

## MA ELT

### Semantics & Pragmatics

#### Lecture No.4

#### Study Material

#### Theories of Meaning

#### What is meaning?

- The term 'meaning' is familiar to us all.
- We often talk about the meanings of words and sentences.
- Semantics is the study of meaning, but what do we mean by 'meaning'?
- To what extent, it is a *linguistic* matter?
- What bits of meaning are given to us directly by the forms of language?
- What kind of *theory* of meaning is best suited to the linguistic facts?
- How can the words fail to mean what they mean? (Palmer, 1997)
- E.g. 'I did not mean that'.
- Let's try to find answers to these questions.
- The verb 'mean' has multiple meanings/ senses in dictionary.
- **Have a look at the following sentences:**
- 'I mean to be there tomorrow'.
- 'What I mean to do'. (Intention)
- 'That cloud means thunder'
- 'A red light means 'Stop''. (Sign both natural and conventional)
- The most relevant use of the term for our purpose may be found in the following sentence:
- 'What does calligraphy mean?'
- Words, phrases or ideas which are given to understand a certain idea – same meaning
- Finding sameness may be a problem (Palmer, 1997, p. 3)
- If our words have a meaning, how can we fail to say what we mean?

- In such cases, we wish to suggest that the words do not mean conventionally.
- There is some other meaning than besides the 'literal' meaning of words.
- Multiple ways to achieve this (e.g. intonation, non-linguistic signs)
- One possible definition of meaning:
- To understand a sentence is to be able to relate it to the outside world.
- Meaning = Extension and Intention
- Extension: The thing in the world that the word/phrase refers to.
- Intention: The concepts/mental images that the word/phrase evokes ( Wood, 2011).
- Meaning and Language
- Meaning is connected to language via the lexicon and grammar
- Also what we do with language.
- Lexical meanings
- sense relations (synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, etc.)
- Componential analysis:
- bachelor = [+male, -married]
- Meaning and Grammar
- The meaning of an expression is a function of the meaning of its parts and the way they are put together
- Compositional meaning:
- The rat bit the cat.
- The cat bit the rat.
- Need to see meaning within the framework of an academic or scientific discipline.

### **Meaning Holism – Meaning within Language**

- Portner (2005) argues that when we ask what a word means, we usually get more words.
- Can meaning be words? No, scientifically speaking.
- Imagine, the meaning of 'Jasmine' is 'a kind of flower'.
- Now what are the meanings of 'kind' and 'flower' – more words

- This becomes circular.
- A word is defined in terms of some of the very words which it helps define.
- This view is similar to ‘meaning holism’ (Quine, 1953, 1960) which claims that the meaning of a word/ phrase/sentence depends on its relationship with other words/phrases/sentences
- E.g. Part of what makes up the meaning of ‘tall’ is that it is opposed to the meaning of ‘short’.
- Holist theory tends to be functional in the sense that it is some aspect of the uses of a piece of language which makes for its meaning.
- If you call something ‘tall’, you should be willing to call it ‘not short’.
- Issues for Holism
- Which of the relations among words/phrases/ sentences are important to semantics?
- Radical holism contends that all connections are important.
- In this way, the semantic system of language will be a complex and interconnected network and all meaning will be relative to the whole system of language
- Too difficult to study meaning scientifically from this perspective.
- The critics of this theory also argue that the way language express thought is not as arbitrary as the holist’s view predicts.
- There may be deep, consistent and sophisticated patterns in how languages express meaning.
- Meaning holism may be correct in a way, it does not provide a basis for the scientific study of linguistic meaning.
- That is why, it has not been appreciated by formal semanticists.

(Portner, 2005, p. 3-5)

### **Idea Theory of Meaning**

- If meanings aren’t words, our next guess might be that meanings are something in the mind: Concepts, thoughts or ideas. E.g. when you understand the meaning of the word ‘Dog’, your mind (and brain) change in certain ways.
- At some point, you form a concept of dogs
- (Portner, 2005, p. 5)
- Here the concept will be indicated with capital letters ‘DOG’
- You associate this concept with the English word ‘dog’.

