



WEEK 2

Main Topic: THE NATURE AND SCOPE OF SEMANTICS

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Expected learning outcomes:

They include:

- i. Discuss the nature of semantics
- ii. To examine the scope of semantics.

Contents

1. Nature of semantics

2. Scope of semantics:

a. Naming

b. Concept

c. Sense and reference.

THE NATURE OF SEMANTICS

Semantics had its origins in Philosophy

✓ scholars in philosophical semantics were interested in pointing out the relationship between linguistic expressions and identified phenomena in the external world.

THE NATURE OF SEMANTICS

philosophical semantics has led to the development of Semiotics and semiology.

Reliance on logical calculations in issues of meaning has led to the development of logical semantics.

However, the concern of this course is to look at linguistics semantics.

THE NATURE OF SEMANTICS

We study the meaning of words and sentences of languages.

Linguistic semantics studies meaning in a systematic and objective way.

Since meaning as a concept is not static, a great deal of the idea of meaning still depends on the context and participants in the act of communication.

THE NATURE OF SEMANTICS

Communication is done mainly using language.

Language is organized into four principal levels:

sounds (that is phonetics/phonology),

words (that is morphology)

sentences (that is syntax)

meaning (that is semantics).

THE NATURE OF SEMANTICS

- Phonology and syntax are concerned with the expressive power of language
- Semantics studies the meaning of what has been expressed
- Knowledge of grammar is an aspect of the innate cognitive ability of human beings.

SCOPE OF SEMANTICS: Naming

Language is thought of as a communication system with the signifier and signified.

The signifier is a word in the language; signified is the object in the world that it 'stands for', 'refers to' or 'denotes.

Hence, words are names or labels of things.

There are, however, difficulties with this view:

It seems to apply only to nouns;

Indeed, traditional grammar defines the noun as ‘the name of a person or thing’.

It is difficult to extend the theory of naming to include other parts of speech like adjectives, verbs, prepositions etc.

Sometimes, the nouns name things that do not exist' (unicorn, goblin, fairy)-hence refer to imaginary things.

These do not denote objects in the world.

One way to distinguish this difficulty according to Palmer (1976) is:

Distinguish two kinds of the world: The real world and the world of fairy tales.

However, this is to admit that the words are not just names of things.

There must therefore be a fairly sophisticated explanation.

Palmer, F. (1976). *Semantics: A new outline*.

NY: Cambridge. (pg. 21)

There are other nouns, do not refer to physical objects at all.

We cannot identify the objects to be named by words such as love, hate, inspiration, humility, employment.

So, we can ask: Is love a thing? Is hate a thing?

If the answer is 'yes', then they are abstract things.

Even when there are physical objects that are identifiable, the meaning may not be the same as its denotation (i.e. the object it stands for).

Consider the terms 'evening star' and 'morning star'

These cannot be said to have the same meaning; yet, they denote a single object.

Another difficulty is the fact that even if we restrict our attention to words that are linked with physical objects in the world around us, they often seem to denote a whole set of rather different objects.

Chairs, for instance, come in all shapes and sizes, but we may ask:

What is it that makes one a chair rather than a settee or a stool?

When is a hill a hill and not a mountain?

When is a stream and a river?

Often, the dividing line between the items referred to by one word and those referred to by another is vague and there may be overlap.

In the world of experience, objects are not ready to be labelled with a single word.

We can therefore say that words can be seen as ‘object words’ and ‘dictionary words’.

Object words are learnt ostensibly by pointing at objects; hence have ostensive definitions.

Dictionary words have to be defined in terms of the object words.

Also, cultures have names that serve their interests.

Words and things relate through the mediation of concepts.

This view has been postulated by De Saussure's sign theory and Ogden and Richards' theory of Semiotic triangle.

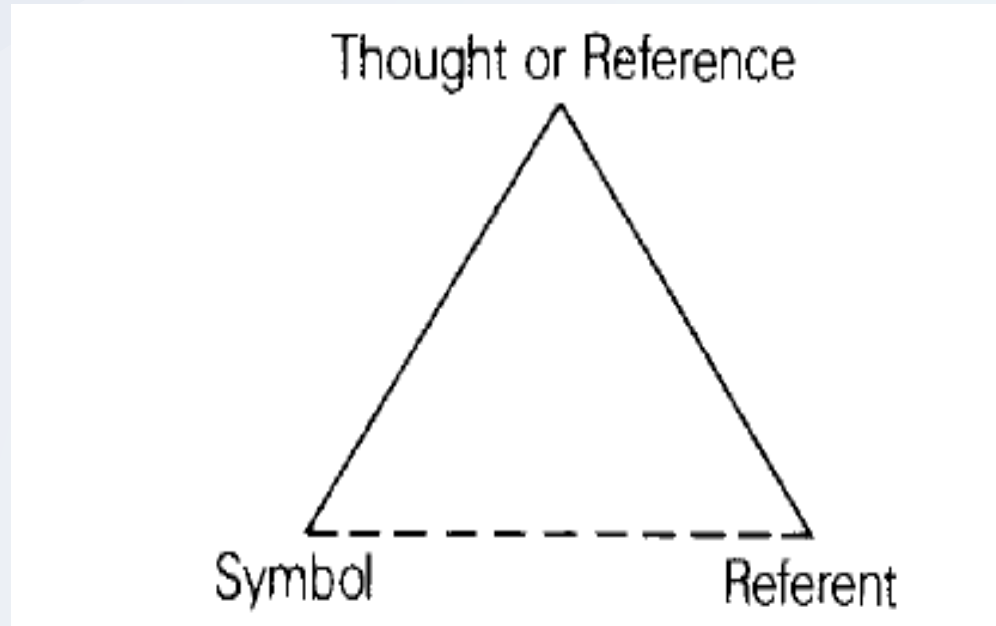
According to De Saussure (1959), sign consists of a signifier and a signified.

