MEANING AND METAPHORS

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Abstract

The analytic approach to the study of language conceptualizes meaning in terms of three levels: abstract meaning, utterance meaning, and communicative meaning or force. These levels are defined in terms of three different domains: context-free intra-lingual relations, relation between language and its context, and relation between language and its speaker.

The paper presents a critique of the notion of levels of meaning. The notion of levels generates hierarchical distinctions like context-free and context-bound, literal and figurative, semantics and pragmatics, etc. It is a conceptual metaphor, rather than a cognitive fact. It is used by linguists to organize and explain disparate facts of language use. The paper discusses an alternative view of meaning in terms of a metaphor of spectrum. The levels are conceptualized as a horizontal structure, where the notions of boundary and hierarchy are important. However, if we turn the structure vertically, then we can view the nature of meaning as a spectrum, where the notion of degree or gradation is important. In that case the distinction between semantics and pragmatics collapses.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first section discusses the notion of levels of meaning. The second section provides a critical assessment of this notion. The third section postulates an absence of context as a kind of context. The fourth and final section attempts to provide an alternative view to this notion within the framework of Cognitive Semantics.

Keywords: Meaning, Conceptual Metaphor, Levels, Spectrum, Cognitive Semantics, Prototypicality.

1. Analytic Tradition and the Three Levels

The Analytic tradition of philosophy of language and linguistics, in the early phase, accepted three approaches to the study of meaning on the basis of the use of language in thought, the use of language in communication, and the use of language in institutions. Their objects were considered different. Later meaning was conceptualized in terms of three levels, and thus, these three approaches studied three aspects of meaning (Harman 1971). The first level consists of abstract meaning, the second level of utterance meaning, and the third level of communicative

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meaning (Harman 1971, Thomas 1998, Lobner 2003, Riemer 2010,).

Abstract Meaning

A sentence is conceptualised as an abstract structure at this level, and the meaning of the sentence as composed of the meaning of its words. That is, meaning is an intralingual, compositional and context-free structure. For example,

(1)   hun   rekhaa-ne   caah-un   chun.
        I-NOM Rekhaa-ACC   love-PRES   AUX
        'I love Rekhaa.'

In the absence of any context, one can say that the meaning of sentence (1) is: one person, probably the speaker, loves another person named Rekhaa. As the sentence has present tense, it can also be said that when this sentence was spoken the speaker was in love with the person. Besides, the subject and the object nouns are singular, and that Rekhaa and the listener are two separate entities.

Utterance Meaning

An utterance is a context-bound event. Utterances may be grammatically well-formed or ill-formed. A context-free sentence is an ideal structure, but its utterance in the context could be complete or incomplete. Without the context, an incomplete sentence becomes ungrammatical. For example,

(2)   tu   ko-ne   caah-e   che?
        you-NOM   who-ACC   love-PRES   AUX
        'Who do you love?'

(3)   rekhaa-ne.
        Rekhaa-ACC/DAT
        'Rekhaa.'

In the absence of utterance (2), the utterance (3) cannot be understood, it becomes ungrammatical and meaningless. It can also not be understood whether the NP 'Rekhaa-ne' is a subject or an object in the utterance (3). But in the context of utterance (2), the utterance (3) becomes meaningful.

Communicative Meaning

Intentions of a speaker are considered as the third level of meaning. The speaker performs different acts by means of words. At this level, words get transformed from structures into acts; acts like promising, praying, requesting, inviting, questioning, etc. The most important characteristic of these acts

is that they can only be performed by using language. For example,

(4)   ma-ne   ek   glaas   paani   aap-sho?
        I-DAT   one   glass   water   give-FUT
        'Can you give me a glass of water?'

The utterance (4) has the structure of a question, but it is not used as a question. That is, the speaker does not require the answer in yes or no. The utterance (4) acts as a request. That is, the speaker performs an act with this utterance, and expects the listener to perform an act in turn. In the absence of language, it is not possible to perform the speech act of request (Austin 1962).

It is assumed that meaning has three levels: context-free and intralingual, context-bound with reference to language and the world, and context-bound with reference to language and the speaker. In this approach, the abstract meaning is considered basic; whereas both, the utterance meaning as well as the communicative meaning, are considered derived from the basic. That is, 'word is an act' is based upon 'word is a structure'. Therefore, in the analytic tradition, the existence of two separate disciplines has been accepted for the study of meaning: semantics, for the study of abstract meaning, and pragmatics, for the study of utterance meaning and communicative meaning. The existence of the third discipline has also been accepted, that is, stylistics, for the study of meaning in literary texts.

In other words, if one conceptualizes language as a structure, one ends up constructing a set of abstract universal rules or principles of a system, that is, a grammar. The focus here is to identify structures and formalize their relations. If one conceptualizes language as a means or a tool, then one's concern is to find a set of norms which vary across systems as well as within a system. The focus here is on strategies used by speakers for producing utterances and by hearer for interpreting utterances. When one conceptualizes language as a goal, the focus is on strategies used for literary organization of a text, spoken or written.

