

SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS

WEEK 6 – FUNCTIONS OF MEANING

UNIVERSITY: UNIVERSITY OF EMBU

LECTURER: DR. LILLIAN OMOKE

FUNCTIONS OF MEANING

- ▶ We communicate in order to pass information to facilitate information.
- ▶ People often experience misunderstanding because there is no shared meaning.
- ▶ Language is a major component in communication and meaning making.
- ▶ Remember we said that we communicate conceptually, and in this, there is more or less universal understanding.
- ▶ Connotations are not universally understood and this may lead to a lack of common meaning.

FUNCTIONS OF MEANING

- ▶ Expected learning outcomes
- ▶ By the end of this lesson, you should be able to:
 - i. Discuss the functions of meaning
 - ii. Examine the use of language in society.

FUNCTIONS OF MEANING

- ▶ We shall collapse all the functions into five according to Leech (1985)
- ▶ Informational
- ▶ Expressive
- ▶ Directive
- ▶ Aesthetic
- ▶ Phatic
- ▶ Leech, G. (1985). *Semantics: The study of meaning*. Britain: Chaucer Press. Pg. 40-41

BASIC FUNCTIONS OF MEANING

- ▶ **The basic functions of language are:**
- ▶ Communication:
- ▶ representation,
- ▶ expression
- ▶ social interaction.
- ▶ humans convey information, represent ideas or thoughts, express emotions and build relationships with others.

INFORMATIONAL FUNCTION

- ▶ Also known as the referential function
- ▶ Responsible for describing things
- ▶ delivering messages
- ▶ Provides recipients with new information
- ▶ Used to:
- ▶ Affirm and deny statements

INFORMATIONAL FUNCTION

- ▶ Convey facts about the world
- ▶ Describes the states of affairs
(what may have led to the collapse of that building)
- ▶ They contribute to the truth value and therefore logic
- ▶ Convey information

INFORMATIONAL FUNCTION

- ▶ Maps
- ▶ Encyclopedias
- ▶ Manuals
- ▶ News or institutional reports
- ▶ Textbooks
- ▶ All contribute to informational meaning.

INFORMATIONAL FUNCTION

- ▶ Note that this is an exchange of information.
- ▶ We don't just receive information for the sake of it but;
- ▶ we engage in conversations as we make sense of the world.
- ▶ Language, in this sense, makes use of the thematic meaning to convey s and focus the message in a particular way.
- ▶ We make choices from various alternatives to communicate our intentions.

INFORMATIONAL FUNCTION

Key facts

- **By 2050, nearly 2.5 billion people are projected to have some degree of hearing loss, and at least 700 million will require hearing rehabilitation.**
- **Over 1 billion young adults are at risk of permanent, avoidable hearing loss due to unsafe listening practices.**
- **An annual additional investment of less than US\$ 1.40 per person is needed to scale up ear and hearing care services globally.**
- **Over a 10-year period, this promises a return of nearly US\$ 16 for every US dollar invested.**

Overview

Over 5% of the world's population – or 430 million people – require rehabilitation to address their disabling hearing loss (including 34 million children). It is estimated that by 2050 over 700 million people – or 1 in every 10 people – will have disabling hearing loss.

Disabling hearing loss refers to hearing loss greater than 35 decibels (dB) in the better hearing ear. Nearly 80% of people with disabling hearing loss live in low- and middle-income countries. The prevalence of hearing loss increases with age, among those older

Source: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/deafness-and-hearing-loss> (Retrieved on 17/04/2024)

EXPRESSIVE FUNCTION

- ▶ We use language when we want to express ourselves or share our feelings.
- ▶ We also communicate our attitudes towards our addressees
- ▶ We also share our emotions.
- ▶ This is what Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) call the ideational function of language.
- ▶ He says that ideational meaning is encoded in a clause.

Halliday, M.A.K & Matthiessen, M.I.M (2014). *Halliday's introduction to functional grammar*. London: Routledge. Pg. 156

EXPRESSIVE FUNCTION

- ▶ As noted, we use ideational meaning to express ideas and experiences.
- ▶ It involves the use of words and phrases to convey thoughts and mental images.
- ▶ Consider this conversation
- ▶ A: 'I am quite hungry I may eat a whole month's portion'
- ▶ B: I can show you where people like you are served such meals. Do you remember in *Things Fall Apart* where food was presented as a mountain and people could only see each other after flattening the mountain?