De Saussure, F. (1959): Translation-

A course in general linguistics. NY: McGraw Hill.

CONCEPTS

These are a sound image and a concept, both linked by a psychological 'associative' bond.



- ▶ Source: Palmer, F. (1976). *Semantics: A new outline*. NY: Cambridge. (pg. 26)

The 'symbol' is the linguistic element- the word, the sentence.

The 'referent' is the object etc., in the world of experience.

'Thought or reference' is the concept.

According to the theory, there is no direct link between symbol and referent (between language and the world)

The link is via thought or reference ,
the concepts in our minds

This view also has its shortcomings:

What is the use of the 'associative bond'?

The most basic answer given is that 'when we think of a name, we think of the concept and vice versa' (Palmer, 1976)

Hence, the meaning consists of our ability to and practice of associating one with the other.

Palmer, F. (1976). *Semantics: A new outline*.

NY: Cambridge. (pg. 26)

This defense does not help as it is not clear what 'thinking of' a concept is.

Some scholars have alluded that we have some kind of image of , for instance ' chair' when we talk about chairs.

But this is not the case as we don't always visualize the things we are talking about.

A more sophisticated version sees the link as some kind of association stored in the mind or the brain.

This, too, is problematic as it is referring to entities that are mirror images of the words they are supposed to explain.

Wherever, there will be a word there will be a concept

And the concept will be the 'meaning of that word'

This is a circular definition.

SENSE AND REFERENCE

Reference deals with the relationship between the linguistic elements, words, sentences etc., and the non-linguistic world of experience.

Sense related to the complex system of relationships that hold between the linguistic elements themselves (mostly the word)

It is concerned only with intra-linguistic relations.

Sense and reference

It may be said that semantics is concerned with the way we relate our language to our experiences;

Hence, argue that reference is the essential element of semantics.

Yet, sense relations have formed an important part of the study of language.

Sense and reference

Such sense relations include:

Antonymy

Synonymy

Hyponymy

We shall consider them later during a separate lesson.

Sense and reference

The dictionary is usually concerned with sense relations and relating words to words.

Hence, the ultimate aim of the dictionary is to supply its users with referential meaning.

It does so by relating a word whose meaning is unknown to a word or words whose reference is already known.

Sense and reference

We can then establish that there are two kinds of semantics:

One deals with semantic structure- intra-linguistic

The other deals with meaning in terms of our experiences outside language- relates to non-linguistic entities.

We have dealt with words and sense relations but is important to note that meaning can also be studied at the level of the sentence.

J.J. Katz and J.A Fodor in Palmer (1976) indicate that 'A semantic theory describes and explains the interpretative ability of speakers by:

- a. Accounting for ambiguity in sentences.
- b. Detecting semantic anomalies
- c. Deciding upon paraphrase relations between sentences.

Palmer, F. (1976). *Semantics: A new outline*.

NY: Cambridge. (pg. 32)

Sense and reference

There are difficulties with these concerns:

It is not always possible to distinguish between sense and reference.

Reason: the categories of our language correspond, to some degree, to real world distinctions.

However, it is important to note that:

Sense and reference

Not all languages will make similar distinctions

There is considerable indeterminacy in the categorization of the real world.

Hence, when dealing with Semantics, we must include the sum total of human knowledge and this restricts our attention to sense.

SUMMARY

We have looked at the nature of semantics where we established that semantics can be organized into four levels :phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics.

We have also explored the scope of semantic as:

Naming

Concept

Sense and reference.

References

De Saussure, F. (1959): Translation- *A course in general linguistics*. NY: McGraw Hill.

Palmer, F. (1976). *Semantics: A new outline*. NY: Cambridge. (pg. 12)

Next lesson

Lesson 3

We shall look at APPROACHES TO SEMANTICS