

FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

LUBELSKIE MATERIAŁY NEOFILOLOGICZNE NR 21, 1997

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Words and their Meanings from the Perspective of a Foreign Language Teacher

The common sense of the meaning of a word seems to be well-known to all mature literate users of Polish, English and other languages, native or foreign. They can pause between words in speech, leave spaces in writing (apart from Chinese where the principle does not apply), and when required, they can count the number of words in a sentence. Yet, although the awareness of a word unit proves useful in a number of everyday situations, not mentioning its educational applicability, a definition of a word to which foreign language teaching theoreticians and practitioners would willingly subscribe is still unavailable.

The lack of a unanimously accepted concept of a word leads to much discussion of the issue and results in the rise of a variety of opinions. With the increasing interest in the problems of direct and indirect vocabulary learning in a foreign language and assigning to it the crucial role in the language acquisition processes, numerous attempts have been taken recently in order to enhance the understanding of how words and their meanings function in the language used in the spoken as well as in the written mode. Thus, a contemporary foreign language teacher is exposed to different viewpoints, some of which are fervently argued for positively, whereas others are criticised or entirely discarded. In the meantime foreign language classrooms are either introducing some innovative procedures or waiting for further theoretical developments.

A word - some basic definitions

McCarthy (1990:3-4), for example, finds it convenient for the purpose of considering the problems of vocabulary instruction to adhere to a traditional definition of words as „freestanding items of language that have meaning”. As far as the form of a word is concerned, it is assumed that it consists either of a root or a root with bound morphemes (prefixes and/or suffixes attached to a word) or simply constitute a compound word.

This basic idea of a word concept as 'a minimal free form' which is further irreducible is derived from Bloomfield 1933 (quoted by Carter 1987:5), and seems to have much intuitive validity and practicality. Yet , on the other hand, it is readily noticeable that many words in the English language do not occur in isolation but are contextually attached to other words, the classical example being the existence of the multitude of idiomatic expressions, the reduction of which is not possible without the loss of meaning.

Another definition of a word appealing for its simplicity is the so-called orthographic definition, which considers a word to be „any sequence of letters /.../ bounded on either side by space or punctuation mark”. It is obvious that endorsing such a view also automatically excludes any multiple word compounds (eg. train driver) and idioms. The same type of limitations are imposed by a stress-based definition of a word (a word will have no more than one stressed syllable), which, in turn, does not cover function words that do not have a stress in a sentence.

The problematic coverage of compound words and multi-word phrases can be alleviated to some extent with the help of the following definition: „A word may be defined as the union of particular meaning with a particular complex of sounds, capable of a particular grammatical employment” (Taylor 1990:146). But even with such a definition there remains the unsolved problem of the existence of different forms of particular words, such as a base form, inflections and sometimes derivations, which, generally treated as representing one word, may turn

out to have completely different meanings (eg. certain/ certainty) or behave differently in terms of paradigmatic and stylistic relationships (Sinclair; Renouf 1988).

Summarizing the main problems concerning the identification of the basic properties of a word and defining it effectively Carter (1987:6) mentions the following issues: the fact that too many words do not fit the working, intuitively accepted definitions of words, vagueness of the concept of the unit of meaning, the existence of different forms counting as the same words and the same forms counting as different words (polysemous words), as well as the already emphasized presence of idioms. All of them make it insurmountably difficult to work out an efficient unified description of words.

Although describing all the aspects of words and the way they function in the language is of much concern for foreign language teachers, it seems that word meanings have always been assigned a key position in handling vocabulary issues. Basically, here one may observe two main standpoints: accepting the existence of several different views of word meanings or adherence to one model viewed as the standard one. Both standpoints are of significance for the current discussion and will be presented below.

Different approaches to word meanings

Parallel to the intuitions concerning word forms are the language users' intuitions about word meanings, which are generally understood as referring to things or simple facts found in the world surrounding the speaker. Some people also seem to believe that meanings actually inhere in particular words. Only when a more professional exploration of the issue is embarked on does the extremely complicated nature of word meanings and their processing in context emerge.

According to Frawley (1992, quoted by Forrester 1996) five basic approaches to word meanings can be distinguished. They link the meaning and form of a word as conceptualized by linguistics (semantics and syntax) activated in the processes of language reception and

production investigated and described by psycholinguistics. The five basic approaches are as follows:

1. Meaning as reference.
2. Meaning as logical form.
3. Meaning as context and use.
4. Meaning as conceptual structure.
5. Meaning as culture.

The underpinnings of the first approach lie in the conviction that the meanings used in the language refer directly to the so-called 'things in the world'. In other words, we understand particular lexical items through categorizations that we impose on the world knowledge activated in natural use of language. This view, however, has to be automatically considered as too simplistic a treatment of such a complicated construct as language as communication, the basic reason being the fact that such a conceptualization of word meanings is not able to deal with implied or metaphorical meanings so often displayed in authentic communication.

