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MEANING: THE SIGNIFICANT CONCEPT

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ABSTRACT :

   The present paper focuses on an overview of place, significance and types of meaning in language. The study of meaning is essential to anyone who wishes to talk in a disciplined way about meaning. As a social being, when we interact with each other, we communicate meaning through language. The ultimate end of our linguistic behaviour is to exchange and perceive the meaning in conversational act. The issue of meaning has been the prime and central notion in linguistic enquiries. Of course, many philosophers, logicians and linguists have disputed on the question, 'what is meaning?', no one has produced exhaustive and satisfactory answer for it. As it is an abstract notion, there is no unanimous agreement on the definition of meaning. The disagreement results from an intermediate uses of both 'meaning' and 'mean'. Still we have to use language in the society for expressive and communicative purpose. As meaning is transferred via language and language is a highly structured phenomenon, it is structured at different levels such as sounds, words (or morpheme), sentence (or utterance) etc. All these aspects of language like sound, word, phrase, sentence, utterance and structure or grammar undoubtedly contribute to the study of meaning in the language.

KEYWORDS : *Communication, Lexeme, Semanitcs, Linguistics, Pragmaics, Community .*

INTRODUCTION:

   Communication between a speaker and a listener helps us understand the nature of meaning. Therefore, the notion of communication provides as a good source as any to start an exploration of meaning. It is said that language is a powerful means of communication as natural human language ensures an infinite expressive capacity. Any complex thoughts, ideas and feelings can be communicated and thus consequently meaning can be transferred from the speaker to the listener. The basic signs (viz. letters, words etc.) may combine together in a rule-governed way to form complex signs which express correspondingly complex meanings. It can here be said that meaning can be studied at different levels like word, sentence, utterance, structure and the society where we practically use language. Of course, other factors like paralinguistic and non-linguistic features are also useful to calculate the full import of meaning.

DIFFERNET VIEWS ON MEANING:

   As meaning is a slippery category, linguists attempted to concentrate initially only on the formal aspects of language. Accordingly, various logicians and philosophers tried to explore the nature of meaning. In their book, Ogden and I.A. Richard (1933:39) have cited more than fifteen definitions of meaning. Bloomfield defines meaning 'the situation in which the speaker utters it and the response which it calls forth

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in the hearer. J.R. Firth (1957:128, 15) believes, 'Meaning is a group of situational relations in a context of situation. Here, Firth seems to have given the importance of context as well as the physical environment as air. Accroding to Wittgenstriu (1958) the meaning of a word or expression is neither more nor less than its use. Usage, not meaning, is the right basis. Thus Wittgensteius' definition characterizes meaning as an operational or functional entity. From this, it follows that true meaning of a word is gained from the observation of what the user of language does with it, not what he says about it. The referential theorists of semantics are of opinion that there exists reversible and reciprocal relationship between name and sense, it can be investigated by starting from either end but one can start from the name and look for sense or senses attached to it as do all alphabetical dictionaries: but one can also start from the sense and look for the name or names connected with it.

As Semantics is one of the branches of linguistics and deals with the study of meaning. The discipline of Semantics has widely accepted meaning as ideas and concepts which can be transferred from the mind of the speaker to the mind of the hearer by embodying them, as it were, in the form of one language or another. But the identification of meaning with concepts will not help us to answer the question 'What is meaning?' The reason is that the term 'concept' is used too vaguely or generally to support it. Hence, it needs to be defined clearly and systematically. Words exist in any language; a few refer to visual images and some to mental images. Moreover, mental images associated with words by different people are variable and full of details. Similarly, the structural words like 'the', 'for', 'anything' even create more problems than it solves.