This conversation presents ideational / expressive/ emotive function of language.

EXPRESSIVE FUNCTION

- ▶ We express ourselves about the physical and the mental world
- ▶ According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) we encode ideational meaning via transitivity and voice.
- ▶ Transitivity specifies the different processes that are recognized in language.
- ▶ The semantic framework includes:
 - ▶ - the process
 - ▶ - the participant, and;
 - ▶ Circumstances associated with the process.

EXPRESSIVE FUNCTION

- ▶ When we communicate, we make choices between different types of processes, participants and circumstances.

- ▶ Collectively, they are called transitivity:

- ▶ Mental- sensing

I recognized his face.

He likes conflicts

- ▶ Material – doing- uses action/logical verbs

He swept the house

EXPRESSIVE FUNCTION

- ▶ Relational – being

The teacher is in class.

He is not wise

- ▶ Behavioural – psychological or physiological

He wept bitterly

EXPRESSIVE FUNCTION

- ▶ Verbal- process of saying

He said he was tired with the rumour.

They asked me many questions

- ▶ Existential – existing or happening

It rains a lot here.

There was a big storm

DIRECTIVE FUNCTION

- ▶ Also known as the conative function
- ▶ The meaning we make will influence the behavior or attitudes of others
- ▶ Commands and requests carry this function
- ▶ It is aimed at achieving social control
- ▶ It places emphasis on the receiver's;
- ▶ Rather than the originator of the message

DIRECTIVE FUNCTION

- ▶ the speech acts come to play:
- ▶ Apologize
- ▶ Command
- ▶ Promise'
- ▶ Threaten
- ▶ Gives less importance to conceptual meaning but places weight to affective and connotative meanings.
- ▶ We can easily relate this to the perlocutionary function of speech acts

DIRECTIVE FUNCTION

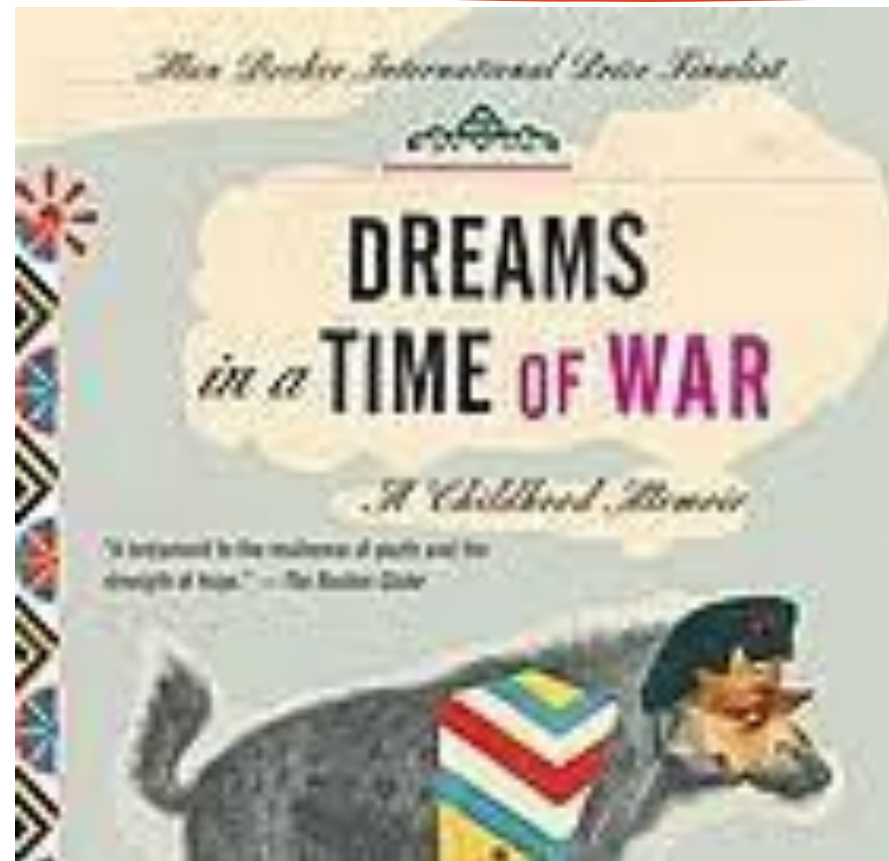
- ▶ This can also be places under social and affective meaning.
- ▶ Here, power play.
- ▶ Who can give directions?
- ▶ Who can be given directions?

