

MEANING AND SEMANTIC ROLES OF WORDS IN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT: *It is quite imperative to note that meaning has a significant role to play in human communication. Consequent upon this fact, semantics as a field of study has become an issue of debate. Linguists are still in oblivion with regard to consensus on single and workable definition of semantics. This controversy has led to several unending attempts to define semantics. The emphasis of this study is centred on the semantic roles of words in a given context upholding extentionalist opinion as a background or theoretical framework. The theory states that language constitutes words put together in a context to enhance communication within those who live and share the linguistic bounds. In the light of the above, the study focuses basically on the roles words in communication in a given situation. Technical terms such as agent, theme, and instrument among others are for the benefit of analytical purposes. The study restates that every lexical word has meaning, but its social application has implication on our day to day communication.*

KEYWORDS: Words, Meaning, Semantics, Semantic Roles.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of meaning for ages as it relates to the study of Semantics has been an issue of debate. Obviously, Philosophers as well as Contemporary Linguists are still finding it difficult to reach consensus over the nature of meaning as it affects the human language. Lord (1966) opined that meaning is full of ambiguity, controversy and contradiction. Consequently, the difficulty posed in adopting a single and acceptable definition has opened window to several and frequent attempts aimed at redefinition. For convenience, a description of what Semantics represents might not be out of place as it would serve as a spring board to this study. Etymologically, semantics is traceable to ancient Greek *semantikos*, 'significant' which means the linguistic and philosophical study of meaning. It deals with the relationship between signifiers like words, phrases, signs, and symbols and what they stand for their denotation. Simply put Agbedo (2015) refers to semantics as the study of meaning. He says it is the ways in which words and sentences of various grammatical constructions are used and understood by native or fluent speakers of a given language. In linguistics, semantics is concerned with the interpretation of signs employed in environment within a particular situation or context. Also semantics as a subfield deliberately attempts to explore the meaning of semiotics, and the study of relation between different linguistic units and compounds, homonymy, synonymy, antonymy, hypernymy, hyponymy, menomyny, metonymy, homonymy.

Meaning is core to the two definitions above. It is crystal clear the issue involved in the study of Semantics is not unconnected with meaning. It is quite essential to ask what then is meaning. In view of this, the onus of this study rests on semantic roles as underlying factor to elucidate and/ or interpret words in a communication. Semantic roles have been an issue of contention over the years. It is whether or not of this statement, the study intends to identify, reiterate, and/or restate the existing position that language is functional and meaning of words is determined contextually.

What is meaning?

Every definition still remains an attempt and inadequate as there is always a vacuum to be filled. Nevertheless, Palmer (1981) defines meaning as a concept or ideas which can be transferred from the mind of the speaker to the mind of the bearer by embodying them as it were in the forms of language or another. Critics dismissed the above coupled with the claim that it is too vague or too general to support the weight needed by its role as the cornerstone in the traditional conceptualist theory of meaning.

Katz (1972) asserts that several attempts to give direct response to meaning have met challenges. Besides, too many theories complicate the concept of meaning, for example referential theory, the stimulus response theory and the use theory. Each theory tends to identify or gives meaning of a sentence constituent with some extremely observable object, event and act.

In the recent past, Linguists preoccupied themselves with lexical meaning more than the sentence. Bienwisch (1969) observes that the study of 'meaning' deals with the way words and sentences are related to object and processes in the world and, on the other with the way in which they are related to one another in terms of such notions as synonyms, entailments and contradiction.

Obviously, lexeme and sentence play complementary role. The meaning of a clause or sentence relies on its constituent lexeme or vice-versa in the context it occurs. Weitingenstien, a philosopher of repute; says meaning of a word or an utterance would frequently be identified with its use. Lyons (1969) states what seems to look like goals instead of a definition that Semantic analysis of any given language should explicate how the sentence of this language is understood, interpreted and related to state, processes and objects in the verse. In education, he says for one to comprehend the meaning of a sentence and its semantic relations to other expression, one is obliged to know the meaning of lexical items as well as 'know' how they (words) interrelate. By implication, since the basic components of meaning in any language are functional, it is imperative, therefore to state that word should not be seen as 'containers' (Yule, 1996) of meaning, but should consider the roles they play within describable context in a sentence.

