Towards a New Theory of Meaning

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Abstract

Over the years, there have been series of arguments cum controversies regarding what actually constitutes meaning in language. In several attempts to resolve these controversies, different semanticists and philosophers of language alike have taken giant steps towards developing different theories that would properly, in their own view, give a lucid account of meaning. In turn, these theories have also generated more challenging controversies. Along this theoretical trajectory, this paper therefore attempts a critical appraisal of some of the existing theories of meaning with the aim of bringing to the fore the cardinal tenets around which each of them revolves. In addition, the paper tries as much as possible to make some incursion into the historical background of these theories as well as identifying some of their strengths and weaknesses where necessary. The appraisal exercise is done in this work therefore necessitates a proposal of a new theory known as "Existential theory of meaning", as a response to the theoretical concerns of beclouding how the concept 'meaning' should be analyzed.

Key words: Meaning; Theories; Tenets; Appraisal; Existential theory

INTRODUCTION

Semantics is a field of linguistics which basically deals with the study of meaning (Lawal, 1992; Saeed, 2003; Ogbulogo, 2005; Matthew, 2007; Syal & Jindal, 2007; McGregor, 2009; O'Grady, Archibald, & Katamba, 2011). The minimal unit of meaning which constitutes the object of study in semantics is technically referred to as "sememe", just as phoneme is to phonology and morpheme is to morphology. It is pertinent to note that the field of semantics is not a field where the meaning of expressions is prescribed; rather, it is a discipline which focuses on the description of meaning. Lawal (1992, p.147) corroborates this view by emphasizing that semantics is not concerned with laying down standards of semantic correctness or prescribing what the meaning of words and sentences will be. The aim of semantics is to set up a theory from which facts about meaning can be described.

Since meaning seems to be an abstract phenomenon which is often surrounded by controversies as to what appropriate interpretation should be given to a particular linguistic expression, different theories have been devised by several semanticists and philosophers of language. In the words of Lawal (1992), "a theory is a specified coherent framework consisting of statements and definitions, construed with the sole aim of explaining or accounting for some facts". Another definition considers it as a supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something, especially as based on general principles independent of the thing to be explained. A theory of meaning therefore is any explanatory hypothesis from which meaning can be deduced and scientifically described. It follows from here that the basic function of theory in semantics is to explain in an explicit way the nature of meaning (Ogbulogo, 2005, p.24).

Each theory of meaning is characterized by a set of principles as well as its flaws. In other words, one semantic theory is distinguished from another by the peculiar tenets which define it. So also, none of these theories can be considered impeccable. Though there are very many competing theories of meaning on the ground,

only the salient ones are reviewed in this paper. These theories are as follows.

1. THE REFERENTIAL THEORY OF MEANING

Following Ogbulogo (2005, p.27), the referential theory is associated with the works of Ogden & Richards (1923). However, the origin of this theory actually dates back to the 4th century BC and was propounded by philosopher Aristotle. The rationale behind this theory was to give account of meaning of a word by pointing to the thing to which such word refers in the real world. In other words, it is a theory which relates the meaning of a word to the actual, concrete or tactile object for which it stands. Thus, the meaning of a word is the object it refers to in the external world (Ogbulogo, 2005, p.26). As far as referential theory is concerned, linguistic expressions are signs of something other than themselves.

Since this theory essentially deals with the relationship between words and their referents in a language, meaning is therefore removed from the mind of its users and placed squarely in the world. By implication, this theory connects the linguistic system (i.e. language) with the non-linguistic entity (i.e. the world). In consonance with the referential theory, to be able to describe the meaning of the word "table" for example, there must be an object which represents it. Consequently, that four-legged wooden/iron material is the meaning of the word "table", and it is the physical entity that will be pointed to the moment the word is mentioned. Another example can be used to illustrate the principle of referential theory in the following sentence:

The best soccer player in the world is Christiano Ronaldo.

In the above sentence, we have used "Christiano Ronaldo" to mean a particular person. Therefore, the latter is the referent (i.e. the human object) of the former. In this way, the meaning of the first description is the same with that of the second since both have the same referent in the external world.

