

LESSON EIGHT

WHAT IS A SENTENCE?

In this lesson, we are going to look at what constitute sentence meaning. We will also look at what an utterance is, utterance meaning and the features of utterance meaning.

A sentence is a group of words which expresses a complete thought.

The definition or description shows that a sentence is a lexically plural entity – has more than one word. Even in one word or elliptical sentences, you need to retrieve the ellipted words in order to help you get the meaning of that sentence.

But what is a complete thought? Semantically, a sentence consists groups of words which are a combination of predicates and arguments.

Predicate as used in semantics refers to any word or group of words which expresses some relationship between an argument and an activity.

An **argument** is any noun that is related to a verb. It also refers to the relationship of a name to the simple proposition of which it is a part. For example, The girl is beautiful? Here, the argument is “**the girl**”. We can say here that ‘**the girl**’ – NP (N) is related to the auxiliary ‘is’ (be). The **argument** can also be said to refer to any noun phrase position within a sentence and this can function as the subject, object, e.t.c.

A **referring Expression** is a noun (argument) which is used as the subject of a proposition. It also refers to other nouns or NPs in a structure. So that

Ref. Exp. = **argument** as a subject

Argument as other nouns.

For e.g.

Yaw killed an ant

‘Yaw’ – referring expression

‘Killed’ - the predicate

‘An ant’ – predicating expression (argument).

The predicate here is the word or sequence of words which provide the most significant information about the referring expression or subject.

For e. g.

Jane is in the room

What is ‘is’ doing? In the sentence, ‘is’ is not doing any thing. It is almost empty. The room’ does not say anything about Jane. ‘in’ talks so much about Jane. It connects Jane to the room, which is the predicating expression.

‘In’ thus becomes the predicate.

We can also identify the predicate from a sentence like the one below.

Esi is a thief.

‘Thief’ is talking more about Esi. ‘Is’ is only joining Esi to ‘thief’, but ‘thief’ tells us of what Esi is.

We can identify the number of predicates based on the number of arguments (referring or predicating expressions) they need in order to be accepted as meaningful.

For e.g.

Aba danced

The verb ‘danced’ is a one – place predicate. It is only one argument.

But if we take the verb **sang** or **beat**, we realize that they need the referring expressions doing the actions and the predicating expressions (which is the things

I gave my book to Aba

1 2 3

Sometimes, we may see an expression which looks like

The lady in the room

There is no verb in this expression. One will think that the presence of ‘in’ is talking about ‘the lady’ (ref. expression). But we have to realize that it is not acceptable because there is no verb, unless the sentence is an ellipted one. If the full sentence is made, it will contain a verb.

A sentence, therefore, is a **proposition**-contains a referring expression and a predicate.

SENTENCE MEANING

Sentence meaning is all the meaning that is assigned to a sentence. This means that the totality of the meanings of the constituent words and the meanings accrued from the functions each of the words performs in the sentence. In short, it is the total senses or meanings of the words in a sentence.

Do we see sentence meaning as the total of all the meaning of the words – word meanings add up to sentence meaning or the meaning from which words derive the meaning?

Naturally, we form the idea of a sentence before we employ or select words to help us bring out that meaning. If that is the case, then the meanings of words cannot be independent of their sentences to make their own meanings.

For instance,

If a sentence is expressing a particular thought you need to add a word to the words, you will realize that you have chosen a particular word and left a word that may sound the same or it must be noted that words have meanings outside the sentence (no matter how much they depend on sentence meaning) and this meaning is what help us choose one word and leave the other. The word will also bring its meaning to contribute to the meaning of the sentence.

WORD MEANING + COLLIGATION OR COLLOCATION

It is not just the meaning of a word it contributes to a sentence that makes the meaning of that sentence, but also the ordering of the words in that sentence. This is what is called **colligation**. This can also be seen as the syntax. When the words are ordered or arranged in the sentence, the ordering then means that we will consider the roles of the words in the sentence.