WORD AND SENTENCE MEANING:

Words play a key role in the study of meaning as words (lexemes) are considered to be the bricks of language. Sentence is made of words, therefore, the sentence meaning and the word meaning can be compared apparently. According to many linguists, much attention must be paid to the lexical meaning because words are the basic unit in the study of the concept of the meaning. It is unquestionably true that one cannot proceed reasonably to study sentence meaning without taking words into consideration. Meaning of word depends on a sentence in which they occur and vice versa. According to Davidson and Wiggins (1967:1971) sentence meaning should be defined in terms of truth conditions and that the meaning of a word as the contribution it makes to the truth condition of the sentence in which it occurs. Alston's (1964 a) approach that treats sentence meaning in terms of 'illocutionary act potential' and then relates the meaning of a word to the contribution it makes to the illocutionary act potential of the sentence in which it occurs. He gives his account as follows.

S_1 means S_2 = df S_1 have the same illocutionary potential.

W_1 means W_2 = df W_1 and W_2 can be substituted for each other in a wide range of sentences without uttering the illocutionary act potentials of these sentences. (Peter Cole & Jerry L. Morgan 1975. 325)

GRAMMATICAL MEANING:

It would be unwise to discuss the concept of meaning neglecting how a particular sentence is structured apart from the consideration of words and a sequence. The grammatical structure of a sentence certainly provides some insights to determine the meaning. Since any language consists of two types of words namely empty, words and open words, they have their own roles in the sentence. Empty words for example occur because of their grammatical function in the sentence. The preposition 'of' indicates 'possession' the conjunction 'or' indicates 'alternative' the indefinite article 'a' indicates singularity of noun and so on. Similarly, the meaning attached to the words like 'did', 'which', is considered as grammatical meaning. It is the grammatical structure which accounts for the 'mood' of sentence in terms of kinds of sentences. From this, it can be said that the meaning of expressions is to be established on the basis of words that have been used while forming those expressions and also on the basis of the grammatical structures that have been employed for that purpose. Bhat D.N.S.(1986: 59) illustrates significance of grammatical structure with following example:

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i. the door of the red house
ii. the red door of the house

The meaning of both the expressions is quite different from each other event though the above two expressions consist of the same set of linguistic elements i.e. words. From this it follows that grammatical structure in which these elements are put together certainly influences the meaning. Therefore, it can be asserted that meaning and grammar can be regarded as less free from one another.

UTTERANCE AND SENTENCE MEANING

The entities sentence and utterance are looked upon as the same very often. Sentences may not be confused with utterances. The place of utterance meaning is somewhat disputable since it includes the meaning of sentence. The utterance meaning is always derived on the basis of context instead of content. The utterance meaning is assessed as a pragmatic entity whereas linguistic semantics does not include utterances meaning. The sentence has to be related to its context to have full account of sentence meaning. Hence, sentence meaning is context dependent. Relating 'sense' with 'sentence' and 'force' with 'utterance' it could be said that a study of sentence meaning falls within the domain of semantics, where as utterance meaning falls within the domain of pragmatics. Thus sentence needs to be explained as 'the largest linguistic unit which is held together by rigid grammatical rules' In most circumstances, a sentence is an abstract linguistic object; specifically, it is a linguistic object put together entirely in accordance with the rules for constructing sentence in a language. Considering Noam Chomsky's (1957) famous example;

'colourless green ideas sleep furiously'

Chomsky's point is that, even though this thing makes no sense at all, it is constructed in accordance with all the rules for making sentence in English; hence it can be labelled as well-formed grammatical sentence of English. Here a point is that a sentence is not just a string of words; rather it is a string of words with a grammatical structure assigned to it. For Bloom field (1933:70) a sentence is 'an independent linguistic form not included by virtue of any grammatical construction in some larger linguistic form'. Sentence is a formal category because there are types of sentence like interrogative, imperative, exclamatory and assertive. Sentence is purely grammatical unit, as it has to follow SVO pattern. It is studied at different levels such as phonology, semantics and syntax. Similarly it can be studied in isolation. It needs to be explained in terms of adverbial subject, predicated complement etc.

