Nicoleta Florina MINCĂ, University of Piteşti

VARIOUS APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF MEANING

If we agree that meaning cannot be identified with the object designated by the sign, we have to define meaning in terms of the notion, the concept or the mental image of the object or situation in reality as reflected in man's mind. Both traditional and modern English semantic studies have mainly used a conceptual definition of meaning taking into account that, for a correct understanding of meaning, it is necessary to relate it to that reflection in our minds of the general characteristics of objects and phenomena. Any study of meaning which presupposes the close interrelationship between language and thought cannot ignore or elude this aspect of language meaning.

For most linguists, denotation represents the cognitive or communicative aspect of meaning, and denotative meaning, which is to a certain extent equivalent to extensional meaning, accounts for the relationship between the linguistic sign and its denotatum. Denotation is regarded as neutral since its function is only to convey the informational load carried by a word. On the other hand, the connotative aspects of meaning are subjective springing from the personal experiences which each speaker has had of a given word as well as from the attitude he wants to emphasize towards what he is to express or towards the person he is speaking to.

It is quite difficult to draw a clear line between denotation and connotation in meaning analysis. This is due to the fact that elements of connotation are often drawn into what is usually referred to as the basic, denotative meaning. This is why it cannot be maintained that dictionaries give only denotative meanings while the connotative meanings are to be encountered in the actual uses of words.

Meaning is so complex and there are so many factors involved in it that a complete definition of meaning is practically impossible. Meaning can be discussed considering a plurality of levels and of dimensions characteristic of the content side of linguistic signs. First, there is a *semantic* dimension, which covers the denotatum of the sign including also information as to how the denotatum is actually referred to, there is also a *logical* dimension, which covers the information conveyed by the linguistic expression on the denotatum, including a judgement of it, and, thirdly, there is a *pragmatic* dimension, which defines the purpose of the expression. Finally, the *structural* dimension covers the structure of linguistic expressions, the complex network of relationships among its component elements, as well as between it and other expressions in the language.

Resuming the ancient '*physei-thesei*' dispute, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure stated that "the linguistic sign is ***arbitrary***", meaning that there is no direct relationship between the sound sequence, or the written representation (*le signifiant)* and the "idea" expressed by it (*le signifié)*[1]. There are cases when the signified decisively influences the form of words (i. e. their signifying side), and thus they partially contradict the concept of the arbitrary character of linguistic signs. Hence, there must be a necessary signifié attached to a significant for a linguistic sign to discharge its signifying function. But there are numerous words in all languages in which a special correlation may be said to exist between meaning and sound. These words include interjections and onomatopoeic words which are imitative of non-linguistic sounds that can somehow be associated with certain meanings, in the sense that they suggest them.

Linguistic signs are supposed to be more or less motivated to the extent to which their inner organization is not altogether accidental. Absolute motivation includes language signs whose sound structure reproduces certain features of their content. Because of the resemblance between their significant and their signifié, these signs are of an iconic or indexic nature in the typology of semiotic signs. Relative motivation involves a larger

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number of words in the language than absolute motivation. In this case, it is not the sounds which somehow evoke the meaning. The meaning of such words is the result of the analysis of the smaller linguistic signs which are included in them.

Stephen Ullmann suggested several criteria of semantic structure which made him characterize English as a "lexical language"[2], as opposed to French which is a more "grammatical"one: the number of arbitrary and motivated words in the vocabulary; the number of particular and generic terms; the use of special devices to heighten the emotive impact of words. Three other criteria are based on multiple meaning (patterns of synonymy, the relative frequency of polysemy, and the incidence of homonymy) and a final one evaluates the extent to which words depend on context for the clarification of their meaning.

Although structuralism in linguistics should be connected to structuralism in other sciences, the fact that structuralist ideas were developed in various linguistic circles accounting for the variety of structuralist approaches to the study of language shows that structuralism should be regarded as a result of its inner laws of development. However, though structuralism has revolutionized the study of language, it has neglected the study of meaning. In fact, we shouldn't assert that structuralism has left the study of meaning completely unaffected. Structuralist linguists have always put forward insightful hypotheses regarding language meaning analysis, thus making significant contributions to the progress of semantics.