Though this theory makes meaning description easy by doing corresponding matching of words with their corresponding objects in a language, it has its own weaknesses, one of which is the fact that if we believe that the meaning of a word is the object for which it stands, it then means that we will be lured into concluding that words which have no tactile or concrete referents are meaningless. There are some words such as love, hatred, ugly, kill, yell, come, big, tired, etc. which have no physical objects (i.e. actual referents) with which they are associated. Therefore, the tenet of the referential theory will describe them as meaningless in English, whereas reverse is the case. Another shortcoming associated with the theory of reference conceals in the treatment of expressions which have the same referent. Let us consider the sentence below:

a) Dr Ebele Jonathan once had no shoe.
b) The immediate former President of Nigeria once had no shoe.

In the two sentences above, the same information is given because "Dr Ebele Jonathan" and the "immediate former President of Nigeria" refer to the same individual. However, the two expressions do not have the same meaning. Contrariwise, holding unto the belief of the referential theory will force one to treat them as synonyms.

2. THE IDEATIONAL THEORY OF MEANING

The ideational theory, otherwise known as the mentalist theory, was developed by the British empiricist philosopher, John Locke, and was subsequently promoted by Leonard Bloomfield. The cardinal principle around which the theory is built is that linguistic meaning is mental. That is, words are used to encode and convey thoughts or ideas. Glucksberg (1995), cited in Ogbulogo (2005, p.26), claims that the theory does not attempt any definition of words and expressions using physical associations. Rather, the range of possible meanings ascribed to a given word is that the set of available feelings, images, ideas, concepts, thoughts, and inferences that can be produced as soon as a word is heard.

According to Locke himself, the meaning of an expression is the idea associated with the mind of anyone who knows and understands that expression. In her own view, Lawal (1992, p.149) lucidly describes the ideational theory, which she refers to as "meaning as mental image", as a theory which sees the meaning of the word or expression as the particular mental image that is usually conjured in the mind immediately the word is uttered. In simple parlance, that mental image is the meaning of that word. Since the meaning of a linguistic expression is connected to the mind, it therefore follows that successful communication requires that the hearer correctly decode the speaker's words into their associated ideas. Otherwise, there will always be breakdown in communication. Citing an example, there is a mental idea or image that will appear in the mind of someone as soon as the word "dog" is uttered. Also, for the word "tree", an image will be pictured in the mind once it is verbally produced. Likewise, mentioning the word "house" will cause its image to mentally manifest immediately. All the mental images that are conjured by the utterance of the words "dog", "tree" and "house" respectively, are the meanings of these individual words as far as the ideational theory is concerned.

One of the criticisms leveled against this theory is that it is too abstract and imprecise because of its heavy

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reliance on mental images for decoding the meaning of words (Ogbulogo, 2005, p.26). For instance, for a hearer to properly decode the meaning of a word, he has to gain access into the mind of the speaker. This is somewhat an impossible task. Thus, if the hearer conjures a mental image different from the expectation of the speaker, such communication has not been successful because the response or reaction of the hearer will not be tally with what is expected of him by the speaker. Along this dimension, this theory fails to take cognizance of the fact that the meaning of a word may vary from one individual to another because no two individuals have the same mindset.

Furthermore, if the meaning of an expression is the mental image associated with it, it means therefore that words without associated ideas would be dubbed as meaningless. For instance, since words such as "to", "will", "very", "passion", "abstract", etc. do not necessarily conjure any mental image when they are uttered or heard, a possible way to account for their meaning is to regard them as simply lacking semantic content, i.e. meaningless.

Another problem or shortcoming of this theory identified by Lawal (1992) is that two synonymous expressions would be required to have the same mental image while antonymous expressions would be expected to have opposing mental images. But the reverse is sometimes the case as even synonymous words, for example, can be associated with different mental images.

Above all, the ideational account is unable to explain the compositionality of natural languages.

3. THE BEHAVIORIST THEORY OF MEANING

In the literature, this theory is otherwise referred to as stimulus-response theory. Originally, the development of the theory is attributed to the American Psychologist B. F. Skinner. His development of this theory was born out of the effort to render linguistic meaning public and the study of linguistic meaning more scientific. He therefore proposed that the correct theory of meaning for a natural language is behavioristic: the meaning of an expression, as uttered on a particular occasion, is either the behavioral stimulus that produces the utterance or the behavioral response that the utterance produces or a combination of both. This theory approaches the meaning of communication in order to explain the nature of meaning. During communication, especially an interpersonal one, a stimulus is always accompanied by a particular response. That response is the behavior of the addressee in return of the directed stimulus by the addresser. Thus, such linguistic behavior is the meaning of the word or expression uttered by the speaker, that is, the addresser.

