DENOTATION AND CONNOTATION: ARGUMENT FOR THE VARIABILITY OF LINGUISTIC MEANING

ERIN, ADEWUMI ANTHONY

DAJANG, POLYCARP NAANMA
Department of Linguistics & Nigerian Languages,
University of Jos,
Jos, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper investigates two important aspects of meaning: denotation and connotation. It attempts to show how the meaning of linguistic expressions can be investigated from these two seemingly opposing points of view in meaning analysis. The paper ultimately argues for a position where meaning is seen as a variable factor, rather than a fixed one, with the purely semantic notion of denotation and the pragmatic one of connotation used as mutually supportive indices of meaning.

Introduction

Semantics is looked at as the study of meaning in language, but what exactly does 'meaning' mean? This is a fundamental issue that has been at the forefront of semantic and philosophical study for ages, and yet no satisfactory answer that seems to satisfy all the queries has been discovered. Crystal (2010) submits that the term 'semantics' did not come to be widely used until the twentieth century, although the subject it represents is very old, reaching back to the writings of Plato and Aristotle, and attracting the special interests of philosophers, logicians and linguists. Crystal suggests that the linguistic approach to semantics 'aims to study the properties of meaning in a systematic and objective way, with reference to as wide a range

of utterances and languages as possible' (Crystal, 2010: 104). In an important early book on the subject of meaning, Ogden and Richards (1923) distinguished 16 different meanings of 'mean'/ 'meaning' , among which include:

i) John means ('intends') to write.

ii) A green light means ('indicates') go'.

iii) Health means ('has utmost importance') everything.

iv) His look was full of meaning ('special import').

v) What is the meaning ('point/purpose') of life?

vi) What does 'capitalist' mean ('convey') to you?

vii) What does 'cornea' mean ('refer to in the world')?

It is the last kind of use that comes closest to the focus of linguistic semantics; but even this is a special kind of enquiry. The question asks for a definition, which is a somewhat unusual form of reply found more in dictionaries than in everyday speech that involves the translation of the difficult word into 'easier' words. Others, provided by Akmajian, Demers, Farmer and Harnish (2001 : 228), are the following:

viii) That was no mean ('insignificant') accomplishment.

ix) This will mean ('result in') the end of our regime.

x) His losing his job means ('implies') that he will have to look again.

xi) Those clouds mean ('are a sign of) rain.

xii) Keep Off the Grass! This means ('refers to') you.

The study of the properties of definitions is an important part of semantics, but it is only a part of the aspect of linguistics. Of greater importance is the study of the way in which words and sentences convey meaning in everyday situations of speech and writing. This, by implication, leads to an important question: Is meaning

in language—any language ' I '—stable or variable? This paper argues in favour of the latter, demonstrating the position using the denotative and connotative aspects, or types, of meaning. Denotation and connotation are two principal methods of describing the meanings of words.

Meaning Variability

Crystal (1991 : 136) posits that the reason why meaning poses a big challenge has to do with the form in which the question is asked, which presupposes that the word 'meaning' has some kind of independent existence or reality and that everything referred to as meaning is similar, if not identical in nature (i.e., the presupposition of existence and homogeneity respectively). In the first instance, using analogies from other concepts, to say something has weight does not entail that weight on its own is an entity, but this simply indicates that a unit of measurement has been used to quantify that item. In the case of the presupposition of homogeneity, Crystal (2010: 106) gives a hypothetical situation in which he tries to describe the meaning of 'chair' to someone who does not know what it means. He believes that if he were to show a wooden chair to such an individual, there is nothing to stop such an individual from capturing the concept 'wooden' rather than 'chair'. Even for those of us who know what 'chair' means, the mental picture that we conjure when chair is mentioned might differ for different individuals. But this is only one part of the argument.

Generally, meaning fluctuates. A reason for the fluidity may be found within the word itself(where a word has several interpretations). (l) below, taken from Finegan CSI (2008: 174) demonstrates the position:

(1) **I saw her duck**.

The idea is that (l) is ambiguous, having different possible interpretations The word duck may be interpreted as a verb, meaning the act of bending over quickly to avoid being hit by something or someone. It may also be interpreted as a noun, meaning a kind of waterfowl. This, too, is only one level of the semantic variation associated with meaning. Another reason for meaning variation can be found outside of the word (where a word depends upon the context of use for interpretation). This is shown in (2) below:

(2) **You are a woman!**

This is somewhat similar to the 'context of situation' view in linguistic studies, which is a concept in Firthian linguistic theory deriving from the work of the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884—1942). In the theory, meaning is seen

as a multiple phenomenon, its various facets being relatable, on the one hand, to features of the external world, and on the other hand, to the different levels of linguistic analysis, such as phonetics, grammar and semantics. Context of situation refers to the whole set of external-world features considered to be relevant in the analysis of an utterance at these levels.

