



DYLAN THOMAS

SEMANTICS

Dr. Anjum Islam

Associate Professor in English
Shashi Bhushan Balika Vidyalaya
Degree College, Lucknow

Linguistics took about fifty years to attempt systematic analysis of meaning. Linguists and earlier scholars of Language often had very clear ideas about the importance of meaning and the need for the study of it. It was not a subject which proved very easy to study. To begin with, there existed numerous preconceptions and false notions about the nature of meaning. There was also a tendency to identify words and things, to think that meanings were somehow concrete entities. Another was the attempt to see meaning in terms of behavioural stimulus and response, as in the theory of Bloomfield, But here also it is not possible to determine the meaning of a linguistic event only by observation of environment and behaviour. In the early part of this century, the idea of meaning was simplified as the relationship between words and things or as the use of language. When more sophisticated accounts of meaning were developed there arose a tendency to relate meaning to philosophy, rhetoric and psychology. The educational doctrines of 'general semantics' aimed at a general improvement of human beings by training them in the use of words and other symbols. Semantic analysis was also practiced by the logical positivists. The rhetorical and literary discussion of the concept of meaning was done by C.K. Ogdon and I.A. Richards (1). General theorizing about the relationship between language and thought, and language and reality was carried out by psychologists, philosophers: anthropologists and linguists alike. In general they dealt with the question of whether there are universal concepts existing independently of language, or whether language imposes a conceptual frame work on our thinking. Benjamin Lee Wharf and Edward Sapir distracted attention from the central and testable aspects of semantics -- "We dissect nature along lines laid down by our natural languages" (2). Their combined arguments led to the development of the 'Sapir Whorf' hype-thesis. The history of

'semantics' is a complete one, because so many fields of study are involved. There was actually little attempt to analyse the structure of language and to see how words defined meaning in various ways. The use of 'semantic field' techniques was a European development of the thirties. This was a method whereby one studied the different sets of words used by different languages to identify the features of a particular area of experience. It attempted to study systematically linguistic principles. More recent than this attempts were made to study all the various relationships of meaning which existed between words in a particular language. This approach is known as 'structural semantics'. Some of these relationships were traditionally taught and dealt with under the headings of 'antonyms' and 'synonyms'. Lexicography is one of the applications of language study. "Lexicography concerned, or seems to be concerned, with the identification of meanings, and the investigation of semantic change is concerned with change of meaning" (3). Semantics, or the linguist, is primarily concerned with the problems of how the semantic system hypothesized for a language is organized, and what kind of model might most usefully be constructed in order to facilitate analysis. Since the 1930's there has been a remarkable shift in the field of semantics. Emphasis has shifted to descriptive Semantics, to the part which words play in the structure of the language. There are divergent views on semantics and this diversity of approaches to semantics is derived from different views of language --- its acquisition and use. Orientation has two basic approaches -- the conception which regards words as signs, as units endowed with a symbolic function, and 'the view of language as an integrated system, a 'structure' whose elements including words, are interdependent and help to delimit each other.

The question of the form that a semantic theory assumes is of basic and primary importance because semantics suffers not from a dearth of facts about meanings and meaning-relations, but from the lack of an adequate theory to organize, systemize, generalize and ultimately explain these facts. Facts about semantics of languages have contributed to diverse fields--philosophy, linguistics, philology and psychology. Investigators in these fields have proposed theories which are loosely formulated and are too weak in explanatory and descriptive power. Taken together, these theories form a heterogeneous and disconnected assortment. Philosophical inquiry into meaning and the use of words has neither drawn upon nor contributed to semantics in psychology and linguistics. Correspondingly, accounts of meaning proposed by psychologists cannot in any way be connected with theories in psychology. This becomes apparent from even a cursory comparison of the work of semantic theorists as Bloomfield, Carnap, Harris, Osgood, Quine, Russell, Skinner, Tarski, Wittgenstein and Ziff. In the writings of these theorists we can find explications of meaning

based upon patterns of retinal stimulation, stimuli controlling verbal behaviour, affective factors in response to words, intentions, sentential truth conditions, conditions for non deviant utterances, distributions and rules of use. Chomsky has rightly observed—“Part of the difficulty with the theory of meaning is that “meaning” tends to be used as a catch-all term to include every aspect of language that we know very little about. In so far as this is correct, we can expect various this theory to be claimed by other approaches to language in the course of their development”.