Giving an empirical example, the meaning of "fire" as uttered on a particular occasion might include running or calling for help. The subsequent gesture that will accompany the production of the word "fire" by someone will be termed as the meaning of that word in that particular context of communication. Similarly, the meaning of the word "thief" might include danger. Therefore, the moment someone utters this word, people around him will react or respond in the form of feelings of danger that is looming in connection to the appearance of a thief. In that wise, such response spurred by that stimulus is the actual meaning of the word "thief" in that specific context of communication.

A major flaw of this theory is that it fails to take into consideration that response does not always match with the intended meaning of an expression. That is, responses to a single stimulus sometimes vary. Going back to the example of "fire", even on a single occasion, it is possible that not everyone who hears fire will respond to it by running or calling for help. Suppose, for example, that the hearers of the utterance include a fireman, a pyromaniac, and a person who happens to know that the speaker is a compulsive liar. For these people, the meaning of fire is different from the meaning of fire for those who run or call for help.

Barring the above shortcoming, the behavioral theory is celebrated for its attempt to justify the fact that the stimulus-response phenomenon is a great determinant of meaning of expression uttered on social occasions for interpersonal communication.

4. THE TRUTH CONDITIONAL THEORY OF MEANING

In the 1960s and 1970s, Donald Davidson made a significant effort to also give account of meaning. He attempted to describe the meaning on the basis of truth. This theory derived from the theory of logic, as Davidson employed a Tarskian theory of truth as a theory of meaning. Alfred Tarski, a Polish logician, defined truth for formal (logical or mathematical) languages in terms of relation of "satisfaction" between the constituents of a sentence and sequences of objects. On this premise, truth is thereby determined systematically by the satisfaction of sentential constituents.

This theory attempts to explain the logical meaning of sentences, treating a sentence as a logical proposition or basic statement which can either be true or false (Syal & Jindal, 2007, p.153). According to Saeed (2003, p.89), semanticists call a sentence being true or false its "truth value", and call the facts that would have to obtain in reality to make a sentence true or false its "truth condition". He gave example of a sentence whose truth value is reversed through the addition of negator "not" as follows:

(a) Your car has been stolen.

(b) Your car has not been stolen.

In the above sentences, if (a) is true, then (b) is false; also, if (a) is false, then (b) is true.

Following the above illustration, it becomes obvious that the tenet of this theory is that the meaning of a sentence is known if the condition under which it is true is known. Thus, a sentence is true if all necessary conditions of truth are satisfied (Syal & Jindal, 2007). As far as they are concerned, the truth or falsity of a sentence is dependent or conditional upon the truth or falsity of other statements. Citing an example, they gave the sentence:

John is in his office.

The above statement will be true if the statement "John is at home" is false, according to them. In essence, the truth conditional theory does not refer to the external world but basically to the logical relations which exist between propositions in a language.

One of the limitations of this approach, as observed by Syal & Jindal (2007, p.154) is that it takes only statements into account and does not consider other sentence types such as questions. Another limitation, they continue, is that truth-conditional semantics is not concerned with synthetic truth, i.e. factual truth about the conditions which prevail in the real world; it is concerned about analytic truth, i.e. truth by the very nature of language.

5. THE REFERENT AND SENSE THEORY OF MEANING

This theory is usually associated with Frege. According to him, the meaning of an expression consists of two elements: a referent and a sense. Both the referent and the sense of an expression contribute systematically to the truth or falsehood (the "truth value") of the sentence in which an expression occurs. Frege points out that the substitution of co-referring expressions in a sentence does not always preserve the truth value. Citing a hypothetical example, someone may not know that Francis Donald was the first president of Sudan but only knows that Francis Donald was assassinated. As a result, if the person does not know that the person that was assassinated, Francis Donald, co-refers to the first President of Sudan in that regard, the truth value has varied.

