

## Module I. Lecture 2

### Word Meaning

#### Plan

1. Referential approach to meaning
2. Functional approach to meaning
3. Relation between the two approaches

#### **1. Referential approach to meaning**

The referential approach seeks to formulate the essence of meaning by establishing the interdependence between words and things or concepts they denote. Essential feature of this approach is that it distinguishes between the three components closely connected with meaning: the sound-form, and the actual referent, i. e. that part or that aspect of reality to which the linguistic sign refers.

The referential approach distinguishes between the three components connected with meaning: (1) the sound-form of the linguistic sign, (2) the concept underlying this sound-form and (3) the actual referent, that is the object of reality to which this linguistic sign refers. These relations may be schematically represented by the so-called “basic triangle”.

The meaning of a word denoting a concrete object is not identical with the underlying concept generalizing all the objects of this class. For example, the meaning of the word denoting the bird **dove** is not identical with the concept ‘**bird**’ as a class of objects to which a dove belongs.

**Concept** is a category of human cognition. Concept is the thought of the object that singles out its essential features which are common to all the objects of this class. Our concepts abstract and reflect the most common and typical features of objects and phenomena of reality. Being the result of such abstraction and generalization all concepts are thus almost the same for whole humanity irrespective of the language. But the sound-forms and meanings of words representing these concepts are different in different languages.

Meaning should be also distinguished from the *referent*, that is from the thing denoted by the linguistic sign, the thing meant. Meaning is a linguistic phenomenon whereas the denoted object or the referent is extra-linguistic. We can denote one and the same object by more than one word of different meanings. For example, the object “**dove**” can be denoted by two words – **dove** and **pigeon**, but these words possess different numbers of various meanings in English.

Thus, meaning is not to be identified with any of the three points of the triangle. Here we should admit that it is impossible to define word-meaning accurately. *Meaning*, as understood in the referential approach, is the interrelation of these three points of the triangle – the sound-form, concept and referent.

#### **2. Functional approach to meaning**

The functional approach maintains that the meaning of a linguistic unit may be studied only through its relation to other linguistic-units and not through its relation to either concept or referent. In a very simplified form this view may be illustrated by the following: we know, for instance, that the meaning of the two words *move* and *movement* is different because they function in speech differently.

The functional approach maintains that a linguistic study of meaning is the investigation of the relation of sign to sign only. In other words, they hold the view that the meaning of a linguistic unit may be studied only through its relation to either concept or referent. E.g.: We know that the meaning of the two words *a step* and *to step* is different because they function in speech differently. *To step* may be followed by an adverb, *a step* cannot, but it may be preceded by an adjective.

The same is true of the different meanings of the same word. Analyzing the function of a word in linguistic contexts and comparing these contexts, we conclude that meanings are different (or the same): *to take a tram*, *taxi* as opposed to *to take to somebody*. Hence, meaning can be viewed as the function of distribution.

When comparing the two approaches described above we see that the functional approach should not be considered as alternative, but rather a valuable complement to the referential theory. There is absolutely no need to set the two approaches against each other; each handles its own side of the problem and neither is complete without the other.

### **3. Relation between the two approaches**

The difference between the lexical and the grammatical component of meaning is not to be sought in the difference of the concepts underlying the two types of meaning rather in the way they are conveyed. The concept of plurality, for example, may be expressed by the lexical meaning of the word *plurality*. It may also be expressed in the forms of different words irrespective of their lexical meaning (*girls*, *boards*).

The interrelation of the lexical and the grammatical meaning and the role played by each varies in different word classes and even in different groups of words within one and the same class. In some parts of speech the prevailing component is the grammatical type of meaning. The lexical meaning of prepositions is, as a rule, relatively vague (*to think of somebody*, *independent of somebody*, *some of the students*). The lexical meaning of some prepositions is however comparatively distinct (*in*, *on*, *under the table*).

The lexical meaning of the word can be of two types: denotational and connotational. One of the functions of the words is to denote things, concepts, etc. Users of a language cannot have any knowledge or thought of the objects or phenomena of the real world around them unless this knowledge is ultimately

embodied in words which have essentially the same meaning for all speakers of that language. This is the denotational meaning, i.e. that component of the lexical meaning which makes communication possible. There is no doubt that a doctor knows more about pneumonia than a dancer does but they use the word and understand each other.

The second component of the lexical meaning is the connotational component which has some stylistic value of the word, the emotive charge.

Words contain an element of emotive evaluation as part of the connotational meaning. The word hovel denotes a small house or cottage and besides implies that it is a miserable dwelling place, dirty, in bad repair and unpleasant to live in.

Many connotations associated with names of animals, birds, insects are universally understood and used.

e.g.: calf (теля)– a young inexperienced person;

donkey (осел)– a foolish person;

monkey (мавпа)– a mischievous child;

serpent (змія)– a treacherous, malicious person.

But it should be mentioned here that different peoples structure the world differently. E.g.: the word bug has such figurative meanings in the English language as a crazy, foolish person and an enthusiast, the word shark means a swindler. In the Ukrainian language the words жук and акула do not have such meanings.

Sometimes words in different languages can have different meanings. E.g.: the word gull means a fool, a swindler, in the Ukrainian language the word чайка can be applied to a woman or a girl. The word hawk possesses a negative meaning in the English language (a deceiver), the word is applied to a handsome and strong young man. Metals possess well-established connotations, derived from their individual qualities. The word gold is associated with great worth. Iron and steel connote strength, brass - audacity, lead – sluggishness or weight.

Words may also contain an element of emotive force as part of the connotational meaning. This is in fact one of the objective semantic features proper to some words as linguistic units and forming part of the connotative value. Such are, for example, stylistically colored words synonymous with their neutral counterparts: child – kid – kiddie; girl – lass – girlie – lassie. In interjections this meaning is known to prevail. We must naturally distinguish between the emotive element as inherent in some words forming part of the connotation and the subjective use of words that are not otherwise emotionally colored.

In actual speech expressive nuances may be obtained in different ways. In various contexts, linguistic or situational, words devoid of any emotive element

may be endowed with a distinct expressive function depending on the speaker's attitude towards his interlocutor or to the thing spoken about.

There are some other types of lexical meaning. They are abstract and concrete (hope, love - window, book); primary and secondary (wall of the room - wall of misunderstanding); bookish and colloquial (young man - chap, lad).

### *Questions for discussion*

1. What approaches connected with word meaning exist in lexicology?
2. What referential approaches to meaning are there in English lexicology?
3. What does functional approach mean?
4. Are there any relations between the two approaches?
5. Give examples to all approaches

### *References*

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