

WORD MEANING AND ITS MEASURING TOOLS

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Abstract

A certain thing or phenomenon has its name in a certain language, i.e. has a definite meaning. In another language the same thing or phenomenon is expressed otherwise. A word meaning can be changed as many times as the author wants to use it in different contexts. It is namely a context where a word constantly acquires new meanings. In order to properly understand any utterance one should understand not only words and word combinations but also deeply comprehend what stands behind them, what they indicate to. Namely this is the so called new meaning that is subjective at a certain degree. This meaning can also be changed according to the association a thing (phenomenon) arouses in people, what emotions and feelings it provokes in them. It will be incorrect to prove that this word should be evaluated positively, and that one – negatively as one and the same notion can be positive for a certain person, negative – for another and even neutral for someone else. Consequently, the following issue becomes interesting: does evaluation come from perception or perception – from evaluation? We consider that both of these processes are interrelated and interwoven.

Keywords: Meaning, association, subjective, perception, evaluation

Introduction:

The aim of the article is the modest attempt to measure a word meaning; to be more precise to evaluate a word meaning and “measure” or discuss the emotion that this or that word (thing, phenomenon) provokes in us. Word meaning is the accepted meaning of a word, the way in which a word or expression can be interpreted. A spoken word as well as a written word, amounts to a nonsensical arrangement of sounds or letters without a consensus that assigns meaning. Namely meaning is the idea a person wants to express by using words, signs, etc., the thing one intends to convey especially by language. In linguistics, meaning is what a sender of information wants to express, communicates, or conveys in his/her message to a receiver of information, and what a receiver infers from the given context. Languages allow information to be conveyed even when particular words used by writers or speakers are not known by readers or listeners. People connect words with meaning and use words to refer to concepts. A person's intentions affect what is meant.

From the very beginning it should be mentioned that a certain thing or phenomenon has its name in a certain language, i.e. has a definite meaning. In another language the same thing or phenomenon will necessarily be expressed otherwise. It is also noteworthy that quite often a word meaning can be changed as many times as the author wants to use it in different contexts. It is namely a context where a word constantly acquires new meanings. It should be especially underlined that in order to properly understand any utterance we have to understand not only words and word combinations but should deeply comprehend what stands behind them, what they indicate to. Namely this is the so called new meaning that is subjective at a certain degree. It is certainly more difficult to understand this new meaning than the one which is already known to us. This meaning can also be changed according to the association a thing (phenomenon) arouses in people, what emotions and feelings it provokes in them.

One and the same word can arouse different associations and emotions in different people. For instance, let us take a word “thunder” – while hearing this word some people can be terrified and others can even feel delight. Thus, one and the same “mediator” (in this case mediator is the word “thunder”) evokes different, even opposite feelings in different individuals.

The experiment has been carried out for the purpose of evaluating word meaning. 50 persons of different ages, different nationalities, and different specialties belonging to different social layer were given a long list of adjectives and nouns. It is a well-known fact that meanings of socially significant signs are different for different classes of people. They were asked to make pairs of these words. In other words they had to make noun + adjective word combination according to the association this or that noun provoked in them. As a result of the experiment was observed that sometimes people’s opinions coincided and in most cases they were diametrically opposite. It is obvious that in this case dominates subjective factor as absolutely objective evaluation is almost impossible. Such adjectives as “good”, “bad”, “beautiful”, “wonderful”, “ugly”, “virtuous”, “depraved”, “attractive”, “disgusting”, “fascinating”, “ghastly”, “kind”, “cruel”, “happy”, “miserable”, “tasty”, “tasteless”, “strong”, “weak”, “useful”, “useless”, “pleasant”, “unpleasant”, “sweet”, “sour”, “bitter”, “pure”, “vicious”, “fragrant”, “smelly”, “honest”, “dishonest” and a lot of other adjectives are fuzzy concepts. Though, there are a great number of adjectives that can be objectively evaluated if we set some boundaries for them. Let us take the adjective pair “tall – short”. A person being 1,70 meter or above can be considered as tall in case the starting point is 1, 70 meter. In this case the concept “tall” is not fuzzy, but the adjective “disgusting” cannot be placed in such frames. It is true that we can make such frames artificially; for instance, we can consider a person “disgusting” if he/she does not satisfy the offered requirements. But such division will still be artificial.

