

I. Introduction

Of the three aspects of language involved in communication process, semantics undoubtedly constitutes more complicated problems than phonology and syntax. The phonological and syntactical aspects of a language, which are more rule-oriented and regarded less meaning-related, are less problematic, as most problems related to them may be approached in terms of linguistic analysis or resorted to base or underlying structures and transformational rules, which are regarded as language-universal (Chomsky, 1964). Experientially, language users spend more time and effort postulating the meaning of a word in a language. Admittedly, the process is far from being easy, and in some cases even unattainable. Language users may need to refer to some criteria for postulating the word meaning. The present study therefore endeavors to provide a theory-based model to which language users may refer in the process of word meaning postulation. Based on the researchers' professional backgrounds, the researchers will provide English and Chinese words as examples.

II. The problems with postulating word meaning

The semantic part of language communication basically deals with word meaning. A word may either be a function word or a content word. A function word is used to fulfill a specific syntactic function and does not bear any meaning *per se*. For instance, the English particle *to* in “I want to be there” and the conjunctive *and* in “John failed to pass the exam, and that surprises us” are both function words, serving respectively as an object infinitive phrase marker and a sentence connective. The Chinese particle 的 in “我買了一朵美麗的玫瑰花” serves as an adjective marker, and the 了 in “他已經去美國了” serves as a marker of aspect. Failure to apply such words in general exerts little, if any, influence on the meaning of a sentence.

An English content word may be in the form of a single word, which is basically composed of a stem, a minimal meaningful morpheme, and/or one or more than one a prefix and/or suffix. For instance, the English word “norm” is a word consisting only one stem. It may assume a prefix, a suffix or a combination of both

to become an adjective or adverb. We have in English related words such as “normal, abnormal, and normally.” It may also be in the form of a compound, a combination of two or more single words. In Chinese, a word may be in the form of a character or *ci* 辭. The Chinese language, according to Lin (1972), is basically composed of *ci*, or a word. A *ci* is composed of a base character and one or more than one compounded character. A base character may compound with varied and many characters to form a set of words, thus constituting a highly complex semantic world. For instance, the character 道 may compound with characters such as 路 “lu” (way), 德 “de” (virtue), 王 “wang” (king), 教 “jiao” (teaching) to form 道路 (path, road), 道德 (morality), 王道 (the way of a king), and 道教 (Taoism). A content word should be differentiated from a noun phrase, which consists of a nominal and its modifier or adjective and is seldom, if not never, listed in dictionaries.

Characteristics of words

Almost without exception, most content words have their formal definitions in dictionaries. However, consulting dictionaries for word meaning may disable translators from seeing the whole picture. Word meaning is difficult for language users to identify in that words have the following three characteristics:

1. Words are always in a process of change

The meaning of a living word is dynamic, not static. Ever since its emergence, a word inevitably undergoes meaning development. It does not become extinct until it is no more used by the general public for daily or specific purposes. It is users, not lexicographers, who give life to the meaning of a word, thus affecting the meaning of a word. In the process of growth, the original meaning of a word may undergo condensation, extinction, twist, transformation, expansion, assimilation, dissimilation, concretion (specification) or abstraction (generalization) (Chuo, 2002, p. 139). Therefore, language users need to be aware where the word posits in the diachronic spectrum of its meaning development.

2. Words seldom exist alone

Words generally appear in a sentential context, which again is a constituent of a situation, which is furthermore part of a socio-cultural norm or mode (Philipsen, 1992). Therefore, the meaning of a word is contingent upon where and when it is used and who uses it. According to Chuo (2002), language users need to approach a specific word under consideration in terms of (a) lexical meaning, (b) contextual meaning, (c) conventional meaning, and (d) situational meaning. Chuo et al (2007, p. 107) further suggested that a study of word meaning involves (1) communication process of language, (2) interconnected relations between phonology, syntax, and semantics, (3) linguistic analysis of the uttered symbols, and (4) social, cultural, experiential, historical implications of the utterance. Obviously, word meaning, or semantics, plays only a small part in the whole process of language communication. In view of the complexity of language communication, Chuo suggested that we need to look at meaning identification from a much wider perspective. The flowchart provided below indicates the relations of words to other relevant factors:

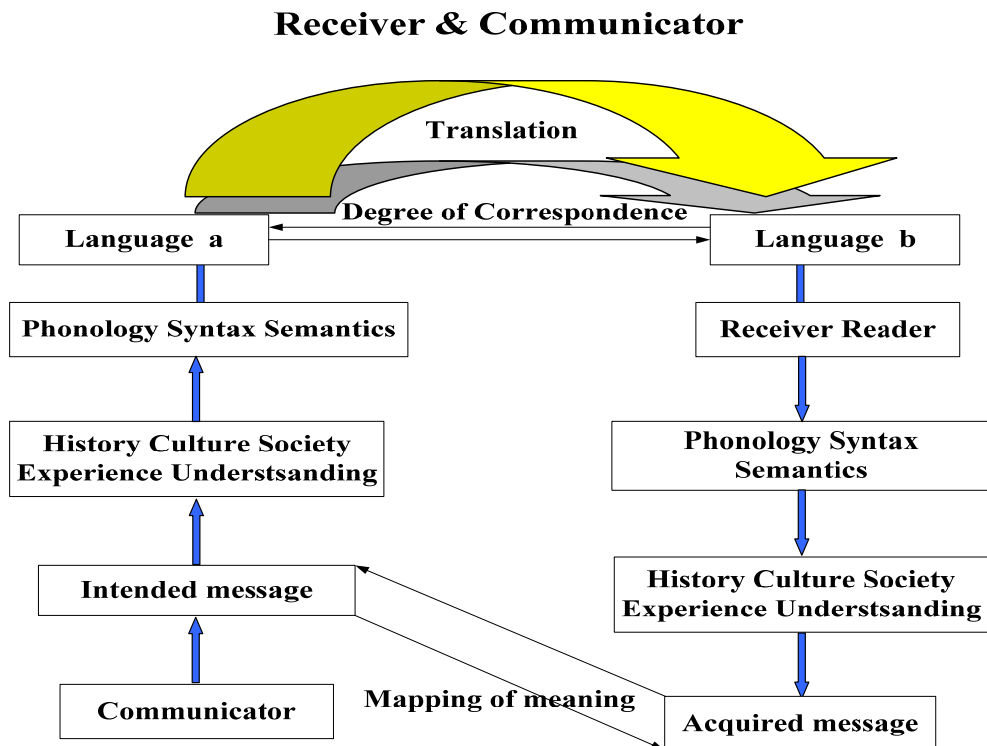


Fig. 1: Total system of translation communication

According to Chuo, word meaning (or semantics), plays only a very small part in the whole process of communication.

3. Words have their respective degrees of acceptance

At a given period of time, there are always various words competing for application in the same context or situation. We find from time to time that some words are excessively favored by users, so applications of them in most situations or contexts will be regarded as completely acceptable. Others are moderately used, as only a specific group of users use them in certain situations or contexts. Applications of them in the presence of others may meet with misunderstanding or resistance. Still others are rarely applied, so a majority of users are not aware of their existence, not to mention their meanings. Applications of them might be offensive to most users, language purists in particular. Synchronically speaking, a variant of a specific word may meet with passive, deliberate or even active resistance (Bynon, 1977, p. 437-8).

Influencing factors of word meaning

In addition to the three characteristics pertaining to words which language users need to be cognitive of, there are also the following ten factors which may individually or jointly influence meaning identification of a specific word:

1. Words have their definitions in dictionaries

Almost without exception, dictionaries are the main sources which translators may refer to for precise definitions of words. Based on citations adapted from various sources, dictionaries provide their formal definitions of words. In framing new entries and definitions on the basis of citations, dictionaries try to determine precisely how the word or meaning is used in sentences, who uses it, and what the attitude of the writer or speaker is toward the subject. By carefully examining the citations for a particular word or sense, the editor can usually decide whether the usage is standard, informal, dialectal, non-standard, literary, or slang. Dictionaries also provide information as to whether the usage is poetic, jocular, facetious, vulgar,

disparaging, or offensive; whether it is American, British, Canadian, Australian, South African, or some other forms of English, and finally, whether it is generally accepted in everyday speech, and writing or the subject of controversy (Webster's College Dictionary, 2000, p. xxii).

2. Dictionaries may provide different definitions of a word

Compilers of dictionaries define the meaning of a word based on the citations collected from sources available. Empirically, different dictionaries may provide different definitions of a certain word. The definitions of the English word "purpose" provided in Webster's New World Dictionary (2000), Hayakawa's "How to Use the Right Word" (1969), Webster's "Dictionary of Synonyms" (1984), and Longstreet & Shane's "Curriculum for a New Millennium" (1993), are good examples indicative of such a phenomenon:

- (1). **Purpose** implies more settled determination or more resolution than intention. (Webster's Dictionary of Synonyms, p. 458)
- (2). **Purpose** may suggest either a resolute, deliberate movement towards a result or the desired result itself, while the other words in this group do not carry this **implication** and concentrate mostly on the desired result (How to Use the right Word. P. 471)
- (3). **Purposes** represent the values as well as the needs of society, and thus give direction to schooling. When educational purposes are expressed systematically but quite broadly, they are called aims. "Preparing the young to be productive members of society" is a purpose that may support aims of vocational training, self-realization, citizenship, and intellectual development. (Curriculum for a New Millennium, p. 58)
- (4). **Purpose**: 1. Something one intends to get or do; intention; aim; 2. resolution; determination; 3. the object for which something exists or is done; end in view. (Webster's New World Dictionary, p. 1154)

