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1.1. COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE

For many authors, Cruse among others, meaning makes little sense except in the context of communication. In consequence, the notion of a simple model of communication is introduced following Lyons (1995). Cruse (2000) explains how, if language is conceived of as a sign system, a simple model representing the process of communication serves to put meaning in context. This includes a speaker who has something to communicate, that is a message. However, since a message in its initial form cannot be transmitted directly, it has to be converted into a signal. In oral language this involves linguistic encoding, which in turn involves translating the message into linguistic form and also translating the linguistic form into a set of instructions to the speech organs so that the signal is executed via an acoustic signal. It is this process of linguistic codification of meaning that we are most interested in these first two lessons.

1.1.1. Branches of the study of meaning

There are different orientations within the general field of semantics as such and different authors classify the field in a slightly different way. For example, Lyons (1995) defines semantics as the study of meaning and linguistic semantics as the study of meaning in so far as it is systematically encoded in the vocabulary and grammar of natural languages. Cruse, in a simpler way, divides semantics into three subfields: lexical semantics, grammatical semantics and logical semantics.

There are various distinct areas in the study of meaning. If we follow Cruse (2000:15) lexical semantics focuses on 'content' words (*tiger, daffodil, inconsiderate*) rather than 'grammatical' words (*the, of, and*). Grammatical semantics in turn, studies aspects of meaning which have direct relevance to syntax. However there is some overlapping with lexical semantics, such as how to deal with grammatical morphemes like *-es, -er*, etc.

Finally, logical semantics (also called formal semantics) studies the relations between natural language and formal logical systems such as propositional and predicate calculi. Such studies try to model natural languages as closely as possible using a tightly controlled, maximally austere logical formalism. According to Cruse, such studies have concentrated on the propositional/sentential level of meaning, rarely attempting to delve into the meaning of words.

1.1.2. Overlap between semantics and pragmatics

There are certain overlappings which can be identified between different disciplines such as Semantics and Pragmatics. The problem of where to draw the line between them is not easy. Saeed (2001) points out that, although the semantics-pragmatics distinction is a useful one, the problem emerges when we get down to details. He further argues that one way to solve the problem is to distinguish between sentence meaning and the speaker's meaning, suggesting that words and sentences have a meaning independently of any particular use and it is the speaker who incorporates further meaning into sentence meaning.

Another way of seeing this comes from Bennett (2002), who bases his distinction between semantics and pragmatics on concepts such as implicature and entailment. And still another perspective comes again from Saeed (2001), who links the semantics-pragmatics overlapping to the concept of presupposition. This has always been an important concept in semantics but the increased interest in it can be seen as coinciding with the development of pragmatics as a subdiscipline. The basic idea is that semantics deals with conventional meaning, that is to say, with those aspects of meaning which do not vary much from context to context, while pragmatics deals with aspects of individual usage and context-dependent meaning.

1.2. DIFFERENT UNITS OF ANALYSIS: WORDS, UTTERANCES, SENTENCES, PROPOSITIONS AND TEXTS

When dealing with the nature of meaning, Cruse (2000) and Lyons (1995) agree that it is difficult to define this concept. The definition of words as meaningful units poses several problems since different criteria come into play in the definition of a word. Lyons differentiates words from expressions. He proposes that words as expressions can be defined as composite units

that have both form and meaning and suggests a more technical term: 'lexeme'. It must be noted that not all lexemes are words and that not all words are lexemes. Lyons points out that it is word-expressions (and not word-forms) that are listed in the dictionaries. They are traditionally known as headwords or dictionary entries. This distinction is related to the «type/token» distinction. We will take this definition of word as a basic starting point. That is, we will take word-expressions as the basic word definition and we will identify them also as dictionary entries.

1.2.1. Words

Cruce explains how most people have the intuition that meaning is intimately bound up with individual words; that this is what words are for.

If we study meaning in language we are forced to consider that we are talking of different types of meaning depending on the different unit of analysis we are referring to.

Even if defining a word is not an easy task and one could try and say what a prototypical word is, a word can be defined as a minimal permutable element. Words are, most of the time, separated by silence in spoken language and by spaces in writing. We can also identify words as dictionary entries.

In unit 5, we will learn more about the differences between words, lexemes and word forms.

1.2.2. Utterances, sentences, propositions and texts

The difference between utterances, sentences and propositions is an essential one. The three terms are used to describe different levels of abstraction in language. These different levels of abstraction allow us to identify different units of analysis in relation to meaning. An utterance is created by speaking or writing a piece of language. It can also be said that an utterance is any stretch of talk, by one person, before and after which there is silence on the part of that person. If someone says *Today is Tuesday* in a room, this is one utterance; if another person in the same room also says *Today is Tuesday* in the same room this is another utterance. Hurford comments that

It would make sense to say that an utterance was in a particular accent (i.e. a particular way of pronouncing words). However, it would not make strict sense to say that a sentence was in a particular accent, because a sentence itself is only associated with phonetic characteristics such as

accent and voice quality through a speaker's act of uttering it. Accent and voice quality belong strictly to the utterance, not to the sentence uttered.

Sentences, on the other hand, are abstract grammatical elements obtained from utterances. Sentences are abstracted or generalized from actual language use. Differences in accent or pitch do not alter the basic content of the sentence. Saeed explains that speakers recognize that these differences are irrelevant and discard them. Hurford (1983) defines a sentence as neither a physical event nor a physical object. It is, conceived abstractly, a string of words put together by the grammatical rules of a language. A sentence can be thought of as the ideal string of words behind various realizations in utterances. Thus, a given sentence always consists of the same words in the same order.

Examples:

1. *Jim picked up the children* and *Jim picked the children up* are **different sentences**.
2. *Mary started her lecture late* and *Mary started her lecture late* are the **same sentence**.
3. *Went to the toilet James* and *Mary the put on hat* are not English sentences. However in languages, such as Spanish, where word order is less important, *María salió pronto a la calle* and *Salió pronto a la calle María* are both Spanish sentences.
4. *Mary started her lecture late* and *Mary started her lecture late* pronounced by two different persons are **different utterances**.

Practice (adapted from Hurford, 1983).

Answer yes/no to the following questions.

- a) Do all authentic performances of 'Othello' begin by using the same sentence?
- b) Do all authentic performances of 'Othello' begin by using the same utterance?
- c) Does it make sense to talk of the time and place of a sentence?
- d) Does it make sense to talk of the time and place of an utterance?
- e) Can one talk of a loud sentence?
- f) Can one talk of a long sentence?

Answers: a, yes; b, no; c, no; d, yes; e, no; f, yes.