The second approach presents the premise that meanings constitute logical forms which can be analyzed formally in terms of their parts, as well as in terms of rules of truth-conditions to be applied independently of their contextual use. The clear flaw in this approach is the fact that language is treated here not as a means of everyday communication but as a formal object of rigorous analysis. However, an interesting idea that arises in this case is one of grammaticalizing meaning components of a sentence, which has also found its reflection in the Lexical Approach developed by Michael Lewis (1993).

Much more significant for considering language skills and vocabulary matters is the assumption that „context and use determine meaning and the meaning of an expression is a function of its use in particular context” (Forrester 1996:45). When the concept of context and its relevance for word meanings is discussed one cannot pass over the name of the philosopher, L. Wittgenstein who, as early as 1953, expressed the following opinion: „Meaning is located in the function the words have as „signals” passed back and forth between people in the

course of purposeful and shared activity . Only in the stream of thought and life do words have meaning” (quoted by Forrester 1996: 45). Hence, this is the approach that gives support to a broad understanding of context arising from plentiful activities of use, action, comprehension, or cultural conventions already experienced by an individual, which are a source of valid presuppositions for him/her to understand new sentences (Forrester 1996).

The 'conceptualist' viewpoint stems from the claim that all human minds function in the same way, that is, they bring prior propositional attitudes, conceptual categories and structures into particular cases of language use. It is, therefore, strongly connected with the cognitive theories of human information processing, emphasizing the aspects of language comprehension and production.

Much discussion on defining conceptual categories behind words has been devoted to the search for and description of the so-called core meanings of words. Labov's (1973) question about the ways in which we judge an object to be a *cup* and how we think about it in terms of its core meaning has frequently been quoted as an example of the problems with delineating particular concepts (eg. Gairns and Redman 1986, Lewis 1993, Hatch and Brown 1994). It has been argued that in order to understand a word fully it is not only necessary to know its referent but also the boundaries separating the given word from related meanings. Similar thinking has been followed by prototype theory. It has been observed that people do actually group objects into categories on the basis of meaning in order to set up the most typical examples for them, that is, prototypes.

But neither the idea of core meanings nor prototypes can be unequivocally accepted. Although it has been empirically proved that native speakers of a given language are able to identify prototypes and rank a number of word categories in a similar way, it is hard to decide which criteria they apply to arrive at their answers. One can guess that they may distinguish them on the basis of frequency, appearance or functions of words, although none of them is really crucial for the use of a particular word in discourse. The notion of a prototype is also not

helpful in handling words with multiple meanings or word meaning changes imposed by context (Aitchison 1994).

The 'culturalist' view stands in opposition to the cognition-orientated 'conceptualist' view as it directly refers to the process of learning a language as limited by culture. John Schumann's so-called acculturation model of language learning (1978) considers the distance between the learner and the target language culture as the most decisive factor for the efficiency of the learning process. It is the learner who may find some words more relevant or simply more interesting to him and thus commit them more readily to his/her memory.

As emphasized by Forrester (1996), although the five main approaches to word meanings are based on different constructs, they show some overlap; when considered separately, however, they are far from being complete. For instance, the notion of reference is far too limited to explain the meaning of all the words, while exploring language as a formal object shows its limitation in handling the issues of everyday language use.

The biggest problem in describing meaning in terms of context, on the other hand, is providing a comprehensive explanation of the role played by presuppositions, which are based on mutual knowledge capitalized on by all the members of the same culture, also referred to by the term of background knowledge. According to the pragmatic view of language, these are both notional and linguistic presuppositions, which are assumed to create the common ground for speakers engaged in communication (Brown and Yule 1983). Here, too, the notion of culture holds a strong position.

Yet, the 'conceptualist' and the 'culturalist' positions are not free from their limitations which have their roots in the incomplete source information stemming respectively either from the theories of the mind or the theories of culture. Without doubt, the carrying out of such a heated debate about the issue of word meanings clearly indicates the need for continuing investigations into the subject.

The standard model of word meanings and its criticism

Although theoretical grounds have been developed to distinguish clearly between different approaches to word meanings as discussed above, one can observe that from the point of view of foreign language teaching there is also much interest in finding ways of handling word meanings at a fairly general level of description. Anderson and Nagy (1991) acknowledge the existence of what they call the standard model of word meanings based on the feature theory analysis of meaning developed by linguistics and make an attempt at its evaluation.

