (e.g. blood **bank**), as well as other meanings as in *a mass of earth, cloud or fog* (*Longman active study dictionary,* 2008: 53). A question then arises as to which of these meanings was intended by the user of the above sentence, especially as each of them can pass as a possible interpretation of the construction. This particular fact seems to have influenced Ovu (2011:16) who observes that lexical ambiguity can be triggered by the use of homograph, homophone, homonym and polysemy. According to him, homography, which refers to a situation when two distinct words are spelt alike but pronounced differently, induces ambiguity especially in written discourse in that the reader may be clueless as to the appropriate pronunciation of the ambiguous word and the meaning to assign to it as in (15) below:

(15) The man smiled and took a **bow.**

Ovu (2011) observes that sentence (15) is ambiguous in that it has two possible interpretations namely, *bow* as in /bəu/, meaning "a hunting device or instrument" and /bau/ meaning "to bend oneself" (p. 18). Ovu, therefore, argues that although the above expression is an acceptable English sentence, a closer look at it proves it to be ambiguous. He observes that one who reads the sentence may want to know if the man *smiled* and *bowed down* or that he *smiled* and *picked a bow* (perhaps to shoot at an animal). He concludes that the sentence is ambiguous as a result of the dual meaning invested in the word ***bow,*** stressing that it is communicatively desirable to recast the sentence in order to reflect the exact meaning intended by the user. Similarly, he identifies homophones as one of the sources of ambiguity in a sentence.

Accordingly, while it is true that homophonous words by their nature are not usually ambiguous when they are written since their spellings often provide a clue to the meaning intended by the user (although sometimes spelling errors may occur as a result of wrong pronunciation), they usually pose difficulty to interpret in conversation as one may find in a dictation class where the listener finds it difficult knowing the particular meaning intended by the speaker (Ovu, 2011). This is illustrated in the table 1 below:

Table 1: Homophone-Induced Ambiguous Sentences

Spoken Forms	***Written Equivalents***
[hi: went tə ði: aıl jestədei]	*He went to the **aisle/isle** yesterday.*
[ðə gɜ:l wɒz fæsıneıtıd baı maı ɔ:rəl skil]	*The girl was fascinated by my **aural/oral** skill*
[ðə flauə ız tu: ıkspensiv]	*The **flour/flower** is too expensive.*
[ðə bɔı wɒz puld aut əv ðə si:]	*The **buoy/boy** was pulled out of the sea.*
[məust hɒspitəlz dəunt ju:z bıə veri ɒfn]	*Most hospitals don't use **bier/beer** very often.*

Culled from Ovu (2011, p. 19)

Based on the analyses recorded in (Ovu, 2011,pps.19-20), the ambiguity in table 1 above takes the following pattern: the phonological word /aıl/ may be written as either "aisle" (meaning a passageway) or "isle" (meaning an island); the phonological word /ɔ:rəl/ may be written either as "oral" (relating to the productive aspect of spoken language delivery) or as "aural" (referring to the perceptive aspect of the speech); the phonological word /flauə/ is also ambiguous because it may either be heard as "flour" (referring to corn or cassava powder) or "flower" (referring to part of a plant). In the fourth sentence the ambiguity lies in the word /bɔı/ which has two word-forms, viz: *boy* and *buoy*, referring to a male youth and safety device respectively while in the last sentence, the ambiguity was caused by the presence of the word /biə/ which may either be heard as *bier* or *beer,* referring to a stretcher and a type of alcoholic beverage. It is important to know that none of those meanings identified above was forced into the sentence, rather each of them is justifiable both on syntactic and semantic grounds.

Furthermore, homonyms also contribute to ambiguity in sentences. According to Ovu (2011), writers have consistently confused homonyms with polysemy. In his words,

> The true nature of homonyms has been misunderstood by many writers. To some, homonyms include cases where words have identical spelling (i.e. homographs) and/or

where the words have identical sounds (homophones). This view is however wrong because doing so will only amount to subsuming what should ordinarily be treated as **real homonyms** within **polysemy**. A better approach would have been to distinguish homonyms from polysemy. This is particularly important given the fact that polysemous words mostly result from a metaphorical extension of meaning (p.21, emphasis in the original)

Thus, Ovu remarks that one principal observation to make about homonyms is that their meaning does not emanate from a common core unlike in polysemy. Yet each can contribute to ambiguity as the sentences below illustrate:

(16). Those men are *gay*.

