WORDS, MEANINGS AND SEMANTIC STRUCTURES

Tatiana IAȚCU

Abstract

The article deals with the main elements of language, words, meanings, deep structure and surface structure, their influence on one another and the connections they have in giving sense to a text or speech.

Keywords: word, meaning, deep structure, surface structure

Introduction

The first to attempt a formulation of a science of signs was Michel Bréal who published *Essai de sémantique* in 1897. He was interested in the influence of usage on the evolution of words. Present-day semantic theory has developed largely from the later theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, who emphasized synchronic system and not diachronic evolution and was a founder of the science of semiotics, which deals with signs in general, whether linguistic or not. Structuralism, in his view, is both an anthropological discipline that examines social cultures in terms of their signs and a mode of approaching to literature that concentrates less on meaning. He adds that this is the most difficult part of the language study, harder than the way sign relates to sign within a literary structure.

Language operations depend on structures. They depend on an understanding of the internal structure of a sentence, rather than on a number of elements involved. The semantic representation of a sentence as a whole is derived from the syntactic deep structure by certain universal operations that combine the meanings of the lexical elements of a deep structure according to the relevant syntactic relations. In principle, the meaning of a sentence can be derived in a definite form on the basis of the meaning of its words and its syntactic deep structure. This derived meaning represents the most important properties of its cognitive content widely accepted.

Words

According to the dictionary (McArthur, 1996: 1024), word in English is a cognate with the German *Wort*, the Greek *(w)eírein*, the Latin *verbum* and the Sanskrit *vrátam* and is a fundamental term of language. It is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* of 1989 under three headings: (1) speech, utterance and verbal expression, (2) an element of speech and (3) phrases.

From a historical point of view, the earliest studies concerning words were made in ancient Greece. Latin words were studied later and in terms of the Greek ones and the models of analysis were adapted to fit a second language. All the other methods have evolved up to the present day from these first ways of grammatical analyses. Before the study of word, *name* was a more clearly defined concept in old Greece, which was

BDD-A2787 © 2010 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:50 UTC)

associated with speech, "apparently the meaning of *wer*, the Indo-European root underlying Latin *verbum*, Sanskrit *vrátam,* and English *word."* (McArthur, 1996: 1025)

Traditional grammar assigns words to grammatical categories taking into account their semantic, morphological and syntactic properties. Semantic or notional criteria classify words according to what they mean, that is, verbs denote actions and states, nouns denote entities, adjectives denote states and qualities, adverbs denote ways of achieving something, prepositions denote location. But, as Radford (2006) states, "[...] semantically based criteria must be used with care: for example, *assassination* denotes an action but is a noun, not a verb; *illness* denotes a state but is a noun, not an adjective; in *fast food*, the word *fast* denotes the manner in which the food is prepared but is an adjective, not an adverb; and *Cambridge* denotes a location but is a noun, not a preposition." (33)

This idea can also be found in Worrall Brown & Brown (1963) who state that all grammatical symbols have one thing in common: they do not represent directly the ideas they stand for. On the contrary, they seem to operate like a system of shorthand, or like a code, for which the study of grammar provides a cipher or key: walk + -ed, or verb + particle for phrasal verbs. Worrall Brown gives an example to support this statement, first taking each segment of the sentence separate, 1. Henry; 2. House; 3. Build; 4. Old. When we want to express the following additional ideas: that *old* qualifies our idea of the man *Henry*; that *build* expresses an assertion that is, the builder is Henry; that the action of building is continuing at the present time; that the result of the building is the *house*; that there is only one house; and that a completed statement is intended, the resulting sentence would be, *Old Henry is building a house.* Grammar makes it possible to condense these complex ideas into six words using the code of grammatical "signs". (Worrall Brown, Dona & Brown, Wallace C., 1963: 211)

Even within a comparatively simple system of signs, we may have difficulties in stating the rules by which signs and sign compounds are related to meanings. No available "operators" from already settled formal systems such as the propositional calculus or set theory seem to show the combinatorial process in an adequate way.

Meanings

Leonard Bloomfield regarded meaning as a weak point in language study and believed that it could be entirely stated in behaviourist terms. Following the Polish anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski, J. R. Firth argued that context of situation was an important level of linguistic analysis alongside syntax, collocation, morphology, phonology, and phonetics, all making a contribution to linguistic meaning in a broad sense. Nevertheless, there have been few attempts to make use of this concept. Many scholars have excluded reference from semantics. In transformational-generative grammar, the semantic component is entirely stated in terms of sense or semantic components. Other linguists have argued for a truth-conditional approach to semantics,

BDD-A2787 © 2010 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:50 UTC)

in which the meaning of *bachelor* as 'unmarried man' is shown by the fact that *if X is an unmarried man is true*, then *X is a bachelor* is also true.

