Word meaning from a social-cognitive perspective

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The classical word meaning conception

For describing word meaning mostly static models are available, when we examine classical grammatical trends. New grammatism did not have an elaborate semantics theory, however, its conception of meaning can be considered as referential: meaning was usually identified with the denotatum itself. Structuralism considered meaning as a kind of relation: a connection between sound images and concepts (SAUSSURE 1915/1997: 91–93). Formal linguistics used distinctive feature analysis, known from phonology, to seize word meaning: meaning consists of distinct features, which coexistence specifies the meaning of words. These meaning conceptions because of being absolute approaches have difficulty to account for such questions as the nature of changing and diversification of word meaning or problems arising due to the static nature of categorization.
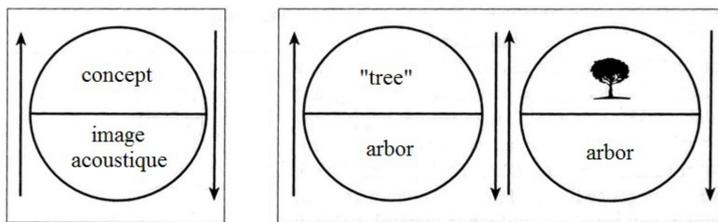
1. Ferdinand de Saussure's word meaning conception
(source: SAUSSURE 1915/1997: 92– 93.)

Social meaning

The social embeddedness of human beings and the network of social relations significantly influence language and thereby meaning as well. Babies while mastering a language find what they hear inherently relevant in every situation and accordingly they attach such meanings to them that are accepted in the community (cf. MACWHINNEY 2003: 509–510, FEHÉR 2011: 54, TOMASELLO–TODD 1983: 197–212). The speaker therefore learns in which situations and with whom to use each mode of expression, and in turn, the listener deduces from what is said which social group the speaker comes from or how the speaker interprets their relationship (SÁNDOR 2001: 87).

Cognitive meaning

The relative conception of word meaning is not unfamiliar for cognitive linguistics. Linguistic categorization based on the Roschian prototype theory allows a far greater semantic flexibility than referential equivalency or distinctive feature analysis. Since here, not only the categorical existence of certain features is in question, but a high degree of relativity, alternative features, which does not require being able to be equally related to all elements of the category. Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN, preceding prototype theory, compared this phenomenon to "family resemblance" (1953/1992: 57–58). This can be imagined, by for example taking the class of games: the word *game* denominates many activities, while there is not one common feature that would be common with all games,

conversely, the concrete cases are always connected to each further game by different similarities (cf. NÁNAY 1996: 265, and CSERESNYÉSI 2009: 13–15).
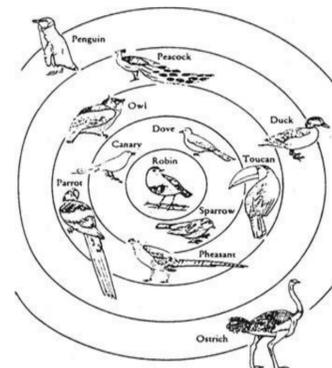
2. Roschian prototype theory
(source: http://www.dqsy.net/jpk/yyyyx/netclass/1022.HTM)

Social-cognitive network of meaning

Since language acquisition takes place in social medium and is closely related to the cognitive processes of experience and gaining knowledge, language becomes on the one hand a metaphorical network of social language patterns, on the other hand a cognitive-biological network-structure organized alongside that. A flexible system, in which each elements are associated with each other and other systems can affect them, for example visual or auditory inputs. In the background there is a mental model that combines the advantages of modularist and cognitivist models: it disposes the mediating subsymbols between neurons and more complex symbols on the same spectrum, and by that it achieves the realization of the transition between the smallest symbols (neurons) and higher levels of mental activity. Like this, prototypical features underlying cognitive categorization might be identified in the brain as well. Thus, the meaning of a word in such a model will never be coded in the word itself, but context in a broad sense and relations emerging from that will effectuate it. For example the word *dog* activates such subsymbols – depending on the experience of the individual with dogs – as "barking", "woofing", "hairy" or even "working like a dog", as well as, for example pictures and functional representations. Also in concordance with Wittgenstein's words, meaning, alongside with factors derived from experiences, will always emerge actually from context (in a broad sense) (1953/1992: 35–38). This is how we can get a semantic model that is relative and flexible enough to describe the meanings of the constantly changing, diversified language.
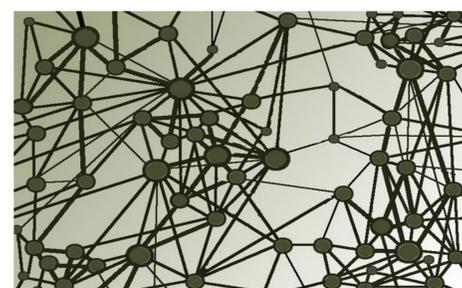
3. Network of meaning

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