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Meaning as Sociopragmatics of Discourse

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Abstract

*This study examines the concept of meaning as evident in language use in human communication. Language is inevitably linked to its social context; that is, the social variables that produce it. In this sense, meaning is specially underpinned in linguistic choices. Language users do not ignore the contextual underpinnings that determine linguistic choices. Thus, pragmatic and social contexts impinge on what is meant in using utterances in discourse. Labov (1972) rightly notes that 'no use of language can be divorced from its social context since special meaning is parasitic upon language.' In discourse, pragmatic and social variables are invoked for the purpose of making speech acts 'easy to mean'. This shows the intentional nature of speech acts. Speakers' intentions, beliefs, and principle-driven use of language cannot be explained outside speech act phenomenon. Pragmatic principle of language use is concerned with extra-sentential meaning(s). In construing 'meaning' as sociopragmatics of discourse, the bottom-line is that the surface structure of language cannot adequately account for the dynamics and underlying principles that generate linguistic choices; research in speech acts strongly hold this view. This study hinges on two theoretical frameworks: Traugott's *Tendency of Semantic Change* as well as C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards' (1923) definition of meaning. The study concludes that in discourse, speaker-meaning is determined by extralinguistic principles of language use in which case meaning is decoded via linguistic and extralinguistic inference strategies.*

Keywords

meaning, semantics, discourse, pragmatics, sociopragmatics, Traugott's Theory of Semantic Change, Ogden and Richards' definition of meaning

1. Introduction

A study of the concept of meaning is essentially an overview of the role of cognition in the use and interpretation of language. Human communication extensively and fundamentally involves cognition (mental states) of the participants of discourse. Chilton (2005a, p. 23) rightly notes that 'cognitive pragmatics is defined as a study of mental states of the interlocutors, their beliefs, desires, goals, and intentions ... produced and interpreted by human individuals interacting with one another ... If language

use (discourse) is, as the tenets of CDA assert, connected to the construction of knowledge about social objects, identities, processes, etc., then that construction can only be taking place in the minds of (interacting) individuals.’ This study contends that decoders of language inevitably have to process the ‘topic relevance’ or meaning of utterances. Failure to understand what an utterance means from speaker-end is regarded as ‘pragmatic failure’. Language studies reveal that the meanings of utterances can be repaired (canceled or attached). In this sense, meaning is unstable and speaker-dependent, in spite of linguistic conventions. Thus, sociopragmatic variables convey speaker-meaning, and this study is poised to elucidate this claim.

2. Semantics

Semantics is the study of meaning. Ogbulogo (2005) reports that ‘**Semantics** is the study of the ‘toolkit’ for meaning: knowledge encoded in the vocabulary of the language and in its patterns for building more elaborate meanings, up to the level of sentence meanings...’ Defining semantics, Patrick Griffiths (2006, p. x) asserts that ‘semantics is concerned with the resources (vocabulary and a system for calculating phrase, clause and sentence-meanings) provided by a language ...’ Leech (1981, p. 319) posits that ‘semantics is the level of linguistics which has been most affected by pragmatics, but the relation between semantics (in the sense of conceptual semantics) and pragmatics has remained a matter for fundamental disagreement. The central issue is: is it valid to separate pragmatics from semantics at all?’ According to Ogbulogo (ibid), ‘the term ‘semantics’ was first used by Breal in 1987 and it does not suggest that there had never been speculations about the nature of meaning.’ The literature reveals that in the study of meaning, there is heavy reliance on concepts which explain the relationship between world knowledge and knowledge of natural language.’ According to Levinson (1983), ‘the major aim of semantic attempts is to take apart our knowledge of language from our knowledge of the world and study atomic concepts which are isolated from context alone.’ The concept of meaning can be understood in terms of theories of meaning which include: Meaning Postulate Theory, Componential (Decompositional) Theory of Meaning, Relational Component Theory of Meaning, Generative Semantics Theory of Meaning, Speech Act Theory of Meaning (pragmatic theory), Truth Conditional Theory of Meaning and Contextual Theory of Meaning. The study of meaning is not recent. However, approaches to the study of meaning and the peculiarities of natural language have changed. As a field of language study, semantics captures discrete aspects of study. According to William O’ Grady and Archibald (2004, p. 174), ‘the four major topics in semantics are: (i) the nature of meaning; (ii) some of the properties of the conceptual system underlying meaning; (iii) the computation of syntactic structure to the interpretation of sentences; and (iv) the role of non-grammatical factors in the understanding of utterances.’