3. Words may develop into a semantic world

Chuo & Chen (2002) pointed out that over the past three thousand years quite a few Chinese words have culminated in a highly complex and almost fathomless

semantic world as a result of natural evolution. They have undergone meaning condensation, extinction, twist, transformation, expansion, assimilation, dissimilation, concretion (specification) or abstraction. In their analysis of the Chinese word 道 (Tao), they found that ever since its first appearance in 老子 (Laotze) 道德經 (The Classic of Taoism), 道 has been widely applied in different contexts and situations by different writers in different periods of time. As a result, it has developed into a complex semantic world with more than one hundred meanings and interpretations. This means that 道 has a plethora of meanings and interpretations in Chinese. For instance, in 道德經 it assumes the meaning of “Tao, way, road, path, going forward, or told”, and in 文心雕龍 (The Literary Mind and the Carving of the Dragon) it assumes the meaning of “source, principle, or way.” While in 四書 (the Four Books) it may assume the following meanings:

“practical matters; rule; way; principles; principles of right and truth; doctrine; lead; governed; characteristics; order; truth; what; course; path of the Mean; goodness; way; path of duty; What is taught in the Great Learning; path; right path; duty; nature; way of duty” (Chuo & Chen, 2002, pp. 141-43)

4. Words may be used for rhetoric purposes, thus enriching and animating languages

Language is made colorful and animated because of the applications of the following rhetoric techniques: simile, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, allegory, personification, euphemism, irony, hyperbole, pun, imitation, repetition, palindrome, etc (Chen, 1996; Zeiger, 1973). Using a certain word for a specific rhetoric purpose may result in an entirely different interpretation of the original meaning of the word. As a result, failure to decode the intended message conveyed by the rhetoric techniques will result in partial comprehension or misunderstanding of the word or sentence. The five sentences, for instance, utilize rhetoric techniques to attain specific effects:

- (1). Madam I'm Adam. (palindrome)
- (2). I met her twenty checks ago. (irony)
- (3). They produce produce. (repetition)
- (4). The unlucky pickpocket went into a nudist camp and came out empty. (pun)
- (5). Both chair of the board and baby on the board are welcome. (pun)

5. Usages may overrule traditional etymology

Usage refers to the customary manner in which words, phrases, and sentences are spoken or written. According to Random House Webster College Dictionary (2000), usage can ignore and overrule traditional grammar and etymology. The study of usage presupposes that a living language undergoes in time changes in vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and syntax, and that it varies in many ways, depending on such factors as the dialect, education, age, sex, and occupation of the speaker or writer. Fundamentally, the good usage is the choice of words suitable for the situation. Colloquialisms, technical words, slang—all are on occasion fit and proper (Zeiger, 1973).

6. English is abundant in synonyms

Hayakawa (1969) pointed out that English has the largest vocabulary and the most synonymous of any language in the world. This richness is due to the fact that English has grown over the centuries by constantly incorporating words from other languages. For instance, there are, according to Fernald (1980), 19 synonyms for the verb “agree,” 34 for the adjective “base,” 19 for the conjunctive “but,” 28 for the noun “end,” 36 for the adjective “pure.” These and other ample lists of synonyms reveal unsuspected riches of the English language. A translator therefore needs to identify the differences between a group of words which are either synonymous or similar. For nothing is so important to clear and accurate expression as the ability to distinguish between words of similar, but not identical, meaning. No wonder Hayakawa (1969) suggested that to choose wrongly is to leave the hearer or reader with a fuzzy or mistaken impression, and to choose well is to give both illumination and delight.

7. Synonyms are hard to differentiate

No two synonyms have an identical meaning. We may, for instance, differentiate one synonym from another on the basis of semantic differential. According to Carroll (1973), there are three major dimensions inherent in connotative meaning: the “evaluative” dimension—how good or bad the concept is; the “potency” dimension—how big and powerful the concept is; and the “activity” dimension—to what degree the concept suggests active, fast, and perhaps unexpected action. In studies using the semantic-differential technique in different languages, he has

found these three dimensions to be universal.

Chuo & Kuan (2007) proposed a more elaborate analysis regarding semantic differentials. According to Chuo's analysis, a synonym may be different from other synonyms in the following ways:

- (1) Difference in implication
- (2) Difference in application
- (3) Difference in extension, range or meaning
- (4) Difference in association or origin and therefore, connotation
- (5) Difference in point of view from which the same thing is regarded
- (6) Because of a simple embarrassment of riches
- (7) Geographical variants of the same kind of thing
- (8) Difference in relationships despite describing the same actions
- (9) Difference in degrees of abstraction
- (10) Difference in the degree of formality of the occasions
- (11) Difference in concreteness
- (12) Difference in exactness
- (13) Difference in personalness (pp. 4-5)

Both Carroll's and Chuo's analyses provide an insight into the complexity existing between synonyms. Realizing the difficulty inherent in differentiating one synonym from another, Fernald (1980) pointed out that the choice of a synonym involves finding not only a variety of terms but the one specific term that will express the one exact shade of meaning intended.

8. Different dictionaries provide different semantic differentials

A dictionary's grouping of a set of synonym is purely arbitrary, that is to say, non-universal. There does exist an area of chaos concerning the precise boundary between similar words. We really don't know to what extent a word is different from its similar word (Chuo et al, 2005, p. 121-2). Experiences point to the fact, however, one dictionary may be different from another with respect to their differentiations of synonyms. For instance:

a. Webster's New World Dictionary

1. **Purpose:** 1. Something one intends to get or do; intention; aim; 2. resolution; determination; 3. the object for which something exists or is done; end in view
2. **Aim:** The object to be attained; intention or purpose
3. **Goal:** an object or end that one **strives** to attain; aim
4. **Objective:** something aimed at or **striven for**

B. Dictionary of Synonyms

1. **Purpose** implies more settled determination or more resolution than intention.
2. **Aim** implies a clear definition of something that one hopes to effect and a direction of one's effort or energies to its attainment.
3. **Objective** may suggest one which is concrete and immediately attainable or at least one which involves no obviously insurmountable problems.
4. **Goal** often evokes the image of one running a race; usually it implies struggle and endurance of hardships and cessation of effort at attainment.

The semantic differentials provided by Webster's New World Dictionary are not the same as those provided by Dictionary of Synonyms.

9. Non-similar or non-synonymous words may occur in the same context

Some English words may be found to occur in the same context; however, neither dictionaries nor dictionaries of synonyms provide sufficient evidence indicating that they are either similar or synonymous in meaning. There exists difference between dictionary groupings of synonyms and users' selections of similar words for the same context. For instance, the 8 words namely "rise, up, gain, advance, rally, surge, add, jump, and soar" are found to be applied to describe the stock market of the day and all may occur before /___/%. Similarly, English also makes use of "fall, down, drop, slip, decline, sink, hit, lose, hover, sag, slumped, off, dip, easing, retreat, slid, and pullback" to describe the index of the day. These rise or fall related words are neither synonymous nor similar in terms of the definitions provided in dictionaries. They may, however, occur in the same context.

10. Personal preference may be at work

Writers in general have their own preferred usages which do not conform to the

definitions or differentiations provided in dictionaries. O’Keefe’s suggested that “meaning is in people, not in words,” (1995, p .3) and Ozman and Craver also mentioned “Wittgenstein stated that words do not necessarily have an inherently, objective meaning; rather, they mean whatever the user intends them to mean. Peters, Ryle, and Wittgenstein cautioned us to examine the context and precision of our word usage” (1995, p. 300). Chuo et al proposed that word selections on the basis of context in most cases may be personal, that is to say, personal preference for a certain word is at work (2005, p. 121-2).

IV. Conclusions and Discussions

Conclusions

By drawing examples from Chinese and English, the present study unveils the difficulty inherent in word meaning postulation. To precisely define a specific word, language users need to be aware of 3 characteristics pertaining to the nature of a word, and 10 factors which influence the meaning of a word in its practical application.

The 3 characteristics of words are:

1. Words are always in a process of change
2. Words seldom exist alone.
3. Words have their respective degrees of acceptance

The 10 factors which may influence writers’ or readers’ understanding or decoding of words meaning are:

1. Words have their definitions in dictionaries
2. Dictionaries may provide different definitions of a word
3. Words may develop into a semantic world
4. Words may be used for rhetoric purposes, thus enriching and animating languages.
5. Usages may overrule traditional etymology
6. English is abundant in synonyms

7. Synonyms are hard to differentiate
8. Different dictionaries provide different semantic differentials
9. Non-similar or non-synonymous words may occur in the same context
10. Personal preference may be at work

The thirteen criteria are respectively related to context, word development, semantic world, dictionary definition, synonym differentiation, rhetoric purpose, co-existence of non-similar words. They may individually or jointly exert influence on the meaning postulation of a specific word in a language.

Discussions

The 13 criteria for postulating word meaning of a specific word in a language evince the inherent difficulty of word meaning identification. An optimal understanding of the meaning of a word requires language users to refer to one or more than one of the 13 criteria so they may truly postulate the intended meaning conveyed by the word. This is a process intrinsically complex and difficult and therefore is presumably beyond the cognitive ability of a majority of language users. In fact, we may infer that most word meaning postulation may be erroneous to a certain degree. Readers are no less likely to misinterpret the meaning of a specific word than writers. The general public may be divided among themselves as to their cognitions of the meanings of certain words. The whole process of verbal communication may therefore be said to be in a state of chaos.

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