

SENSELESSNESS AND MEANINGFULNESS IN SELECTED VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL ENGLISH EXPRESSIONS AMONG NIGERIA ENGLISH LANGUAGE USERS

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Abstract

This paper examines the 'senselessness' and 'meaningfulness' of some English (verbal/ non-verbal) expressions. The paper thus, sets to consider the notion of 'making sense' from three different perspectives: the sense of signs and symbols, affixation and the alphabet. Two linguistic approaches are adopted to carry out this study; grammar and semantics. In grammar and as generally acclaimed, a sentence is a group of words formed in accordance to the grammatical rules of a language in order to make a complete sense to both the speaker and the hearer (Kroeger,2006:4;Thakur,2007:8;Kreidler,1998:27&Kroeger,2006:5). In semantics, the expression, 'making sense' is a significant phenomenon. Thus, the paper discovers that the definition of a sentence as generally acclaimed is too exclusive. This is because there are some English expressions which though not expressed in sentence forms, still meet the criterion of 'making a complete sense'. However, the definition of a sentence as earlier stated, does not rule out the 'senselessness' of a sentence because the expression 'It is hot' for example, is only meaningful in certain context but senseless because there is a zero argument between 'It' and 'is hot'(Kreidler,1998:68).The paper concludes by saying that 'senselessness' and 'meaningfulness' are intertwined because some senseless expressions can make meaning.

Key Words: Senselessness, Meaningfulness, Verbal and Non-verbal English Expressions

Introduction

The notion of *sense and reference* has been variously addressed by scholars in the forefront of research. Scholars like Saeed, Kreidler and Frege to mention but few, believed that the duo are concerned with word/sentence meaning rather than word/sentence alignment. To these exponents of word/sentence interpretation, *sense and reference* are one and the same. Today, the notion of sense and reference has been confined to two distinct linguistic branches. Thus, while 'sense' is purely 'semantic in approach', 'reference' is both 'grammatical and semantic'. The paper therefore, intends to shed light on the discrepancies and interplay between *sense and reference* on the one hand, and *senselessness and meaningfulness* on the other by considering some English sentences and statements from the perspectives of the sense theory and empirical verification respectively.

The Sense Theory and Empirical Verification

Users of language often times, misinterpret the two concepts, 'sense and reference'. As common issues in semantics, they are interrelated. According to Frege, the meaning of an expression is 'sense' while what the expression refers to is termed 'reference'. In other words, while 'sense' shows the semantic links between the elements of a sentence or proposition, 'reference' intends to indicate or represent by defining the specific entities in a sentence or proposition (Saeed2006:12). Moreover, 'sense' defines the syntactic balance of a sentence or proposition while 'reference' defines the different elements or items of a sentence or proposition. Let us consider the following examples:

S P C A

- (1) The white house/ is /the W.C. closet/ in my house.
- (2) The white house /is /the Science building/ at Obafemi Awolowo University.
- (3) The white house /is/ the government seat/in the United States.

Sentences (1-3) have the same sense but different referents. On 'sense', each of the three sentences i.e., Sentences (1), (2) and (3) has similar syntactic structure i.e., the SPCA structure; S(subject), P(predicator), C(complement) and A(adjunct) respectively. In addition, there is a re-occurrence of the expression, 'white house' at the subject position of each sentence. On 'reference' each of the three sentences has different referents. In other words, what 'white house' in each sentence represents or

indicates differs. In Sentence (1), 'white house' refers to the *W.C. closet*. The same 'white house' refers to the *Science building at Obafemi Awolowo University* and *the United States seat of government* in Sentences (2) and (3) respectively.

Surprisingly, semanticists and philosophers of language believe in the 'sense of a sentence'! This concern and belief was developed in the twentieth-century movement known as the scientific empiricism or logical positivism; a movement significant for the analysis of a language with a view to re-constructing the most acceptable criteria for its meaningfulness. The movement declares any statement not empirically verifiable meaningless. In other words, the meaning of a statement is tied to its method of verification (Blackburn 2005:215). Ayer (1970:35) also wrote on what is regarded as the bible of logical positivism. In his book, *Language, Truth and Logic*, Ayer opines that:

...a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows
how to verify the proposition which it purports to express- that is, if he knows
what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the
proposition as being true, or reject it as being false (Ayer 1970: 35).