3. Pragmatics

The Greek term *pragma* (deed) is mentioned in the literature as the originator of the term ‘pragmatics’. Formalism emphasizes ‘linguistic competence’ while pragmatics emphasizes ‘communicative

competence' (the freedom and supremacy of language users over linguistic conventions). The *Encyclopedia Americana* (1994) defines pragmatics as 'the subfield of the study of language that investigates the techniques by which language is processed for communication purposes.' Crystal and Varley (1993) define pragmatics as 'the study of the factors that govern our choice of language (sounds, construction, words) in social interaction, and the effects of our choice upon others. The subject includes the cooperation in our speaking behavior and it thus involves using language to convey politeness, intimacy, playfulness, rudeness, awkwardness and a range of other social attributes.' Elements of pragmatics (pragmatic concepts) provide insights on the definition of pragmatics. Austin (1962) provides tips on such pragmatic concepts:

- participants (users of language in context);
- speech acts (locutionary act which is an utterance with determinate sense and reference; illocutionary act which is the making of a statement, offer, promise, etc. in uttering a sentence by virtue of the conventional force associated with it; and perlocutionary act which is the bringing about of effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence);
- context (the relevant aspects of the physical or social setting of an utterance or discourse);
- non-verbal communication (extra-linguistic communication);
- inference (the process of making logical conclusions from all that a particular context provides to arrive at what a speaker means);
- presupposition (facts that the participants of discourse take for granted in a particular context of communication); and
- shared knowledge (common background information shared by the participants of discourse).

Searle (1969), Levinson (ibid), Adegbija (1999) and Mey (2001) are instructive in terms of the definition of pragmatics. Adegbija (ibid) highlights the scope of pragmatics:

- (i.) The message being communicated;
- (ii.) The participants involved in the message;
- (iii.) The knowledge of the world which they share;
- (iv.) The deductions to be made from the text on the basis of the context;
- (v.) The impact of the non-verbal aspect of interaction on meaning.

4. Discourse

Discourse is human communication. Brown and Yule (1983, p. 1) define discourse as 'language in use.' The terms 'text' and 'discourse analysis' reveal more about the definition of discourse. A text is a unit of communication with a topic. Ruth Wodak and Martin Resigl, cited in Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton (2001, p. 385) submit that 'we obviously need to think about what our

‘text’ is about, since clearly what a person is talking about has a bearing on what is said and how it is said. We also need to think about who said it, or who wrote it or signed it, who is thought, in its particular socio-cultural context, to be responsible for what it says, who the intended audience was and who the actual hearers or readers were, because who the participants in a situation are and how their roles are defined clearly influence what gets said and how. We need to think about what motivated the text, about how it fits into the set of things people in its context conventionally do with discourse, and about what its medium (or justify a certain social status quo (and ‘racialized’, ‘nationalized’ and ‘ethnicized’ identities to it). Third, they are instrumental in transforming the status quo (and ‘racializing concepts’, nationalities, ethnicities related to it). Fourth, discursive practices may have an effect on the dismantling or even destruction of the status quo (and of racist, nationalist, ethnicist concepts related to it). According to these general aims one can distinguish between constructive, perpetuating, transformational, and destructive social macrofunctions of discourse.’ On the other hand, discourse analysis is the analysis of the organizational structure of discourse (talks, interactions). Discourse is often analyzed with linguistic elements (structure) and extralinguistic elements (sociocultural nuances). Ruth Wodak and Martin Resigl, cited in Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton (*ibid.*, p. 385) submit that ‘discursive practices are socially constitutive in a number of ways: first, they play a decisive role in the genesis and production of certain social conditions. This means that discourses may serve to construct collective subjects like ‘races’, ‘nations’, ‘ethnicities’, etc. Second, they might perpetrate, reproduce, or justify a certain social status quo (and ‘racialized’, ‘nationalized’ and ‘ethnicized’ identities to it). Third, they are instrumental in transforming the status quo (and ‘racializing concepts’, nationalities, ethnicities related to it). Fourth, discursive practices may have an effect on the dismantling or even destruction of the status quo (and of racist, nationalist, ethnicist concepts related to it). According to these general aims one can distinguish between constructive, perpetuating, transformational, and destructive social macrofunctions of discourse.’

