The Concept of Meaning

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Abstract

The concept of meaning becomes very important aspect to discuss when analyzing the nature of reading. Reading is a process of getting meaning of printed media produced by the writer. It focuses on the construction of general theory to the nature of language in terms of semantic, the theory of meaning. It is said that semantic component should meet three conditions as word meaning, sentence meaning, and the situation. This article deals with analyzing the theories meaning related to word, sentence, and ambiguity. It provides an intellectual frame of reference that can be used by investigators to approach how the students comprehend English texts by understanding the concept of meaning.

Key Words: dictionary meaning, individual meaning, ambiguity

Reading is actually getting meaning from printed form. In fact, describing the concept of meaning is not as simple as what most people think. There are many variables that involve in the process of deciding the meaning of a word or sentence, and even in paragraph and longer text. The notion of meaning has been discussed in terms of reading difficulty in the previous section. This article is focused on the process of getting meaning when one is reading.

The investigation of the concept of meaning is generally begun from the theory of semantic as a part of general linguistic theory that is scientific in the sense that it makes empirical testable predictions (Kempson, 1984). That is to say that a theory is said to be scientific if it can be tested based on empirical data. However, linguistics as science is concerned not with the mere collection of facts, but with the construction of a system of abstract concept which will account most adequately for the particular properties which language display.

In order to have any claims of adequacy, Kempson (1984:4) asserts that a semantic theory must have at least three conditions.

(1) It must capture for any language the nature of word meaning and sentence meaning, and explain the nature of the relation between them;
(2) It must be able to predict the ambiguities in the forms of a language, whether in words or sentences;
(3) It must characterize and explain the systematic relations between words and between sentences of a language – i.e. it must give some explicit account of the relations of synonymy, logical inclusion, entailment, contradiction, etc.

If a theory fails to capture these relations, either at all or in particular cases making the wrong prediction, it must be inadequate, either in principle or in some detail of the theory. She further points out that all languages depend on words and sentences. In other words, every word and every sentence conventionally associated with at least one meaning. Accordingly, for any one language, our semantic theory must be able to assign to each word, the meaning associated with it in that language.

In the case of words, these basically deal with dictionary meaning, that is, individual meaning of words apart from sentence. But in the case of sentences, the problem is more complex. In any language, words are arranged into sentences and that the meaning of these sentences depends on the meaning of the words it contains even though it is not as simple as it is. *Dogs like to chase cats* is different from *Cats like to* *chase dogs* even though the two sentences consist of the same words, they don not mean the same.

Therefore, a semantic theory has not only to capture the exact nature of the relation between word meaning and sentence meaning, but it must be able to state in what ways this relation is dependent on word-order or other aspects of the grammatical structure of sentences (Kempson, 1984: 3)

Furthermore, both words and sentences can be ambiguous in different ways and this may confuse the reader to get the intended meaning (Nation, 2005). The word “bank” in *John has gone to the bank* is ambiguous for a reader without looking at the preceding and following sentence or without any clear clue. The word “bank” may have two meanings, that is, ground near a river and an established place for keeping money. On the other hand, at the sentence level, the sentence *Flying planes can be dangerous* has no ambiguous word but the sentence itself is ambiguous. What can be dangerous, the act of *flying* or the *planes*? In this case the ambiguity is due to the structure dependent on whether the *planes* is understood as the subject of the verb flying or as the object (Kempson, 1984).

However, if there is a noun marker in front of the word “planes” or infinitive “to” in front of the word “flying”, then, there seems to be no problem.

Flying a plane can be dangerous.
To fly a plane can be dangerous.
To fly planes can be dangerous.

These three sentences are not ambiguous because there is no other possible interpretation of the noun phrase.

In addition to the concept of meaning, Firth in Coulthard (1989:1) points out that language is only meaningful in its context situation. He asserts that the descriptive process must begin with the collection of a set of contextually defined homogeneous texts and the aim of description is to explore how the sentences or utterances are meaningful in their contexts. Therefore the main concern of descriptive linguistics is to make statements of meaning. Linguists cannot define meanings, but must appeal for this to common knowledge (Bloomfield, 1933).

