

THE PROBLEM OF MEANING

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В статье делается попытка объяснить разнообразные смыслы слова которые, традиционно описываются как разные значения слова. В статье показано, как значение слова функционирует в системе языка, сохраняя свои инвариантные (стабильные) компоненты. Автор статьи анализирует как семантический механизм порождения многочисленных разных смыслов слова, так и собственное значение тех компонентов, с которыми слово сочетается и которые являются ключом к полисемии слова. Особое внимание уделено дискуссии двух научных направлений в современной лингвистике: референтному и функциональному подходам исследования значения слова.

Ключевые слова: инвариантное значение, референтный подход, отношение слово-понятие, контекстуальный подход, полисемантические единицы

У статті робиться спроба пояснити численні різноманітні смисли слова, які традиційно описуються як різні значення слова. У статті показано, як значення слова функціонує у системі мови, зберігаючи свої інваріантні (стабільні) компоненти. Автор статті аналізує як семантичний механізм породження численних різних смислів слова, так і власне значення тих компонентів, з котрими слово сполучається та котрі є ключем до полісемії слова. Значну увагу зосереджено на дискусії двох наукових напрямів у сучасній лінгвістиці: референтному та функціональному підходам дослідження значення слова.

Ключові слова: інваріантне значення, референтний підхід, відношення слово-поняття, контекстуальний підхід, полісемантичні лінгвістичні одиниці

The present article is an attempt to give some reasonable explanation of kaleidoscopic variability of numerous senses traditionally ascribed to different meanings of the word. It is shown in the article how the word meanings "work" in the system of the language preserving their invariant meanings. Much attention is given both to revealing the semantic mechanism responsible for producing numerous different senses of a single pair of words and to the independent meaning of the second components, which is the key to their polysemy. Special attention is focused on discussing two schools of thought in present-day linguistics due to the above-mentioned problem: these are the referential and the functional approaches.

Key words: invariant meaning; referential approach, word-concept relationship, contextual approach, polysemantic linguistic units

While examining the meanings of the relatives one has to proceed from certain general principles, for the meaning of any one word in its purely theoretical aspect is a particular case of the linguistic problem of meaning in general. Although semasiology (=semantics) has long been recognized as the most important as well as the most difficult and complicated branch of linguistics, it is the very branch which until recently has been badly neglected as compared to phonology and morphology.

One of the probable reasons for this is evidently the fact that it is much more difficult to determine the general principles at work in semantics than, say, in phonology, morphology or syntax. Another reason is that many linguists (notably American) have been making attempts to analyse linguistic structures without reference to meaning because they seem to have come to doubt the very possibility for meaning to be studied as objectively and as rigorously as phonology or morphology. The complexity of this problem lies in its very nature: while phonology and grammar are purely and entirely linguistic disciplines, the problem of meaning inevitably involves philosophy, logic and psychology and even sociology. The above considerations may well account for the fact that there has not as yet appeared any satisfactory and comprehensive general theory of semantics even in its outlines. The definition of semantics as "the study of meaning" is, as J. Lyons has wittily, observed, the only point of agreement among scholars [3,p.402]. But as soon as they come to consider particular aspects of the subject they show "a bewildering variety of approaches to the definition and determination of "meaning"[4,p.403]. In consequence of this great variety of approaches, there appears a still greater number of various definitions of meaning.

It is only natural that this state of things in the general theory of meaning is reflected in different quantities and qualities of meanings of most of the words in lexicographical works - mainly in various dictionaries and special studies of certain groups of words. The authors have been making great efforts to work out certain general principles or techniques for describing different meanings of one and the same word as well as some objective reliable criteria to distinguish one from another, and their views may be roughly divided into two major groups with two varieties in each, depending on the way of approach to this problem.