5. Theoretical Frameworks

This study hinges on two theoretical frameworks: Traugott’s Tendencies of Semantic Change and C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards’ (1923) definition of meaning.

5.1 Traugott’s Tendency of Semantic Change

Traugott (1989, pp. 34-35) proposes three major tendencies of semantic change. These are:

- (1) Tendency I: Meanings based in the external described situation > meanings based in the internal evaluative/perceptual/cognitive) described situation
- (2) Tendency II: Meanings based in the external or internal described situation > meanings based in the textual and metalinguistic situation
- (3) Tendency III: Meanings tend to become increasingly based in the speaker’s subjective belief state/attitudes towards the proposition.

The suitability of the two theoretical frameworks above is based on some facts:

- i. the theories align with the view that linguistic and extralinguistic elements of communication operate in discourse as far as the transaction and decoding of meaning is concerned; and
- ii. the theories emphasize the roles of shared knowledge and presupposition in effective communication from speaker-hearer ends.

5.2 C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards' Definition of Meaning

C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards' (1923, pp. 186-7 cited in Leech *ibid* p. 1) definition of meaning is as follows:

... the connotation of a word; the place of anything in a system; the practical consequences of a thing in our future experience; that to which the user of a symbol actually refers; that to which the user of a symbol ought to be referring; that to which the user of a symbol believes himself to be referring; that to which the interpreter of a symbol: (a) refers; (b) believes himself to be referring; and (c) believes the user to be referring.

6. Meaning as Sociopragmatics of Discourse

As the sociopragmatics of discourse, the concept of meaning can be elucidated in terms of the following perspectives:

6.1 Meaning as Context

The meaning of expressions can depend on context of use (connotative meaning). The literature of pragmatics is replete with the categorization of context. For example, Adegbija (*ibid*, p. 192) submits:

Broadly, we may identify at least four types of context as impinging on utterance interpretation: the physical, the socio-cultural, the linguistic, and the psychological. Pertinent questions for probing into the context include the following:
 Did the communicative exchange occur at night, in the morning, twenty years ago, at a church, at a mosque, in a bedroom, in the market, at a cemetery, at a hospital. Socio-culturally, one may ask questions such as these: what are the beliefs, habits, value systems, or cultures of those involved? Are their religious and cultural beliefs at hand? Linguistically, what are the other words appearing in the environment of the word used? What do they mean? What do they imply within the physical and socio-cultural setting? Psychologically, what is the state of mind of those involved in the interaction?

Commenting further on context, Adeniran, cited in Ayodabo (2013, p. 22) posits that 'the coverage of the term 'context of situation' is wide and varied in nature and texture. Some of its content may be physical or concrete, and immediate; some others may be psychological, abstract and remote.' Language users explore context to make their intentions clear. If discourse behaviour is not in tandem with context, implicatures are generated; that is, meaning changes. Adegbija (*ibid* p. 191) asserts that 'the concept of intention is very important in understanding of speech acts. It refers to the goal purposed to be achieved,