For e.g.

(1) The *man* killed the *elephant*

(2) The *elephant* killed the *man*

If we were looking at word meaning alone, then the two sentences will mean the same because they contain the same words which have the same meanings. But if you look at the arrangement, you realize that the meaning of (1) is different from the meaning of (2).

In (1), *man* is syntactically the subject and *elephant* is the object.

In (2), the roles have changed. *Elephant* is subject and *man* is the object.

Semantically, *man* in (1) the agent whilst *elephant* is the affected or sufferer. In (2), the roles have changed. *Elephant* is agent while *man* is the affected. We then realize

that though the two sentences contain the same words, their roles make the two sentences different in meanings.

However, if we have two sentences with same number of words performing the same semantic roles, then the two sentences mean the same.

For e. g.

Adwoa is a nice person – (1)

A nice person is Adowa – (2)

WORD MEANING AND SENTENCE MEANING

How does word meaning contribute to sentence meaning?

A word is associated with different ideas. One word may have different meanings (where the words are homonyms or polysemous). When this happens, we need then to select the idea that is suitable for that situation. We do this through the process of **modulation** and **selection**.

Selection – in selection, we realize that one word form may have different lexemes. These lexemes have different unrelated senses. In a sentence, we may meet one of these senses. We know that the word form has different lexemes. In helping to contribute positively to the meaning of that sentence, we need to pick the appropriate lexeme. This is what we all *selection*.

For e.g.

We went to the bank. We needed some money for the weekend

Immediately one realizes that though 'bank' has different senses, we chose (selected) one and neglected the rest.

Modulation: In a sentence, we may meet some words. We need to pick the necessary senses of a word. Modulation involves promotion and demotion. When we pick the necessary senses, we are promoting those senses. The other senses are then demoted.

For e.g.

My friend is pregnant

Friend + o (neutral)

Pregnant + female

So my friend is a female

Here, + female has been promoted because only females can be pregnant. All other features (+male) have been demoted (rejected).

Other e.g.s.

Like **substance**, (sipped, held, e.t.c).

We can also promote some senses of an item or a word.

We are looking for that television-item

That television is expensive-price

That television is ash-colour

That television is round-shape

That television is beautiful-design.

Depending on which sense or aspect of the television you want to select, you do **highlighting** and **backgrounding**. It is the highlighted sense which is selected to

contribute to the meaning of the sentence in which it occurs. The rest of the senses are said to be ignored or **backgrounded**.

MEANING PARADIGMATIC AND SYNTAGMATIC RELATIONS

Paradigmatic relation: In this relation, the words are arranged vertically. Each of the words can perform in a particular role. Only one of these words or items is needed at every point in time in that role. This means that any of words can be selected to replace another. In this relation we say words are in a paradigm.

TYPES OF PARADIGMATIC RELATIONS

Grammatical relationship: In this kind of paradigmatic relation, all the items are seen to belong to the same part of speech or seen as performing the same grammatical role in a given structure. For example: we have eight (8) parts of speech or 8 paradigms. These are nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, determiners and auxiliaries. Taking nouns as an instance, each word or each noun is in a paradigmatic relationship with all other members which are considered nouns.

We can also look at the function of a word. Here, if we have one word and that word can function as a subject, complement object or adjunct, we can say that all these different functions are in a paradigmatic relationship. Over here, we are concentrating on the function of the word and not the class of the word.

Contextual relationship: Words in this type of relationship are those that can replace one another and still fit into the idea embodied in the structure. For example:

Yellow, young and boy. We cannot replace **young** with **yellow** in the description of **boy**. We can say **young boy** and not **yellow boy**, though they are all adjectives and so grammatically paradigmatic.

Certainly, **yellow** cannot replace **young** but then we can have an adjective replacing another adjective and still make a sentence meaningful.