To show that context situation is important, Coulthard (1989) gives an interesting illustration. The sentence *I am hungry* can depend on its context situation and therefore can be used for different purposes; it can be used by a starving beggar to request food or by a petulant child to delay going bed. Bloomfield (1933) argued that linguistics is only concerned with those phonological, lexical and syntactic features which the utterance share. It was no concern of linguistic to explain how identical utterances can have different functions in different situation, nor how listeners correctly decode the intended message.

Other relation is called entailment (implication) and contradiction (Kempson, 1984), which means that one sentence entails the second sentence. If the first sentence is true, it implies that the second is also true. For example, *Paul passed the test*, *Paul got a certificate*; similarly, *Simon has just built our house*, *We have a house*; *Tom is walking*, *Tom is moving*, etc. Again, the corresponding relation of words is logically inclusion. The meaning of *girl* logically includes the meaning of *human*, because to say that something is a *girl* implies that it is a *human*.

So far we have looked at the construction of general theory to the nature of language in terms of semantic, the theory of meaning. It is said that semantic component should meet three conditions as described. The following discussion deals with word meaning and sentence meaning in more detail. Ambiguity and vagueness are also discussed to complement the understanding of the concept of meaning. Most of the discussion concern with a brief outline of the account provided by Kempson (1984).

1. Word Meaning

To construct the explanation of meaning in natural language, linguists, according to Kempson (1984) have three main ways: (1) by defining the nature of word meaning, (2) by defining the nature of sentence meaning, and (3) by explaining the process of communication.

In the first point there is clear relation between words and objects because a word is used to refer to object, and actions, and explanation of this relation is the task of semantics to explain. Similarly sentences are used to describe events, beliefs, opinions, and it is the task of semantics to explain the nature of the relation between sentences and the states of affairs those sentences describe and finally interpretation of language should be explained in terms of its role in communication.

To illustrate these three aspects of meaning, word meaning, sentence meaning and communication can be seen from the uses of the word "mean" (Kempson, 1984:12) as the following:

(a) (1) Spinster *means* unmarried
(2) To earn *means* to receive money in return for work
(b) (3) The sentence Brian murdered Mary *means* that someone called Brian deliberately killed someone called Mary.
(c) A: Are you not doing anything?
B: What do you *mean*?
A: I *mean* I want you to help me with this heavy box.

The uses of the word *means* in (a) and (b) are basically the same, that is to *indicate* similar idea, but *means* in (a) is used in word meaning, while (b), sentence meaning. In contrast, in illustration (c) the word *means* is used in different sense. The word "means" here is used between two speakers to indicate *intention*. Thus, the word is used as *I intend to indicate or to say*.

Furthermore, the meaning of a given word depends on the other words with which it forms a sentence as well as on its position within the sentence (Harris and Smith, 1986). Hence, longer utterances (phrase and sentences of which individual words are a part) provide keys to word meanings and also determine word usage (Wardough, 1975)

Furthermore, in describing the concept of meaning, it is worthwhile to look at the term reference in relation to meaning. The relationship which holds between word and things is the relationship of reference (Lyons, 1968 in Brown and Yule, 1985). According to traditional semantic view, reference is one in which the relationship of reference is taken to hold between expression in a text and entities in the world and that of co-reference between expression in different parts of a text. It is used to discuss lexical meaning (Brown and Yule, 1985:204). In other words, reference shows a one-to one correspondence between name and object, between *signifiant* and *signifie*. Take for example, the signifiant *cat* is partially determined by its sense, that is, the component properties of animate, fur covered animal often kept as a pet. The name of *Beehive* refers to the object of parliament building in Wellington, New Zealand; but in US, it refers to a different thing. This relationship between words and objects called relationship of reference (Kempson, 1984). Moreover, according to van Dijk (1977:45) reference may be identical, i.e., terms may denote the same individual, but only under some further conditions. Similarly, the reference also changes and these changes must follow certain constraints. However, this is not only the case of reference to individuals, but typically holds for 'reference' to properties and relations between individuals. In the reference to individuals and to properties and relations, the interpretation of sentence will depend on their interpretation of preceding sentences. That means it is not only the interpretation of relative to a model but also with respect to a set of sequence of previous sentence. Therefore, a discourse semantic essentially deals with formulating conditions of relative interpretation.