A difficulty which partly explains the "slow" progress of structural research in semantics comes out from the vague and fluid nature of meaning. The existence of semantic series and the organization of words into semantic fields, however vague they might seem, justify a structural approach to the study of the lexicon. Such series are usually represented by kinship terms and a few other lexical elements that can be said to reveal a structural organization. The structural organization of the vocabulary forms a particular kind of system, much more complex as far as its elements are concerned and much more dynamic in its evolution.

The insistence on discriminating what is relevant from what is irrelevant in the study of meaning has led to attempts at applying phonological methods to the study of meaning. According to glossematics there is an underlying isomorphism between the expression and content levels of language. Ferdinand de Saussure made a distinction between *signification* and *sense*, that can also be analysed in terms of another structuralist dichotomy: invariant/ variant [3]. Significations represent invariant units while the sense consists of its variants. There is a commutation relation between significations as invariants and a substitution one between senses, as variants. Thus, in English, *hand* and *arm* are invariants, while in Romanian, we may discover the existence of three invariant terms operating in the same area of meaning: *mână, braț, palmă.*

Significations as invariants are materialized into senses as their variants. Since signification stands for content form alone, it is no more semantic than any other aspects of content form which is dealt with by grammar. Therefore, only a theory of sense could be the object of study of semantics as the science of meaning. If we want to emphasize the basic isomorphism between expression and content, we should point out that there are some important differences between the two language levels. The most important one is that while the expression level of language implies sequentiality, a development in time (in the case of spoken language) or space (in the case of written language), its content level is characterized by simultaneity.

The meanings of a word are structured as forming microsystems , as opposed to the entire vocabulary which represents the lexical macrosystem. It is well-known that the meanings of a lexical element display some levels of structure: a semantic constant (the highest level of abstraction), the meanings that are grouped around it, and the level of speech. Componential analysis is one of the most important developments in semantics, based on the isomorphism between language expression and content [4]. Componential analysis assumes that all meanings can be further analysed into distructive semantic

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features, called *semes, semantic components* or *semantic primitives*, etc., as the ultimate components of meaning. The set of kinship terms was probably among the first lexical subsystems to be submitted to componential analysis. If one has the items:

father, 2. mother, 3. son, 4. daughter, 5. uncle, 6. aunt, 7. nephew, 8. niece

he/she can arrive at a number of semantic features (semes) by examining the relations obtaining among them. For instance, opposing 1, 3, 5, 7 to 2, 4, 6, 8, the feature of gender will be uncovered. Similarly, we may oppose 1, 2, 5, 6 to 3, 4, 7, 8 and arrive at the ''generation'' seme with two distinctions: older generation and younger generation.

The "meaning postulates" are certain expressions in a formalized system used to describe the semantic structure of a language, expressing certain compatibilities or incompatibilities between the signs of the respective system. According to the theory of meaning postulates, the meaning of lexical items will be defined by the set of all meaning postulates associated with it. The semantic rules could have the form:

stallion →*male* and *adult; mare*→*female* and *adult; colt* or *filly*→not *adult.*

The meaning of *filly,* for example, can be defined in terms of all the possible meaning postulates associated with it. The sentences based on these meaning postulates are true by virtue of their syntactic form and the meaning of the words in them:

A filly is female and young.
A filly or a colt are young.
A filly is not male.
A filly is a female, young horse.

Meaning postulates theory has the advantage of including in the semantic description data on the system of knowledge shared by a given language community on the extralinguistic universe. The ability of speakers to analyse sentences into normal and anomalous ones from a semantic point of view, could be considered to be equally the result of their knowledge of the language and of the world.

Sydney Lamb's stratificational theory of language is based on the idea that there is a structuralization of meaning characteristic of all languages. While "pre-stratificational" linguistics tried to solve the problem of meaning mainly by relating "words" directly to their *significata*, the stratificational approach assumes the insertion of a new stratum, "sememics", between language and the outside world, which could delimit what is linguistically relevant on the content level of language from what is not [5].