Frege's explanation of this phenomenon is that in sentences such as above, truth value is determined not only by reference but also by the sense. The sense of an expression, roughly speaking, is not a thing the expression refers to but the way in which it refers to that thing. The sense of an expression determines what the expression refers to. Although each sense determines a single referent, a single referent may be determined by more than one sense.

For instance, Francis Donald and the first president of Sudan have the same referent but different senses.

Thus, the two belief sentences: "Francis Donald was the first president of Sudan" and "Francis Donald was assassinated" can differ in truth value because, although both are about the same individual, the expressions referring to him (Francis Donald) have described him in different ways. This becomes clear, in consonance with the core principle of this theory, that the meaning of an expression may not wholly depend on the object or referent to which it refers but the way in which the expression refers to that referent.

6. THE VERIFICATIONIST THEORY OF MEANING

The rationale behind the development of this theory was to determine how linguistic expressions come to have the meaning they have. The axiom of this theory is that linguistic expressions mean what they mean because of what speakers do with them. That is, the meaning of a sentence is given based on an account of the experiences upon which the sentence can be verified. Hence, the meaning of a sentence can be verified in connection with other existing sentences. By implication, sentences that are unverifiable through any possible experience such as ethical, religious, metaphysical sentences, etc. are literally meaningless.

For example, the meaning of the sentence "My father is happy that I study Linguistics" is given simply because it is based on the meaning of the basic sentence "I study Linguistics". In other words, the meaning of the latter sentence defines or verifies the meaning of the former one. On the other hand, "They discussed Steve's death" would be meaningless because it is not verifiable by any experimental sentence indicating the death of Steve if the observation sentence is "Steve is alive".

Above all, the basic idea which underlies verificationism is that meaning results from links between language and experience: Some sentences have meaning because they are definable in terms of other sentences but ultimately there must be certain basic sentences, which the theorists called "observation sentences", whose meaning derives from their direct connection with experience and specifically from the fact that they are reports of experience.

7. THE COMPOSITIONALITY THEORY OF MEANING

This theory concerns itself with sentence meaning. Going by the position of Lawal (1972, p.150), this theory or principle states that the meanings of sentences are determined by the meanings of the component words and by the syntactic structure of the sentence. In other words, what the sentence is composing of as its internal constituents will go a long way in assigning meaning to

that sentence. To illustrate this principle, let us consider the following sentence:

The man killed a goat with a knife.

The meaning of the above sentence can be deduced from the meaning of the component words that make up the sentence. For instance, once the meaning of the words "man", "kill", "goat", and "knife" are decoded, it becomes easy unlocking the semantic content of the sentence as a whole.

To show the role of component words and syntactic structure in the deduction of the meaning of a sentence, the following sentences become relevant:

(a) The teacher slapped the student

(b) The student slapped the teacher.

The two sentences above do not have identical meaning even though they contain the same words. What brings about the difference in meaning is the order of the words in the sentences in that while "the teacher" is the subject in (a), "the student" is the subject in (b).

If we also take a look at these two sentences:

(a) I carried a bucket.

(b) I carried a chair

We will discover that the difference in their meaning is brought about by the fact that while "bucket" is the object in (a), "chair" is the object in (b). This again shows the relevance of component words in inferring the meaning of a sentence.

In essence, the meaning of a sentence depends on the meaning of the component words and how they are syntactically combined (McGregor, 2009, p.141), as far as the theory or principle of compositionality is concerned. While this theory appears appealing, it is not devoid of its shortcoming.

A principal limitation of this theory is that if one attributes meaning to a sentence based on the meaning of the individual words combined in that sentence, one will always assign wrong meaning to an utterance that

Man	Boy	Woman
[+HUMAN]	[+HUMAN]	[+HUMAN]
[+MALE]	[+MALE]	[-MALE]
[+ADULT]	[-ADULT]	[+ADULT]

The meaning of each word above is defined by the inherent semantic components into which the words have been broken. In essence, those components are the respective meaning of this word.

O'Grady, Archibald and Katamba (2011, p.204) argue that an obvious advantage of this approach is that it allows us to group entities into natural classes (much as we do in phonology). For example, "man" and "boy" could be grouped together as [+human, +male]; while "man" and "woman" could be put in a class defined by the features [+human, +adult]. Another benefit of this theory, as noted by Syal and Jindal (2007), is that it helps us understand meaning relations such as synonymy

is idiomatic. In other words, this theory cannot capture the meaning of idioms or idiomatic expressions because their meanings are not derived from the meanings of their component words but what is actually intended. For example, "The sick man eventually gave up the ghost" has a meaning (e.g. died) entirely different from the literal meanings of the words "gave", "up" and "ghost".

