FEEDBACK TUTORIAL LETTER

ASSIGNMENT 1

SECOND SEMESTER 2017

STUDY OF SEMANTICS

[SOS721S]
Dear Students

Most of you did very well in this assignment. I am pleased that you remembered citing your references and that you consulted other references than the study guide.

I wish you all the best with assignment 2 and your preparation for the exam.

Regards,

Ina Cloete

Assignments: Semantics

1. Analyse the semiotic approach to meaning in the study of semantics. (15)
   - Semiotics is the study of how meaning is created.
   - Semiotics is the study of signs, symbols and signification part of communication processes.
   - Language is just one of the sign systems.
   - Emphasis is on iconic systems – signs whose form reflects their meaning e.g. onomatopoetic words such as bang, crack, and howl.
   - Meaning is made up by the deployment of acts and objects which function as “signs” in relation to other signs.
   - Systems – complex meaning relations that can exist between one sign and another e.g. relations of contrast and superordination or subordination
   - Social semiotics examines semiotic practises specific to a culture and community. Our sense of identity is established through signs.
   - Semiotics involves the study of anything that stands for something else e.g. words, images, sounds, gestures and objects.

   • The semiotic approach considers paralinguistic features such as those features that reflect on our voice during speech and include abnormal volum quality, tempo, pitch and voice quality. So for example, you could tell from a person’s voice during speech whether they’re happy, upset, frustrated, annoyed or non challant.

   Non-linguistic features would include such things as pausing during speech, gestures which are either emphatic or metaphorically used to signal direction of motion. Cruse (2011) points out the functions of paralinguistic features as corresponding to punctuation in written language as in segmenting the stream of speech in order to facilitate smooth processing or as modulation as reflected in emotive and attitudinal colouring of linguistically encoded messages or as illustrative signs that signal key elements such as direction of movement, shape, literal depiction through hand movements or metaphorical as in the use of vertical and parallel hands to accompany the setting of some kind of limit.

   Important terms:
   • Signifier – any material thing that signifies
   • Signified – any material thing that the concept refers to
   • Symbolic signs – relation is purely conventional and culturally specific.
   • Indexical sign – smoke signifies fire
   • Iconic – signifier resembles the signified
• Denotation – basic or literal meaning of a sign
• Connotation – secondary, cultural meaning of a sign
• Metonymy – one sign is substituted for another which is closely associated.
• Paradigmatic – signs have meaning from their association with other signs
• Syntagmatic – meaning arises out of sequential order.

2. In an essay, analyse the Denotational (Referential) Theory of meaning by looking at its characteristics, strengths and weaknesses. You should also look at the scholars who made significant contributions to the theory.

The Denotational theory is rooted in the Naturalist Approach to the study of meaning. The theory is dependent on the word-world relationship. The idea is that linguistic expressions have the meanings they do because they stand for things; what they mean is what they stand for. On this view, words are like labels; they are symbols that represent, designate, name, denote or refer to items in the world.

It is characterised by the general or conceptual meaning of words. It names or denotes objects, in the real world. Therefore the reference of an expression is the relationship between the expression and the object, action or event in the real world to which the expression refers.

Characterised by three components of meaning, namely;
• The sound form or linguistic sign,
• The concept underlying the form,
• The actual referent (part of the extra linguistic world the sign refers to).

This theory helps to understand the arbitrariness of language, e.g. there is nothing doggy in the word ‘dog’. Arbitrariness of language rest on contentious of speakers of a language.

The Denotational theory demonstrates an inability to capture meaning of words that have no concrete reference. Words that express emotion such as joy, love and sadness (abstract nouns) has no concrete referent in the real world. (De Studler).

Mythology – characters such as Pegasus and the Phoenix do not exist.

Subject-predicate construction: John is fat. Fat is not an individual. (LOGIC)

The theory does not account for compositional meaning in certain words such as laptop and the so-called ‘strawberry’ morphemes.

It fails to account for compositional meaning of all sentences as sentences may contain figurative expressions. In those instances such as idiomatic expressions and proverbs the meaning of the expression cannot be deduced from the meaning of the individual words of the expression.

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Semantics is not directly concerned with the study of the external world, or its conceptualisation. The primary focus of modern semantics is the relationship of lexical items in an expression to one another. Denotational theory fails to account for ‘sense’ of expressions.
Fails to explain whether it is the lexical meaning of a word or the non-literal meaning. E.g. the chair one sits on, chair of a meeting (verb), the chair (person) in charge of meeting.

3. Write short notes on the following, providing appropriate examples for each:
   a) **Social/Stylistic meaning**

   - Meaning associated with the situational context of an utterance.
   - Leech (1990) defines it as what a piece of language conveys about the social circumstances of its use. According to him, we decode in part the social meaning of a text through the recognition of the different dimensions and levels of style within the same language. For examples, certain words or pronunciation reflect the dialect of a speaker thereby identifying what part of the word the speaker comes from or from which region of a country the speaker originates. For examples, certain words or pronunciation reflect the dialect of a speaker thereby identifying what part of the word the speaker comes from or from which region of a country the speaker originates. E.g. “I ain’t know nothing”. From the style used one can deduce that the speaker is probably an African-American.
   - The decoding of a text is dependent on our knowledge of stylistics and other variations of language. Social meaning is also called stylistic meaning.
   - Social relationship between the speaker and the hearer in terms of status or age could demand certain word choices. These word choices would than reflect aspects such as respect, disrespect or familiarity.
   - Social meaning provided us with stylistic overtones in the use of words. The following are examples from Ogbulogo, (2012) and Leech (1990) respectively:
     - Style helps us to know about the period, field and status of the discourse. Some words are similar to others as far as their conceptual meaning is concerned. But they have different stylistic meaning. For example, ‘steed’, ‘horse and ‘nag’ are synonymous. They all mean a kind of animal i.e. Horse. But they differ in style and so have various social meaning. ‘Steed’ is used in poetry; ‘horse’ is used in general, while ‘nag’ is slang. The word ‘Home’ can have many use also like domicile (official), residence (formal) abode (poetic), home (ordinary use).
   - Domain or register.

