

LESSON SEVEN

MEANING CATEGORIES

When we talk of meaning categories, we are talking about the different forms of meaning which are made at various or the different levels of the language.

The different forms of meaning can be classified as expressions. These expressions can further be broken down as **Words, Sentences and Utterances**. We need to understand the meaning of one category before we can move on to the other category. This helps to understand the expression we are dealing with. Let us begin by looking at what a word is.

WORD

How do we assign meaning to a word? We need to understand what a word is before we can assign meaning to it. **A word is a physical manifestation or entity**. This is talking about a unit of sound or a string of sounds (**Phonological**). It is also a group of letters of the alphabet (**graphological**). A word has a semantic manifestation or entity. This means that every word has a meaning. Thus, a word is a string of sounds or letters which has a meaning. A word can be divided into syllables and phones and into morphemes.

CHARACTERISTICS OF WORDS

The smallest independent unit of language. Words do not depend on any other word to make meaning. We can even use punctuations or spaces to isolate words from other entities. Use of punctuation shows the boundary of the word. A morpheme which is free and independent is a word.

Cruse (1986:35) states that **a word is the smallest mobile unit of language.** This means that a word can move from its position to another position because it is independent. Though the meaning of the sentence may change with the movement of the word, the meaning of word does not.

For e.g.

Kofi goes to school every day

Give the money to **Kofi**

The building collapsed on **Kofi**

Let try to use the same mobility for e.g. with any morpheme using “**dis**”

For e.g. **dis**appoint appoint**dis**.

We realize that when the morpheme “**dis**” moved, the word becomes meaningless. Morphemes can’t move; they are located at specific places (dis, mis, un, ir, il, etc) are at initial, “s” and others at final places in words.

A word is the largest unit of Language to resist

interruption

This means that we can always insert new words, phrases, clauses or sentences.

For e.g.

Ama beats Kwesi

Ama **always** beats Kwesi

My boyfriend **always** saw **clearly** the **black tall** ghost

If we insert a morpheme in any structure, we may have nonsense or absurd words.

For e.g.

Beautiful girl as against

Beaugirltiful or even girl beautiful.

Problem of description of Words

Sentence-word

For e.g. mebedā- I will sleep

Other examples from students.

We realize that semantically and syntactically, this is a complete sentence with subject and predicate. We however try to avoid such expressions.

TYPES OF WORDS

There are different types of words based on their **function** and **contents**. These are also grouped as **major** and **minor** classes. The **major/content words** are nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. The **minor/functional words** are prepositions, conjunctions articles, auxiliaries. The classification of words is based on independence of meaning. **Content** words are basically independent. They have meaning in themselves even outside the context of use. The **functional**, as the name implies, realize their meanings only in context. For e.g. a noun is a noun, a verb is a verb etc. A preposition must be in a structure to realize its meaning. Their role is largely or wholly grammatical. The structure gives it its meaning. For e.g. on, under in, an, the, and etc.

We can also group words as being **closed** or **open** sets. **Open-set** classes of words are these whose membership is unlimited or indefinite. In this set, new items are continually being added as new ideas or inventions emerge. For instance nouns, verbs (fenestration) adverbs, adjectives are in this class. In the closed-set classes, the membership is limited or fixed. New items are not regularly added. It is finite. The members display interdependent of meaning

and use. These groups may change but one cannot easily add to their number.

The change also occurs over a long period of time.

We can also distinguish words by looking at their **morphological** structure or their **semantic** constitution. This will give us a simple words or complex words.

A simple words is one made up of only one morpheme, e.g. a sense and, an, house, mad, go, come, etc. A complex word is one which is made up of two or more morphemes with at least one of them being a free morpheme. The meaning of such a complex word comes as a result of bringing together all the morphemes that contribute to make that word

For e.g.

Teacher----teach (v) + er - one who

Driver----drive (v) + r - one who

Worker----work (v) + er - one who

Goes----go (v) + es - 3SG

NB: The length or phonological complexity of a word has nothing to do with its meaning.

For e.g.

Sets – set + “s” (complex) controversy – no division (simple)

Philanthropist – philanthropy +ist (complex)

NB: Do not look at the etymology of words as some word might have been borrowed from other languages.

Distinction between Lexeme, Lexical Unit and Lexical Form.

Lexeme: A lexeme is a unit of a word (form). This unit has meaning. The meanings of lexemes could have their own subdivisions of meanings which are related.

For e.g.

Pass (exam); pass (from one side to another side)

Pen (place for goat, etc) pen (bomb –proof shelter for submarines)

For pass, they have different semantic categories and as a result belong to different lexemes. Pen rather deals with place so they are the same lexeme. They are also lexical units based on their uses. If they are lexemes, then their meanings must be unrelated. **A lexeme** refers to a family of lexical units (Cruse 1986). A lexeme is polysemous; made up of a number of applications of the same sense.

Lexical unit: A lexical unit is a division in the sense of a lexeme.

For e.g.

If the two meanings of a word are related, then they are lexical units of one lexeme. If on the other hand there is no relationship in their meanings, (different meanings), then they are lexemes of the same word. Pass (exam) and pass(one to other side) constitute different lexemes. Pen for writing; pen-friend, penknife, pen-name etc are lexical units of the lexeme pen because they all have aspects of **write** in them. Lexical units constitute all the senses of a lexeme and all the words which are associated with the meaning of that lexeme. This includes words formed out blending, compounding, backformation, etc. for e.g. telecast (blending), televise (backformation) are lexical units of the lexeme **television**; **Education** – educator, educationist, educated, educant are all lexical units of the lexeme **educate**; **House-** housekeeper, houseboy, housegirl are all lexical units of house.