8. THE COMPONENTIAL THEORY OF MEANING

The development of this theory was born out of an attempt to determine whether or not words are the smallest semantic units in language. Some semanticists have hypothesized, according to Saeed (2003, p.247), that words are not the smallest semantic units but are built up of smaller components of meaning which are combined differently (or lexicalised) to form different words. As a result of this hypothesis, it was discovered that "the total meaning of a word is broken up into its basic distinct components" (Syal and Jindal, 2007, p.151). They stress further that each component of meaning is expressed by a feature symbol with a "+" or "-" mark to indicate the presence or absence of a certain feature respectively. The theory holds that each word in a language is decomposable into certain inherent semantic properties or features and that those features are actually the meanings of those words. In another sense, for one to be able to account for the meaning of words, one must first of all break those words down into their semantic primes or features which characterise them. Only then would one be able to give the accurate meanings of those words.

For example, the words "man", "boy", "woman", "bachelor" and "spinster" can be semantically decomposed into their semantic features as follows:

Bachelor	Spinster
[+HUMAN]	[+HUMAN]
[+MALE]	[-MALE]
[+ADULT]	[+ADULT]
[-MARRIED]	[-MARRIED]

and antonymy.

Despite the relevance of componential analysis expounded above, some problems are still posed. In the words of Yule (1996, p.116), for many words in a language, it may not be so easy to come up with neat components of meaning. For example, words such as "advice", "threat", and "warning" do not have clear semantic components into which they can be broken. If this is the case, one would erroneously conclude that they have no meaning in English. Similarly, Syal and Jindal (2007) point out that while many meanings can be understood in terms of binary contrasts, there is some opposition that involves more than two terms. Examples

are in the field of description of species of animals or plants, types of metals, colours and so on.

9. THE CONTEXTUAL THEORY OF MEANING

The contextual theory is the framework which describes the meanings of words and sentences not as isolated entities but as related to the situation of occurrence and use (Syal & Jindal, 2007). This implies that the meaning of an expression or utterance is only deducible from the context of use, i.e. the circumstances which surround the use of such expression. Firth (1957), cited in Syal and Jindal (2007), claims that language is only meaningful in the context of situation. On this premise, Syal and Jindal (2007) conclude that when we try to analyse the meaning of a word or sentence, the set of features from the external world or the "context of situation" becomes relevant, i.e. who is the speaker, who is the hearer, what is the role of each and the relationship of the two, what situation they are in. In an example, they cited, they argue that the sentence "It is raining cats and dogs", even though grammatical, will not be meaningful on two grounds: First, if it is not actually raining. Second, if the speaker is making a formal speech.

In sum, the contextual theory is a pragmatic theory of meaning in which emphasis is placed on the context of speaking rather than the literal, logical, natural or denotative meaning of an expression.

10. THE SPEECH ACT THEORY OF MEANING

This is also a pragmatic theory of meaning that is based on sentence or utterance meaning. By historical origin, speech act theory was developed by the Oxford philosopher J. L. Austin, and was subsequently promoted by John R. Searle. This theory is basically based on the belief that we use language essentially to perform acts; for this reason, the meaning of a sentence is to be equated with the set of acts it is used to perform. By speech acts, it is meant the actions that speakers perform in uttering sentences, including informing, promising, requesting, questioning, commanding, warning, preaching, congratulating, laying bets, swearing and exclaiming (McGregor, 2009). The type of actions, he continues, performed by the speaker in making an utterance is referred to as its illocutionary force.

To practically demonstrate how utterances are performance of various acts, let us consider the sentences below:

(a) The boy killed a hen.
(b) Stand up!

(c) Where are you since morning?
(d) I will marry you.

Uttering the above sentences is basically performing certain acts. Since these acts are connected to language use, they are called speech acts. The speech act in (a) is that of declaration; the one in (b) is that of command; the one in (c) is that of questioning; while the one in (d) is that of promising. The use of performative verbs in sentences happens to be a phenomenon this theory takes care of. Performative verbs are verbs such as promise, order, resign, apologize, pronounce, etc. which are used to perform direct speech acts e.g. "I pronounce you as husband and wife", "I order you to get out of my office" and so on.