The sememic stratum is inserted by Lamb between the lexemic and the semantic strata. Its elementary unit is the "semon" and its relational unit to the next higher stratum is the "sememe". The semon is the minimal unit of the semantic stratum such that its components are not representations of the components of the semantic stratum. A sememe is the basic tactic unit of the sememic stratum. While sememes may be accounted for by general construction rules, the combination of semons, up to the tactic level of sememes must be listed individually for each sememe. Lamb found out that the existence of the sememic stratum could be exemplified by the representation relation between the lexemic stratum and the sememic stratum [6].

When sememes on the higher, sememic stratum, are connected to lexemes on the lower, lexemic stratum, the relationship is not always one to one. A sememe is quite often connected to several lexemes so, in that manner, diversification accounts for synonymy in language. Neutralization is the process of connecting a lexeme upwards to several sememes on the sememic stratum. In that manner it accounts for polysemy. Diversification and neutralization remind of the method used by many semanticists to study meaning along two dimensions: from a linguistic form to denotata and significata- the semasiological direction-

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which accounts for polysemy and, from denotata and significata to a linguistic form- the onomasiological direction- which accounts for synonymy.

Componential analysis revealed as the ability to analyse sememes into semons, is the only procedure by means of which such paradigmatic relations as synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, etc. can be accounted for. The task of componential analysis is to identify a list of semons which are sufficient for the definition of sememes. Semons are not to be identified with the characteristic features of referents (objects, events), but there must be a parallelism between the two as the only explanation of the referential function of language signs. This does not destroy the nature of semons, which are linguistic entities and not conceptual ones. Semons like:

male, female, young, adult,

identified by componential analysis of a number of lexemic signs:

man, woman, boy, girl, horse, mare, sheep, ram, lamb, etc.,

are paralleled by conceptual entities such as:

maleness, femaleness, adulthood, youth, etc.

Although the number of possible characteristics of objects is unlimited, the number of semons is relatively small, because their function is to keep sememes apart and not to give descriptions of objects. It is quite arbitrary what extralinguistic characteristics of referents are analysed into linguistic semons and this explains the linguistic relativism hypothesis.

The various relations among words involve the polysemy of most words in the language, and the opposite case of synonymy when several words have the same meaning and the possibility of arranging words in pairs on account of their expressing opposite meanings – antonymy. Semanticists also concern with the possibility of analyzing the meaning of words into component elements of meaning which are shared by a set of words in various combinations characteristic of each item in the text. An aspect of semantic studies refers to the analysis of compounds into meanings which are not simply the sum of the meanings of the component words.

Semantics aims at correcting the "inconsistencies" of a language as well as their tendency to "simplify" the complex nature of reality. A clear definition of the meaning (or meanings) of a word is said to contribute to removing the rigidity and dogmatism of language and to make up for the lack of emotional balance among people which is ultimately due to language.

NOTES

[1] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale,* Paris, Payot, p. 86-89
[2] Stephen Ullmann, *Semantics. An Introduction to the Science of Meaning,* Oxford, Blackwell, p. 126
[3] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale,* Paris, Payot, p. 97
[4] Charles Fillmore, *Form and Meaning in Language,* Standford, CSLI Publications, p. 134-136
[5] Sydney M. Lamb, *Outline of Stratificational Grammar,* Washington D.C., Georgetown University Press, p. 193-204
[6] Sydney M. Lamb, *Outline of Stratificational Grammar,* Washington D.C., Georgetown University Press, p. 205

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ABSTRACT
Meaning can be discussed considering a plurality of levels and starting from various assumptions. The existence of semantic series and the organization of words into semantic fields justify a structural approach to the study of the lexicon. The insistence on discriminating what is relevant from what is irrelevant in the study of meaning has led to attempts at applying phonological methods to the study of meaning. Componential analysis assumes that all meanings can be further analysed into destructive semantic features as the ultimate components of meaning. The meaning postulates represent certain expressions in a formalized system used to describe the semantic structure of the language, expressing certain compatibilities or incompatibilities between the signs of the respective system. While "pre-stratificational" linguistics tries to solve the problem of meaning mainly by relating "words" directly to their significata, the stratificational approach delimits what is linguistically relevant on the content level of language from what is not.

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