Semantic analysis of natural language presumed the meanings of lexical items are not indefinable whole, Car-nap (1956) postulates two ways through which word meaning analysis could be carried out.

1. meaning Postulates
2. Semantic components into which the lexical meaning are analysed.

By meaning postulates, meaning of a lexical item is specified roughly speaking by the set of all the meaning postulates in which it occurs.

Componential analysts, Katz and Foder (1963) and Bienwisch (1969) define the meaning of a lexical element explicitly in terms of semantic component. Expanding further, the component is not part of the vocabulary but rather theoretical elements postulated in order to describe the semantic relations between the lexical items/elements of any language (logical constraints).

The crux of the study is to uphold extensive analysts' approach of language with a view to examine how words are used in context and that language is functional and meaning of lexeme is best analysed contextually.

Semantic Roles

A semantic role is the basic idea or information of an encoder in conformity with the action words perform in a given context. It is the actual activity participant carried out in some real/imagined situation, apart from these linguistic encoding of those situation. It is also referred to as the underlying relationship that a patient has with the main verb in a clause. Semantic roles according to Gawron(2013) are roles that participants play in events and situations. They are part of the content of linguistic communication, therefore they are defined in terms of prototypes and the labels we give them are convenient approximations of the semantic roles. In their views, Jurafsky and Martin (2015) describe it as representations, that express the abstract role that arguments of predicate can take in the event, these can be very specific. There are distinctive kinds of semantic roles. Jurafsky and Martin (2015) point out the following:

Agent; volitional causes of an event

Experiencer; experiences an event

Force; the non volitional causer of the event

Theme; the participant directly affected by an event

Result; it is the end product of an event.

Beneficiary; the beneficiary of an event

Source; the origin of the object of a transfer event

Goal: the destination of an object of a transfer event

Accompaniment: This is a semantic role of a thing that participates in a close association with an agent, causes or affected in an event

Locative – identifies the location or spatial orientation of a state or action.

Affected role according to Larson (1984) is the only thing affected by an event or person who undergoes a process or person who experiences an event,

The door is opened
John is at home } predicated

The door is opened
The door swung open } Change of states or location

John has a new book
John bought a new book } processed, acquired or exchanged

More examples

The dog ate the meat }
The tree fell on the car } affected by event

The water evaporated }
Mary became happy } process

John smelled the smoke }
Mary saw the smoke } experiences an event

INNER ROLE

In describing semantic roles, inner roles play a significant role, in other to classify verbs a distinction between role that are closely related to the verb and those that are not should be clearly stated. For example, all verbs may admit best one noun phrase in any given inner role. Multiple noun phrases must be connected by conjunction. For any given verb if the role is binding, it could be regarded as inner role. Consider this;

Yebo and Yetu went to the River. (Valid)

Yebo, Yetu went to the River. (Invalid)

Participant Role;

Thematic relation is used to designate the role a noun phrase plays in an action or event described by the action word in a clause which normally is the main verb.

Yebo ate the bread.

Yebo represents the *Agent* while *bread* is the *patient*.

Thematic relation is concerned with the nature of the relationship between the meanings of the noun. They are purely semantic descriptions of the way which the entities described by the noun phrases function with respect to the meaning of the action described by the verb (Wikipedia).

CHARACTERISTICS OF SEMANTIC ROLES

Semantic roles (SR) also thematic roles (TR) attempts to identify the similarities and dissimilarities in verb meaning that are reflected in argument expression with emergent generalisations that will contribute to the mapping from semantics to syntax.