In (2) above, the possible interpretations include the denotative fact that the addressee is someone characterized as '+HUMAN +FEMALE +ADULT' as well as the connotative characterization of the addressee as being of 'weaker sex', or 'of being frail'. Situations like this have proven to be a challenge, especially for non-native users of the language in question. Ultimately, these are some of the problems that give rise to a lot of confusion when talking about meaning. In the next section, the denotative and connotative aspects of meaning that would help to shed some light on the authors' view concerning meaning variability are discussed.

Denotation

Denotation is widely assumed to be the central factor in linguistic communication. The denotation of a linguistic expression, according to Cruse (2006: 45) is 'that aspect of its meaning which is involved in its potential for use in making true statements about the world.' In other words, the denotative sense of a word, for example, is the word's conceptual properties. The denotative meaning of an expression is the literal meaning of that expression indicating the 'idea' or 'concept' to which it refers. The concept is a minimal unit of meaning which could be called a 'sememe' in the same way that a unit of sound could be called a 'phoneme' and is like the morpheme in its organisation. Just as the phoneme /b/ could be described as '+BILABIAL +VOICED +PLOSIVE', the word 'woman' may be described as '+HUMAN +FEMALE +ADULT'. Denotative meaning, in a nutshell, represents the minimal qualities that a concept must possess in order to be a distinguishable concept.

Denotation is synonymous with the primary, central, logical, cognitive or conceptual meaning of a word. It is the first, ordinary meaning listed in dictionaries, which is not affected by the context, or emotional overtones associated with the act of communication. There is an assumed shared

conceptual meaning of every word of a language. It is possible to express the denotative meaning of a word using contrastive semantic features. Such features indicate the attributes present and those that are absent. If a feature is present, it is specified as (+); if absent, it is (—). These contrastive features specifying the attributes of the words provide the necessary criteria for the correct use of words. The feature specifications for the words 'boy' and 'girl' are as follows:

(3)	Boy	Girl
	+HUMAN	+HUMAN
	+MALE	-MALE
	-ADULT	-ADULT

Larson (1984: 100) notes that denotative meaning is also called 'primary meaning', that is, the meaning suggested by the word when it is used alone. It is the first interpretation which a word will suggest to most people when the word is said in isolation. The denotation of a word is its agreed-upon sense—what it refers to, stands for, or designates—apart from the feeling it may call up. Basically, the aim of denotative meaning is to provide, for any given interpretation of a sentence, a configuration of abstract symbols which shows exactly what we need to know in order to distinguish that meaning from all other possible meanings in the language.

Connotation

According to Leech (1974: 40-41), connotation, or connotative meaning, is 'the communicative value an expression has by virtue of what it refers to, over and above its purely conceptual content'. This is the additional meaning that a concept carries. Apart from its logical or essential attributes, there is a further meaning attached to a word, which comes from its reference to other things in the world. For example, the denotative meaning of the word 'boy' is the concept '+HUMAN +MALE —ADULT'. To it may be added the concept of 'immaturity' or 'not ready for responsibility', which are the connotations or values associated with the concept. These connotations come into use over a period of time in a particular culture and can change over time, indicating that denotative meaning remains stable since it defines the essential attributes of a concept, while connotative meanings can change over time.

Furthermore, connotation contains elements of the conceptual meaning of a word and the individual's personal interpretation of what is communicated. That interpretation is based on the personal experience of the hearer. The implication of this is that connotation, or connotative meaning, varies with the experience of people in communication. It may also vary from society to society. Indeed there are symbols, especially in literature, which have different connotations in different cultures. For instance, in Nigeria, among the Hausa's the cricket (gyååréé) is associated with tricks, whereas among the Igbo's and the Yoruba's, it is the tortoise that has that attribute. In the Western world, it is the fox that is considered cunning. There are additional semantic features that are associated with connotative meaning. Thus, a great deal of the meaning of idioms and figurative expressions derive from

connotation.

Denotation and Connotation as Factors of Semantic Variability

The existence of denotation and connotation in linguistics seems to imply a discordant linguistic situation regarding meaning in language. But the view of the present authors is the contrary, suggesting that the interaction of the two concepts is one of complementary association. After all, when one sets out to seek the meaning of an expression (except if the expression stands in isolation, in which case a dictionary provides the range of interpretations according to the various senses available for that expression), one usually depends on the 'circumstances'—technically, the context—of usage of the expression in question to get the specific meaning intended by the particular user of the expression. This is what Crystal (2010: 106) captures in the following way:

…[To] say that words 'have meaning' means only that they are used in a certain way in a sentence ... meaning is studied by making detailed analyses of the way words and sentences are used in specific contexts . . . Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889—1951), in particular, stressed ... in his dictum: 'the meaning of a word is its use in the language.