Thus, adjectives can be divided into two parts:

- Adjectives that can be used for objective evaluation, i.e. those that we can place within certain frameworks;
- Adjectives that remain as fuzzy concepts.

While evaluating a word we have to take into consideration the fact that the “stronger” the word is and the more emotions it arouses the sharper are features that can be used for its characteristics. Thus, in such a case we deal with directly proportional relations. We strongly believe that word-combinations can be determined the same way. Two constituent words of a certain composite if separately taken can be characterized with absolutely different qualities than this word-combination itself. These separate components can be evaluated as being weak, passive or good but the word combination can become strong, active and generally, acquire different features.

A certain group of people can explain a particular thing with certain words, for instance, with words “sweet”, “sour”, “tasty”, “delicious”, “devastating”, “bitter”, “marvelous”, “fascinating”, etc. but another group of people can explain the same thing descriptively. It depends on a person’s mentality, psychology, wit, education, and the skills of communication. In any language there definitely exist certain norms which should necessarily be strictly followed, but still a lot of things depend on separate individuals, the society where these individuals were brought up, worked and work.

Owing to the fact that a certain thing, phenomenon can be perceived differently than its meaning is in reality, this thing or phenomenon can acquire a new, different meaning. It is certain that a word acquires a new meaning on the basis of its nominative meaning; at least “a small drop” of the seme of a nominative meaning of a word should be the base for formation of a new meaning. Thus, a meaning is formed on the basis of perception of a thing or a phenomenon:

thing → person’s reaction (perception) → new meaning

Proceeding from the aforementioned, it can be said that a person evaluates a thing or a phenomenon as he /she perceives it, according to his / her perception. For instance, a certain group of people evaluated “US Dollar” positively, but the same people evaluated “fylfot (swastika)” negatively. The question arouses: Is not such evaluation conditional and arbitrary? If fascists were asked the same question, would they also evaluate the word “fylfot (swastika)” negatively? Similarly, some notions such as “church”, “labor leader”, “tyrant”, “Negro” have diverse connotative signification for different people and semantic differentiation can be used to determine the number of these differences. The concepts “labor leader”, “Negro” or “tyrant” can cause awe in one part of individuals and delight – in others; some of them can even have no feelings, i.e. these notions can be neutral for them.

Besides, it should be mentioned that national factor has to be taken into consideration as well as the evaluation of a notion can vary according to nationality.

Thus, some words can be disgusting, even horrific for a certain group of people, but evoke positive associations in others. This fact probable can determine an individual’s character, what kind of a person he/she is, what is his/her psychology, background, etc. But maybe it can also be other way round: knowing his/her personal features, we can a priori be aware how he/she will characterize this or that word.

It is also noteworthy that eventually, owing to some occurrences and events meanings of social signs change. For instance, the meaning of “Italians” changed for Americans in the second half of XX century. Similarly, under the impact of the pressure of psychopathy, the meaning of emotional signification undergoes changes. Otherwise saying, an individual may have some kind of impression on a thing or a phenomenon what can be changed over time under the influence of a certain fact.

Conclusion:

Thus, it will be absolutely incorrect to prove that this word should be evaluated positively, and that one – negatively as one and the same notion can be positive for a certain person, negative – for another and even neutral for someone else. Consequently, the following issue becomes interesting: does evaluation come from perception or perception – from evaluation? It was mentioned above that the following chain can exist: thing → person’s reaction (perception) → new meaning; but on the other hand, if we do not know the meaning, how can we perceive this thing/phenomenon? And if we know the meaning of a thing or a phenomenon, is it perceived and fixed afterwards?

Finally, we consider that both of these processes are interrelated and interwoven.

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