The word *meaning* appeared in the Old English vocabulary in the 13th century as *mænan*, 'to have in mind, intend, signify'. It is the general meaning or message conveyed by words, phrases, sentences, signs, symbols, etc. It also means signification, sense, and interpretation. The definition provided by *The Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language* is what a speaker or writer intends. (McArthur, 1996: 587)

Changes in meaning cannot be systematically accounted for because there are no regular laws or large-scale trends as they are found in phonology or in grammar. When a word develops a new meaning, it can sometimes lose the old one. Thus the word *wan* (Old English *wann*) at first meant 'dark', or even 'black', and was applied, for example, to a raven and to night. In late Middle English it developed its modern sense of 'pale'. This change of meaning seems to have taken place on one hand through the application of the word to human faces discoloured by disease, and on the other, through its use to describe the colour of lead. From meaning 'darkened by disease' it came to mean 'livid', the colour of a person's face when they are ill, and thus 'pale'. When one word has two such contradictory meanings as 'dark' and 'pale', they can be easily confused, and it is natural that one of them dies out. The meaning 'dark' was last recorded in the 16th century.

The willingness to create new words is an essential feature of the natural development of a language, as well as to forget the origin of a name, to help drop the old associations and suggestions which belonged to it etymologically. Investing it with a new set is what makes a language live. "There is no intrinsic meaning to any word. A word means what the speech community makes it mean, and if people use the word *aggravate* in the sense of *annoy*, than it means 'annoy'." (Barber 1965: 239)

Many British and American linguists wonder about their mother tongue and the way meaning is expressed in different phrases. Phrasal verbs are usually referred to in such cases, as in the examples given by Lederer:

"If *uplift* is the same as *lift up*, why are *upset* and *set up* opposite in meaning? Why is that when I *wind up* my watch, I start it, but when I *wind up* this essay, I shall end it? How can expressions like "I'm mad about my flat", "No football coaches allowed" and "I'll come by in the morning and *knock* you *up*" convey such different messages in two countries that purport to speak English?

"I lucked out." To *luck out* sounds as if you're out of luck. Don't you mean I *lucked in*?" (1989: 22)

Structures

The *grammar* of a language is a system of rules that determines a certain pairing of sound and meaning. It consists of a *syntactic component*, *a semantic component*, and a *phonological component*. The syntactic component defines a certain (infinite) class of abstract objects (D, S) where D is a deep structure and S a surface structure. The deep structure contains all information relevant to semantic interpretation; the surface structure, all information

BDD-A2787 © 2010 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:50 UTC)

relevant to phonetic interpretation. The semantic and phonological interpretations are purely interpretative. The former assigns semantic interpretations to deep structures; the latter assigns phonetic interpretations to surface structures. Thus the grammar as a whole relates semantic and phonetic interpretations, the association being mediated by the rules of the syntactic component that define paired deep and surface structures. (Chomsky, 1972: 125)

The semantic features constitute a "dictionary definition". Thus transformations not only convert a deep structure to a surface structure, but they also have a "filtering effect", ruling out certain potential deep structures as not well-formed. The investigation of referential opacity has turned up a great number of examples illustrating how replacement of one expression by another changes meaning, even when the semantic connection between the two is very close.

Chomsky has provided the theoretical basis of what is termed "transformational-generative grammar" – or just "transformational grammar" – which seems to derive from a view held as far back as the Middle Ages. It states that all languages have broadly the same sort of grammar. It means that a statement made in ancient Sanskrit and one made in modern Chinese both have notions like substantive categories (parts of speech) and formal categories (subject and predicate). A native speaker acquires a grammar on the basis of very restricted evidence; the grammar has empirical consequences that extend beyond the evidence. On one hand, the phenomena with which the grammar deals are explained by the rules of the grammar itself and the interaction of these rules. On the other hand, at a deeper level, these same phenomena are explained by the principles that determine the selection of the grammar on the basis of the restricted evidence available to the person who has acquire knowledge of the language, who has constructed for himself this particular grammar. The principles that determine the form of grammar and that select a grammar of the appropriate form on the basis of certain data constitute a subject that might be termed "universal grammar"/UG. The study of universal grammar, so understood, is a study of the nature of human intellectual capacities. It tries to formulate the necessary and sufficient conditions that a system must meet to qualify as a potential human language. Knowledge of a language – "linguistic competence", in the technical sense – involves a mastery of these grammatical processes.

Chomsky, and later in the century Steven Pinker in his book *The language Instinct*, concludes that language learning has little to do with exceptional intelligence, and what seems so complex is really quite simple – or else the rules of language are built into the human brain, as much a human endowment as the instinct of self-preservation.