Despite its numerous shortcomings, the standard model of word meanings aims at providing a comprehensive view of the issues relevant for describing word meanings in a unified way. As Anderson and Nagy emphasize, constructing such a model is an especially difficult task as the very number of different types of words existing in the language casts into doubt the possibility of constructing a model general enough for all the words to be dealt with by means of a finite number of rules. The exceptions immediately noticed here are proper names which are referred to only by convention or the so-called one criterion words like *orphan* or *bachelor* which can only be described with the help of world knowledge; the difficulty with rendering the distinction between content and function words is also evident.

Anderson and Nagy assume that in order to characterize word meanings effectively four technical terms *reference*, *denotation*, *connotation* and *sense* have to be relied on. *Reference* of a word is defined by them as occasion-specific, as it refers to a thing or things 'picked out' on a particular occasion. *Denotation* refers to a set of all potential referents of a word, while *connotation* refers to basic distinctions or rules applied to decide whether a thing, action or property belongs to the set that constitutes the denotation of a word. A *sense* of a word is the distinction the word conveys in a particular case of use.

The researchers claim that both denotation and connotation are context-free, whereas reference as well as sense of a word are content-

bound. The distinctions between sense/reference and denotation/connotation are necessary to explain sentences in which two expressions different in meaning refer to the same individual. Connotation is the central element in the standard model as it puts forward the necessary and sufficient conditions for the inclusion of a word in the denotation, that is, calling it as one of a kind.

The assumed efficiency of the standard theory of word meanings follows from the conviction that a set of features underlying all the words can be identified. The properties of word features as discussed by Anderson and Nagy are presented below in greater detail together with the objections put forward against them:

- *criteria* (word meanings should be characterized in terms of a set of necessary and sufficient components) - however, there are words (eg. the already mentioned *bachelor*) whose meanings change under the influence of social factors;
- *atomic* (not reducible) and *sense-based* (determined by the use of senses) - it is difficult to combine both for many words;
- *binary* (a feature with a plus or a minus sign which is used to denote the presence or absence of the tribute) - works only with the features dividing the world into two mutually exclusive categories (eg. good and bad, but not black and white), it is for this reason that interpreting semantic features as continuous variables has been suggested (eg. Labov 1973, Lakoff 1972);
- *unstructured* (word meanings can be described as disordered sets of features) there are words like *buy* and *sell* whose meanings contain the same features but organized into a different structure;
- *exhaustive* (all word meanings in a language can be analyzed into semantic components) - accepting this feature, however, automatically excludes the parsimony of the system;
- *parsimony* (the set of semantic features necessary to describe the vocabulary of a language should be smaller than the number of the words in the language) - yet if a very fine distinction among the words

is perceived an extremely large number of specialized features has to be distinguished.

- *universal* (all meanings in every language can be mapped onto a single universal set of semantic features) - this is a very strong claim that would be incompatible with the claim of exhaustiveness;
 - *sufficient to account for sentence semantics* (notions of synonymy, analyticity, ambiguity, meaningfulness and anomaly can be adequately characterized in terms of semantic features) - there are issues which cannot be resolved solely on the basis of the language, eg. one can think of a real-life use for the sentence: *She is the father of her children* with she - male and the father +male.
 - *causally involved in comprehension* (word meanings are understood by decomposing them into their semantic features) - if the word features were psychologically real, the speed and difficulty of processing would depend on their number, but experimental data have not confirmed such a claim;
 - *convergent* (the elements of meaning that are primitive in a description of adult linguistic knowledge will also be developmentally primitive and computationally primitive) - the psycholinguistic data cannot prove that children's acquisition processes and the use of meanings by adults are controlled by the same sets of features, nor can their existence be proved in comprehension processes.
- Being aware of the need for semantic decompositions of meaning and the simultaneous inability to fulfill the strong claims of the standard feature theory, Anderson and Nagy suggest a resolution for this paradox. They give support to the so-called „family resemblances model” which draws on the premise that the relationships among the senses of a word used in contexts and their features change from use to use. They claim that although some senses can be explained by the application of core meaning and general principles of reference and instantiation, no uniform and simple framework for all word meanings can be worked out since, in numerous circumstances, word meanings can be established only after reference to knowledge of the world.

It clearly follows from such an interpretation of word meanings that the issue of contextual variation becomes of utmost importance. The view of Anderson et al. (1976) that a word has a family of potential meanings and that their instantiation is based primarily on one's knowledge of the world is in opposition to more traditional approaches (eg. Johnson - Laird 1987) which, in an attempt to maintain parsimony of word meanings, claim that a sense of a word remains the same and only reference changes. In order to maintain the concept of a fixed word connotation one has to accept the existence of decontextualized, invariant *core meaning* of a word, which becomes sense, that is, *contextual meaning*, when world knowledge is imposed on connotation in a particular case.