Syntagmatic Relation: In this type of relationship, the words in a structure come together to constitute a longer structure. We say they constitute a **syntagm**.

Every syntagam has a structure which explains how the words are brought together. It is this structure that helps us to select a substitute for each of the individual constituents. We choose the substitute from a paradigm to provide us with the choices for the constituent elements of a syntagam. In making a choice from a paradigm into a syntagam, we consider a **syntactic or grammatical** relationship and also consider the **semantic** relationship. The **grammatical** relationship between constituents is what we call **colligation** while the **semantic** relationship between constituents is what we call **collocation**.

COLLIGATION AND COLLOCATION

Colligation refers to the syntactic rules of a language. This can be agreement (number, person, tense), rules of transitivity, comparatives, superlatives, use of prepositions etc.

Collocation: This is the semantic relationship of acceptability between words. Words co-occur or associate with other words. These words are called collocants because they are acceptable in the company of one another.

For e.g.

Girl-pretty and boy-handsome.

There are two main types of collocation; these are restrictive and non-restrictive.

Restrictive collocants are fixed. This means that, it may be grammatically, lexically or semantically unacceptable to replace an item or a word with another from the same paradigm. Expressions that have restrictive collocants are idioms, doubles or irreversible binominals, collective nouns.

Non-restrictive collocants: In this type of collocation, a word collocates with a number of words out of which a speaker selects one or more. However, the choice the speaker makes depends on the meaning they intend to communicate. For example **arrest** and **catch**; **thief** and **criminal**. Here, the context of the speech will inform the speaker of the selection of collocants. So that **arrest** will normally go with **criminal** or **thief**.

For e.g.

We will usually say

The Police woman arrested the thief or the criminal and not

The police woman caught the thief or the criminal.

UTTERANCE MEANING

The meaning of the abstract entity of a sentence or longer structures plus all the meaning that structure derives as it is said by a person. The meaning of a sentence is an input for its utterance meaning. It is not about the meaning as is being conveyed by the meanings of the independent words and their different roles only but also about the functions the words perform in the context within which they have been uttered.

Utterance meaning is more interpersonal or social than linguistics. Utterance meaning looks at features such as events (time, place, and function), participants (speakers, audience), issues discussed before and after the speech and speakers facial expressions, gestures and other non-verbal forms which accompany his speech.

Whenever one makes a sentence, it is made within a particular time and space. This

makes what has been spoken on utterance. Some aspects of meaning such as affective, thematic and stylistic meanings are not associated with words but utterances.

FEATURES OF UTTERANCE MEANING

Event: This talks about the scene or setting of an utterance. It looks at time, place, occasion or context. In this, meanings of utterances are derived based on a speaker's adherence to the right choices of words in a speech community. This helps the speaker in terms of the fact that he is either aware of his culture or otherwise.

Also, the psychological effect a scene or setting has on hearers of an utterance is of great importance to every speech community.

Participants / Audience: Here, the meaning of an utterance is based on the roles, the status and the relationship of its participants. For instance, in some speech communities everybody has a role assigned to them. Once these are changed, it becomes a non-adherence to lay down rules. Thus, once the roles are changed, the meaning of an utterance becomes proper or improper, effectual or ineffectual. Participants' status looks at age, social, economic or political status of the speaker. The status of a speaker makes an utterance acceptable or unacceptable.

The relationship of a participant also decides for an utterance to be appropriate or in appropriate.

Things talked about (Genre). This is the utterance type. It deals with what is being talked about, is it an ordinary conversation, a lecture, a story, or a joke or what? The acceptability or appropriateness of an utterance depends on how it conforms to generic expectation.

Speakers' facial expression: This is the tone, manner or spirit with which an utterance is made. We are looking at the speaker as to whether he is angry, serious

stiff or humorous We also look at non-verbal elements such as gestures, facial expression, volume (number of words), speed of speech and other things. All these come together to convey the meaning of an utterance from a speaker to his audience or hearers.