Lexical form: A lexical form is a manifestation of a lexical unit in terms of tense, aspect and number.

For e.g. Go (verb): went, gone, going
 Sing (verb): sang, sung, singing
 Drive (verb): drove, driven, driving
 Eat (verb): ate, eating, eaten
 Manage (verb): managing, managed

We can then say looking at the examples that lexical forms arise as a result of inflectional affixation or inflectional difference while lexical units arise as a result of derivational affixation. Also different word class manifestations of a word are lexical units.

For e.g. Import (v) and import (n)

 Contract (v) and contract (n)

Thus far, we have looking the word, lexemes, lexical unit and forms. All these help us to assign meaning to any word. We must take into consideration all the manifestations (inflectional or derivational) of a word in order to be able to analyze the meaning of that word. Words have different distinct meanings. These words are distinguished semantically and physically from one another. The distinction can be in tense, aspect or number. In spite of all these, every word has its own distinct meaning. The different meanings of words contribute differently to the meaning of sentences.

WORD MEANING

When we take words for e.g., these constitute the basic unit or the lowest level of language structures. When we talk of word meaning, we are taking about the meaning of a word before it is used in any expression; sentence or utterance. We can also identify word meaning as the input of meaning (what the word contributes) that word makes to a sentence or utterance.

Words bear various meaning relations to one another (words share difference relation-homophony, synonymy, etc). They can also share a relationship of inclusion (sister-female, sibling). They can belong to the same semantic field-colour, kinship, cooking, etc. The study of word meaning reveals that the lexicon of a language is not simply a random list of words; all these relationships are in a “**network**”. The idea or sense that is associated with any word is the meaning of that word.

Problems in Word Meaning Analysis

Words are demarcated by rules of writing instead of considering their meanings.

For e.g.

There are some words which are a combination of two words. Others are separated into words.

For instance:

Foot +ball =football

Head +boy = head boy

Head + master =headmaster

Head+ prefect =head prefect.

The autograph or writing system allows us to put some words together and separate others though the process of sense making in the different words are basically the same. This makes it difficult to semantically see one as a word and the other as made of two words.

Another problem is compound names.

Compound names have two simple names with each having its own sense. When these are put together they semantically constitute one word because they have a single sense.

For instance:

Cape + town = Cape Town

Cape + coast = Cape Coast

Orthographically, these are treated as two words. This becomes a problem especially when one does not know, though they each convey one meaning (the name of a town).

Lack of uniformity in the demarcation of word boundaries from language to language.

This phenomenon may create confusion for second language learners.

For e.g.

The negative element, **not** in English, is a negative morpheme in Akan represented by [n, nn, m, and mm]. Another example is the future maker will. It

is a morpheme in Akan represented by [bo, be, be bɔ]. If this happens, you realize that whereas the marker + word in English constitute two different words, they constitute one word each in Akan. When this happens a second language learner may have problems separating the word in Akan.

A problem also occurs with sentence-words.

For instance, in Akan, “**mibedzi**”, “**mibedi**” meaning “I will/shall eat” is seen as one word, but it is a full sentence of subject and predicate.

Semantically and syntactically, this is a sentence; but orthographically, it is a word. When this happens one becomes confused because it is difficult to place it as a word or a sentence in semantic analysis.

Opaque words also present another problem

The meaning of opaque words is not easily got by putting the meanings of morphemes together.

For instance, **bluebird** is a kind of Nissan car. It contains **blue** and **bird**. When we are looking at the meaning of this word there is a problem of considering it a semantically as a brand of car as a complex semantic entity or as a transparent word in reference to a **bird** which is **blue** in colour.

Parts of speech

Parts of speech are not independent of meaning. Two principles that underlie the allocation of parts of speech in assigning meanings are as follows:

- An attempt to cut up the world of perception the of the members of a speech community. This considers what the parts of speech do in the total perception of the speech community. We have nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs. These parts of speech constitute the major class because the basic framework for demarcating the world of cognition or perception by the use of language.
- The place the word has as we string together words to make up longer stronger structures of language-which means longer structures of meaning. Here, we are looking at a word as it is used to perform a different part of speech (function).

For e.g.:

Book (n) to Book (v).

If we consider longer structures, book (n) will not go with will (Modal). It will rather go with book (v). The other word helps us to identify which function that part of speech is playing. In the same way, fat will go with book as a noun-fat book and not with book as verb.

Content and function words

For Content words, it is easy to determine their meanings; but function words will have meanings only in terms of the contribution they make in the overall meaning of the sentence in which they appear, rather than the inherent and identifiable sense they carry into the sentence. They also help in stringing the content words together to constitute larger texts of meaning. As such, they are called structural or grammatical words.

Independence of sense

Functional words are thought to be dependent on the structure. This means that their **use** rather than their **existence** determines the sense we allocate to those words. For the example the preposition “of”. Here, we see transfer or application of meaning for content words because their senses have been established and they talk of inference in function words.

For e.g. the girl of Adeiso = the girl from Adeiso