   b) **Connotative meaning**

   - It takes into consideration the features which in the real world are typical of a word or expression.
   - So for instance, the meaning of the word female may include womb, maternal, dress, skirt, cookery etc or even assumed features based on perceived views in the society or by group within society such that the meaning of woman would include-teary, emotional, sensitive, kind and irrational.
   - Connotative meaning varies from society to society and from age to age and from individual to individual within speech communities. It deals with the real world experience that is associated with words and expressions. Thus, connotative meaning can be subjective or unstable.
• It depends very much on how an individual or society perceives a word. It is the association that we make in our mind of what these lexical items represent. Meaning associated with word over and above its lexical content.

• It’s shared by other communicative systems such as visual arts and music and is used strongly in the media in advertisement through the use of visual connotation. They’re relatively unstable as they vary according to culture, individual experience and historical period. It’s in determinate and open-ended in comparison to conceptual meaning.

• More variable, figurative and subjective.

• Includes all feelings, associations and emotions that different people link to a word.

c) Collocative meaning

• Meaning that is associated with words due to the environment in which they occur with other words.

• Certain words tend to co-occur habitually and therefore convey meaning by association. E.g. bread and butter, fork and knife, salt and pepper, steak and kidney, husband and wife.

• Collocative meaning is also expressed through quasi-synonyms such as wander/stroll; tremble/quiver. Collocative meaning could be due to stylistic or conceptual differences. It’s an idiosyncratic characteristics of individual word.

• According to Ogbulogo (2012) the collocative meaning of lexical items in a language is based on related semantic fields. For instance, job, employment, engagement and work are all related.

• Collocative meaning is the meaning which a word acquires in the company of certain words. Words collocate or co-occur with certain words only e.g. Big business not large or great.Collocative meaning refers to associations of a word because of its usual or habitual co-occurrence with certain types of words. ‘Pretty’ and ‘handsome’ indicate ‘good looking’.

• However, they slightly differ from each other because of collocation or co-occurrence. The word ‘pretty’ collocates with – girls, woman, village, gardens, flowers, etc. On the other hand, the word ‘handsome’ collocates with – ‘boys’ men, etc. so ‘pretty woman’ and ‘handsome man’. While different kinds of attractiveness, hence ‘handsome woman’ may mean attractive but in a mannish way.

4. Discuss:  

Hyponymy- sense relation that exists between two words where the meaning of the one is included in the meaning of the other e.g. the sense of fruit is included in the sense of apple; the sense of animal is included in the sense of elephant.

A hyponym is a specific term used to designate a class.

It describes when we say: X is a kind of Y. E.g. Scarlet is a kind of red.

- Hyponymy is a hierarchical relationship

- The generic term is the superordinate (hyponym) and the specific term is the subordinate e.g. FURNITURE – (chair, sofa, bench) COLOUR – (green, white, blue, black).

- Involves the logical relationship of entailment.

- Chair entails furniture; white entails colour.

- Sense relation not restricted to objects alone.
Componential Analysis

- Approach to word meaning by the process of breaking meaning down into its minimal components.
- Stress the function of elements in a language.
- Assume that words are made up of semantic components, belonging to the same semantic field and can be analysed and described in terms of common components and distinctive components.
- Example:
  - Wasp, hornet, bee, moth, housefly, ant, termite
  - Common semantic component is insect.
  - Wasp, hornet, bee - flying, stinging insects
  - Moth and housefly – fly, but not sting
  - Ant and termite – neither fly, nor sting

To describe + {presence} and – {absence} of features

Both hyponymy and componential analysis analyse the structural aspects of word meaning and shows the systemic nature of language.

5. Explain what you understand under the sense relation of antonymy?

Semantic relationship of clear oppositeness that exists between items.
Relating words which are opposed on one semantic dimension, whilst normally sharing other semantic features e.g. large and small – differ in extend, but share measuring size;
Buy and sell – differ in direction of transfer of goods, but share the meaning of commercial transaction. Antonyms are usually in pairs and they occur mostly with adjectives. Some antonyms can be morphologically related; one member of a pair is formed by adding a prefix to the other member e.g. happy/unhappy; trust/distrust.
Discuss the following subtypes of antonymy and give two examples for each subtype:

a) Complementary antonymy: Opposites that is mutually exclusive in logical terms so that if it is not x, then it is y. e.g. dead/alive; male/female

b) Gradable antonymy: Through language itself it is evident that there are values between the two extremes. These values can be intensified or reduced, comparative and superlative forms can be used. The negation of one member in a pair does not necessarily mean the negation of the other member. E.g. big/small; hot/cold

c) Converse: Pairs of words which have different perspective on the same scenario. They are mutually dependent rather than exclusive. E.g. husband/wife; father/son.

d) Directional or reverse opposition: Opposition where one action is the reverse of the other. E.g. build/demolish; construct/destroy.

(15)
6a) Answer true or false.

a) Semantics is only concerned with linguistic meaning. False.
b) The Denotational theory in semantics deals with the relationship between words and the world. True.
c) Linguistic semantics is concerned with all aspects of meaning in natural languages. True.
d) Lexical semantics relates to the meaning of words and their sense relations. True.
e) The notion ‘concept’ in semantics concerns the mediation between constructs of the mind and actual objects and the real world. True.