The adjectival form, ‘semantic’ had been used by Bloomfield in 1895. He referred to ‘The Semantic value of the older reduplications’. In Bloomfield's later book *A Language* (5), there is a chapter titled ‘Semantic Change’. He says; “Semantics---from semantic (sic), pertaining to meaning. These words are less clumsy than semasiology, semasiological--- Literally then semantics is the study of meaning” (6). According to Bloomfield, semantics is grammar and lexicon, or grammar and lexicon are semantics. Semantics is the study of meaning; and also, the study of meaning is the study of grammar. Nothing could be more confusing than this. The drawback Bloomfield's theory is the confusion between formal grammar and contextual meaning. Modern semantics should be separated from the purely formal, positional and other categories of grammatical description to facilitate a thorough contextual study of meaning unobscured by categories serving any other purpose.

The study of meaning is one of the most important parts of general linguistics. But the study of meaning is precisely that branch of linguistics which cannot be undertaken “Without recourse to facts outside language itself” (7). Meaning in its full sense belongs only to sentences - pieces or complete utterances. Bloomfield, in his principal work, ‘*Language*’ has freed the study of meaning from its dependence on “ideas”, “concepts”. But this does nothing to solve the problem presented by meaning. Bloomfield's aim was to make linguistics scientific. He set about to do this by applying the method of “behaviourism” or “mechanism” to the explanation of the phenomena of linguistic functioning. The meaning of a word is to be defined exclusively by reference to actually or potentially common-observable and measurable data (8).

As opposed to this view of Bloomfield, the statement of meaning in terms of “context of situation” was developed by Professor B. Malinowski and, with more direct connection with general linguistics by Professor J.R. Firth. In the 1930's, the development of linguistics in Great Britain was dominated by J.R. Firth and Daniel Jones. The problems connected with meaning in linguistics needed attention and the most influential approach to meaning in Great Britain came in the first instance from B-Malinowski. He found that to explain the meaning

of many words and sentences in texts one has to give an account of their function in the situation and environment.

The theory can be formulated into two main point

- (1) Meaning belongs primarily not to individual words but to the sentence or the utterance as a whole.
- (2) The meaning of words is the function it performs via the sentence or the utterance in the context of situation or relevant components or the environment. Along with this Malinowski insisted that “language ---(is) to be regarded as a mode of action rather than a countersign of thought”(9).

Malinowski’s theory of language and contextual analysis of meaning were some of the main factors contributing to the general linguistic theory of J.R. Firth. The greater part of distinctively British trends in general linguistics have their origin in Firth's works. Firth saw language as embedded in the life and culture of the speakers, the joint product of nature and nurture, involving and revealing both the individual's role, personality and status (10). Language, in Firth's theory is a meaningful activity. All language study is the study of meaning, and linguistic analysis consists of the analysis of different types of ‘linguistic meaning’. This leads to one of the key components of Firth's theory levels of analysis. The notion of level is a general one in linguistics, but Firth made use of it in his own way (11). For the purpose of analysis, he set up number of levels--phonetic and -phonological levels, grammatical level, situational or semantic level. Specifically Firthian point of view appears in his insistence that linguistic analysis at all levels is the analysis of meaning: I propose to split up meaning or function into a series of component functions. Each function will be defined as the use of some language form or element in relation to some context. Meaning, that is to say is to be regarded as a complex of contextual relations and phonetics, grammar, lexicography, and semantics each handles its own components of the complex in its appropriate context” (12). This led him to the “concept of semantic or situational meaning, as well as grammatical meaning and phonological meaning. A unity runs through the whole scheme in that meaning at each level is interpreted as function in context. Meaning, then, can be used for the whole complex of functions that a linguistic ‘form may have. Meaning, is function in a context of extra-linguistic context of situation and intra-linguistic contexts of grammar, phonology or other subsidiary levels. “Descriptive linguistics is thus a sort of hierarchy of techniques by means of which the meaning of linguistic events may be, as it were, dispersed in a spectrum of specialized statements”(13).

References

1. I.A. Richards and C.K. Ogdon, The meaning of Manning. (Rout ledge & Kegan Paul).
2. Benjamin Lee. Whorf, Language, Thought, and Reality : Selected Writings (Cambridge, Mass : Technology Press, 1956).
3. W. Quine, “The problem of Meaning in Linguistics”, From a logical Point of view, 2nd ed. (Cambridge Mass : Harvard University Press 1961) pp.47-64.
4. N. Chomsky, Syntactic Structure, 2nd ed. (L. Mouton & Co. : & Granenhave, 1962) p.103.
5. L. Bloomfield, Language (Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1933)