2. Nature of Levels

The levels are conceptualized as a vertical structure, where the notion of boundary is extremely important. That is, one level is separate from another one involving necessary and sufficient conditions of Aristotelian principles of categorization. One of the features of level is: even though they depend on each other, they are independent from each other. Therefore, thought, speech and act are separate and independent in the Analytic tradition.

Similarly, semantics, pragmatics and stylistics are considered separate from each other. Furthermore, each of the levels requires a different theory.

Another feature of level that different levels are hierarchically arranged. That is, one level is primary or basic, and the other is secondary or derived from the basic. The metaphor of level generates hierarchical distinctions like basic and derived, literal and figurative, context-free and context-bound, structure and function, etc. Langacker (1987) states that linguists are particularly fond of positing such dichotomies. Besides, the notion of level also creates distinctions like self and other, man and woman, fact and fiction, writer and reader, conscious and unconscious, etc.

In the early phase of Structuralism, a grammar, too, was conceptualized through the conceptual metaphor of level (Sarvaiya 2008). The grammar had four levels: phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. The first level consists of sounds or phonemes, the second level consists of words or morphemes, the third level consists of sentences, and the fourth level consists of word meanings or sentence meanings. These levels were hierarchical, that is, without identifying phonemes of a language one could not reach morphemes. Similarly, without identifying morphemes of the language, one could not reach sentences. The motivating idea behind this approach was: combination of phonemes creates a morpheme, combination of morphemes creates a word, and combination of words creates a sentence. As per the logic of level, the movement across the levels remains unidirectional.

The notion of level as applied to the object of meaning raises a few interesting questions: Why only these three levels? Why only three levels? Why levels? Are the three levels of meaning a cognitive fact? That is, are they natural? Is it a genetically hardwired structure in the mind of the language users to create and understand meanings? In fact the notion of level is a conceptual metaphor MEANING IS LEVELS, which researchers use to investigate the object called meaning. In cognitive semantics, a conceptual metaphor is conceptualized as a cognitive structure that facilitates understanding one domain of experience in terms of another domain (Dancygier and Sweetser 2014; Kovecses 2010; Lakoff 2006; Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999). Levels are physical facts as far as disciplines like Geology and Archaeology are concerned. Events occurred at one level of time are independent from the other level, but as they occur earlier in time, they become source or base for the

occurrence as well as understanding of the events that occur later in time at other levels. Levels are, therefore, interdependent. But when applied to the nature of meaning the notion of level is just a metaphor, a conceptual structure which human mind uses to understand abstract phenomena.

3. Absence of Context as a Context

Let us consider the meaning of the following Gujarati sentence:

(5)　　hun　　　　　e-ne　　　　　caah-un　　　　chun.
　　　　I-NOM　　　him/her-ACC　love-PRES　　AUX
　　　　'I love him/her.'

In the absence of any context, sentence (5) will not provide any information as to who speaks, to whom, about whom, and why, as pronouns are gender neutral in Gujarati. At the level of semantics, the meaning of sentence (5) will be same as sentence (1), that is, one person, probably the speaker, loves another person, who is different from the listener. Such a meaning is enough, if we consider absence of context, that is, a sentence's being context-free, as one type of context. Disciplines like traditional grammar, linguistics, philosophy of language, etc., use absence of context as a speech act. We shall call such a speech act exemplifying. Any language user is always surrounded by infinite contexts. Each word and each sentence become a new context, and that way context is endless. Language use is nothing but creating and manipulating contexts. The meaning seems invisible in sentence (5). We can see the words, but can not see the meaning. Let us check the pragmatics of this sentence by putting it in different contexts:

Context – 1

Let us suppose this sentence is uttered by a rich girl proclaiming her love for a poor boy. She utters this sentence in front of her parents, who never had time enough to take her care. The speaker tries to shock the listeners by means of the utterance, and calls for the attention towards her existence.

Context – 2

Let us suppose this sentence is uttered by a village girl mentioning her love for a city boy. She utters this sentence in front of her father. The speaker seeks approval for her relations by means of the utterance.

Context – 3

Let us suppose this sentence is uttered by a girl proclaiming her love for an imaginary man. She utters this sentence in front of

her boy-friend to make him feel jealous. The speaker teases the listener.

Context – 4

Let us suppose this sentence is uttered by an 'upper' caste girl proclaiming her love for a 'lower' caste boy. She utters this sentence in front of her family to defend her love. The speaker here tries to get acceptance from the listeners.

Context – 5

Let us suppose this sentence is uttered by a lesbian confessing her love for another woman. She utters this sentence in front of her male friend who wants to marry her. The speaker here tries to politely reject the proposal of the listener.

Context – 6

Let us suppose this sentence is uttered by a married woman confessing her love for another man. She utters this sentence in front of her husband to reveal the secret about her affair.

In all the above contexts, not only the meanings of the first person pronoun *hu* and third person pronoun *e* change, but the meanings of the verb *caahvu* also change. The moment *caahvu* is uttered in a context, it attracts values like self-other, good-bad, possible-impossible, normal-deviant etc. Besides, the intention of the utterance also changes in each context. If we imagine one more context, of a piece of fiction, in which this sentence can be used to produce exactly the opposite meaning, as a case of irony.