As R.S. Ginzburg has pointed out, there are two schools of thought in present-day linguistics representing the main lines of contemporary thinking on the problem [2,p.23]. These are the referential and the functional approaches. The adherents of the first school of thoughts endeavor to establish the interdependence between words and a) things or b) concepts they refer to (hence the term "referential approach"), while those holding the views of the second school investigate the function of a word in speech (hence the term "referential approach") and show

much more interest in a) how meaning actually works in speech than in b) what meanings is. In what follows below these points will be discussed in detail.

1. Referential approach.

- a) *Work-thing relationship*. According to this view the meaning of a particular word is actually identified with a thing or, to put it more generally, with an object of reality referred to or denoted by this word. This is the most important traditional and purely practical way of identifying the meaning and may be best illustrated by different meanings as they are given in dictionaries, as, for example, the meanings of the word "head", *n. et al.* 1. the **part** of the body (they cut his head off, *sub* 1); 2. the whole **body** (the head of a family, *sub* 4); 3. the top or highest part (at the head of the page, *sub* 7); 4. a body of water kept at a certain height, *sub* 8). ALD it is easy to see that the different parts and the different bodies are described here as the different meanings of this word respectively. Now, apart from the main objection that the bodies and parts, etc. are extra-linguistic entities while meanings proper are components of a certain linguistic system, it is not clear why the whole body should be denoted by the same word as its part, on the one hand, and what other meanings this word may still have, that is to say, what other bodies and parts are to be so denoted, on the other, for the list of the things ("heads") is surely not exhaustive. One thing however is quite clear and that is that we deal in this way with particular more or less typical cases of usage which do not always provide a clear-cut explanation as to why a certain novel object of reality has been named so and how this new usage should be interpreted (on the part of a reader).
- b) *Word-concept relationship*. The authors holding this view contend that it is not the objects of reality but the corresponding notions or concepts that constitute the word meanings, which invites objections on the part of linguists, creating one of the most complicated and intricate problems - that of differentiating between meaning and concept, for the latter is also an extra-linguistic entity belonging to logic, whereas linguistics, or semantics, to be more precise, must have its own specific object of study - the meaning. Besides, concepts are by far more numerous than words of any language, hence the conclusion that a word is inevitably to be associated with more than one concept, which gives rise to the questions already considered above: the concept of a part is certainly different from that of a whole body. Moreover, the concept of any one object of reality varies with the age of the speakers, their knowledge, profession, etc. and it would scarcely be possible, without a dangerous stretch of imagination, to conceive how people could communicate and convey their thoughts by means of words which do not have exactly the same meanings (=concepts) for the speaker as for the hearer.

2. Functional or contextual approach. Unlike the above two, this treatment of the subject is purely linguistic, for the meaning of a word in this case is said to be determined by the context, that is to say, by the immediate environment of the word in a sentence and is expressed in terms of word collocations. In other words, without any further inquiry into what exactly it is the meaning of a word is identified with a certain rule or type of usage determined by various distributional formulae deduced from the context containing the word in question. Thus, the verb "to drop" is assumed to have the following meanings depending on the preceding or the following words in the context: *s h e would drop. The wind had dropped. Her voice dropped. I dropped my handkerchief. He dropped a hint. You should drop that habit* [1,p.47]. Similarly, adjectives, as St. Ullmann observes, "are apt to change their meaning according to the noun they qualify" [5,p.160]. Thus, the adjective *blind* depends for its various meanings on the noun it modifies: *blind valley; blind wall; blind arch; blind hedge; blind stitch*, etc [4,p.35 ff]. this kind of contextual meanings (defined surely not without the influence of translation) can by no means be regarded as mere sense interpretation of the English word collocations in sense terms of some other language, for most of the English authors extensively use the same technique to define the meanings of certain words in one and the same language. As, for example, the following meanings of the word *out* (*adv. part.*) in ALD: "Combined with verbs to express: a) **sudden activity** – *A fire broke out* (*sub* 3); b) **disappearance** – *The stains will wash out* (*sub* 4); c) **clearness or loudness** – *Speak out, please!* (*sub* 6); d) **to suggest distance** – *I'm living out in the country* (*sub* 8); e) **to express distribution or circulation** – *to hand things out, to pay out money* (*sub*. 10), etc.

