

Mode of indistinctness in semantics

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Abstract

Language is a mode of communication which helps us to converse with each other. Linguistics is the base to scientifically learn the language. Grammar also has main role in learning a language. Semantics is one of the types of Linguistics that deals with the study of words and its meaning. By using a word having same structure it causes Ambiguity (indistinctness) in some place. If a word gives more than one meaning it is called Ambiguous. This manuscript deals with the types of Ambiguities in Semantics.

Keywords: linguistics, grammar, semantics, ambiguity (indistinctness)

Introduction

"A Scientific analysis of Language is carried out systematically on the basis of objectively verifiable observations and within the framework of some general theory of Language Structure."

S.K. Verma.

Linguistics is a methodical cram of the approach, ideology underlying human languages. It is scientific because it pursues the general methodology of science (controlled observation, hypothesis-formation, analysis, generalization, prediction, testing by further observation and confirmation, modification or rejection of the hypothesis). There are several types of Linguistics.

- Applied Linguistics
- Socio Linguistics
- Theoretical Linguistics
- Comparative Linguistics

Branches of Linguistics

Linguistics has set up phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic and semantic levels of analysis.

- *Phonetics* is the study of the Articulation Transmission and Reception of speech sounds.
- *Phonology* is the study of the organization of the units of the sounds of speech into syllables and other larger units. The Phonology of a language is a description of the systems and patterns of sounds that occur in that Language.
- *Morphology* is study of words.
- *Syntax* deals with the combination of words into Phrases, Clauses and Sentences.
- *Semantics* is concerned with the study of meaning in all its aspects. The term Grammar is sometimes used to refer to morphology and Syntax; some Linguists use it to refer to the entire Language.
- *Graphology* is the study of all the conventions used in representing speech in writing.
- *Lexicology* is the study of Lexical items and their collocation relations.

Linguistics does not study any particular language, but

identifies and establishes the principles and rules, features and processes that are universal, and can applied for understanding all Languages.

Semantics

The subject matter of Semantics is meaning.

"Semantics is the technical term used to refer to the study of meaning, and since meaning is a part of language, semantics is part of Linguistics"

- FR Palmer: 1

The term Semantics was first used in the 17th century in the phrase "Semantic Philosophy". M.Breal is credited with coining the word semantics in his "Essai de Semantique" (1897) 'as a name for Philosophical enquires'. In 1894, the English word "semantics" occurred in a paper presented to the American Philosophical Association: "Reflected Meaning: a point in Semantics". In 1996 A.J.Greimas produced "Structural Semantics" which viewed semantics as an exploration of signification anchored in the world, perceived through senses. Halliday nevertheless feels that "A Language is a system for making meanings, a semantic system, with other systems for encoding the meanings it produces. The term 'semantics' doesn't merely refer to the gist of words; it is the intact practice of meaning of a language, uttered by Grammar as well as by Vocabulary. Semantics as a branch of Linguistics is mainly concerned with how the "meaning" is conveyed by the Linguistic system consisting of different units and structure like Sentences, Phrases, Words, and Morphemes etc. Philosopher study Semantics to understand 'good' 'evil' 'right' 'wrong' etc. In term the approach of the Philosophers is also made use of by Linguistics. Anthropologists study semantics to understand the cultural and behavioral patterns reflected in Language. The Psychologists look at semantics from the point of view stimulus and response, signs and signified etc.

Ambiguity

An expression is supposed to be ambiguous when more than one elucidation can be assigned to it. There are two sources of Ambiguity in Natural Language: Lexical and Structural

Ambiguity. "Ambiguity is a Linguistic condition, in which one linguistic form gives more than one meaning. In structure of language, this may arise at 3 levels.

