

Factors that Determine the Meaning of a Word

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Abstract: This study looks at the elements that influence a word's meaning in order to settle a long-running disagreement among lexicalists, constructionists, emergentists, and other schools of thought. The Constructionists place a high value on the following skills that skilled communicators possess: Linguistic competence includes the correct application of grammar and syntax, as well as the capacity to linguistically comprehend communications from other speakers. Lexicism, on the other hand, is a modern generative linguistics theoretical position that claims that the processes and procedures that generate complex words are accounted for by a set of Lexical Rules that are independent of and distinct from the processes and procedures that form simple words. Thus, some factors come to play vital roles to decipher the meaning of words and facilitate successful communication and this article shows how mental ability, linguistic competence, and contextual and grammatical knowledge disambiguate the meaning of a word.

Keywords: constructionists, Emergentists, lexicalists, context, homonym, metonym, polysemy, hyponym, simile, metaphor.

Introduction: According to (Frances, 2018) "One of the hardest problems in philosophy, one that has been around for over two thousand years without generating any significant consensus on its solution, involves the concept of vagueness: a word or concept that doesn't have a perfectly precise meaning. There is an argument that seems to show that the word or concept simply must have a perfectly precise meaning, as violently counterintuitive as that is." A word actually does not have any meaning but it does have when it is contextualized .Meaning is defined by (Bloomfield, 1935) as "the situation in which the speaker utters it and the response which it elicits in the hearer." Similarly, according to (Firth, 1957), meaning is a collection of situational relations in the framework of a situation and in language that disturbs the air and other people's ears, as well as styles of action in relation to other factors in the context of a scenario. With the passage of time the meaning of particular words is changing, for example, the words 'journey' and 'journal' both are derived from the French word 'jour' meaning a day. Something that records any event of a day would mean a journal. It might be a business book or a diary but now the sense of a day has been adjourned and anything that records the events of more than one day, seven days or even months is also termed a journal (Wood, 1969). Words are also losing their meaning because of overuse and abusing them in different contexts. (Marder, 2020) confirms that "Over the years I have grown to truly abhor some of the words that are overused and abused when we review manuscripts, job candidates, and grant applications. In particular, I now detest five words: incremental, novelty, mechanism, descriptive, and impact. These words are codes behind which we hide, and are frequently used in lieu of actual explanations of what people think about the subject at hand." So the meaning of words is very slippery to catch. But

linguistic competence, grammatical and contextual knowledge remove the slippery slope to great extent.

Sometimes readers or listeners comprehend the meaning of a sentence or the word meaning from their background knowledge although the syntax of the sentence falls apart. (Hagoort, 2020) asserts that “Any permutation of the string ‘apple man eat’ will result in the understanding that the man eats the apple, based on recruiting common background knowledge for computing the multi-word meaning. In most cases, one does not need the correct word order or the presence of inflections to arrive at the correct interpretation.”

Factors that determine the meaning of words: (Steels et al., 2002) find that the meaning of words is determined by two factors that are internal factors and external factors. They proved it by the experiment of artificial intelligence of robots placed in different parts of the world interacting with diversified agents. Some software simulations or robotic setups, such as the Talking Heads experiment, may be useful in arguing the origin and evolution of human languages.

1. Internal factors are:

- Agents must be able to engage in coordinated interactions, as well as have nonverbal ways to achieve the goals of verbal interactions.
- Agents must be able to comprehend reality and form these comprehensions, which are constrained by the ontology underlying the emerging lexicon and the types of context they encounter.
- The agents' conceptual formation process must be based on similar sensory channels and produce similar results, but they do not have equivalent conceptual repertoires.
- The agents must have a decent chance of guessing the conceptualization of a special context if the conceptualization is confined to be identical.

2. External factors:

- There should be enough group equilibrium for each agent to have a sufficient number of opponents.
- The initial group size should not be so huge that there are too many interactions amongst the same people.
- There should be enough environmental balance and a variety of levels of complexity.

3. Background knowledge: Sometimes readers or listeners comprehend the meaning of a sentence or the word meaning from their background knowledge although the syntax of the sentence falls apart. (Hagoort, 2020) asserts that “Any permutation of the string ‘apple man eat’ will result in the understanding that the man eats the apple, based on recruiting common background knowledge for computing the multi-word meaning. In most cases, one does not need the correct word order or the presence of inflections to arrive at the correct interpretation.”

4. Context: According to (Hornby, 1995) ‘Words that come before and after a word, phrase, statement, etc., helping to show what its meaning is’

(Dash, 2008) opines that “The term context refers to an immediate linguistic environment (rarely detached or isolated) in which a particular word occurs.” So context is the immediate

smaller or greater linguistic environment that assists the reader to decipher a particular meaning of a particular word that occurs in that environment.

Classification of context : Miller and Leacock (2000) distinguish between two forms of context: (a) local context and (b) topical context. Contexts can be categorized into four types, according to Dash and NiladriSehkar (2001:22): (a) local context, (b) sentential context, (c) topical context, and (d) global context. The term "local context" refers to circumstances in which one or two words appear before and after the key word (KW). The topical context refers to the text's topic where the KW was utilized. Similarly, sentential context refers to the circle immediately beyond the local context, whereas global context refers to the entire world. The directly preceding one or two words are referred to as local context.

Local context: Local context is defined as the KW's next circumstance in a phrase, which includes the words immediately before and following it. As a result, the immediately previous word stands for left word (LW) and the immediately following word stands for right word (RW) (RW). As a result, the likely structure of the local context is a block like this (= LW+KW+RW), with the KW as the block's major member. So the KW will generate a meaning with the relationship of the neighboring words. If this block fails to produce an acceptable meaning the block can be extended with a word(+_1) on each side of the KW. So the probable structures are

- A. LW1+KW+RW1 B. LW1+KW+RW1+RW2
C. LW2+LW1+KW+RW1 D. LW2+LW1+KW+RW1+RW

Some examples from both English and Bangla languages will illustrate the matter more clearly.

1. I have a computer.

Tar cigarette khaoahayni.

(He has not finished his smoking)

Here the KW words 'have' and 'khaoa' have different meanings from respective languages. In the first sentence in English "have" means "eat" and in Bangla "Khaoa" means "smoke".

2. I am having a problem now.

Se Dhutkhay (another form of the verb Khaoa)

(He drinks milk.)

Here both the verbs "have" and 'khaoa' mean "facing a problem" and 'drink" respectively in English and Bangla.

3. The patient is advised to have medicine regularly.

Tinibhatkhaoa sere rutikhassen.

(He is eating bread instead of rice.)

Here both 'have' and 'khaoa' again provide different meanings of 'take' and 'eat' respectively.

Figure-2 different meanings of KHAOYA in different contexts.

Sentential context: A sentence in which the KW appears is the sentential context. It sends a syntactic message to determine whether the KW has any external or internal relationships with the other words in the sentence. The following sentences both from English and Bangla languages will be enough to illustrate the same.

Kamal loves his mother, so does Himel.

Gholtomakeamikhaiyescharbo.

‘I will trouble you to the extreme.’

Here both the words ‘khaiye’ and ‘do’ don’t decipher the dictionary or primary meaning of the words, rather they are providing the contextual meaning of ‘harass’ and ‘love’ respectively depending on the syntactic structure of the sentences.

Topical context: The topical context is a discussion topic that focuses on the substance of specific parts of a text. It is frequently observed that the true meaning of the KW is mostly determined by the topic that has made a significant contribution to changing the KW's etymological meaning. For example, in English, the term "shot" can mean "shooting," "drinking," "striking a ball with a bat," "kicking a ball," "placing a ball in the net," "distance between a player and the hole," "taking a snap," "providing an injection," or "making love," among other things (Dash, 2004). The following Bangla and English examples demonstrate how the meaning of the KW alters depending on the context.

Khali petekhabenna

Don’t have it on an empty stomach.

Khaoer age kisukheyenin

Have some food before you have them.

Khaoer age er shathekisujalmisiye khan.

Mix this with a little water before you have.

Khubbhalo hay zodibaraphmisiye khan

It is far better if you mix some ice with it.

Here we observe that the KWs don’t clarify their meaning until we reach the last sentence of the text. If we combine the sentences then we get a network of meaning and they refer to the topic of a prescription with an instruction. So the meanings of the KWs are ‘to take’ and ‘drink’.

Global Context: Words are not disjointed aspects of a language, according to (VERSCHUEREN, 1981). They are in fact entangled and interconnected with other words as well as extralinguistic reality. In the same way, the meanings of the terms are interconnected. The meaning of words is linked not only to the local context, sentential context, and topical context but also to the extralinguistic reality that surrounds language users' linguistic acts. Consider the following statement, which comes from the Bengali language.

O to ektaoipoka ,saradinboikhaoa or kaj

He is a bookworm indeed, reading books all day is his job.

Here, to realize the meaning of ‘khaoa’ is not sufficient to get from the other context until we get the help of the phrase ‘boipoka’ which means ‘always reading books. But the literal meaning of the phrase ‘book worm’ is ‘a larva of a moth or beetle which lives on paper and glue used in books’. Once we have this extra-linguistic knowledge then we get the metaphoric meaning which is ‘person devoted to reading’.

Integrations of the Contexts: Sometimes one context is enough to interpret the meaning of a word, and then we combine other situations to arrive at a conclusion. Some aspects, such as time,

place, agent, and action, should be considered. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, extracting the meaning of the KW is dependent on the users' base knowledge, and persons with greater linguistics and extralinguistic knowledge are more efficient than others. To appreciate the meaning of the KW, society, culture, life, geography, and demographic knowledge are all combined. A few words from the Bengali corpus, for example, will sufficient.

Aare! Adhoronerlokerkhaoaase.

Foo! These sorts of people have no value. Here the word 'khaoa' does not actually mean the literal meaning, 'eating' rather it means 'value' but only particular people of a particular class or society can understand it as it is not used in the high variety of the Bengali language which is thought to be the standard.

Now I will focus on some linguistic devices that will help us to disambiguate the meaning of the words.

5.Knowledge of grammar: "Psycholinguists are interested in the question of how nouns and verbs are represented in the mind. These two notions noun and verb attract a lot of attention as they are the best candidates for being cross-linguistically universal. Recent findings in neurolinguistics show that distinct cortical regions are activated in response to concepts of objects and actions: visual object-words most strongly activate occipito-temporal cortex and action-related words fronto-central motor areas (see Moseley, Pulvermüller, and Shtyrov, 2013 for the most recent evidence based on high-density MEG-EEG recordings in combination with individual MRI images).This means that speakers in all languages should have minimal grammatical means to express these two types of concepts and the best linguistic categories for expressing this cognitive distinction are nouns and verbs (Moseley et.al.,2013) cited in (Błaszczak& Klimek-Jankowska, 2016)."

6.Componential Analysis of the word: It refers to an attempt to compare the organization of vocabulary in terms of a small collection of extremely broad meaning elements known as "components," "markers," or "sememes," and their numerous combinations in different languages. With the help of a simple example, this may be simply conveyed.

a. man woman child

b. bull cow calf

c. ram ewe lamp

When we take these sets of English words in consideration, we can set up such proportional equations on the basis of our intuitions in the following manner.

“man: woman: child::bull: cow: calf”

It is a formal or notional device that indicates the presence and absence of semantic properties by pluses and minuses. A linguist may choose at least the following semantic feature to the nouns:

[hope]	[house]	[cat]	[man]
[+noun]	[+noun]	[+noun]	[+noun]
[-concrete]	[+concrete]	[+concrete]	[+concrete]

[-animate]	[-animate]	[+animate]	[+animate]	
[-human]	[-human]	[-human]	[+human]	
[-count]	[+count]	[+count]	[+count]	
[-definite]	[+definite]	[+definite]	[+definite]	(Varshney, 2002)

7. Synonymy: Synonymy is defined as the presence of a sense with many names. When two items share the same sense, they are considered synonymous. If lexical items may be interchanged without affecting the meaning of an utterance, they are deemed synonymous. As an example,

Mad, lunatic, Maddy, insane, crazy, and bedlamite etc.

8. Antonymy: Antonym refers to the oppositeness relationship between two lexical terms, where one asserts the refusal of the other. Big and little, little and much, and few and many are examples of this.

9. Homonymy: Homonyms are different words that have the same pronunciation but may or may not be written the same. To, too, and two, for example, are homonyms despite their differing spellings. Homonyms can sometimes cause ambiguity in meaning because a word or sentence is ambiguous or perplexing if it can be understood or interpreted in multiple ways. Consider the following sentence.

I will meet you by the bank, which may imply ‘ I will meet you by the financial institution’ or ‘ I will meet you by the riverside’.

10. Polysemy: A word is termed polysemous when it has numerous levels of meaning that are conceptually or historically related. For example, bear, music, guard, and rot.

11. Heteronym: A heteronym occurs when two words are spelled the same but pronounced differently, implying different meanings. Dove is a bird, while dove is the past tense of dive; they are heteronyms, as are bass, bow, lead, wind, and dozens of other words.

12. Hyponymy: Hyponymy is often referred to as "inclusion" or "classification." For instance, the meaning of scarlet is said to suggest the meaning of blood, while the definition of red is said to include the meaning of rose, which is said to be included in the meaning of flower; and so on. This form of ‘inclusion’ interaction is based on the concept of reference.

13. Metonymy: A metonym is a synonym for the item for which it is intended, as well as an attribute or notion linked with that object. When the word "crown" is used to refer to a king or a country ruled by a king, it is a case of metonymy.

14. Metaphor: It's a figure of speech in which a term or phrase refers to something that doesn't have a literal equivalent. It's also known as a metaphor when two dissimilar items are directly compared. For example,

Our doubts are traitors. (Shakespeare)

Walls have ears. (Cervantes)

15. Simile: It's a figure of speech in which two seemingly unrelated items are openly compared. She is like a rose, for example. She and a rose have nothing in common here.

16. Learning the stem of words: (Hasenäcker et al., 2021) narrates that there is mutual agreement among the linguists that children activate embedded stems in the appearance of real suffixes

(e.g., TEACH in TEACHER), but it is not so evident whether they also activate embedded stems in the presence of pseudo suffixes (e.g., CORN in CORNER) and in words where the final letter chunk never works as a suffix in the language (no suffixes', EW in CASH–EW).'

17. Morpheme-based reading: Morpheme-based reading also helps the reader to determine the meaning of words. When morphological pseudowords (DONN-ISTA, woman-ist) are compared to basic pseudowords (Hasenäcker et al., 2021), the same is found (DENNOSTO). These data suggest that morpheme-based reading is particularly beneficial to beginning readers.

Conclusion: Actually, a word or a language does not possess an independent and intrinsic meaning; rather it has no meaning at all, but apart from some contextual meanings given by the psychology of human beings. It is most likely assimilating with crystal water which takes the shapes and colors of the container. So only one factor is the factor that determines the meaning of a word; rather all the mental ability, external factors, context, and linguistic competence all together determine the intended meaning of a word.

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