THE MEANING OF ‘MEANING’

Some Basic Concepts in Semantics

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Verily! In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and in the alteration of night and day, there are indeed signs for men of understanding (QS Ali Imran /3:190).

ABSTRACT
The meaning of meaning has been one of complicated concepts in the study of language – linguistics. In this article, the writer provides some brief but concise explanations concerning with expression, meaning, sense, reference, and connotation. Each concept is discussed interconnected to one another. This article is particularly prepared to be published in Arrihath, a scientific magazine published by Muhammadiyah University of Pontianak.

1. Prologue
Knowing the meaning of “meaning” is very important for those who are interested in studying semantics. Since we often simply use the term “meaning” almost every day, we will get to a complicated discussion if we try to define the term. In their monumental book, Ogden and Richards (1923), explain that there are a lot of meanings of ‘meaning’. At least, there are 16 different meanings on the word ‘mean/meaning’ were distinguished. Here are some of them.

| John means to write. | ‘intends’ |
| A green light means go. | ‘indicates’ |
| Health means everything. | ‘has importance’ |
| His look was full of meaning. | ‘special import’ |
| What is the meaning of life | ‘point, purpose’ |
| What does ‘capitalist’ mean to you? | ‘convey’ |
| What does ‘cornea’ mean? | ‘refer to in the world’ |

From those examples, it is clear that the meaning of meaning is not simple, especially when we talk about the term in the English language.

We – normal human beings – have our own language in our brains. Yet, the language itself functions only as a system to think and to organize our ideas and feelings. Other people can understand what we think and how we feel only after listening to or reading our expressions. Meanwhile, our expressions are composed in such a way that they have systematic syntax. McIntyre (2004) provides an example of a discussion on the relation between meaning and syntax, particularly about event paths,
conflation, argument structure, and VP shells.

It is often heard that human expresses ideas and feeling using words. However, in technical terms, it is considered incorrect. What can we observe so far is that human expresses his/her feeling and ideas not using words but using word expressions. In this regard, even not specifically discussed in this short paper, morphological units are also important to take into account when discussing the meaning of words and word expressions. An example of a good discussion has been done by Arquiola (2003), especially when discussing the case of Spanish auto- and co- prefixation to verbal bases.

2. Expression

As introduced by Lyons (1977:1,13-18), there are two quite different distinctions of words. The first distinction is by an American philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce (1839-1914), who writes words can be seen as tokens and types. Tokens are unique physical entities, located at a particular place in space or time. The relationship between tokens and types is referred to as one of instantiation; tokens instantiate (as instances of) their types (Pierce 1940). Example: the word pop has three tokens, namely p, o, and p and has only two types namely p and o. Another example: the sentence You are beautiful, she is sexy, but I am more interested in a smart girl has fifteen words as tokens and each of them instantiate different type.

There is, however, another distinction by a outstanding expert in this field of study - John Lyons - to be taken into account. According to him, there is a significant difference between words as forms and words as expressions (Lyons 1995:48-54). We can use the same example to explain the second distinction. In the sentence You are beautiful, she is sexy, but I am more interested in a smart girl exist fifteen words as tokens and as forms. In the sentence the entities of token are exactly the same as the entities of form. There are, however, only thirteen expressions in the sentence, namely you, beautiful, she, is, sexy, but, I, more, interested, in, a, smart, girl, and to be. In this case, am, is, and are are regarded as three forms of the same expression and traditionally in English grammar they are regarded as the same word. In the other word, the sentence consists of fifteen word-forms and only thirteen word-expressions.

3. Meaning
a. Form – Meaning

It is a popular and the oldest view of meaning known by the linguists that Plato’s Cratylus that words name or refer to things. Structural linguistics in Europe, that is generally said to have begun in 1916 with the posthumous publication of the Cours de Linguistique Générale (Course in General Linguistics) of Ferdinand de Saussure, contributes many important ideas in the development of linguistics. One of them is an approach of understanding meaning. The approach understands a sign to have two inseparable things, form and meaning. When we hear or read a sign, what we hear or read is only the form (signifier) while what we understand is the meaning (signified).
Words (and other expressions, including phrases and sentences) have meaning. They also have forms: spoken and written forms (especially the words of natural languages which are associated with writing system). (See Lyons 1995:22-24). Words may also be considered purely as forms, whether spoken or written, or, alternately, as composite expressions, which combine form and meaning. As a meaningful unit, a word (and a phrase) may have a single or several meaning(s). In traditional point of view it is discussed in terms of the concepts of homonymy, polysemy, and synonymy.