We espouse the position that denotation represents the explicit or referential meaning of a sign. It refers to the literal meaning of a word, the 'dictionary definition.' Connotation, on the other hand, represents the various social overtones, cultural implications, or emotional meanings associated with a sign. For example, 'Hollywood' denotes an area of Los Angeles known worldwide as the center of the American movie industry. At the same time, 'Hollywood' connotes such things as glitz, glamour, tinsel, celebrity, and dreams of stardom. Again, if one looks up snake in a dictionary, it will be discovered that (one of) its denotative meaning(s) is 'any of numerous scaly, legless, sometimes venomous reptiles having a long, tapering, cylindrical body and found in Inost tropical and temperate regions.' The connotations for snake, however, may include evil or danger. Also, if you were to look up house and home in a dictionary, you would find that both words have approximately the same meaning of 'a dwelling place.' However, the speaker in the sentence above suggests that home has an additional meaning. Aside from the strict dictionary definition, or denotation, many people associate such things as comfort, love, security, or privacy, with a home, but do not necessarily make the same associations with a house. That is perhaps why real estate advertisers employ the word 'home' more frequently than they do 'house'. In fact, the line, "You may live in a house, but we live in a home" is popular among realtors. So, although both 'house' and 'home' have the same denotation, 'home' also has many connotations. It has the various feelings, images, and memories that surround it to make up its connotation. Connotation and denotation are, therefore, not two separate 'things', or signs. They are two aspects, or elements, of a sign, and the denotative meanings of a word exist together in a complementary manner with its connotative meanings, with the overall aim of providing a descriptively and explanatorily adequate interpretation of the word (its meaning).

Language is symbolic in the sense that we use it to represent ideas, objects, and feelings. But language is only representative, so one can interpret any given statement in more than one way. Sometimes the difference is simply a literal versus figurative interpretation divide. Denotation and connotation are

two other tools one can employ to discern the meaning of an unfamiliar term. For a writer (or speaker) to express himself precisely, he must understand both the denotations and connotations of words, and use that understanding to convey to the reader (or hearer) his exact intent. Likewise for the reader (or hearer) who must also understand both the denotations and connotations of words in order to ensure sufficient understanding of the meanings of expressions used by the writer (or speaker). This is an important criterion because if, for example, a writer wants his readers to fully grasp his meaning, he must use words according to their established denotations to avoid meaning something he did not intend and end up confusing the reader. An example of a misused word is represented in (4):

(4) John's dissent was gradual and hesitating.

This is a typical example of homonym confusion—and, subsequently, denotation confusion. Although a dissent (disagreement) may be gradual and hesitating, the most likely denotation is that of descent (travel downward), which makes a lot more sense to the reader. However, this is by no means a straightforward matter, because even with the apparent objectivity of a denotative definition, one may still encounter certain challenges on the conceptual level, because a word can have multiple denotations. For example, Riebs and Reeves (2004:203) point out the following:

> *The dictionary lists more than 20 distinct meanings for low. As a result, you can say, 'A low wall bordered the field', and you can also say, 'Alex was feeling low today'. The same word, used in two different contexts, has two distinctly different meanings. This ambiguity of word meanings can provide some challenge in understanding new words. Considering that, the solution lies in ensuring that when one reads he understands both denotation and context to get the precise meaning of words as they are used.*

That said, it is important to separate denotation from connotation because while one might assume that a word's denotation is fully intended, whether a word's connotations are intended is much more difficult to determine. This is because, as mentioned earlier, connotations are often emotional in nature, and thus if they are intended, it may be for the purpose of

swaying a person's emotional reactions rather than the logical evaluation of an argument. If there are misunderstandings about how a person is using a word in a particular debate, a primary source of that misunderstanding might lie in the word's connotations: people might be seeing something not intended or the speaker may be intending something people do not see. In constructing arguments, therefore, it is often a good idea to not merely consider what one's words denote, but also what they connote. The relationship between words and meanings is extremely complicated, as words do not have single, simple meanings, but multiple, variable meanings. Although dictionaries might be useful in providing certain basic explanations of common words, they do not, by and large, reflect accurately enough the meaning and variations in meaning of words in current use in everyday spoken language. And even when they are useful, they presuppose that the reader is already familiar with all the words used in the definition, which eventually appear in other definitions. That is where connotation readily complements denotation in an attempt to complete the interpretation process. Indeed, in literary works, it is common practice with writers to deviate from the denotative, dictionary meanings of words to create fresher ideas and images. Such deviations from the literal meanings are facilitated by the use of figurative language, or literary devices such as metaphors, similes, personifications, hyperboles, understatements, paradoxes, puns, etc. Even in our daily conversation, we diverge from the dictionary meanings, with recourse to connotative or associated meanings of words, in order to accurately convey our message. This is made possible by not just the existence, but the association, of denotation and connotation. In the same vein, the reverse is equally true, as connotation alone is inadequate in constantly determining the meaning of whole expressions. The examples in (5) below capture some common deviations from denotative meanings of words that we experience in our day to day life:

'(5) dog' is used to suggest shamelessness, or an ugly face.