It is clear that, the meaning of a word can be explained in terms of relation between that word and object or objects to which it refers. Just like proper name refers to individual, it has been said, common nouns refer to set of individual, verbs refer to action; adjective refers to properties of individual, and adverbs to property of actions. However, the problem arises in a large number of cases following verbs such as *like*, *hope*, *want*, etc. It is difficult to provide an analysis of their reference. The same thing occurs for a number of abstract nouns and adjectives such as *belief*, *honest*, *honesty*, *intention*; and some other structural words like *but*, *of*, *the*, *on*, etc.

According to Bolinger (1975), sometimes it is hard to prove whether there is a single very abstract meaning or a set of relatively more concrete ones tied together in a bundle. He then clarifies by taking the word "own" as in "your own" which might be encountered in any of the following three situations (191)

1) A customer goes to a roadside stand to buy vegetables. He points to some heads of cabbage and says, Are *these your own?* Interpretation: "Did you grow them yourself?"
2) A census taker queries a householder: *Is this house your own?* Interpretation: "Do you have title to it?"
3) A den mother at a Boy Scout jamboree where there are several other den mothers, each with her flock of boys, points to two boys and asks one of them, *Are these your own?* Interpretation: "Are these your offspring?"

We can see that the possession of *your own* is interpreted differently, but we can still test the meaning of the possession by leaving out "*own*". In the first example, the utterance *Are these yours?* still can be used, but it could be taken into this sense *Are they your property?* In the second sentence, the question Is *this yours* is still acceptable, but it is more likely to mean as asking: *Is this where you live*? The last, with *Are these yours* could mean: *Are these two among the boys assigned to you?* Thus, we can see that there is option of defining *one's own.* The possession *own* is a function word, and function words tend to acquire abstract homogeneous meaning.

In addition, Brown and Yule (1985) have an important idea in discourse representation. They discussed an analytic distinction between what is in the world and what we might describe as the representation in the mind of a person of what is in the world. In other words, when paying attention to a particular piece of discourse, as a sample of experience of the world, the individual may build a specific representation of this particular expression of his particular experience of the world which, of course, will be integrated, to a degree, within his more general representation of the world (p. 206).

This is to suggest that when a writer produces a piece of discourse, it will be based on his individual representation of a particular state of affairs. When receiving the discourse, the reader will normally try to build a representation (his model) of the state of affairs communicated by the writer. Therefore, the state of affairs might be different among the writer and the reader. This is what we call writer's version and reader version. This basic version allows us to see that there is likely to be inherent mismatch between the writer's representation and reader's representation.

In order to do this, the reader must operate with some regular notion of what type of expressions, under what conditions, are used to refer to entities (Brown and Yule, 1985: 208). Finally, it should be taken into account that the ultimate goal of reading is to get meaning from print. The flow of meaning in a passage or a story is really more important than the individual words (Harris and Smith, 1986).

2. Sentence Meaning

Although word meaning and sentence meaning are closely related, they can be discussed separately. What is true is that the relation between lexical and sentence meaning and the problem of the extent of the interdependence of syntax and semantic are closely linked that they are virtually one and the same problem (Brown and Yule, 1985). Any effort to analyze sentence meaning we need to discuss syntactic generalization which are stated in terms of two syntactic levels, deep structure and surface structure (Chomsky, 1965). Surface structure is a term used in the study how grammar is constructed in order to generate infinite number of sentences of which language is made up. While deep structure was defined by Chomsky (1965) to be

(1) the output of the phrase structure rules (i.e. it was the level at which phrase structure rules could be used to state generalizations about the syntactic structure of a language)
(2) the input to the set of transformational rules (which state the relationship between this level and the surface string of elements making up the sentence)
(3) the level at which relations such as subject and object were defined (deep structure was the level at which *John persuaded Bill to leave* and *John promised Bill to leave* could be structurally distinguished)
(4) the level at which lexical items were inserted (i.e. syntactic generalizations in the form phrase structure rules and transformational rules concern either lexical items as a group or lexical items, but not such minimal unit as semantic components),
(5) the level at which ambiguity in sentences was captured, by assigning a different deep structure corresponding to each interpretation a sentence has.
(6) the level of deep structure was said to be the input to the semantic component (in Kempson, 1984: 161).