Homonymous words are different words with the same form. Example: ‘bank’ means ‘financial institution’ and ‘bank’ means ‘sloping side of a river’. So, ‘bank’ and ‘bank’ are homonyms. Absolute homonymy should satisfy the following three conditions: (1) they are unrelated in meaning, (2) their forms are identical, and (3) the identical forms are grammatically equivalent. Partial homonymy can only satisfy one or two conditions. Homonymy (whether absolute or partial) is a relation that holds between two or more distinct lexemes.

Polysemy (multiple meaning) is a property of single lexemes. The most conflicting problem in judging whether two words are polysemy or homonymy is whether they are a single lexeme. In morphological study we learn how to do so but here I add one more aid, that is looking it up through etymological study.

Synonymy means two (or more?) expressions with the same meaning. Near-synonyms (examples: ‘mist’ and ‘fogs’, ‘stream’ and ‘brook’, ‘dive’ and ‘plunge’) mean expressions that are more or less similar, but not identical, in meaning. It is not necessarily to be confused with (what Lyons 1995 called) partial synonymy, which meet the criterion of identity of meaning, but which, for various reasons, fail to meet the conditions of what is generally referred to as absolute synonymy. Two or more expressions are absolutely synonymous if, and only if, they satisfy: (1) all their meanings are identical, (2) they are synonymous in all contexts, and (3) they are semantically equivalent.
Monica Lewinsky illustrate this conception, as do several other words and phrases—the labels attached to objects for sale in a shop, or those found on a paint color chart. However, there are large numbers of the words where it is not possible to see what 'thing' the word refers to: verbs such as come or run; adjectives such as fast and high; nouns such as contribution and religion. In fact, the majority of words seem unable to be related to things, in any clear way.

c. Words → concepts → things

In reality, the existence of symbol never relates directly to any referent. Symbol exists only in socio-cultural contexts, created arbitrarily and need conventions. Without both conditions, there never be any symbol in the world. So, a symbol needs human thought to exists. The same is true to a referent.

d. Stimuli → words → responses

Example: Yanti is thirsty, sees an orange (S) and asks Faizal to get it for her (r); this linguistic stimulus (s) leads to Faizal getting the orange (R).

Leonard Bloomfield (1887-1949) expounded a behaviorist view of meaning in his book Language (1933): meaning is something that can be deduced solely from a study of the situation in which speech is used—the stimulus (S) that led someone to speak (r), and the response (R) that resulted from this speech (s). He draws this as follows.

meaning of a word is its use in the language (Wittgenstein 1889-1951).

Meaning is compositional. The meaning of a text or discourse is composed from the meanings of its constituent utterances, including their punctuation or prosody—stress, disjuncture, intonation, tone of voice—and the sense of the sentences used in each utterance.
4. Sense

A simple proposal about sense was made by a German philosopher Gottlob Frege. He proposed that sense (sinn) is the meaning of an expression. Even seems to be easy, such kind of definition is to complicated to understand because of the existence of the word “meaning”. As we have discussed, the meaning of “meaning” is very complicated and was simplified by saying “something conveyed by language form”. We know that there are many relation between language forms and what are conveyed. If I may suggest, I shall say that Lyons’s contribution (1995:77-82) is more sufficient to explain what sense and referent are.

According him (p. 80), the sense of an expression is defined as the set, or network, of sense-relations (or we can say simply “of relations”) that hold between it and other expressions of the same language. It is a matter of interlexical and intralingual relations. In the other word we can say that it is a matter of relations between a lexical expression and one or more other lexical expressions in the same language. In Allan’s term (Allan 1992) the sense of a language expression is its decontextualized meaning, abstracted from innumerable usages. This can be found in a dictionary, expressed in terms of other words. So, it is wholly internal to the language system. Sense is much different from denotation, which relates expressions to classes of entities in the world.

5. Connotation

In some linguistics textbooks written in Indonesian language the discussion of denotation is linked with the discussion of connotation. Even, there are some misleading discussions about them. This sub topic is added here just to give a short clarification on it.

It was John Steward Mill, who is not a linguist at all, who made a philosophical opposition between denotation and connotation (Mill 1843). An adjective such as white denotes the class of white things, but connotes, or implies, the attribute of whiteness, which they share. This use, which approximates to the linguistic notion of ‘sense’, is mainly restricted to philosophical semantics. In linguistics, connotation is usually applied differently. It is restricted to communicative value of linguistic units.

