

5SSEL026 – Language Construction

Lecture 6

Doing Things with Words

MEANING

Saussure believed that language was an exchange of signifiers (words) which have pre-agreed meanings (significances). The idea of the object reliably initiates the sound or orthography of the word, and the sound or orthography of the word reliably initiates the meaning. This, however, is how language does *not* work. Language is a **negotiation toward meaning**, it is not coding thought into sound or text and decoding sound or text into thought.

WHERE IS MEANING?

Meaning is all around us. It pervades our existence. Yet maintaining all this meaning is not cheap, it costs heavily in terms of cognition. The brain is one of the two most expensive organs in the human body, taking 20% of the energy acquired by the body (the gut takes another 20%)¹. This means that having a big brain is a big evolutionary cost; and big evolutionary costs do not evolve unless they also bring big evolutionary benefits.

In terms of costly brain functions, language meaning is involved in:

- **Semanticity:** in language, there is a relationship between an utterance and what it represents, but this relationship is not one-to-one, and not always direct. We are able to treat actual, real and virtual meanings as if they are of the same type.
- **Memory:** all meanings are stored in the brain. This requires storage space, fast retrieval methods, and complex data tagging to allow the meanings to form a network rather than a list.
- **Socialisation:** language meaning is not a simple relationship between signifier and signified, it is a negotiation toward meaning; there is no language meaning possible without communication.
- **Computation:** all linguistic meanings are relationships between sensory inputs, memory, and communicative inputs & outputs (although not all these are needed for any single computation). Language is not a simple stimulus-response system, nor a more complex input-process-output system; it evaluates intention as well as meaning, and it also allows for the innovation of new meanings.
- **Semiosis:** meaning is a shorthand cognitive representation of a negotiated reality; the meaning represents, it does not recreate.

WHAT IS MEANING?

Language meaning has four major aspects:

Meaning is arbitrary:

- It can be a product of function (such as *wheel*) or of form (*circle*), or of process (*rotation*).
- It can be associated with an object or action, or with a subsystem that has no value without reference to the system (such as *steering wheel*).
- It can be actual (*a round thing*), real (*a wheel*) or virtual (*a stop sign*).
- In terms of language it is one element in the triad of semantics-lexis-phonology. Words have meaning (semantics), function (lexis), and form (phonology/orthography).

Meaning is salient:

- Salience is what one mind is attempting to bring to the attention of another mind. It is relevant (the other mind

needs the information), significant (the other mind will value the information), and obtrusive (the information affects the thinking of the other mind).

- There is only meaning if there is value to the meaning; what has no value has no meaning. For instance, atoms have no value in everyday language; so their existence, while vital, is usually unremarked.
- There is only meaning at the point of attention; what is not attended to has no meaning.

Meaning is scaleable:

- Meaning can occur at different levels, allowing the same type of thing to be named in different ways (e.g. *beef*, *cow*, *cattle*). Each lexical item has semantic significances which do not apply to other lexical items (e.g. *a herd of cattle* is more than just *a large pile of beef*).
- **Prototyping** involves grouping meanings by arbitrary sub-features, and can create strange groups (for instance, is a *duck* a bird or fish? Medieval monks took the pragmatic view that it was a fish because it lived in water; if it were a bird they couldn't eat it on Fridays (no meat was allowed on Fridays), but as it was fish they could).

Meaning is interrelational:

- What counts as a meaningful single object in the world is contextual: attention can be directed at a set of objects as a set, a single object, or a component of an object. This creates meaning at multiple levels, with different meanings nesting within other meanings. Meaning can therefore be atomic (a bicycle rack, a bicycle, a pedal) or blended (a set of bicycles, a working bicycle, a bicycle pedal); and it can be simultaneously both atomic and blended. Meanings are themselves fuzzy.
- Nothing identified as a single object has a single meaning mapped to it; everything has multiple meaning-associations, creating fuzzy correspondences between objects and meanings, and between meanings and meanings.