resident in the mind of a speaker or a hearer ... people often have different intentions. Sometimes, the intention may coincide. Intentions can change as interaction progresses. They can also be modified in the cause of interpersonal interaction. In most types of interaction, there is a communicative intention. Intention is often indeterminate; that is, they may not be always easily accessible. The addressee in a communicative exchange often tries to recognize the speaker's intention. Deduction about the meanings being communicated by the speaker is often based on the context of interaction and interpretation of the intention of the speaker.' The social context of an utterance concerns states-of-affairs in the world. In human communication, such states-of-affairs are crucial in the use of language to achieve intended illocutionary acts. They are also vital for invoking meanings of utterances across discourse genres. For example, in the advertisement genre, advertisers explore speaker-hearer background information to convince their audience to buy products. According to Savas L. T. (1994), 'the study of illocutionary act should be acknowledged as an indispensable component of the study of meaning.' In such adverts, illocutionary acts performed in the advertiser's utterances are to be understood by the audience before the decoding of meaning (knowing the advertiser's intention). David Harrah, cited in Savas L. T. (ibid) opines that 'most speech acts seem to be focused and directed. They are intended as coming from the agent and going to the receivers or audience. They are intended to have a certain point, and they are intended to be construed as having a certain point.' This view corroborates Faigenbaum (2003) who notes that 'the meaning of the sentence is its use in the speech act ... speaker meaning is a matter of the intentional content.'

6.2 Meaning as Linguistic Convention

There are different arguments to buttress the claim that linguistic conventions convey meaning in utterances. For example, the truth-condition of an utterance is part of its potential to mean in discourse. Participants explore knowledge of language rules (linguistic competence) to ascertain truth-conditions of linguistic stretches. The denotative meanings of expressions concern language structure and vocabulary conventions. In pragmatic use of such expressions, mastery of linguistic conventions is necessary for deviant forms in the use of structure and vocabulary. Speech act verbs (questions, requests, orders, etc.) have to be understood as what they mean in the conventions of language, before their extended meanings (speaker-meanings) can be deployed and processed using different inference strategies; studies on implicature accentuate this claim. Eva Alcon Soler (2012, p. 513) notes that 'the complexity of the speech act requires face saving maneuvers to accommodate the non-compliant nature of the act. Thus, a series of pre-refusal, main refusal and post-refusal sequences, as well as the choice of direct and indirect strategies, and adjuncts to refusals can be expected to appear in negotiated sequences in response to different speech acts such as invitations, requests, suggestions, and offers.' Attaching or detaching meanings via clause-structure implies that meaning-making is a clause-structure process. Levinson (ibid) submits that 'since the notion of indirect illocutionary force may be re-analyzed in conversation analytic terms, it follows that there are strong relations between discourse structure and sentence structure in this area too. Many of the semantic processes called 'movement rules' seem to have

the function of indicating how information in the clause relates to what has been talked about before – and this is in line with conversational organization in pragmatics called ‘turn-taking and repair.’ Commenting on the potential of structure to mean in discourse, Levinson (ibid) submits that ‘since the notion of indirect illocutionary force may be re-analyzed in conversation analytic terms, it follows that there are strong relations between discourse structure and sentence structure in this area too. Many of the semantic processes called ‘movement rules’ seem to have the function of indicating how information in the clause relates to what has been talked about before – and this is in line with conversational organization in pragmatics called ‘turn-taking and repair.’ The interaction between linguistic conventions and the sociopragmatic variables is captured by the meaning-laden potential of deixis expressions. For example, Levinson (ibid) submits:

for the purposes of semantic or pragmatic interpretation we think of deictic expressions as anchored to specific points in the communicative event ... the unmarked anchorage points, constituting the deictic centre, are typically assumed to be as follows:

(i) The central person is the speaker, (ii) the central time is the time at which the speaker produces the utterance, (iii) the central place is the speaker’s location at utterance time or CT, (iv) the discourse centre is the point which the speaker is currently at the production of his utterance, and (v) the social centre is the speaker’s social status and rank, to which the status or rank of addressees or referents is relative.

6.3 Meaning as Speech Act

Early scholars of pragmatics contend that at the minimal unit of human communication, actions are performed beyond the sentence, based on contextual nuances. Such actions include requesting ordering, advising, informing, apologizing, persuading, and so on. Alston, cited in David A. Brenders (2003) asserts that ‘the correct unit of analysis for meaning is not at the level of words since, referring or denoting is something one does in the course of performing a larger action-unit, such as making a request, admission, or prediction.’ Austin (1962) classified speech act into three types: locutionary act (performing an act OF saying something); illocutionary act (performing an act IN saying something); and perlocutionary act (performing an act BY saying something). According to Searle as cited in Brenders (ibid), ‘in the performance of an illocutionary act the speaker intends to produce a certain effect by means of getting the hearer to recognize his intention to produce that effect, and furthermore, if he is using words literally, he intends this recognition to be achieved ...’ Austin contends that with the use of a non-performative formula (as in non-verbal communication), speech acts can be performed. The meaning-making dimensions of speech acts demonstrate the rule-governed nature of human communication. David A. Brenders (ibid) rightly notes that ‘speech act theory, as a part of the philosophy of language, has been concerned with analyzing the performance of linguistic acts (asserting, promising, questioning) as a rule-governed form of behaviour...’ Significant efforts on speech act taxonomy (categorization) abound in the literature. In this regard, Austin (ibid), Searle (ibid) as well as and Bach