Question: Are they happy or are they homosexuals?

(17). Jane's *lock* is better than anyone else's.

Question: Is the speaker talking about Jane's hair? Or her performance in a

game?

(18). They *can* fish.

Question: Is the speaker talking about ability to fish or about someone's

occupation? E.g. the job of preserving fish in cans to sell it.

(19). She cannot *bear* any child.

Question: Is she barren or is she hostile towards children?

Sometimes an ambiguous expression produces a ridiculous interpretation as can be seen in the sentence below:

(20). Prostitutes *appeal* to the Pope.

Question: Is it that the Pope admires prostitutes or that they solicit help from him?

Extra linguistic knowledge (or our understanding of a real-world situation) would make us accept the latter interpretation and reject the former bearing in mind that the Pope by virtue of his position as a pious religious leader would neither contemplate going to patronize prostitutes nor even admire them! However, nothing in the individual words suggests that this second interpretation is better except that the alternative meaning sounds rather unexpected and mischievous.

In the case of polysemy, which is a term originating from the Greek word *poly* i.e. many and *semeion* meaning *sign,* a reference is made to "words or other items of language with two or more senses" (McArthur, 1996, p.715). So polysemy is used for situations where "the same word has two or more different meanings" (Jackson & Amvèla, 2001 p.58). But it needs pointing out that polysemous words often have related meanings. It is this relatedness of meaning that distinguishes polysemy from homonymy especially as polysemy is usually a product of metaphoric extension of meaning (cf: Ovu, 2011, p.21). Saeed (2016) has noted the traditional distinction between homonymy and polysemy. He maintains that "polysemy is invoked if the senses are judged to be related…polysemous senses are listed under the same lexical entry while homonymous senses are given separate entries" (p.64).

Furthermore, lexicographers often depend on the ideal native speaker/hearer's intuition and/or what the lexicographers themselves know about the historical development of the words whenever they want to know whether different lexical items share common semantic primitives. In fact, this method was reported to have been used by editors of *Collins electronic dictionary* in categorizing the following words: *barge*, *court*, *dart*, *fleet*, *jam*, *pad*, *stem*, *stuff*, *watch*, etc. into homonymy and polysemy respectively (Jackson & Amvèla, 2001 p.191). Thus, polysemous words usually have different but related senses or meanings. Ambiguity arises when other words that occur with the polysemous words fail to provide sufficient clues to clarify the meaning of the keywords as the sentences below illustrate:

(21) I need the *paper***.**

(22) There is a *mouse* under the table.

(23) My *glasses* have broken.

(24) Refill the *barrel*.

Owing to the various meanings attached to the words in italics each of them turns out to make the sentence ambiguous. To disambiguate them, more words are needed in the sentence as in the following examples:

(25) a. There is a **mouse** under the table; kill it (i.e. a rodent).

b. There is a **mouse** under the table; use it to replace the damaged one.

(i.e. computer accessory).

(26) a. My **glasses** have broken because the water is too hot. (i.e. cups)

b. My **glasses** have broken, so I can't read well. (i.e. spectacles)

(27) a. He refilled the barrel with bullets (i.e. part of a gun)

b. He refilled the barrel with wine (i.e. a storage vessel).

Ndimele (2007, p. 61) has further observed that regardless of the number of meanings a polysemous word may generate, one of such meanings is usually central to the word while others are mere "metaphorical extension" of the sense of the word. i.e. meaning acquired by the word through constant usage. This is illustrated in words like *surfing* the internet, *foot* of a hill, computer *virus*, computer *mouse*, *eye* of a needle, *banking* of an aircraft which are a mere metaphorical extension of the original meaning.

Aside from the above instances of ambiguity, scholars have identified cases of structural ambiguity which also relate to sentence meaning as illustrated below:

(28) He killed the woman with a knife.

(29). Call me a taxi.

(30). Flying planes can be dangerous.

(31). Visiting relatives can be boring.