Connotation is not meaning at all and, even, has nothing to do with meaning. It is very closely related to what Osgood (1952) and Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957) investigated about the psychological ‘distance’ between words. Using semantic differential procedure, the asked their respondents about the emotion the words generate. In this point of view, and some other works coming later, connotation is the affective meaning or the emotional reactions attached to a word. It is not too much different from Palmer’s idea about connotation. For Palmer (1981), a word is associated with certain characteristics of the items to which they refer. In his example, woman has the connotation ‘gentle’ and pig the connotation ‘dirty’. When a word is associated with a socially distasteful subject, it becomes distasteful itself, and another word, a ‘euphemism’, takes its place. Words even become taboo when the distateful is referred to by the word in different sense. In Indonesian term, for example, the word mali “death”, if associated to human, is distasteful and people now
tend to use *meninggal* instead. Another example of Indonesian unpleasant word is *tahi* “stool” and *tinja* or *air besar* used to take its place. But now *tinja* and *air besar* are considered unpleasant and *air kotor* now takes their place. However, a particular word has a pleasant or desirable connotation.

Those ideas of connotation seem to have been supported by Lyons (1977). In his two volumes work, he says “the connotation of a word is thought of as an emotive or affective component additional to its central meaning”. A strong warning is stated in that volume: “The reader should be on his guard whenever he meets the term ‘connotation’ in semantics. If it is explicitly contrasted with ‘denotation’, it will normally have its philosophical sense; but authors do not always make it clear in which of the two senses it is to be taken” (vol. 1. Page 176).

The connotations which one person associates with a name may be different from the connotations which another person associates with the same name, even in cases where both persons would use the name to refer to or address the same individual (or set of individuals) p. 220.

In addition to those explanations, Backhouse (1992) observes that the range and precision of connotation vary widely, and many linguists explicitly avoid it. However, at least there are some major groups of understanding. First, the term is used with reference to expressive components of meaning, most obviously in the case of terms, which carry ‘favorable’ or ‘unfavorable’ connotation. Second, connotation may reflect social or situational circumstances of use. Lexical units may function as markers of particular speech varieties, either in terms of the social affiliation of their typical users (such as regional provenance, class, sex or age) or in terms of features of the situation in which they are typically used—such as the social relationships of participants, social setting, or genre of communication. Third, connotation derives from general cultural associations of what is denoted by lexical unit. Such associations are often highlighted by cross-linguistic comparisons of translation equivalents. Thus English *dog* and Indonesian *anjing* denote the same species of animal, but the cultural associations are quite different: In English speaking countries an expression of the *dog is very cute* is very common but in Indonesia we may say *Dasar anjing*. Connotations may result from associations of various kinds among lexical units themselves: in these cases, the communicative value of a lexical unit is influenced by other units to which it is in some way related. The clearest examples involve the influence of a taboo homonym: thus *rooster* has replaced *cock* in some varieties of English because of the presence of the taboo homonym meaning ‘penis’. While connotations are commonly discussed with reference to lexical units. Some grammatical elements and constructions (such as personal pronouns, or inversion of noun + adjective in French) carry expressive or socio-stylistic connotations, and features of pronunciation and spelling may serve to mediate communicative value over and above their basic distinctive function.

6. Denotation

Connotation is often discussed in relation to denotation. It is Allan’s idea that the **denotation** of a language expression is what a speaker or writer uses it to mean in the world evoked by a
text in which the word appears. Thus, the sense of a sentence "I shall call him tomorrow" is virtually unchanging. The sense is: the speaker [+male] will call a person [±male] in the day after the day of speaking. On the other hand, the denotation of an utterance "I shall call him tomorrow" will depend on who makes the utterance (who is the "I"), how he or she will call (by phone etc. based on the situation), who will be called (who is the "him"), and when will the process of calling happen (when is the "tomorrow"—date, day etc.: depend on the time of speaking). So, we may say that denotation is the meaning relation that holds between language-expression and the world. World may be fictional, as in stories.

7. Reference

Denotation is closely and intrinsically connected with reference. Both relate expressions and the external world. However, the way they relate expressions to the external world is different. In denotation expressions are related to the classes of entities in the external world. The denotation of an expression is invariant and utterance-independent. "It is a part of meaning which the expression has in the language system, independently of its use on particular occasions of utterance" (Lyons 1995:79). On the other hand, reference is variable and utterance-dependent. For instance, "car" always denotes the same class of vehicle but "the car", "Iwan's car", or "the car that you bought" may refer to different members of the class on different occasions of utterance. It depends on the context of the expression.

8. Epilogue

Studying the meaning of meaning has been the concerns of many linguists in the world. After the publication of this article in this scientific magazine, it is expected that the study of meaning in West Kalimantan local languages will flourish. It is true that to get into a clear meaning of an expression, one needs to know the socio-cultural context in which the expression is uttered. Therefore, understanding on extra-linguistic problems will be a new great challenge. Pragmatics and discourse analysis will be prospective interests.
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