Following from Ayer's, a sentence or proposition in its entirety, must denote/connote the existence or non-existence of entity/entities as either true or false. Some language experts have also accepted and developed the logical positivist criterion of meaning (Kreidler 1998:63). Thus, two substantive criteria for the meaningfulness of a sentence have evolved viz-a-viz:

(i) A sentence must be well-formulated; that is, it must be grammatically or logically correct and; (ii) A sentence must be empirically testable, that is, verifiable (Skirberkk & Gilje 2000:427)

Consider the following sentences:

- (4) The weather is hot.
- (5) It is hot.
- (6) The cat is running.
- (7) It is raining.

Remarkably, Sentences (4-7) state certain facts about the actual world. However, not every instance of the word combinations in the sentences is opened to empirical verification (Kreidler 1998:63). While Sentences (4) and (6) are verifiable empirically, because they are statements, Sentences (5) and (7) are not. Sentences (5) and (7) can only make sense in specific contexts. The meaningfulness of Sentence (4), 'The weather is hot', is tied to the fact that the word 'weather' refers to a certain event in the actual world and thus, liable to *achieve the* goal of human communication. The same is applicable to Sentence (6) where the expression, 'The cat' makes a complete sense because it refers to a particular animate entity in the actual world. Sentences (4) and (6) are thus, typical representations of the referential theory of meaning which states the connection between a word and its referent (Thakur 2007:122-130). The same Sentences (4) and (6), also describe the relationship by which a language hooks onto the world (Saeed 2006:12). By implication, Sentences (4) and (6) show the relationship between language and what it represents in the outside world (Thakur 2007:13).

However, Sentence (5), 'It is hot', does not, in all instances, make a complete sense except in the context in which it is used. Ordinarily, a sentence with a 'pronoun subject' will not make a complete sense because it can elicit a question. Sentence (5), 'it is hot' can elicit a question, 'what is hot?' It will sound ridiculous to offer the expression, 'it' as a satisfactory response to the question, 'what is hot?' This suffices to establish the fact that, there is no logical connection between 'It' and 'is hot'. Thus, Sentence (5) is a 'zero argument' which shows no referential relationship between the subject, 'It' and its predicate, 'is hot' (Kreidler, 1998:68). On the contrary, Sentence (7), 'It is raining' despite its syntactic semblance with Sentence (5), 'It is hot', makes sense. Though a 'zero argument',

Sentence (7) refers to the category of sentences termed, **weather predicates** (Kreidler, 1998:68). As a weather predicate, Sentence (7) will pass as an utterance in relation to the 'state of the weather'. Thus, Sentence (7), 'It is raining' will be empirically verifiable given its 'circumstantial stance.' The explication shows that coherence or meaning is achieved in a sentence, not only by the structure of the sentence, but by the referential nature of the sentence's key words. Other examples of sentences that do not really convey meanings are presented in Sentences (8-11):

- (8) He is smart.
- (9) It is brownish in colour.
- (10) They love singing.
- (11) We hate each other.

Sentences (8–11) are simple sentences with pronoun subjects. They are, however, strings of words meaningful 'only in certain contexts'. Context is defined by the relationship between a word or a linguistic form and their situation (Berry 1977:46). Sentence (8) will make sense in the context of the question, 'Is Wilfred smart?' This illustration confirms context as a connection or relationship that holds between language use and situation. Context also has a role to play in determining the meaningfulness of an expression. The latter sheds light on the limitation of the definition of a sentence as a group of words that make a complete sense because it fails to incorporate in its definition, other possible occurrences of certain group of words though not expressed in sentence forms, still meet the criterion of 'making a complete sense'. A closer look at the conversation below shows certain English constructions; 'A bait'; 'The cook' and 'A snake' make meaning in their own rights:

Yomi: What did you use to catch the fish?

Tomi: A bait

Yomi: Who was the king's favourite?

Tomi: The Cook

Yomi: What bit the poor boy?