- Phonetic
 - Grammatical
 - Lexical"
- (Ullmann, 1962, p.156)

Types of Ambiguity

Phonetic Ambiguity

Ambiguity may result in the speech due to the phonetic structure or phrases. In the connected speech sentences or phrases made of different words may be pronounced alike (homophonous) and thus become potentially ambiguous. (Ullmann, 1962, p.156)

For example

- 1) Sun's rays meet.
- 2) Son's raise meat.

The English sentences 1 and 2 are pronounced alike and therefore ambiguous as they refer to different informations.

Grammatical Ambiguity

Grammatical Ambiguity may arise either due to identical grammatical forms giving different meaning or due to single sequence of words having more than one structural organization (hierarchical structure). The English adjectival suffix 'able' means differently when it occurs after different verbs.

Example

- Readable "easy or enjoyable to read"
- Debatable "not certain open to discussion"

In spoken Tamil the case Suffix *oota* functions both as Possessive case Suffix and Associative/ Sociative case suffix.

Example: Possessive

1. *ennoTa puttakam " My Book"*
2. *VaNTTyooTa cakkaram "Wheel of a Cart"*

Associative

- Kannan ennooTa vantaan -"Kannan came with me"
- ciitaa raamanooTa KaaTTukku ponnaa -"Sita went to the forest along with Rama"

In a sentence or phrase, same sequence of words may have two interpretations when their grammatical relations are altered.

For example

Old men and women

Each has two structural organizations and thereby two interpretations.

- 1) The men who are old and women
- 2) Men and women who are old

There are cases of grammatical ambiguity. Similarly the following Tamil sentences also show grammatical ambiguity due to different structural organizations.

rajaa veesam pooTTaan

- 1) King disguise/costume put on.
- 2) The King put on some costumes/disguise.
- 3) (Someone) put on the costume/disguise of the King.

Lexical Ambiguity

The most common Ambiguity than English Language has is Lexical Ambiguity whereby a word has more than one meaning (Bach,n.d.). The most frequent everyday words that be considered as confusing are Nouns such as 'chip', 'pen', 'suit'. Meanwhile for Verbs are 'call'. 'Draw' and 'run'. The Adjectives consist of 'deep' 'dry' and 'hard'. According to Bach (n.d.) there are various test could be done for ambiguity problem and one of them is by using the two unrelated antonyms to one ambiguous word.

For instance: the word 'Hard' this has both 'soft' and 'easy' as opposites.

- 1) John went to the bank
- 2) I convinced her children are noisy.
- 3) The girl told the story cried.

This is called as Lexical Ambiguity, because it is the result of one of the words having more than one possible meaning. The next sentence is syntactically ambiguous (the syntax or grammar, can be understood in more than one way)

Lexical Ambiguity arises, when a single word is connected with two or more meanings. There are two kinds.

- Polysemy
- Homonymy

Sentences may become ambiguous when they have words which are either polysemous or homonymous. This is used in the story of 'Oliver Twist' by Charles Dickens. 'The boy Oliver Twist is told by one Bumble that he should go to the board' (council)

"Seeing no board (plank) but the table, fortunately bowed to that"

Here the Polysemy of the word ' board' has created ambiguity. In Tamil the sentence, *Kaal uTaintatu -"The leg broke" may mean*

- 1) A leg of a person broke.
- 2) The leg of chair broke.
- 3) The post of a shed broke.

This is because the word 'kaal' is polysemous.

There are certain safeguards to avoid ambiguity.

- Safeguards against ambiguity due to polysemy.
- Genuine ambiguity due to polysemy.
- Safeguards against ambiguity due to Homonymy.

Conclusion

Ambiguity arises of Polysemy and Homonymy. However sometimes safeguards may arise in cases of semantic borrowing, technical usage and even in ordinary language. In the cases of ambiguity arising due to homonymy, context and differences in word class, grammatical gender, inflection, spelling system, spelling alteration etc avoid the ambiguity. However genuine ambiguity may arise in some cases and lead to homonymic clash called Semantic Pathology. Finally in Semantics, Lexical ambiguity has the main role to maintain the clashes of Translation.

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