NEGOTIATING TOWARD MEANING

John Austin (1962)² took the view that language is not just for exchanging information, it is for creating new realities, too. For instance, the words "I sentence you to life imprisonment with a minimum term of 34 years", when said by a person appropriately recognised by the State³, changes the freedom and rights of a particular individual. Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words, too, can hurt us.

Language, therefore, affects the world. Some of the ways it does this are:

- **Language is creativity:** when we create a new word we also create an access point to a set of new ideas, which can lead us in new directions. For example, the term *gene* was coined in 1911 by Wilhelm L. Johannsen as a name for a unit of inheritance. At that stage, DNA was unknown, but the existence of the name encouraged others to investigate what had been named. Eventually the structure of DNA, the mechanism behind genes, was discovered in 1953 by James Watson and Francis Crick.
- **Language is enforcement:** perhaps the first use of language as enforcement was a word which meant the same as "no". This little word contains a metamessage of consequences if it is ignored; and it is the consequences that give it value, not the negative meaning by itself. For instance, there has to be widespread moral outrage, and an effective set of legal sanctions to back it up, if no is to really mean no.
- **Language is agreement:** "I promise" establishes a commitment by the sender to the receiver, and "if" can

create an expectation of something in return. This relationship is fundamental to human socialisation, forming the basis of all kinds of social agreements and arrangements; but, to date, it remains undetectable in the social relationships of other species.

- **Language is naming:** when the Queen names a ship, the ship becomes that name; you have a personal and proprietary interest in your own name; and when you hear the words “you passed” you can add BA to your name, which changes your nature (at least, as far as employers are concerned).
- **Language is transformation:** what is the difference between a freedom fighter and a terrorist? Between a flower and a weed? Context changes the way something is described, but the way something is described can also change the context of the thing (Adam M. Croom, 2015)⁴.

For Austin, speech acts do not have meaning. Meaning exists in the mind of the sender and is generated in the mind of the receiver; speech acts are the vehicle by which the sender generates meaning in the mind of the receiver. Negotiation toward meaning involves a dialogue which has both main-channel and back-channel communication, a bidirectional process which involves:

- The speaker regularly checking the listener’s continued comprehension;

- The listener seeking clarification within the dialogue and not after it.

However, what does this say about writing? Is it merely speech by another channel, or is it a different mechanism from speech?

METAPHOR

Metaphor is a direct product of fuzzy meaning. It allows objects which are alike in some ways but not others to share names; and it allows new meaning correspondences to be made between otherwise-unrelated events and objects. Metaphor enriches the network of meanings, establishing new nodes of meaning and forming new connections between nodes. Some linguists see metaphor as a primary generator of language itself.

In language, metaphor relies on a mutually agreed cultural system of meaning. For instance, TIME can be seen as a process passing by us, as something we pass through, or as a series of events happening in front of us rather than to us. We can see the future as placed in front of us, behind us, to left or to right. Time can also be seen as cyclical (TenHouten, 1999)⁵, and even as unrelated to spatial metaphors (Sinha et al, 2011)⁶. Metaphor will be reviewed in more detail in lecture 9.

¹ Marcus E. Raichle & Debra A. Gusnard (2002). Appraising the brain’s energy budget. In *PNAS* 99:16, 10237–10239.

² John L. Austin (1962). *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.

³ In this case, the Honourable Mr Justice Haddon-Cave on 23rd March 2018, Central Criminal Court, The Queen -V- Ahmed Hassan.

⁴ Adam M. Croom (2015). The semantics of slurs: A refutation of coreferentialism. In *Ampersand* 2, 30-38.

⁵ Warren D. TenHouten (1999). Text and Temporality: Patterned-Cyclical and Ordinary-Linear Forms of Time-Consciousness, Inferred from a Corpus of Australian Aboriginal and Euro-Australian Life-Historical Interviews. In *Symbolic Interaction* 11:2, 121-137.

⁶ Chris Sinha, Vera Da Silva Sinha, Jörg Zinken & Wany Sampaio (2011). When time is not space: The social and linguistic construction of time intervals and temporal event relations in an Amazonian culture. In *Language and Cognition* 3:1, 137-169.