

TUTORIAL

5.14

Language and Meaning

This tutorial discusses how language contains and communicates meaning, and what meaning actually is. It uses an illustration from a Native American culture to explore some key issues in language, meaning and identity.

Introduction

We could say that communication is:

A two-way process of reaching mutual understanding, in which participants not only exchange news, information, ideas and feelings but also create and share meaning.

But in practical terms, how do we actually create meaning? And what are the factors involved in sharing what we mean with another person, and for us to understand what they mean?

Since we are going to focus on meaning in the next group of tutorials, we should probably try to come up with a simple definition first. But, apparently a simple definition is difficult to come up with - "*Philosophers have debated the question [i.e. of what meaning is], with particular reference to language, for well over 2000 years. No one has yet produced a satisfactory answer to it.*" (Lyons, 1981)

But even though philosophers haven't pinned it down yet (maybe if we give them another 2000 years...), we still have a pretty good idea of what meaning is. We might have trouble *defining* it, but we probably all have some sense of what it *is* - we are able to understand sentences such as:

What is the *meaning* of malophile? or

What does malophile *mean*? [*in case you are wondering ... 'one who loves apples'*]

and we can ask and understand similar questions about other languages:

What is the meaning (in English) of (the Ata word) *lavuxi*? [*banana*] or

What does *casa* (the Spanish word) mean in English? [*house*]

If we know the word or the language involved, we can answer these kinds of questions, which shows that we *do* know at some level what *meaning* is, even if we can't put it into words.

Semantics and Pragmatics

We said before that communication involves creating and sharing meaning. When we listen to someone speaking we are trying to understand what they *mean* by what they are saying. This is actually a very complicated process, and it doesn't just involve the words being spoken, or the way those words are put together into sentences, but it also involves other things like the relationship we have with the person speaking, their cultural background and the social context we are in. All of these considerations in the area of meaning in language are together referred to as *semantics* and *pragmatics*.

"It has been generally assumed that we have to understand two types of meaning to understand what the speaker means by uttering a sentence. . . . A sentence expresses a more or less complete propositional content, which is semantic meaning, and extra pragmatic meaning comes from a particular context in which the sentence is uttered." (Etsuko Oishi, 2003)

Semantics is the structured system of meaning within individual languages. It is the way the grammar and lexicon (the vocabulary or units of meaning) of a language construct meaning in words, and sentences, and the way parts of sentences relate to each other in terms of meaning. Native speakers have an unconscious knowledge of the operation of semantics - of meaning in their language. Semantics is the part of grammar that builds meaning, and controls the relationship between meanings of words and phrases.

Pragmatics is concerned with the use of language in real interaction in real social contexts and the ways in which people produce and comprehend meanings through language. Some examples might be asking someone to "put the kettle on", when you really want them to make you a cup of coffee, or saying that "it's a cold day today", when you want them to close the window. Pragmatics looks at the practical aspects of human action and thought, and the use of linguistic signs (words and sentences), in actual situations.

Why is this important?

We will be looking at semantics and pragmatics in more detail in the next tutorials and discover the 'nuts and bolts' of how they work. But first we want to start with a bigger picture of the importance of this area to cross-cultural communicators. Probably you can already see why it is important for those whose goal is to communicate spiritual truth into another language and cultural situation, to have a good understanding of how meaning is created and shared in that context, but now you are going to listen to a program to explore these ideas in more depth.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Language and Meaning

1. Pick a language you do not speak, but are able to do some research about online. Why do people who speak this language consider their language important: e.g. what specific things are they not able to express any other way, which areas they can only speak about in the language, and what the language means to them in terms of their identity.
2. How do you think these issues of identity and language could affect the message and messengers who might come from outside and try to present Truth in that setting?