Characteristics of SR

- a. Completeness; the argument of every verb is designated TR or the other.
- b. Uniqueness; designated only on TR.
- c. Distinctiveness; every verb is differentiated from the other argument by the role it is assigned.
- d. Independence; each role is given a consistent semantic definition that applies to all verbs and all situations.

THEORY OF SEMANTIC ROLES

Scholars over the ages have debated the authenticity and acceptability of the theoretical status of semantic role in linguistic theory. The question is, should semantic roles be regarded as syntactic, lexical or semantic or conceptual entities or considered as a primitive part of linguistic knowledge (1968; 77). Despite the ongoing argument common understanding accept semantic roles as semantic/conceptual elements (Jac.1990). Since the

study bothers on the roles of words in context, a linguistic theory that investigates word meaning is quite appropriate. Lexical semantic is a theory that emphasised meaning in context. Cruse (1986) states that meaning of a word is constituted by its contextual relation, consequently a distinction between degrees of participation and code of participation are made. He highlights further in order to accomplish this distinction any part that bears a meaning and combines with the meanings of other constituent is labelled as sentence constituent. Semantic constituent that cannot be broken down into more elementary constituents are labelled minimal semantic constituent (Cruse, 1986).

DISCUSSION

Obviously, words and sentence play a complementary role hence word should not be seen as reservoirs of meaning but rather how they inter-relate within a given context. Semantic role is the underlying relationship that a participant has with the word (verb) in a clause. Semantic role is the actual role participant carries out in some real situation, besides the linguistic encoding of the situation. Consider this;

Yetu		drove		the car
NP		V		NP

The above structure cannot be described without considering the grammatical and lexical elements. The verb 'drove' shows an action, the noun phrases describe the role played by 'Yetu' on the car. Semantic roles could be assigned the above noun phrases as demonstrated below;

Yetu		drove		the car
Agent				Theme

Yetu as the doer of the action also is the 'Agent'. The 'car' is the recipient of the action that is Theme. By this, agent is the Semantic role (doer or performer) of an action/event, animate (human) or inanimate (thing). Agent could be the subject of the verb.

Encoding and decoding, interpreting and assigning roles is not only limited as stated above, but in a sentence virtually all constituents play diverse function at a time. Halliday (1985) explains that the key to a functional interpretation or grammatical structure is the principle that in general linguistics items are multifunctional.

The hunter		killed		the antelope
Agent/ Subject				Theme/object

Giving, the noun phrase dictates the action of the individual or thing. Hence, 'the hunter the antelope' where 'the hunter' could be referred to as the subject or Agent similarly, antelope could be referred to as the Theme or object. One's ability to identify the performer of an action as indicated by noun phrases, for example Agent, or Theme is in away given semantic roles to the noun phrase in the sentence.

From the ongoing, it is crystal clear that the Agent of a noun phrase which also is the entity that performs the action is human. However, inanimate being also can perform the function of an agent, which further depends on its role as a noun phrase.

(i)	(The) tree Agent	fell	(on) the house Theme (Object)
(ii)	(The) bicycle Agent	ran	over the stone. Theme (machine)

Yule (1996) says to designate semantic function on an agent that involves an entity to perform an action, other entity assumes the role of an instrument. For example;

Eating	with (a) fork spoon Instrument
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Considering the example above, we see the semantic role of an animate being, an agent using an implement (instrument) to execute his purpose.

Also, in a sense, theme can be human coupled with the assertion that linguistic items could be multifunctional. As seen below, physical entity can assume two different semantic functions.

Jummai Agent	danced	with her legs Theme
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The illustration above demonstrates the theme as acting on the agent which is the entity on whom the action is performed. In other words, the legs become the recipient of the action or event.

Giving semantic roles to elements in a given situation could be by feeling, perception or state of an entity. The entity referred does not performed or suffer any action, hence he could be labelled as experiencer. Consider the example below:

You	heard him	Experiencer
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The above example presents the entity which is the subject passive. He only heard the sound depicting and experience. In this case, 'you' turns out to be the experience while 'hear him' become the theme.