A careful examination of these and other definitions of meanings shows, in the first place that the contextual approach, though proclaimed to be purely linguistic and rigorously objective, is in the long run nothing but the same referential approach in a linguistic disguise. Indeed, if collected, all the words co-occurring with the word *head* in the context describing the part of the (human) body will no doubt differ from those combining with it when it denotes a whole body, that is, a single person. And the only possible conclusion to be drawn (based on these objective linguistic data) is that the word in question must have two different meanings, which will only confirm linguistically the direct reference of the same word to different objects of reality as its respective different meanings. Moreover, different heads, say, that of an elephant and of an insect, if properly described, will certainly have each its own specific set of words denoting its characteristic features. Shall we next infer from these different sets of context containing the same word *head* that it has different meanings?

It is seen at once that this method, if logically extended, will yield almost as many different meanings of the word as many different words it combines with. It is also quite evident that context with its speech patterns and typical arrangements of linguistic units is indeed of paramount importance mainly for the reader (header) who has to read off the sense of the ready-made context. With the speaker (writer), however, things are different: he has **to create the context**, hence he is expected to use each word in the pattern according to its linguistic (structural) value – some sort of invariant meaning indispensable and sufficient for an unambiguous expression of his own thoughts

and feelings and attitude to what he is saying in the particular situation he happens to find himself in. and it is precisely here that foreign students of English (and perhaps not only foreigners for that matter) are treacherously misguided by this purely surface method. For even after learning, with due diligence, all those meanings a student is first puzzled by their incredible and chaotic diversity, ranging, as above, from “sudden activity” or “distance” to “loudness” or “distribution”. Then he starts wondering what other possible meanings this word may still have, that is to say, where else he may use the word properly. And that is where this method fails him badly providing very little, if any, help in his desperate efforts to grasp the general idea – the invariant meaning underlying the use of the word and thus to grope out for himself certain rules how to understand and use the word in question. Indeed, it is perhaps next to impossible for him to find out any feature common to “sudden activity”, “distance”, “loudness”, “disappearance”, “distribution”, etc. that would serve him as a guiding line for his own proper use and exact understanding of the word.

In general, contextual meanings, however detailed and typical, are mere explanations of what has once been said in a certain context, which does not always fit in very well with what the speaker (reader) has to say or to interpret in a different situation or context respectively. Thus, even with a perfect knowledge of the above contextual meanings of the adjective *blind* a foreign student will no doubt find it difficult to understand what exactly a *blind rock* or a *blind turn* is, and the first thing for him to do will be to try to apply and adjust each of the above meanings in turn until he comes to what may happen to appear as a satisfactory solution, guessing thus rather than exactly understanding the actual feature of the object that has attracted the name *blind* in English.

Summing up the discussion, one should say that the contextual approach cannot provide a foreign student with an adequate helpful knowledge of a) how he should exactly interpret an unusual use of a particular word b) how, at a later stage of learning the language, his own particular thought should be properly expressed. The knowledge of the general or invariant meaning of any one word, as opposed to its particular contextual sense, may give a foreign student a firm helping hand in his first, shaky steps along the long slippery novel path yet to be groped out.

The contextual approach in its essence and practice, however, denies the very notion of the invariant word meaning independent of context by asserting: “the word exists only through the context and is nothing in itself”, which, as St. Ullmann has rightly observed, is neither accurate nor realistic [5,p.48 ff], for it is difficult to see how several “nothings in themselves” could come to mean something if put together. No, we shall stress here emphatically that every word by definition has its own independent meaning determined by the lexico-semantic system of language and it is this meaning that is supposed to direct the use of the word in all possible contexts. We shall now proceed to discuss at length what this meaning is and how it functions occurring in a great variety of contexts.

Literature:

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Abbreviations

ALD – The advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English by A.S. Hornby et. al. – London, 1956.