The belief in core meanings of words finds its direct reflection in constructing dictionary definitions. But, as Anderson and Nagy argue, the existence of core meanings of words is far from being a general phenomenon and there are many cases that can be explained neither phenomenologically nor experientially. If such a compromised model, were to be agreed upon, however, it would have to account for contextual meanings by adding a specification of contexts for the use of particular words that would put restrictions on their distribution.

It can be easily noticed then that definitions of words that appear in reference dictionaries, as well as definitions that are constructed for a variety of pedagogical purposes, reflect many characteristics of the standard model of word meanings, such as, parsimony and abstractness. In order to save space they are brief, often presented in sophisticated and abstract language with no sufficient contextual information about a word given and sufficient amount of illustrative sentences. They are generally aimed at readers, not writers.

Formulating an effective definition of a word is not an easy task, even for well-educated people who know many word meanings. Furthermore, the definition itself is neither sufficient nor necessary for understanding the meaning of a word, although even knowing the meaning of a word we can still learn something more about it when studying its definition.

Some interesting findings concerning the conceptualization of word meanings come from psycholinguistics. It has been observed, for instance, that children come to understand word meaning features at later stages of cognitive development. Only then does their ability to reorganize lexical items within domains of related words become enhanced. Moreover, it has been noticed that neither appropriate use of particular lexical items nor understanding them are determined by prior recognition of semantic relationships between words. And yet, the knowledge of semantic features, although optional, may be helpful in organizing word meanings and, as has been claimed by vanDaalen Kapteins (1982, quoted by Anderson and Nagy 1991), the skill of analyzing words is analyzing words is effectively exploited by people with higher verbal ability. As a rule, however, when people try to notice similarities between words or make generalizations about them they do not operate at the highest level of abstractness.

In summary, Anderson and Nagy find it imperative that word meanings be considered as 'complex, ill-structured knowledge' with much irregularity which has to be accepted in order to avoid oversimplification.

Some current considerations in foreign language teaching

Recent developments in foreign language teaching methodology have proved to be conducive to further reconsiderations of the issue of words and their meanings looked upon from the point of view of language learning and teaching processes. Communicative Language Teaching and the Lexical Approach emphasize the significance of meaning in real-life communication which is assumed to be interactive in its nature. Yet, the basic problem, unresolved at the present state of knowledge, is that of better understanding and defining the place of stability and creativity in vocabulary use.

With the difference of opinions it seems reasonable to support the view of Cowie (1988) that stability and creativity are complementary and interactive factors in vocabulary use. On the one hand, there are a

number of stable multi-word units in the natural language predictable for native informants (the so-called speech formulae or prefabricated routines). On the other hand, there are also many situations in which one has to use one's intellectual and social skills to interpret a new sense of a word already known, or infer the meaning of a completely unknown word.

With the development of a new philosophy of language as a means of communication, reflected in the methodology of foreign languages in Communicative Language Teaching, more voices critical of conventional views of words have appeared. Sinclair and Renouf (1988), for instance, adhere to the opinion that what is wrong with the conventional approaches to words is primarily the fact that they deal with either their lexical meaning or syntactical functions to the neglect of discursive and paradigmatic patterns in the language. The proponents of CLT would give support to the view that the knowledge of code resources (linguistic elements) and procedures for vocabulary use in discursive context are in constant interplay.

Furthermore, CLT emphasizes the need that words and sentence meanings are looked upon as negotiable from one context to another (Cowie 1988). Under the impact of pragmatics the significance of extralinguistic factors for arriving at word meanings in a naturally used language has been underlined. More and more frequently the question is voiced which are the stable and which are the creative properties of a word.

In the current literature in foreign language teaching there are two general aspects of the problem that seem to have gained most emphasis. First of all, there is the awareness of the very complex nature of meaning in the language. Michael Lewis (1993) mentions as many as twelve different types of meaning that have to be considered (referential, differential, connotational, contextual, collocational, pragmatic, factual, modal, negotiated, top-down, bottom-up and discourse meaning). And as he stresses in his most recent publication („Implementing the Lexical Approach”, 1997) it is understanding how

lexis functions in real life communication that can help us interpret language acquisition processes.

Much attention has also been focused on the fact that the central process in the creation of meaning is that of choice (Morrow 1981, Willis 1990, Lewis 1993). It is the language user who attempts to create the most satisfactory meanings from his point of view, meanings which do not have to be the most accurate for a given situation. The accompanying context has a significant role to play as it supports the intended meanings while at the same time limiting them.

With the increasing interest in conceptualizing a word and the awareness that none of the traditional definitions really suffices in fully explaining the characteristics of a word and its meaning, especially with the view to new developments in language teaching, there has arisen a need for further search for didactically useful models. Foreign language teachers preoccupied with the problems of direct and indirect vocabulary learning and teaching on a daily basis are awaiting further theoretical developments that would result in successful classroom implementations.

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