- Then onwards, you have an ability to use the word ‘dog’ whenever the concept DOG is active in your mind.
- We can say that ‘DOG’ in the meaning of ‘dog’.
- This theory explains the patterns in how languages express meaning in terms of the nature of concepts – ultimately, the way the brain is structured.
- Challenges faced by the Idea Theory
- To come up with a sound psychological theory of what concepts or ideas are. (Portner, 2005, p. 5)
- 2. Needs to provide a concept for every meaningful piece of language.
- Consider the following words and imagine the concepts behind them.
- Rain, Horse, my picture, nine, however, why, sleep, whatever, is, etc.
- ‘The governor lives in Lahore’
- What idea is associated with whatever, why, or three?
- Now imagine the concept behind some Urdu Words.
- چونکہ، یہاں، اگرچہ، خارج، آغاز، بونا، باریک، لوہے کی چادر، کیوں
- What idea is associated with the highlighted Urdu words?
- Does not seem as easy a project as explaining what idea is associated with the word ‘dog’ (Portner, 2005, p. 9).
- Therefore, idea theory does not provide a quick and easy path to a complete theory of meaning.
- 3. Whether the ideas and concepts have the right properties to explain everything we need to explain about meaning?
- 4. the idea theory needs to establish how to explain ‘grammatical meanings’ (e.g. Active-passive voice change)
- If idea theory is to work, ideas will have to have a language-like nature – grammar.
- Ideas as a language of thought (Portner, 2005)
- 4. concepts are formed by the experiences of people – experiences may vary from person to person.
- Our concepts may be different versions of the same thing.
- This weakens idea theory.
- Our intentions to apply words the same things help us specify meaning.

- We do have concepts about things but the meaning are not simply ideas.
- There may be a relation between ideas and meaning, they do not seem to be the same thing.  
(Portner, 2005, p. 9)

### **Meanings are out in the world**

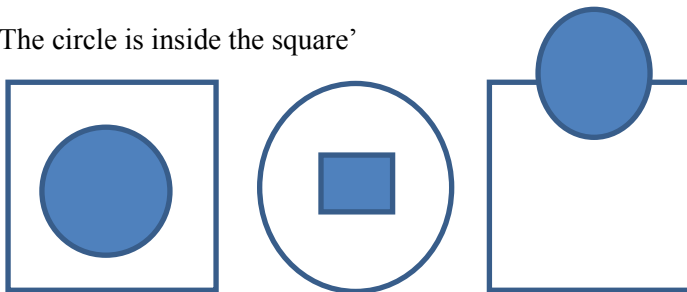
- There are certain philosophical views/theories which lead us to think that ‘meanings are out in the world’.
- 1. Social practices and meaning
- If meanings are not in the relations among pieces of language, and are not ideas, what else could they be?
- They are social practices.
- When somebody says something, it should be thought as a kind of move in a giant language game we play.
- This game has rules which imply that if somebody asks:
- ‘What time is it?’ The reasonable move for you is to say ‘It is X o’clock’.
- This theory failed to influence semanticists.
- In conflict with one of the basic ideas of modern linguistics - our languages are not arbitrary social conventions rather reveal deeper universal patterns which spring from the way our minds are built.
- It also ignores the key role of intuition in meaning making.
- 2. Reference as a theory of Meaning
- Simplest theory of meaning is to claim that semantics is reference (Saeed, 2004)
- To give the meaning of a word one shows what it denotes.
- Proper names denote individuals, whereas, common nouns denote sets of individuals.
- ‘Reference’ picks out elements in the real world.
- Problems of the Theory:
- Predicts that many words have no meaning because it is very difficult to find a real world referent for ‘so, not, very, but, of, etc.’.
- Many nominal expressions do not have a referent that exists or has ever existed. E.g. Unicorn, World War Three, etc.