Furthermore, the rule of grammar is often reflected very indirectly in the actual surface structure of the speech (Littlewood, 1989). For example the surface structure of John *is easy to please* looks identical to that of *John is eager to please*. But their deep structure is completely different. Other similar case, as it has been mentioned, can be found in the following two sentences, taken from Kempson (1984):

John persuaded Bill to go
John promised Bill to go

The surface structure of these two sentences looks identical in that they contain a subject noun phrase, main verb, an object noun phrase and a following non-finite verb. The difference in the deep structure of each sentence is the structural relationship between these items. In the first sentence, the object noun phrase (Bill) is understood as the subject of the following non-finite verb (to go). Thus, *Bill* is expected to go; but not in the second sentence. In the second sentence, it is *John* as the subject noun phrase that is expected to go.

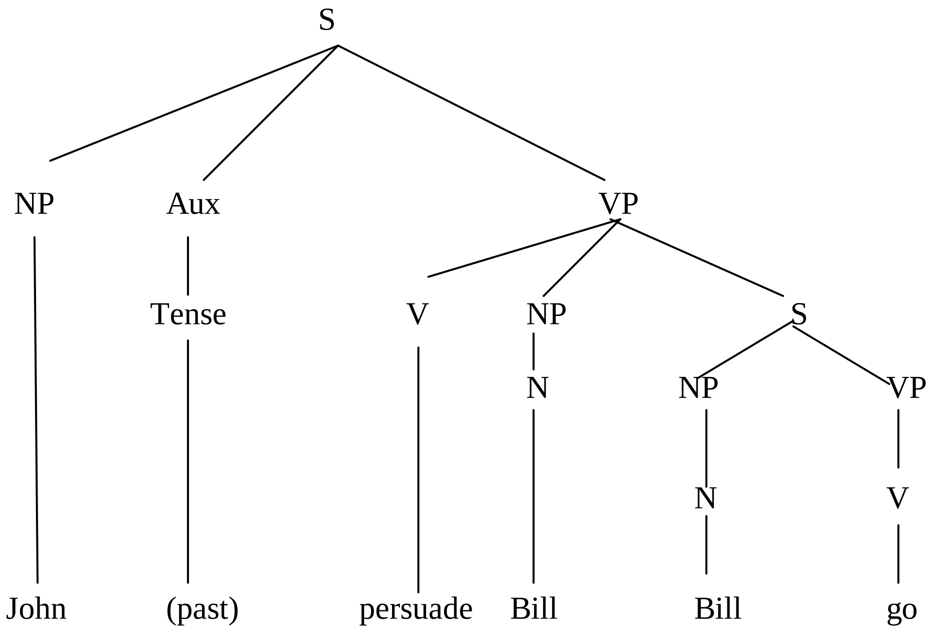

Figure 1 The structure of “John persuaded Bill to go”

Furthermore, Kempson argues that if we are to give structural account of subject object relations in the sentences, then the distinction between these two sentences requires a level more abstract than the sentences themselves at which phrase structure configuration contain distinguishing structural features. The distinction can be illustrated in Figure 1 and Figure 2. The two figures are structurally specified that, as has been mentioned, the subject of *go* differs in the two cases. What we need here is to state the precise relation between this structure and the sentence itself.

Yet, a considerable body of argument is still found especially at the level of deep structure where subject and object relation is stated. The sentence I *want to go* clearly shows that the pronoun “I” functions the subject of non-finite verb “go” (Figure 3). But the case is different when the sentence has another object, for example, Bill, as in *I want Bill to go*.