and Harnish (ibid) are instructive. To understand the meaning-potential of speech act verbs, see Bach and Harnish (ibid) speech act taxonomy.

6.4 Meaning as Shared Knowledge

Shared knowledge and beliefs that participants of discourse bring to the fore in communicative events is immersed in social context. Thus, meaning (implicature) is defined in terms of obeying or violating the basics of rational human behaviour. Bach and Harnish (ibid) submit that speaker-hearer mutual contextual beliefs (MCBs) facilitate the inferential process. To infer what S is saying, the hearer (H) depends also on the 'Presumption of Literalness' (PL); the hearer should know when the linguistic communication of the speaker (S) is within or outside the bounds of literalness, and if S is speaking in a non-literal dimension, H should not only acknowledge it, but should also be able to understand what such speech by S means. Apart from MCBs, Bach and Harnish (ibid) recognize other types of beliefs shared by an entire linguistic community, which the hearer relies on for inference-making:

- (i) Linguistic Presumption (LP); and
- (ii) Communicative Presumption (CP).

Linguistic Presumption (LP) refers to the moral belief that members of a Linguistic Community (LC) share on the particular language (L). Therefore, any expression (e) uttered by a member to any member of the community, is taken by the speaker for granted; the speaker presupposes that the hearer understands the expression or utterance. An act of communication is successful as soon as the hearer recognizes the speaker's illocutionary intention. For example Advisories (which is a speech act category in their taxonomy) express the belief that 'there is (sufficient) reason for H to A (act)' and 'the intention that H takes S's belief as (sufficient) reason for him to A'. Presuppositions of language users are the meanings of referents in the universe of discourse (our real world). Mey (ibid p. 184), notes 'the notion of presupposition was originally developed in a semantic environment; as such, it does not hold up to our pragmatic expectations. For one thing, semantic presuppositions deal with truth or falsity: they are defined as 'holding' (that is, being true), even if the sentence containing the presupposition is false ...' Shared knowledge and presupposition are used to infer meanings of utterances. The types of presupposition in the literature reveal how shared knowledge/background knowledge of the participants of discourse impinge on speaker-hearer meaning. Bossan (2018, pp. 70-71) highlights types of presupposition:

1. Existential Presupposition:

This has to do with entities named by the speaker and assumed to be present. When we name an object, it is presupposed that the object exists. All nouns are presuppositions e.g. Simba's car is new.

2. Factive Presupposition:

It is the assumption that something is true due to the presence of some verbs such as know and realize. For example, when a teacher says that he didn't realize someone has failed the exam, we can suppose that someone has failed the exam.

3. Lexical Presupposition:

It is the assumption that, in using one word, the speaker can act as if another meaning (word) will be understood. Example:

- Clara stopped smoking (She used to smoke).
- You are pregnant again (You were pregnant before).

The use of the expression 'stop' and 'again' are taken to presuppose another (unstated) concept.

4) Structural Presupposition:

This is the assumption associated with the use of certain words and phrases. WH-questions in English (e.g. when and where) are conventionally interpreted with the presupposition that the information after the Wh-form is already known to be the case. Examples:

- When did she leave home? (She left.)
- Where did you get the information? (You got the information.)

5) Non-factive Presupposition:

It is an assumption that something is not true. For example, verbs like 'imagine', 'pretend' and 'dream' are used with the presupposition that what follows is not true.

- I dreamt that I got married (I am not married).
- We imagined that we were Americans (We are not Americans).