'dove' is used to suggest peace or gentility.

'home' is used to suggest family, comfort and security.

'politician' has a negative connotation of a wicked and insincere person.

'pushy' refers to someone loud-mouthed, irritating and forceful.

'mom' and 'dad', when used instead of 'mother' and 'father', suggest loving parents.

Additionally, an analysis of a couple of examples from literature will suffice to demonstrate the use of denotation and connotation by writers. And excerpt in (6) below, from Robert Frost's poem Mending Wall, in which "wall" is used to suggest a physical boundary (its denotative meaning), but also implying the idea of 'emotional barrier' (its connotative meaning) is opportune for analysis:

(6) And on a day we meet to walk the line,
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.

Also, the following lines from Shakespeare's play As you Like It are apt for analysis:

(7) All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts.

In (7) above, Shakespeare moves away from the denotative meanings of words in the above lines in order to give a symbolic sense to a few words, where 'stage' symbolises i the world, 'players' suggests human beings and 'parts' implies different stages of humans' lives.

Conclusion

A well-known approach to semantics attempts to equate the meaning of a linguistic expression with the entity to which it refers. This is the denotation approach to meaning. Another concept that is closely linked with the linguistic concept of meaning is connotation. Denotation is a term used in semantics as part of a classification of types of meaning. It covers the relationship between a linguistic unit and the non-linguistic entities to which it refers. By contrast, the main application of connotation is with reference to the emotional associations (personal or communal) which are suggested by, or are part of the meaning of, a linguistic unit, especially a lexical item. Indeed it is sometimes

very difficult to draw a hard line between denotation and connotation in meaning analysis, due to the fact that elements of connotation are drawn into what is referred to as basic, denotative meaning. By taking into account connotative overtones of meaning, into its analysis has been introduced a new dimension, namely the pragmatic one. Denotation has a complex and sophisticated organisation, and denotative meaning can be studied in terms of contrastive features.

Connotation and denotation are not mutually exclusive. They are two mutually supportive indices of meaning. The present paper has demonstrated that denotative meanings of words exist together in a complementary manner with their connotative meanings. Ultimately, the interaction of the two 'types' of meaning discussed in the paper in determining meaning, especially of expressions in use, or in context, presupposes that meaning is a variable factor in language rather than a fixed one, and aspects of both denotation and connotation are required in the description, explanation and interpretation of linguistic expressions. Attempts at favouring either of the two types of meaning over the other in the determination of meaning only undermine the expressive power of one valid linguistic force while overemphasizing that of the other. Semantic variability is thus facilitated by the co-existence and interaction of denotation and connotation in language.

REFERENCES

Akmajian, A., Demers, R. A., Farmer, A. K., & Harnish, R. M. (2001). Linguistics: an introduction to language and communication (5th ed.) Cambridge, Mass.: MIT

Cruse, A. (2006). A glossary of semantics and pragmatics. Edinburg: Edinburg University Press.

Crystal, D. (1991). A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics (3rd ed.). Cambridge: Blackwell.

Crystal, D. (2010). The Cambridge encyclopedia of language (3rd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Finegan, E. (2008). Language: Its structure and use. Boston: Thomson Wadsworth.

Kennedy, X. J. & Dana, G. (Eds.) (1995). Literature: An introduction to fiction, poetry and drama. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc.

Larson, M. L. (1984). Meaning-based translation. AJ ress of America.

translation. USA: University Pres

Leech, G. N. (1974). Semantics: The study

of meaning. Auxland: Penguin Books.

Leech, G. N. (1979). Semantics l. Auxland: Pe

Penguin Books.

Leech, G. N. (1981). Semantics 2. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Ogden, C. K. & Richards, I. A. (1923). The meaning of meaning: A study of the influence of language upon thought and on the science of symbolism. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.

Palmer, F. R. (1981). Semantics. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Riebs, K. W. & Reeves, K. (2004). Expanding your vocabulary for the armed services vocational aptitude battery exam. Indianapolis, Indiana: Pearson IT Certification.