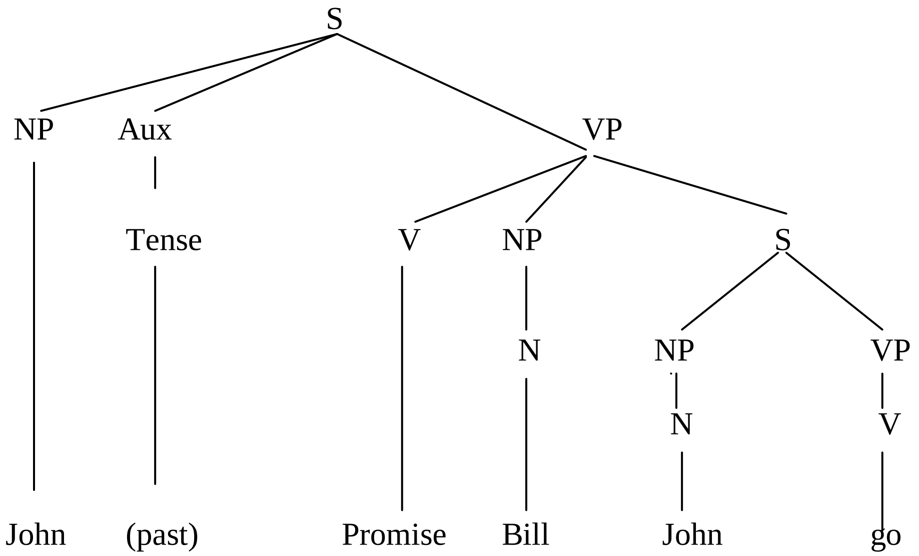
S
NP
Aux
VP
Tense
V
NP
S
N
NP
VP
N
V
John
(past)
Promise
Bill
John
go

Figure 2 The structure of “John promised Bill to go”

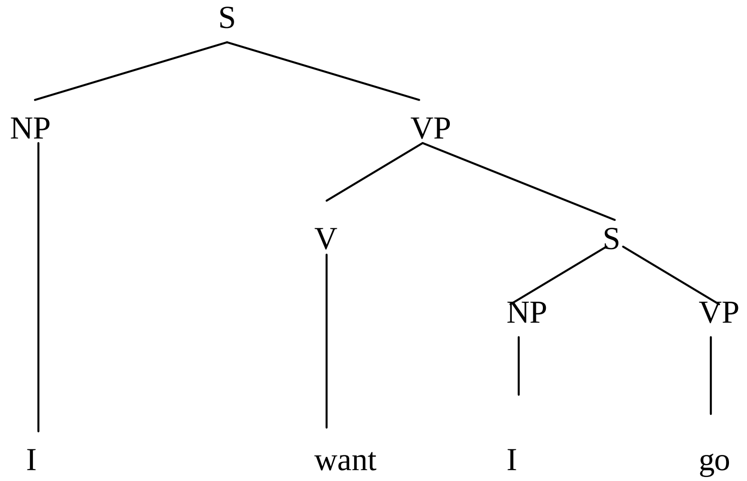
S
NP
VP
V
S
NP
VP
I
want
I
go

Figure 3 The structure of “I want to go”

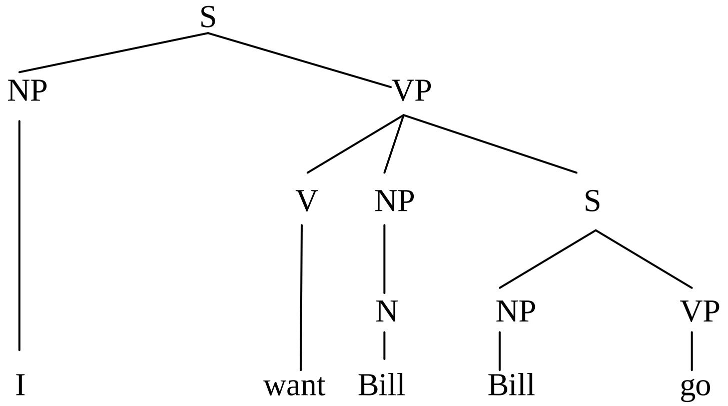
S
NP
VP
V
NP
S
N
NP
VP
I
want
Bill
Bill
go

Figure 4 The structure of “I want Bill to go”

The two sentences *I want to go* and *I want Bill to go* have their contrasting subject of "go" specified at that level, the subject of non-finite verb (to go) in the second sentence is "Bill". These two different structures can be illustrated in Figure 3 and 4.