Yetu Experiencer	saw	the aeroplane theme	in the sky location
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The emphasis here is the position of the entity which occupies the function of location. As the experiencer who saw the aeroplane which is giving as the theme is located in the 'sky' giving the position where the aeroplane could be seen 'in the sky', here dismisses possible ambiguity which the above statement would have caused the decoder.

John saw the aeroplane

The location or the adverbial 'in the sky' erased any further question.

Jummai		collected		the knife		from her mother
Agent				Theme		Source

Each segment above could be giving semantic roles: Jummai is the subject of the sentence, technically referred to as Agent and also the doer of the action. The knife is marked as the Theme because it is the hob around which the action evolved and 'her mother' is the main source where the knife was collected, that is the owner. Also, the action 'collected' followed by prepositional phrase safes the breath of the listener with the information that would have demanded further query. Knowing the source of an action aids understanding and rules out ambiguity.

Consider this;

Jummai		Peeled		yam		with yam
Agent				Theme		Instrument

As stated earlier the action carried on the yam is impossible without the instrument. Similarly, goal contributes to meaning in no small measure. For every communication, there is a goal which the speaker/encoder intends to achieve. See this example,

Jummai		gave		the knife		to her mother
Agent				Theme		

The entity (the knife) also the theme upon which the action (gave) is meted by the Agent, Jummai moves to its goal.

FINDINGS

The survey is basically undertaken on the work of George Yule (1986) *'The study of Language'* on Semantic roles. The emphasis has been the semantic roles of word in a context adopting the extensionalist approach as a theoretical framework to the study. The theory holds the view that language constitutes words put together in a context to enhance communication among those who possess and live in the same linguistic environment. Lexeme here is not considered as an entity nor treated in isolation (basic) as found in the lexicon but rather in a context. Words in isolation only have basic meaning except if given in context, in order word made to work. However, in the event of one word sentence, for example 'come' it is assumed there is a second person being addressed who invariably creates a situation that enables communication effective and comprehensible.

The concept of meaning itself is an issue over time, the study, however does not preoccupy itself with definition but precisely reveals the truism that what is claimed to be meaningful largely depends on what information conveyed and deduced by the decoder as meaningful

in an interaction. Meaning in a nutshell is communication effectual and comprehensible through the manipulation of appropriate words as determined by the scenario.

A Sentence (structure) might be meaningless if words are not systematically ordered. For instance, 'Grass eats goat' structurally and prescriptively is correct because the rule of grammar-subject and predicate is observed. Nevertheless, the sentence is meaningless since ideally, grass can never eat goat, rather '*Goat eats grasses*'.

As asserted by several experts including reputable philosophers, meaning of a word and/or utterance could be decoded by its usage. Lyon (1969) argues that to interpret any syntactic elements and its semantic relations require the knowledge of lexical items and how they inter relate. The idea suggests understanding the basic meaning of every word prior to its connotative application.

Furthermore, findings indicate that meaning deals with the manner words and sentences are related to object and processes involve in the world. The above further substantiate the view where semantic relations and synthetic elements require the knowledge of lexical items and how they inter relate.

Also, the study shows meanings of lexical items are not indefinable whole. On the general note, until words are assigned roles in an utterance both written and spoken, they remain indefinable. The rationale is based on the fact that linguistic items are multifunctional and physical entity can assume two distinct semantic functions.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown the significance of assigning roles to lexeme as formative factor to effective communication. Effective communication should take into cognisance denotative and connotative knowledge of words which must be in tandem with context of discourse. Every lexical word has meaning, but its social application designated by its role could enhance good communication or otherwise. Communication is meaning oriented whether in written or verbal form. In order to avoid ambiguity, misinterpretation or being misconstrued the semantic roles of words in contexts must be explicitly explicated. It is therefore necessary to conclude that roles are assigned to words in our daily interactions (official and unofficial), consequent upon the fact that linguistic items are multifunctional and often polysemous. In other words, words could consist of more than one meaning.

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