From the above illustration, it becomes clear that the speech acts theory deals with the account of meaning of utterances in terms of using sentences to perform some acts. These acts are therefore the meaning of those sentences (or utterances) associated with them.

11. THE FIELD THEORY OF MEANING

Another account of meaning in language is the field theory which analyses the meaning of words. This theory was developed in Europe by Trier, According to Syal and Jindal (2007, p.155). In the words of Syal and Jindal (2007), the field theory explains the vocabulary or lexicon of a language as a system of interrelated networks or semantic fields. In his own observation, McGregor (2009, p.137) submits that the lexemes of a language relates to one another semantically in various ways, and form a highly structured system which is known as the lexicon. The lexicon, as far as he is concerned, is better thought of as a huge network of interrelated items rather than a mere listing, such as is provided by a dictionary.

From the above two positions, it is deducible that the field theory essentially gives account of meaning in terms of semantic relatedness. In other words, rather than analysing the meanings of individual words in a language as isolated entities, they are seen as sharing some relationship with one another in such a way that each language is characterized by a complex structure of items (lexemes) that are semantically related in terms of their individual meanings. As Syal and Jindal (2007) observe, words that are interrelated may belong to the same semantic field, e.g. "flower", "bloom", "blossom", and "bud" belong to the same semantic field because they are related in meaning. On the other hand, there may be overlapping between fields, e.g. the field of "flower" and "tree" may overlap in relation to such as "plant", "grow". It is important to note that the field theory provides an insight into the concept of collocation in language. Grouping lexical items together in terms of meaning relationship forms the basis of the idea of collocation, since collocated items are those which habitually co-occur with

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certain items. For example, in English, "car" collocates with "drive"; "food" collocates with "eat"; "beautiful" collocates with "girl", "woman", "mother"; "handsome" collocates with "boy", "man", "father" and so on.

McGregor (2009) provides an example of how lexical items can be related in terms of their meanings with the following taxonomic hierarchy for plant in English:
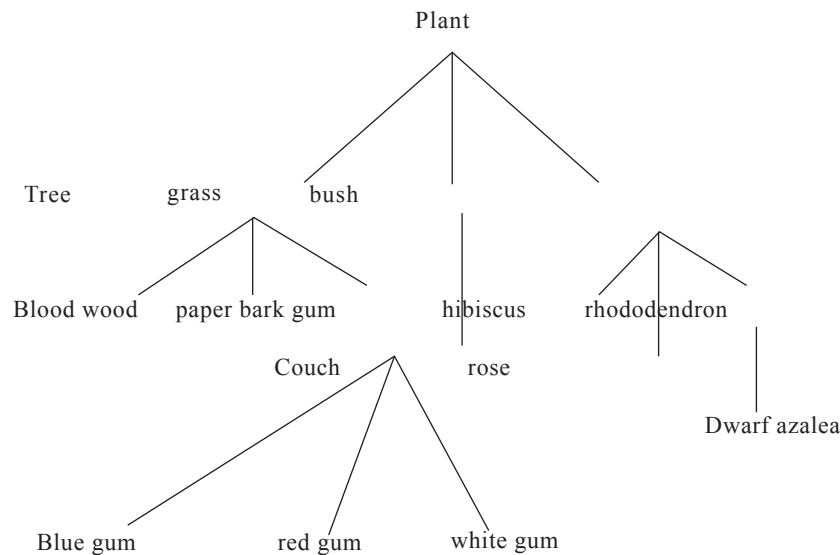
Figure 1
Taxonomic Hierarchy for Plant in English

All the words above belong to the semantic field of "plant". It could also be observed that there also exist certain sub-fields such as the field of "tree" which encompasses "blood wood", "paper bark" and "gum". Also, the "bush" field has "hibiscus", "rose" and "rhododendron" classified under it. In a nutshell, the field theory describes the meanings of words in a language as networks and collocations which are in turn built on sense or lexical relations in a language such as synonymy, antonym, hyponymy, metonymy, polysemy, homophony, etc..