So far the concept of meaning at the level of sentence has been discussed. To do this the two levels of approaching meaning should be discussed. The two levels are called surface structure and deep structure. One is dealing with grammatical form of sentence as prescribed rule. And the later is the underlying meaning beyond the form of the sentence.

3 Ambiguity

Ambiguous word or sentence is a word or sentence whose meaning is doubtful or uncertain. Ambiguity is the expression that can have more than one meaning. It is believed that ambiguity is one of the factors that make a reader have difficulty in getting the message in written text.

As previously mentioned, both word and sentence can have more than one meaning. Semantic rule linguists set up must state correctly for each language which words or sentences have more than one meaning. In other words, semantic rule must be able to identify the ambiguous words or sentences and predict some possible meanings.

On the other hand, it is mistaken to think that there is a little problem in deciding of a given sentence whether a sentence is ambiguous or not. Take for example, the word "good" in isolation. One might think that it is not ambiguous word because the meaning is virtually clear. But when it is put into a sentence such as *She has good legs*. Some interpretations will come up with the word "good". The word "good" might have a number of meanings. This can mean that she has healthy legs, or it can mean she has beautiful legs, or it can mean that she has legs that function well, for example in sport as an athlete. Thus, the word *good* has a number of different interpretations when it is used in a sentence.

Other example of ambiguity can be seen in the sentence *We saw her duck*. This sentence yields different interpretations. In one hand, the phrase "her duck" can be interpreted differently. The problem is that the word "her" itself can function as either possessive pronoun or objective pronoun. If it functions as possessive pronoun, *her duck* is similar to other forms such as *my duck*, *his duck*, etc. so that the word "duck" contains entity of animal, because the word "duck" in this context functions as a noun.

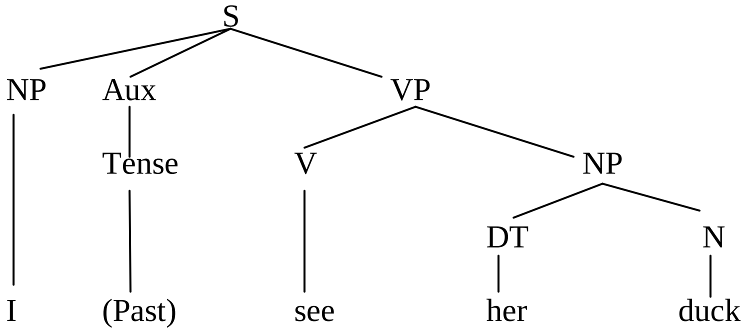

Figure 5. The structure of "I saw her duck" 1

The structure of this sentence can be seen in Figure 5. If *her* functions as an objective pronoun (indirect object), the word *duck* functions as a verb. Again, if it is so, the verb *duck* might have a number of meanings such as, (1) move quickly down or to one side (to avoid being seen or hit); (2) go quickly under water for a short time (see Figure 6). However, the sentence is not ambiguous if the pronoun is other than *her*, for example, *I saw his duck*, *I saw your duck*, or *I saw him duck*, *I saw them duck*, etc. That means that the ambiguous word is mainly on the pronoun “her”. Thus the ambiguity of the sentence is rather clear. The sentence has many meanings depending on where it is seen. There must be other similar ambiguous forms that can be found.

Furthermore, Kempson (1984: 124-125) distinguishes ambiguity from vagueness and classifies this into four main types of vagueness. These four classifications are discussed below. The first is referential vagueness, where the meaning of lexical item is in principle clear enough but it may be hard to decide whether or not the item can be applied to a certain object. Take for example the lexical items *city* and *town*.