Linguistic competence is achieved when a speaker has mastered the set of rules by which language is generated. To learn a language is not to memorize vocabulary but to acquire a set of rules. We can do this when we have the rules. So far no rules have been written about the formation of words, for example with nouns. Nobody can tell us why we have *childhood*, *boldness*, and *cowardice*; why we *light up a cigarette* and not *light it on*, and why we *put it out* and not *put it off*. To the transformational grammarian, a complete

BDD-A2787 © 2010 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:50 UTC)

grammar of a certain language is the full corpus of operational procedures needed for producing all the acceptable sentences of that language. This grammar would be a copy, or rather a model, of the "grammar mechanism" already built into the human organism. (Burgess, 1992: 44)

Chomsky maintains that the boundaries between semantics and cognition remains largely unexplored, and argues that "[…] part of the semantic component of a grammar must be a characterization of filed properties that is outside the lexicon. By means of transformations, the phrase-structure grammar can be expanded to cover all combinations, rearrangements, additions, and deletions of the basic sentence". (in Burgess, 1992: 45-46)

Chomsky prefers "deep structure", to which he opposes "surface structure" – meaning the superficial divergences that mask the basic identity. Deep structures are now argued about a great deal. Chomsky said that "John gave a book to Bill" and "Bill was given a book by John", being synonymous statements, shared a common deep structure. But "Bill received a book from John" clearly means the same as those two and yet, because of the lexical, or verbal, difference ("receive" not "give" – active or passive), cannot be paired with either in terms of deep structure. Now Chomsky's successors are saying that it is not a matter of the word but of the meaning, or, to be exact, of generative semantics. But how about "John killed Bill" and "John caused Bill to die"? That's why we have relative synonyms – to express different shades of the same thing, different points of view, and different meanings after all.

The deep structure is related to the surface structure by certain mental operations – in modern terminology, by grammatical transformations. Each language can be regarded as a particular relation between sound and meaning. The grammar of a language must contain a system of rules that characterizes deep and surface structures and the transformational relation between them, and thus there is an infinite domain of paired deep and surface structures, the speaker making infinite use of finite means.

One major problem is posed by the fact that the surface structure generally gives very little indication in itself of the meaning of the sentence. There are, for example, numerous sentences that are ambiguous in some way that is not indicated by the surface structure. Chomsky points this with the example,

I disapprove of John's drinking, which can refer either to the fact of John's drinking or to its character. He solves this ambiguity in different ways, *I disapprove of John's drinking the beer*, and *I disapprove of John's excessive drinking*. He concludes that the surface structure is often misleading and uninformative and that our knowledge of language involves properties of a much more abstract nature, not indicated directly in the surface structure. He also remarks that the study of universal semantics has barely advanced since the medieval period. In general, apart from the simplest examples, the surface structures of sentences are very different from their deep structures. (Chomsky, 1972: 37)

The grammar of English generates, for each sentence, a deep structure, and contains rules showing how this deep structure is related to a surface structure. Deep

BDD-A2787 © 2010 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:50 UTC)

structures, which are often quite abstract, exist and play a very important role in the grammatical processes and are used in producing and interpreting sentences. Such facts, then, support the hypothesis that deep structures of the sort postulated in transformational-generative grammar are real mental structures. These deep structures, along with transformational rules that relate them to surface structures and the rules relating deep and surface structures to representations of sound and meaning, are the rules that have been mastered by the person who has learned a language. They constitute his/her knowledge of the language; they are put to use when he/she speaks and understands. Sometimes the deep structure may be remote from the surface form.

Conclusion

Semantic rules are necessary to establish correspondences between sign compounds on the one hand, and significations on the other. Pragmatic rules are used when one focuses upon signs compounds as a means to an end, i.e., when one expands the scope of inquiry beyond the set of sign itself and explores conditions and effects of usage. The search for explanatory theories must begin with an attempt to determine these systems of rules and to reveal the principles that govern them. (Rommetveit, 1968: 26)

It is usually assumed that the semantic interpretation of a sentence is determined by universal, language-independent principles from the concepts comprised in the utterance and the manner in which they are grammatically related (for example, as subject – predicate).

References

Barber, L. C. (1965) *The Story of Speech and Language*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co.

Burgess, Anthony (1992) *A Mouthful of Air. Language, Languages...Especially English*. New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc.

Chomsky, Noah (1972) *Language and Mind*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.

Lederer, R. (1989) *Crazy English. The Ultimate Joy Ride through Our language*. New York: Pocket Books

McArthur, Tom (1996) *The Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Radford, Andrew (2006) *Minimalist Syntax*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Rommetveit, R. (1968) *Words, Meanings, and Messages*. New York: Academic Press

Worrall Brown, Dona & Brown, Wallace C. (1963) "Grammatical Distribution" (in *Essays on Language and Usage* Leonard F. Dean & Kenneth G. Wilson Eds. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 217-222)

BDD-A2787 © 2010 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:04:50 UTC)