6) Counterfactual Presupposition:

It is the assumption that what is presupposed is not only untrue, but is the opposite of what is true or contrary to facts.

Speech acts are felicitous when shared knowledge of the participants of discourse underpins the use of utterances. According to Bosco et al. (2006), 'conversation is a two-fold activity in which the participants form utterances that are products of shared meaning, and such utterances produce felicitous results to the communicative event.' Austin (ibid.) posits that speech acts can be felicitous (happy) when the required conditions (appropriate participants, the right words at the right place) for their performance are met. For instance, performing a felicitous speech act such as declaring a man and a woman as husband and wife presupposes that: the person making the declaration should be in a position to do so (e.g. a priest); the usual utterance should be uttered; the utterance should be uttered in the correct physical setting (e.g. a church) and the person making the declaration should have the consent of those to be declared as husband and wife. In the performance of other institutional (social) acts, felicity conditions are compulsory. If the felicity conditions for declaring a man and a woman as husband and wife are not met, a word-to-world direction of fit (as in Searle's (ibid.) speech act theory) does not emerge. People in society explore their shared knowledge of socio-cultural practices in responding to a wedding declaration. Presuppositions and shared knowledge facilitate inference-making in literal and non-literal propositions, including indirect speech acts. Adegbija (ibid.) notes that indirect speech acts are interpreted at a higher level of

inference-making which presupposes the use of linguistic and extra-linguistic variables to arrive at total meaning.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Participants of discourse explore knowledge of the conventions of language and extralinguistic factors in ascertaining meanings of utterances. The extralinguistic elements constitute general background knowledge of discourse participants. The core of meaning as sociopragmatics of discourse is speaker-meaning/sender meaning. In this sense, the pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics of language use explain the concept of meaning. Eva Alcon Soler (ibid p. 511) notes that ‘pragmalinguistics refers to the resources for conveying communicative and interpersonal meaning, whereas sociopragmatics refers to the social perception underlying participants’ interpretation and performance of communicative acts.’ Acheoah’s (2018) typology of illocutionary strategies accentuates the view that in pragmatic sense, the meaning of an expression or utterance is mainly speaker-based, although decoders can process such an expression or utterance successfully to realize its meaning. Illocutionary strategies in Acheoah (ibid) include: ascribing quality to the object requested; using a constituent to demand a whole; offering to do what H (hearer) will not accept; declaring what H will not do if he possesses a certain quality; mentioning a constitutive referent; and making an ironical remark. See the theory for sentential examples and their non-literal/indirect propositional potentials. Language possesses meaning in terms of internal and external referents. This study captures this perspective by elucidating dimensions and variables of meaning. Charles W. Kreidler (1998, p. 42) submits that ‘generally we can recognize three aspects of meaning in lexemes: the relation to phenomena outside language, the relation to people’s attitudes and feelings and the relation to other lexemes.’ Language users rely on facts about the language they use in different contexts and situations. Meaning is usually negotiated based on this fact. Charles Kreidler (ibid, pp. 11-12) presents an elaborate perspective about speakers of a language:

... Speakers of a language generally agree as to when two sentences have essentially the same meaning and when they do not ...

3). Speakers generally agree when two words have essentially the same meaning – in a given context ...

4). Speakers recognize when the meaning of one sentence contradicts another sentence ...

5). Speakers generally agree when two words have opposite meanings in a given context ...

6). Synonyms and antonyms have to have some common elements of meaning in order to be, respectively, the same or different. Words can have some element of meaning without being synonymous or antonymous ...

- 7). Some sentences have double meanings; they can be interpreted in two ways. Speakers are aware of this fact because they appreciate jokes which depend on two-way interpretation ...
- 8). Speakers know how knowledge is used when people interact. If one person asks a question or makes a remark, there are various possible answers to the question or replies one might make to the remarks ...
- 9). Speakers are aware that two statements may be related in such a way that if one is true, the other must also be true.
- 10). Speakers know that the message conveyed in one sentence may presuppose other pieces of knowledge ...

The study concludes that the sociopragmatics of communication is essentially about speaker-meaning as determined by the elements of pragmatics which are basically extra-linguistic variables.

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