In each of the examples in (28-31), the ambiguity stems from the structural patterns of sentences rather than the individual words that make them up. On the other hand, vagueness may arise due partly to the attempt by the writer to express his or her thoughts in a more colourful and literary language.

(32) The sun smiled to her beauty (personification)

(33) The ocean surged and rocked crest by crest to welcome a brand new

season

(34) She drove, moved with all the fury within her little frame to escape the

aborted town.

(35) Colourless green ideas sleep furiously.

Ogbulogo (2011) has observed that vagueness arises because of "the incompatibility of the semantic properties of some words" in some sentences. While vagueness may be deployed as a literary device by seasoned authors, it nevertheless becomes a source challenge when the language user fails to match words appropriately. In this case, vagueness results from the violation of collocational meaning of words in a sentence. In the case of tautology, Ogbulogo (2011) opines that it arises when there is unnecessary repetition of words without making the meaning of the sentence clearer as in (36) below:

(36) John is an unmarried bachelor.

(37) The dead man is no longer alive.

Ogbulogo (2011, p.64) distinguishes tautology from mere redundancy. According to him, redundancy occurs when new linguistic elements are introduced into a sentence without affecting the meaning while tautology is a ridiculous repetition. On the other hand, Ovu (2010) maintains that the effect of semantic redundancy is less dramatic than tautology. For instance, in the sentence "She ate the food without no salt" is tautological while "The man reversed back" is redundant. However, it seems that in reality the distinction between tautology and redundancy is harder to establish than the authors have shown. Another type of sentence meaning is the one called anomalous sentence. Like vagueness, anomalous sentences are a result of collocational meaning violation. For example, while "tall" and "long" are closely related semantically, they do not colligate nor collocate with the same type of nouns. Thus, there may be long ropes, long essays, long journey but there is tall building, tall man, tall tree, etc. Non-observation of this rule results in an anomalous sentence. Sentences that are ambivalent are capable of expressing double meaning in a way that they express a dual proposition. Ambivalent sentences are used in a way that either yes or no is a valid response to it. For instance, a sentence like the following is ambivalent:

(38) Are you a student or a Christian?

In this case, any response to the question may be valid in that the listener may be a Christian and a student at the same time. Another example was the answer given to Macbeth by the three witches which was neither true nor false; which also deceived him into waiting to be defeated by Macdoff.

Theoretical Framework

The paper is anchored on the version of semantic theory developed by Katz and Fodor in 1963, modified in Katz Postal (1964). According to this theory, semantic rules like syntactic rules are recursive and infinite in that the range of possible meanings like sentences in a language is both large and infinite. Also, the relationship between a sentence and its meaning is not arbitrary in de Saussure's sense nor unitary; rather it depends on the interaction of both the syntactic structure of the sentence and its lexical contents such that the meaning of a word is determined by its function. Thus, this theory obviates the fact that two sentences may differ in meaning despite sharing the same exact number of words. This can be illustrated in (39-42) below:

(39.). John killed Fred.

(40.). Fred killed John.

(41.). The snake frightened Mary

(42.). The movies delighted Mary.

The above view of sentence meaning is now called Katz-Fodor and Katz-Postal hypothesis. According to Saaed (2016:250), the Katz-Fodor and Katz-Postal hypothesis is a semantic parallel to Chomskyan syntactic theory in that it aims at specifying the meanings of lexical items; explicitly accounting for how the meaning of lexical items builds up into sentence through what they called projection rules in order to derive a universally applicable metalanguage. Specifications on the meaning of lexical items are achieved through the use of a dictionary that pairs lexical items with semantic representations (i.e. in the lexicon) while the rules that account for how sentence meanings are built from lexical meanings are known as projection rules which are achieved with introduction of semantic components.

Conclusion

The position taken in this paper is that sentence meanings depend on how lexical items in a sentence are organised and the relative interpretations that speakers of the language assign to them. Where there is a disparity between speakers or a writer's intention and what the listener or reader interprets the expression to be, there will be a communication breakdown. Accordingly, several factors can play a role in disrupting the free flow of information between the encoder (i.e. speaker or writer) and decoder (i.e. listener or reader) such as failure by the encoder to structure the message in manageable units for easy flow and sequential presentation. Or when the decoder is ill-prepared to listen or read what is being relayed to them.

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