Huang Y. (2007:11) remarks that by contrast, an utterance is the use of a particular piece of language –be it a word, a phrase, a sentence, or a sequence of sentences-by a particular speaker on a particular occasion. For example,

When someone produces the word like 'Hello', it can be treated as an utterance. Therefore, an utterance need not correspond to a sentence at all. When we speak, therefore, we do not strictly produce sentence; instead we produce utterance. Simply speaking an utterance is a particular piece of speech produced by a particular individual on a particular occasion. Leech (1983:14) states 'An Utterance is a form of act or activity: a speech act.' In this sense pragmatics deals with verbal acts or performance which takes place in particular situation in time. There is another sense in which the word 'utterance' can be used in pragmatics: it can refer to the product of a verbal act rather than to the verbal act itself. Secondly utterances are the elements whose meaning we study in pragmatics. In fact, we correctly describe pragmatics as dealing with utterance meaning. Thus the meaning of an utterance can be called its 'illocutionary force' Levinson (1983: 18) characterizes terms as 'a sentences is an abstract theoretical entity defined within a theory of grammar, while an utterance is the issuance of a sentence, a sentence-analogue, or sentence-fragment, in an actual context. Levinson also notes empirically, a relation between an utterance and corresponding sentence may be quite obscure e.g., the utterance may be elliptical or contain sentence-fragment or false starts. But it is customarily thought of an utterance as the pairing of a sentence and a context in which the sentence was uttered. Unlike sentence, utterance is functional category as we use in promising, ordering, betting, threatening etc, which are accomplished by an utterance. Sometimes an utterance may have non-linguistic properties such as silence or pause. An utterance can be said as syntax free entity for it need not

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follow rigid rules of grammar. For instance, if we want to ask question, we have to construct question, but in utterance we can ask question by raising our tone. As an utterance being functional entity, they are controlled by certain maxims, hence it is pragmatic representation. A sentence can be studied in isolation, but utterance needs to be studied in context.. The reason is that even an utterance is a fragment or brief form. A lot of may get communicated if there is a context. Making out the meaning of an utterance involves the making of inferences which require participant's knowledge of world.

SOCIAL MEANING:

Language has a great and significant role in the society. The values of society can be reflected in language**.** Language is a social activity and is intimately connected with the ways of life of community. It is the language that provides a powerful link between man and society. According to some linguists, the community of people who seek same language is called speech community. Meaning gets connected arbitrarily to words and through frequent use, the members of one society pass on this meaning to the next generations. Therefore, words or utterances need to be explained in the context of that particular social group. Social background of the speakers and the geographical region where he comes from are influencing factors of meaning. The linguistic expression such as choice of words, intonation and stress of an illiterate user will certainly differ from educated one. The people who live in a particular society have their own notions about the world. For instance, the meaning of the English word 'dinner' as used by English people cannot be appreciated by us unless we are familiar with their eating habits. Of course, we come across the meaning of these words in dictionary but different social groups interpret them according to their own notions about the world. For example, some dialectical words inform us about the regional and social background. In upper Midwest of United States the vast majority of informants in one area say 'they take their groceries home in paper bag' while majority in another area say 'they use a paper sack' (Yule 1985:229). This meaning attached to a word by social group is called social meaning. As this meaning is confined to a particular group it is less general than the conceptual meaning. There are socially acceptable ways of saying things, as there are socially prohibited ways of doing so. Thorat A. (2002: 42) opines 'the traditions and customs of the community it all times impinges upon the linguistic behaviour of speakers and hearers. Therefore, even in the same speech community maximum communication would be possible only if the members of community belong to the same cultural group. There are many speech situations that are culture specific. For example, in Christian communities the elder perform the act of blessing by putting the hand on the head of a person to be blessed using the linguistics expression,' May God bless you'. In Indian context, parents bless their children by saying, 'May you live long life'. Lyons believes (1981) this meaning has to do with the use of language to establish and maintain social roles and social relations.

CONCLUSION:

There are thus several types of meaning and there are many factors affecting the meaning of sentence as well as utterance. Apart from linguistic factors, there are many things which influence the nature of meaning. It is possible that more gets communicated than what is actually said. The hearer may or may not infer what the speaker exactly means. There are number of factors like context, shared knowledge between the speaker and the listener, their beliefs, their opinions, goals and intentions as well as their attitude towards their interlocutors, their socio cultural assumptions regarding their role and relationship.

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