Meaning In Language Essay, Research Paper

SP567: Cognitive Neuroscience

‘The Study of Language is really the study of Meaning’, Discuss.

It is generally accepted that language is one of the key attributes that distinguishes humans from other species. Although other animals possess at times very sophisticated methods of communication, none match the cognitive capabilities of human language. The terms communication, speech, language and vocalisation should not be used interchangeably, though in practice, it is not easy to separate and maintain distinctions between them. While communication refers to the general ability to influence other conspecifics via signals, language conveys perceptions, intentions, impressions and actions. Speech is an articulatory manifestation of language . The fact that so much of the human brain is devoted to or involved in language suggests that language lays more than a cummunicatory role , but in fact may be deeply involved in how we model reality. (Jerison 1986) Within the first couple of years of life, not only is a rich and complex vocabulary acquired, but also the complexities of rules of grammar, and subtleties of expression. Language is traditionally a left hemisphere phenomenon, though at present a right hemisphere contribution is increasingly evident. There are four main principles of language that must be acquired for it to be used at the maximum potential.

1. Phonology : or the sounds used in language. Any spoken word may be broken down into its constituent ‘phonemes’. It is defined as the ’smallest unit of speech whose substitution or removal from a word causes a change in the words sound’ (Stuart -Hamilton 1995).This emphasises the relationships between the positions adopted by the articulators and the resulting speech sounds. (Bradshw et al 1995)

2. Syntax : This constitutes the second system that is necessary for language, and are the grammatical rules which govern language. They represent the grammatical rules that combine morphemic (smallest meaningful units constituted of phonemes) strings into uniquely meaningful propositions.

3. Semantics : This is the formal meaning of a string of morphemes in other words, word meaning.

4. Pragmatics : This is an understanding of intent, and typically, social aptness. It is the practical use to which we may put language, such as jokes, irony, metaphor, sarcasm, or context.

The last two systems are concerned with the meaningful interpretation of language and it is these aspects that will be concentrated on in this essay. The human capacity for language is largely innate, even though its actual realisation is highly specific, and reflects the speech of caregivers and experiences at critical developmental milestones. The issue of semantics and meaning within language, like any other issue in psychology, is much debated and has been found to be problematic within syntactic approaches to language. Studies have suggested that an understanding of this issue is based upon the idea that semantic approaches to language are best considered within the broader framework of pragmatics .

All languages are sign systems which have their own distinct meanings. Frawley (1992) defines semiotics as the discipline that studies all meaningful signal exchange, this includes culture as rules for acceptable behaviour, talk, text, the visual media and literature and art as conventionalised aesthetic meaning. In other words, the study of ‘meaning’ in language is the study of a signification process where the essential element is the sign (Frawley 1992). Underlying the psychological theory of meaning is a philosophical theory which is concerned with the analysis and investigation of what things mean in the world. This entails looking at different cultures and assessing the competing accounts or philosophies of how that culture makes sense of things (Forrester 1996). One can assume from this, cognitively speaking that any trend found occurring across all cultures is seen to be innate and universal. The philosophical argument divides the question of meaning to two orientations: the direct and indirect views. The direct view, originating in Socratic and Platonion thought, postulates that knowledge of the world was knowledge of things in the world that do not change. This saw meaning attributed to things as being abstract in form and thus knowledge was divided between opinion and true knowledge. In contemporary terms Katz (1981) asserts that ‘Meaning is a transparent relation between signifier and signified. The signifieds of language (entities, dynamic relations, names) are recoverable from the signifiers (nouns, verbs, sentences).’(p.17)

The indirect approach, also dated back to ancient concepts of the world, was that held by Aristotle, who disagreed with Plato about abstract factors and postulated two orientations:

a) individualist – in which meaning was the information structure mentally encoded by humans, and;

b) Societal – where meaning was the relationship between symbol and referent, with social rules determining how meanings are paired with overt forms.

In light of this, while also bearing in mind the relation between semantics and form and how they must be linked in the act of understanding and speaking, five approaches have been suggested by Frawley (1992) which provide a useful overview:

1. Meaning as reference: This is in the form of a mental projection. We package up meaning in the form of language and this is then communicated to an individual who unravels the package.

2. Meaning as logical form: This is in the form of meaning as natural language expressions; it stems from logic. Zevaat and Scah (1992) argue that ‘The meaning of a natural language expression is normally analysed as the truth-conditions of the (natural language ) expression in so far as these can be analysed independently of its context of utterance’ (p.18-19) Frawley (1992) points out an interesting approach to this is that the essential components of understanding what a sentence means is encapsulated in the grammar of any sentence. Criticisms of this include the idea that people do not analyse meaning during ordinary comprehension.

3. Meaning as context and use: When language is understood in terms of integration into and within the patterns of everyday life. Wittgenstein (1953) emphasised this in his metaphor of language games. He believed that language and therefore meaning could only be understood when it was integrated into everyday life., saying that ‘?.only in the stream of thought and life do words have meaning’ (Wittgenstein 1953 p.180) He basically saw words as signals passed back and forth between people. This relationship can be understood in terms of semantics; where the relationship between semantics and pragmatics presupposes our understanding of the relationship between language use and practical actions. For example, if someone were to say that they had to meet deadlines, we would pre-suppose that they had a piece of work, or an assignment to complete. A critical feature of this is the idea of a mutual knowledge between the speaker and the hearer. If a computer programmer were to talk about meeting deadlines to a rickshaw driver in Bangladesh, the driver would probably not understand of what they were speaking of. Criticisms of this are that the concept of presupposition is only partially understood and that it is impossible to access the intentionality of others.

4. Meaning as conceptual structure: This concept begins from the idea that all minds are the same in terms of the structure and neuronal functions. The semantic properties underlying meanings are conceptual; that is that there are universal grammar rules. The question that arises from this is that do these point to the existence of underlying universal categories or do social conventions bring about the similarities that are observed.

5. Meaning as Culture: This view is diametrically opposed to the preceding view, in that this view sees linguistic meaning as being entirely determined by the cultural context. The reasoning behind this is that the acquisition of language occurs at the same time as the acquisition of the cultural norms. His perspective is supported by DeBernardi (1994) who makes the point that the acquisition of a language is not only the internalisation of a linguistic code but also entails the learning of status and role, appropriate social affect and the foundation framework for a world view. Criticisms of this are that if this were so, how would one gain knowledge outside of culturally limited information.

Searle (1969) outlined five basic ’speech acts’ which he termed as ‘Speech Act Theory’. What he was attempting to illustrate with this theory was the concept of a motivation or a force associated with making any utterances. This he called ‘illocutionary force’ . The three components which are involved in this concept is the locutionary act, which occurs when the speaking of a sentence involves the creation of a specific sense and reference, an illocutionary act (explained previously) and a prelocutionary act which occurs when a sentence uttered brings about an effect on the audience, specific to the circumstances that they happen to be in. His five essential kinds of action are outlined below.

1. Representatives – these commit the speaker to the truth of the utterance, in the form of concluding, asserting, defining and so on.

2. Directives – these are basically attempts by the speaker to get the person addressed to do something in the form of questioning or requesting.

3. Expressives – these are said to express a psychological state or condition which is expressed in the form of thanking, welcoming, congratulating and so on.

4. Commissives – these are basically attempts by the speaker to a course of action in the future, in the form of promising, threatening, and so on.

5. Declarations – these depend on fairly complex extra-lingual social institutions, and involves production of immediate changes in the institutional state of affairs.

In summation of Searle’s theory, he believed that it was not the word or the sign that was the basic unit of communication, but rather it was the ‘production of the token (word, symbol) in the performance of the speech acts’ (Searle 1969 , p.254)

Turning to the concept of Pragmatics and its role in the understanding of language, it is first necessary to gain a full understanding of the underlying concept of pragmatics. As mentioned previously, it is an understanding of intent, and typically, social aptness. It is the practical use to which we may put language, such as jokes, irony, metaphor, sarcasm, or context. Levinson (1983) defines pragmatics as covering ‘both context-dependent aspects of language structure and principles of language usage and understanding that have nothing or little to do with linguistic structure.’ (p.9) Further more, it covers a wide range of phenomena from the formalised constructions of procedural semantics to the ethnomethodology based study of everyday conversation. For the purpose of this essay the focus will be on a the main underlying principles of this concept. The psychological view within pragmatics is generally focused on understanding how language acts as a medium between the individual and other people, and in particular how the relations between people become ‘encoded’ in language use during interaction. The main point, it seems, is that is functions as a ‘domain of inquiry’ (Forrester 1995) and also as a technical description of a functional approach to language. Brown and Levinson (1978) sum it up as ‘the description of our ability to make inferences about the nature of the assumptions that participants are making, and the purposes for which utterances are used. ‘ (p.286)

Where do semantics feature in pragmatics? As mentioned before, semantics are the formal meaning of a string of morphemes, in other words, word meaning. Before any understanding of the relationship that they bear two important points must be made: a) that the study of pragmatics means slightly different things depending on whether one takes a psychological, linguistic or sociological approach , and when looking at these different aspects one needs to be aware of the differences in the underlying approaches; and b) that pragmatics covers a wide range of language phenomena each of which has something to say about the relationship between utterance meaning and sentence meaning. So, pragmatics may be seen as a process which is concerned with our ability to compute out of a sequence of utterances, taking into consideration background assumptions of language use, highly detailed inferences about the nature of our assumptions about why people do the things that they do in terms of what they say. The difference between the two is summarised by Leech (1983) who maintains that while both fields are concerned with learning, the difference between them may be traced to two different uses of the verb ‘to mean’. The examples [I] What does X mean? [II] What do you mean by X? show that while semantics deal with a diyadic relation [I] pragmatics deal with meaning as a triad [II]. Therefore, where as meaning in pragmatics may be defined as relative to the speaker or user of the language, meaning in semantics is defined purely as a property of expressions in a given language, unrelated to any particular situation, speaker or hearer (Leech 1983).

This essay has attempted to show that language is a structure which is formed by phonology, syntax, sentences and phrases. Underlying this is the deeper aspect of the meaning that is attributed to these forms. Semantics and pragmatics form the part of the structure of language that explain the way in which language conveys and communicates meaning between individuals. The language that we use existed before we did, and though we may string together words in our own unique way, the implications of psychological perspective of meaning is that, in a strange way, the thoughts in our head are not our own. Wittgenstein (1953)argued that ‘?only in the stream of thought and life do words have meaning’ (p.180). However, without thoughts, and the need to communicate our ideas and feelings, language would not have evolved in the first place. Thus, one may say that it is because humans attributed meaning to the world, language was evolved, and as a result of language, that meaning, be it subjective or objective, was conveyed.

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