- There may be more to meaning than reference – two words/expressions may refer to the same thing.
- Where are meanings then?
- Meanings are out in the world.
- Meanings are not internal to language, are not in the mind, and are not merely social practices.
- Meanings are based in language – and mind-external reality.
- For example, meaning of the word ‘dog’ implies that it describes all of those things that actually are dogs, regardless of our ability to define it with words or to formulate an appropriate mental concept.

### Meaning of sentences and Truth Conditions

- A theory about the meaning of sentences – a part of sentence semantics.
- So far, we need a comprehensive theory about the meaning of complete sentences.
- Based on the tradition that the meanings are part of language – and mind-external reality, we can assume certain things about sentence meaning.
- There can be some possible ways in which a sentence or sentences may be true or false.
- E.g. look at the following sentence and diagrams:

‘The circle is inside the square’



- Which diagram reflects the situation above?
- This kind of logical patterning is important to understand the nature of sentence meaning.
- The knowledge of meaning involves (at least) the knowledge of conditions under which it is true or false.
- All there to the meaning of a sentence is its truth conditions instead of knowing in fact it is true or false.

### Possible Worlds

- Truth conditions as possible worlds/ situations

- The notion of possible worlds does not mean something imaginary and disconnected from reality.
- Rather the possible worlds are specific and closer to the real world.
- We think about possible worlds all the time.
- E.g. the investigation based on the question ‘who committed a crime’ always begin with certain possibilities.
- In this theory, the meaning of a sentence is called a proposition.
- The proposition expressed by a sentence amounts simply to its truth-conditions – a set of possible worlds.
- e.g. the noun ‘dog’ describes certain things (the dogs) and not others.
- Likewise, a sentence describes certain possible worlds (in which it is true) and not others.

#### Advantages of truth-conditions

- Help us explain logical words (and, or, not) and semantic relations

#### Limitations of Truth- conditions

- Non-declarative sentences: Interrogatives and Imperatives

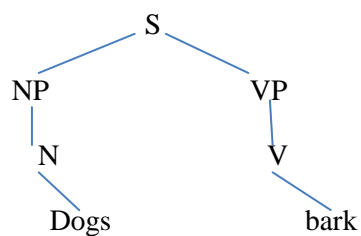
#### What of sentences which cannot be described as true or false?

- E.g. ‘who did Kashif visit? (Interrogative)
- Tick the right option. (Imperative)
- This seems impossible for some scholars while possible for others.
- The meaning of a question may be defined in terms of its possible answers.
- The meaning of imperatives may be seen as ‘satisfactory’ or ‘unsatisfactory’ instead of ‘true’ or ‘false’. (Portner, 2005, p. 12- 24)

### **Putting meaning together from pieces -Compositional Theory**

- A language is an infinite collection of phrases, sentences and discourses.
- Any sentence can be made longer by adding another sentence.
- In addition, semanticists also have to consider the fact that language is creative – we constantly hear new phrases and sentences never heard before.
- Semantic theory has to provide an account of the knowledge of meaning which language users have and which allows for their ability to quickly and easily understand novel pieces of language (Portner, 2005, p. 34).

- They seek to explain the infinity and creativity of human language by including the principle of compositionality.
- This says that the meaning of a piece of language is based solely on the meaning of its parts, and the way they are put together.
- Here the infinity and creativity of language are comprehensible.
- All we need to know is:
  1. a finite number of basic things (the meaning of the smallest pieces of language).
  2. the methods of combining them.
- This gives us enough knowledge to associate the right meaning with every bigger piece of language.
- Example:
  - ‘Dog barks’
  - In this sentence, ‘dog’ is the subject and ‘barks’ is the predicate.
  - Dog refers to a thing.
  - ‘barks’ gives us the property of barking.
  - The predication (rule of combining) tells us to saturate the property with the thing.
  - We need to understand what are basic language piece means (adjectives, determiners, verbs, etc.).
  - This principle informs us that semantics has a very strong relation with syntax.



- The lines show how the phrases higher in the tree are composed of the pieces lower in the tree.