PHATIC FUNCTION

- ▶ Derived from Malinowski's 'phatic communion'
- ▶ It means the function of keeping communication lines open.
- ▶ Maintaining social relationships by using language for small talk and everyday interactions.
- ▶ Talking about weather, politics and other social issues.
- ▶ The cover shown next is from Prof. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o' memoir: *Dreams in a time of war: A memoir*

Ngugi, T. (2010). *Dreams in a time of war: A memoir*. USA: Pantheon (Cover)

Phatic information



PHATIC FUNCTION

- ▶ Someone reading this text may receive messages such as:
- ▶ 'I like Ngugi'
- ▶ And this will open a long communication:
- ▶ What matters is the feel that one speaks; not so much what one says.
- ▶ It is important for maintaining the equilibrium of society.
- ▶ In Halliday's terms, this is the interpersonal function

PHATIC MEANING

- ▶ To show that our intentions are friendly, we engage in 'small talk:
- ▶ How is your family?
- ▶ How is the baby doing?
- ▶ Do you harvest water?
- ▶ The speaker here is not actively seeking for information but maintaining social relations.
- ▶ These questions are often empty of meaning; they are meant to fill the communication hiatus.

PHATIC FUNCTION

- ▶ Competence demands that when we are engaged in communication with strangers, we use inoffensive remarks.
- ▶ Hence, one needs a repertoire of such terms
- ▶ Assertions must be uncontroversial
- ▶ Note: Silence can be devastating to good relations,
- ▶ A: Hi
- ▶ B: No reply

PHATIC FUNCTION

- ▶ This can cause anxiety and A will feel unrewarded.
- ▶ This is not just a neutral response
- ▶ Can be interpreted as hostile.
- ▶ In public sphere, we experience politicians making utterances that may not mean much conceptually.
- ▶ Such utterances are attempts to maintaining communication channels
- ▶ (i.e. satisfy the expectations of mass media and the public)
- ▶ They say that phatic language is used to substitute for physical activities such as stroking.

AESTHETIC FUNCTION

- ▶ Also referred to as the poetic function
- ▶ The use of language for artistic and creative purposes:
- ▶ poetry,
- ▶ storytelling,
- ▶ fiction
- ▶ Literature
- ▶ Music
- ▶ Movies

AESTHETIC FUNCTION

- ▶ implementation of this function depends on specific cultural norms.
- ▶ Write a short poem and identify the aesthetics in it:
- ▶ You may find yourself employing brevity
- ▶ Also using metaphors and other styles
- ▶ It also may take the form of stanzas.

AESTHETIC FUNCTION

- ▶ Some aesthetic forms end up being informational, expressive and even directive.
- ▶ Consider the use of cartoons, this stems from Fine Arts and as an aesthetic form, it plays various functions as:
 - ▶ Warning
 - ▶ Satire
 - ▶ Educating
 - ▶ Advertising and marketing
 - ▶ All these are important functions in the society.

AESTHETIC FUNCTION

- ▶ This function is considered as language communicating at full stretch.
- ▶ All levels of types of meaning are open to use.
- ▶ You find both the 'poet' or any author and the reader/ audience bring a heightened sensitivity to meaning
- ▶ This is to bear on the act of communication

AESTHETIC

- ▶ the use of language for the sake of the linguistic artifact itself, and for no purpose
- ▶ This aesthetic function can have at least as much to do with conceptual as with affective meaning”

Summary

- ▶ Five functions
- ▶ Informational- conveying information
- ▶ Expressive- expressing the speaker's or writer's feelings and attitudes
- ▶ Directive- directing or influencing the behavior of others
- ▶ Aesthetic- creating an artistic effect
- ▶ Phatic- maintaining social bonds.

References

- ▶ Halliday.M.A.K & Matthiessen, M.I.M (2014). *Halliday's introduction to functional grammar*. London: Routledge.
- ▶ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/deafness-and-hearing-loss> (Retrieved on 17/04/2024)
- ▶ Leech, G. (1985). *Semantics: The study of meaning*. Britain: Chaucer Press.
- ▶ Ngugi, T. (2010). *Dreams in a time of war: A memoir*. USA: Pantheon: