



Seven Types of Meaning

A presentation on Semantics

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- A piece of language conveys its dictionary meaning, connotations beyond the dictionary meaning, information about the social context of language use, speaker's feelings and attitudes rubbing off of one meaning on the another meaning of the same word when it has two meanings and meaning because of habit occurrence.
- Geoffrey Leech in his '**Semantic- A Study of meaning**' (1974) breaks down meaning into seven types or ingredients giving primacy to conceptual meaning.

HYMES's SPEAKING

- In Sociolinguistics, seven types of meaning are in line with Hymes's theory of SPEAKING.
- Situation – style; talk about formal or informal style.
- Participant – who is the speaker.
- End – goal is the denotative meaning.
- Act – speech act; the implicature; the ordering/commanding whether you are giving information, promising, or any other expressions; something that is implied by the speech
- Key – emotion/the mood of the speaker
- Instrument – the thing we use to send the message
- Norm
- Genre – the same with style.

I. Conceptual or Denotative Meaning

- Conceptual meaning is also called logical or cognitive meaning. It is the basic propositional meaning which corresponds to the primary dictionary definition.
- It is the essential or core meaning.
- E.g.
/P/ can be described as- **voiceless + bilabial + plosive.**
- Similarly
Boy = + human + male -adult.
The hierarchical structure of '**Boy**' = **+ Human + Male -Adult**

- It is the literal meaning of the word indicating the idea or concept to which it refers. The concept is minimal unit of meaning which could be called 'sememe'.
- As we define phoneme on the basis of binary contrast, similarly we can define sememe **'Woman'** as = + **human** + **female** + **adult**.

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- Conceptual meaning deals with the core meaning of expression. It is the denotative or literal meaning. It is essential for the functioning of language. For example, a part of the conceptual meaning of **‘Needle’** may be **“thin”, “sharp”** or **“instrument”**.
 - The aim of conceptual meaning is to provide an appropriate semantic representation to a sentence or statement.
 - The conceptual meaning is the base for all the other types of meaning.

2. Connotative Meaning

- Connotative meaning is the communicative value of an expression over and above its purely conceptual content. It is something that goes beyond mere referent of a word and hints at its attributes in the real world.
- Thus purely conceptual content of **'woman'** is **+human + female+ adult** but the psychosocial connotations could be **'gregarious'**, **'having maternal instinct'** or typical (rather than invariable) attributes of womanhood such as **'babbling,'** **experienced in cookery'**, **'skirt or dress wearing** 'etc.

- Connotations vary age to age and society to society.
- **E.g. Old age 'Woman' - 'Non-trouser wearing or sari wearing'** in Indian context must have seemed definite connotation in the past.
- Present **'Woman'----- Salwar/T-shirt/Jeans wearing.**
- The boundary between conceptual and connotative seems to be analogous.
- Connotative meaning is regarded as incidental, comparatively unstable, in determinant, open ended, variable according to age, culture and individual, whereas conceptual meaning is not like that . It can be codified in terms of limited symbols.

3. Social Meaning

- The meaning conveyed by the piece of language about the social context of its use is called the social meaning.
- The decoding of a text is dependent on our knowledge of stylistics and other variations of language.
- We recognize some words or pronunciation as being dialectical i.e. as telling us something about the regional or social origin of the speaker.
- Social meaning is related to the situation in which an utterance is used.

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- E.g. **“I ain’t done nothing”**
 - The line tells us about the speaker and that is the speaker is probably a black American, underprivileged and uneducated.
 - **“Come on yaar, be a sport. Don’t be Lallu”**
 - The social meaning can be that of Indian young close friends.

- Stylistic variation represents the social variation. This is because styles show the geographical region social class of the speaker. Style helps us to know about the period, field and status of the discourse.
- For example, 'steed ', 'horse and 'nag' are synonymous. They all mean a kind of animal i.e. Horse. But they differ in style and so have various social meaning. 'Steed' is used in poetry; 'horse' is used in general, while 'nag' is slang.
- The word 'Home' can have many use also like domicile (official), residence (formal) abode (poetic) , home (ordinary use).