It has been asked whether word is a static structure, with reference to Greek *logos* or a dynamic human action, with reference to Hebrew *davhar* (Harold Bloom as quoted in Robinson 1997). Neither does it seem like a question, nor a problem. It seems like a puzzle. Puzzles can be solved by changing perspective. If we look at the language from the perspective of the former, then a word is a structure under certain contexts, and the word is an action under certain other contexts. Therefore, we require the three levels, and the related three disciplines of semantics, pragmatics and stylistics. But if we look at the language from the perspective of the latter, then there is nothing outside context. Therefore, the above question becomes meaningless, and so does the distinction between the disciplines.

If we conceptualize meanings of Gujarati word *caahvu* in terms of different levels, it would be difficult to account for the different senses of the word, and equally difficult to integrate all levels. Perhaps integration is not even sought. This paradox is

the heart of the metaphor of level. It is clear that dictionary meaning is found at a context-free level, all the contextual senses are found at a context-bound level, and figurative senses are found at a figurative level. It is difficult to explain how these levels relate to each other, and also how different senses relate to each other on the same level.

On the other hand, if we conceptualize meaning in terms of the conceptual metaphor MEANING IS SPECTRUM, then different shades are inevitable. The different senses of Gujarati word *caahvu* can be accounted for in terms of prototypicality, one sense being a core member, and other senses being peripheral members (Lakoff 1987; Rosch 1973, 1975; Taylor 2003). Similarly, different intentions can also be accounted for in terms of prototypicality, one sense that of expressing one's feeling, being a core member, and other senses being peripheral members. This way verticality of levels gives way to horizontality of spectrum. The distinction between context-free and context-bound collapses, as absence of context becomes a kind of context used to exemplify certain concepts as well as to justify certain philosophical positions. Different contexts can also be conceptualized as different members of a prototype. As there is a spectrum of senses, there is a spectrum of contexts.

Meaning is assumed to be encyclopedic in nature in cognitive semantics. Concepts are assumed to be formed on the basis of a speaker's experiences of living in a particular society, culture and history; due to which speakers develop folk theories about the world (Fillmore 1982, Lakoff 1987). These folk theories consist of background knowledge, beliefs and views developed in a given culture. These theories are termed as frames by Fillmore and as idealized cognitive models (ICMs) by Lakoff. The word *caahvu* has different frames or ICMs in different communities and cultures, so in actuality there is no value neutral and abstract sense of the word. The distinctions like signified and value (Saussure 1974), denotation and connotation (Barthes 1967), dictionary meaning and encyclopedic meaning (Haiman 1980) that are based on the metaphor of level, collapse. Frames and ICMs are based on the notions of degree or gradation, and therefore, are based on the metaphor of spectrum.

4. Denaturalizing Levels through Spectrum

The conceptual metaphors of level and spectrum are explained with the help of following image schemas:

(6) $\underline{x}$
          y

The diagram (6) depicts all the features of the levels. The levels are independent yet interdependent. The upper level, indicated in the image schema by *x*, is the basic level, and the lower one, indicated in the diagram by *y*, is the derived level. The boundary not only separates the levels but also makes derivation unidirectional. And so is the direction of the power. It is evident from various contexts of sentence (5), that meaning is as much cognitive as it is political. This image schema captures both these aspects.

(7)   x : y : z

If the vertical image schema is turned sideways, so as to make it horizontal, the image schema in (7) is obtained. What one gets now is the spectrum. There isn't any boundary in this representation, and neither is there any distinction between context-free and context-bound, literal and figurative, fact and fiction, writer and reader. One merges into the other.

In Cognitive Semantics it is claimed that meaning emerges from embodied experience; meaning is grounded in the nature of our bodies and brains, and in our interactions with our physical, social and cultural environment (Johnson 1992). The related claim is that knowledge of language emerges from language use, that is, categories and structures in semantics, syntax, morphology and phonology are built up from our cognition of specific utterances on specific occasions of use (Croft and Cruse 2004). Instead of conceptualizing grammar in terms of level, a vertical structure, Cognitive Semantics conceptualizes grammar in terms of spectrum, a horizontal structure.

The Analytic approach to philosophy and linguistics produces context-free concepts that are hierarchically arranged; as the goal is to produce abstract system of principles, these concepts are postulated as a priori and immutable, and therefore, they are disembodied. Cognitive Semantics is based on Experientialist or Enactivist philosophy which considers experience, context and the structure of the human body and brain as conditions for any investigation into the nature of language or mind (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999; Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1991, Taylor 2003). It, therefore, constructs embodied concepts. The former approach is preoccupied with the metaphor of level, which stresses upon the notion of boundary and separation, and, therefore, is exclusivist. The later approach is based on the metaphor of spectrum, and it does not stress upon boundary, but focuses on degrees or gradation. It, therefore, opens up the possibility of plurality, coexistence and interaction.

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