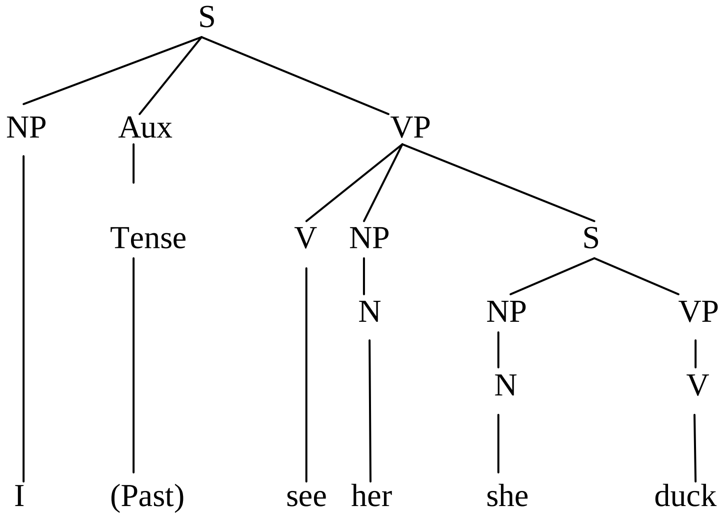

Figure 6 The structure of “I saw her duck” 2

These two words have something in common, that is simply a place where collection of people live, made up a certain number of houses. We agree that the meaning of each word needs a specification; we have difficulty to decide if some places are called city or town. Perhaps one place in a certain country is called a city but for other people from different country it would be called town, etc.

The second type is indeterminacy of meaning, where the meaning itself of an item seems indeterminate, where the interpretation seems quite intangible. The most common example of this is the possessive construction: *John’s book*, *John’s train, John’s school*. John’s book can describe as the book which is owned by John, the book which is written by John, or the book that John has been reading. John’s train can imply that the train that John took, the train he normally goes on, the train he is going to catch or to drive, etc. John’s school can be interpreted as the school the he went to, the school that he is studying in, the school that he teaches in or even the school that he founded, etc. Thus the meaning of this kind is so indeterminate.

The third type is lack of specification in the meaning of an item, where the meaning though in principle quite clear is very general. The simple example of this lack of specification is the word *neighbor*. This word is unspecified for sex, race, or age, etc. Other examples are verbs like *go, do*. These words have a clearly specifiable meaning, and yet cover a wide variety of meanings or actions. The next verb is “do” as *in I’ve done the sitting-room*. This sentence can describe that he/she cleans the sitting-room, paints it, empties it, etc., depending whether the speaker (writer) is cleaner, painter, a furniture remover, etc. Other similar expressions are to do some object - *to do the engine, to do the dishes*, etc., - means to carry out some actions involving the objects; but the actions are quite unspecified.

The fourth type is disjunction in the specification of the meaning of an item, where the meaning involves an *either or* statement of different interpretation possibilities. The disjunction within a single lexical item leads to a prediction that more than one of disjunction can be interpreted, and then such interpretations should be possible simultaneously. The example of this item is the word *run*. Consider the word run in the following sentences.

(1) He *ran* onto the field.
(2) He *ran* the race for Hampshire.
(3) The ball *ran* onto the field.
(4) The car is *running* well.
(5) The road *runs* from Krawang to Bekasi.
(6) He *runs* the motorshow.

The verb *run* used in above sentences has many meanings. But the most common meaning for this verb is that in sentence (1). The learners usually have difficulty when the intended meaning is other than this one.

In addition to different interpretation, the opposite case can also occur. We often find that different types of sentences can actually be used for the same purpose. In other words, the opportunity for variety arises from the relationship between grammar and discourse. For example, the unmarked form of a directive may be imperative, “Shut the door”, but there are many marked version, using interrogative, declarative and moodless structure (Coulthard, 1989: 129):

Can you shut the door?
Would you mind shutting the door?
I wander if you could shut the door?
The door is still open
The door.

This illustration also shows the relationship between form and meaning, surface structure and deep structure. What often happens is that a sentence is read at the surface level (what is printed). Harris and Smith (1986) assert that readers understand the ideas communicated by the author by engaging in a series of transformations that take them to deep structure. For example, the following three sentences have different surface structures, but they actually have the same meaning

(1) John drew a red cat
(2) John drew a cat red
(3) John drew a cat that was red

Thus, in order to gain the meaning from the printed page, the readers must be able to recover deep structure.

We have discussed the types of vagueness in theory of meaning. The examples in the four types of vagueness are still limited. There must other similar examples that belong to these four types. This part is to show that a reader should be able to identify the type of sentences that contain vagueness and decide to take the intended meaning.

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