12. THE GENERATIVE THEORY OF MEANING

This account of meaning mainly deals with sentence meaning. This model attempts to relate meaning with syntax and sound through a set of transformations from deep structure to surface structure (Syal & Jindal, 2007). This basically implies that the generative theory deals with meaning as deep structure, where lexical items with particular features are selected to combine with others to generate a meaningful sentence. For example, the selection restriction rules will determine whether or not a verb in a language should have a noun phrase object following it. That is, whether a verb is transitive or not. For instance, the sentence "The boy slept" can be generated as a grammatical and meaningful sentence in English but we cannot generate "The boy stole", unless there is a noun phrase after "stole" indicating the object or

entity that was stolen. Thus, as far as the generative theory is concerned, the sentence "The boy stole" is meaningless.

Syal and Jindal (2007) cite a similar example using the verbs "frightened" and "scared". These two verbs contain the meaning of fear and have the same selection restrictions, i.e. "The idea frightened the girl" and "The idea scared the girl" are both meaningful, but neither "The girl frightened the idea" nor "The girl scared the idea" are meaningful. In essence, the generative theory makes attempt to avoid generation of un-meaningful or anomalous sentences in language.

13. PROPOSAL

Having done a critical appraisal of some theories of meaning, this paper also makes its own little contribution to knowledge by proposing a new theoretical framework to account for meaning in language. This theory has been named as "The Existential Theory". This theory essentially deals with sentence meaning, thereby paying little attention to word (lexical) meaning. The defining assumption around which this theory is built is that the meaning of an utterance is principally defined by some existing fact(s) in the real world. In other words, the meaning of an utterance will remain so, as long as the existing fact which surrounds the entity to which such utterance refers is still in existence.

It thus implies that the meaning of an utterance can vary from one generation or era to another. The implication of this tenet is that the moment certain fact

or thing is no longer in existence, the expression which refers to it would be considered as meaningless. For instance, saying that "Africa is the largest continent in the world" is meaningful simply because the message passed across subsumes a fact that is still in existence, since Africa still remains the largest continent in the world. However, this fact may become obsolete if possibly another continent emerges in the future that will seize the tag "largest continent in the world" from Africa. In that case, "Africa is the largest continent in the world" will become meaningless.

The existential theory shares a little similarity with the truth conditional theory in terms of sentence label. While the latter will label a sentence as either true or false depending on the satisfaction of truth conditions, the former will dub a sentence as either meaningful or meaningless respectively, depending on the satisfaction of some existing facts. For example, "Professor Olanrewaju Oloyede is the vice chancellor of the University of Ilorin" will be termed as false under the truth conditional theory since the referent no longer holds the title, but will simply be termed as meaningless under the existential theory on the grounds that there is no any tactile evidence in the real world that supports the above claim (in the given sentence).

In the light of the above, it could be inferred that as far as the existential theory is concerned, whatever utterance or expression in a language which has no connection with some existing fact in the real world would be regarded as meaningless since it conveys no real message other than mere stringing of linguistic items. Citing a similar example, the expression "Yar'adua, the former president of Nigeria, is a nice man" is meaningless since the referent around which the given information revolves is no longer alive. Being nice as expressed by the present auxiliary verb "is" in that sentence is not in consonance with the existing fact because a dead man cannot be nice. Thus, it is the wrong choice of the verb "is" that has rendered the sentence meaningless. It can be turned to a meaningful one by changing "is" to "was", its past form: "Yar'adua, the former president of Nigeria, was a nice man".

Finally, the existential theory also accounts for potential of reference of expression or utterance in so far as the connected fact is expected to be in existence in the (nearest) future. For instance, the expression "Eden Hazard will become the world footballer next year" will be adjudged as tentatively meaningful on the basis of the expectation that the fact attached to it will exist when the envisaged time arrives. However, if reverse eventually becomes the case, that is, if the referent (Eden Hazard) eventually fails to win the accolade next year, the sentence will by then be regarded as meaningless.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it is observable that the field of semantics is a very broad discipline, at least if the theories of meaning are taken into consideration. This paper has examined some of the salient theories of meaning by identifying some of their strengths and weaknesses. Having being exposed to some of these theories, it suffices to infer that rather than prescribing the meaning of linguistic expressions, semanticists set up general frameworks, principles or theories by which meaning can be described.

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