4. Affective or Emotive Meaning

- It refers to emotive association or effects of words evoked in the reader, listener. It is what is conveyed about the personal feelings or attitude towards the listener.
- E.g. **'home'** for a sailor/soldier or expatriate and **'mother'** for a motherless child, a married woman (esp. in Indian context) will have special effective, emotive quality.

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- For Leech affective meaning refers to what is conveyed about the feeling and attitude of the speaker through use of language (attitude to listener as well as attitude to what he is saying).
 - Affective meaning is often conveyed through conceptual, connotative content of the words used

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- E.g.

“You are a vicious tyrant and a villainous reprobation and I hate you”

or

“I hate you, you idiot”.

- We are left with a little doubt about the speaker’s feelings towards the listener. Here speaker seems to have a very negative attitude towards his listener. This is called affective meaning.

- But very often we are more discreet (cautious) and convey our attitude indirectly.

E.g. “I am terribly sorry but if you would be so kind as to lower your voice a little”

- The sentence conveys our irritation in a scaled down manner for the sake of politeness. Intonation and voice quality are also important here. Thus the sentence above can be uttered in biting sarcasm and the impression of politeness maybe reversed while –

E.g. “Will you belt up?”

can be turned into a playful remark between intimates if said with the intonation of a request.

- Words like darling, sweetheart or hooligan, vandal have inherent emotive quality and they can be used neutrally.

5. Reflected Meaning

- Reflected meaning arises when a word has more than one conceptual meaning or multiple conceptual meanings.
- In church service 'the comforter and the Holy Ghost' refer to the third in Trinity. They are religious words. But unconsciously there is a response to their non-religious meanings too. Thus the 'comforter' sounds warm and comforting while the 'Ghost' sounds 'awesome' or even 'dreadful'. One sense of the word seems to rub off on another especially through relative frequency and familiarity (e.g. a ghost is more frequent and familiar in no religious sense.).

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- In poetry too we have reflected meaning as in the following lines from **'Futility'**
**'Are limbs so dear achieved, are sides,
Full nerved still warm-too hard to stir'**
 - Owen here uses **'dear'** in the sense of expensiveness. - But the sense of beloved is also eluded.



- **Daffodils**

**“The could not but be gay
In such jocund company”**

- The word ‘**gay**’ was frequently used in the time of William Wordsworth but the word now is used for ‘**homosexuality**’.

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- Reflected meaning is also found in taboo words.
 - The word **‘intercourse’** immediately reminds us of its association with sex (sexual intercourse). The sexual association of the word drives away its innocent sense, i.e. **‘communication’**.

6. Collocative Meaning

- Collocative meaning is the meaning which a word acquires in the company of certain words. Words collocate or co-occur with certain words only e.g. Big business not large or great.
- Collocative meaning refers to associations of a word because of its usual or habitual co-occurrence with certain types of words. **‘Pretty’** and **‘handsome’** indicate **‘good looking’**.

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- The word **'pretty'** collocates with – **girls, woman, village, gardens, flowers, etc.**
 - On the other hand, the word **'handsome'** collocates with – **'boys' men, etc.** so **'pretty woman'** and **'handsome man'**.
 - The verbs **'wander'** and **'stroll'** are quasi-synonymous- they may have almost the same meaning but while **'cows may wander into another farm'**, they don't stroll into that farm because **'stroll'** collocates with human subject only.

7. Thematic Meaning

- It refers to what is communicated by the way in which a speaker or a writer organizes the message in terms of ordering focus and emphasis.
- Thus active is different from passive though its conceptual meaning is the same.
- The ways we order our message also convey what is important and what not. This is basically thematic meaning.

1) Mrs. Smith donated the first prize

2) The first prize was donated by Mrs. Smith.

- In the first sentence “**who gave away the prize**” is more important, but in the second sentence “**what did Mrs. Smith gave is important**”. Thus the change of focus change the meaning also.

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- Alternative grammatical construction also gives thematic meaning. For example,
 - 1) He likes Indian good most.**
 - 2) Indian goods he likes most**
 - 3) It is the Indian goods he likes most.**