Tomi: A snake

From the dialogue, Tomi's responses; 'A bait', 'The cook' and 'A snake' though not expressed in sentence forms, can be both 'meaningful' and 'senseless.' On the one hand, Tomi's responses will be meaningful because as a dialogue and a form of communication, it is 'meaningful in its own rights'. On the other, Tomi's responses will be senseless because the responses show the different shortfalls portrayed by sentences of a conversation or dialogue; lack of the full sentence structure with little or no information though meaningful to the interlocutors. Apart from the meaningfulness and senselessness of a conversation or dialogue, there are some lexical (verbal) and non-lexical (non-verbal) 'senses' which re-affirm the interplay between meaningfulness and senselessness; thus, the sense of signs and symbols.

The Sense of Signs and Symbols

A sign is an interpretant opened to diverse interpretations and mostly, culturally-influenced. The point confirms a fact about signs; its *arbitrariness*. The arbitrariness of a sign shows a zero reference for example, between the spoken or written word, 'TRIANGLE' (*the signifier*) and what it stands for (*the signified*) (Saussure 1974:15). In other words, there is no connection or relationship between the word 'TRIANGLE' and its numerous representations in the real world. Thus, the word 'TRIANGLE' can be any three-sided object anywhere in the world as long as it makes sense to its users. As earlier remarked, not every expression that makes a complete sense is expressed in a sentence form. Non-verbal expressions such as traffic signs, symbols (emblem, batch etc.) as well as code (country code, street code etc.) also make a complete sense. Worth knowing, the non-verbal

expressions (traffic signs, symbols and codes) are actual messages which though culture-dependent, need not be represented in ordinary sentence form to convey meaning (Saeed 2006:5). Therefore, 'signs' may be both 'meaningful' and 'senseless'. The meaningfulness and senselessness of a sign are tied to its diverse cultural interpretations. For instance, an 'HANGER' used for clothes is triangular. But the shape of an 'HANGER' in another linguistic environment may not be considered, triangular given its 'CORK'. The point, notwithstanding, does not rule out the communicative nature of a sign (Lyons 1977:33). Let us consider other examples:

Road Signs and Colour Interpretations

SIGNS	ACTUAL MESSAGES
Red light On	Halt/ Do not move
Amber On	Get ready to move
Green light On	Move now

COLOURS	ACTUAL MESSAGES
Black	Mourning
Red	Danger
Blue	Love
White	Peace
Green	Productivity

Following from the table is this; first, the illustrated road signs show its meaningfulness to road users (drivers and pedestrians) and second, the illustrated colour interpretations show the extent/degree of its meaningfulness/senselessness to and among diverse speech communities. For instance, the colour for mourning in some cultures is meaningfully interpreted as 'black' but such colour is considered senseless in another linguistic environment where 'white' is generally believed to be the colour for mourning (Saeed 2006:5). By implication, what makes meaning in one culture does not in another. Also to be considered is the sense of affixation.

The Sense of Affixation

Both prefixes and suffixes (affixes) can be considered appendages to the root or the base of a word. This is because not all prefixes and suffixes make sense unless they appear before a root/base (prefix) or after a root/base word (suffix) (Yule 2007:69). For example, in the word *irresponsible*, 'ir' is the prefix which is senseless i.e., it is significant for meaning: the 'ir' prefix is a negative prefix. Other prefixes in the same category are 'im' in *impossible*; 'il' in *illegal* and so on. Remarkably, some prefixes can make sense either singly or collectively. The prefix, *ultra* for example, has a separate meaning. The prefix means, *person holding extreme opinions*. The same can co-occur with words like 'sound', 'violet' to convey entirely another meaning. Instances of *ultrasound* (of a medical examination) and *ultraviolet* (of a form of radiation) respectively and more abound. There is also the possibility of a meaningful co-occurrence of two different suffixes. For instance, the two different suffixes '-ful' and '-ness' when combined together, will produce 'fulness'. Interestingly, the new combination, 'fulness', takes up the meaning, 'totality'. Thus, while the fusion of the English suffixes, 'ful+ness', makes sense collectively, the same remains meaningless or senseless individually. Worth knowing, some suffixes can make sense individually. Suffixes like *-able* meaning, *having the ability to do something* and *-less* meaning, *without* will make sense individually/singly (Collins English Dictionary, 2010). In addition, the two suffixes *-able* and *-less* can co-occur with some base/root words like *commend(able)* and *worth(less)* respectively to convey a slightly newer meaning. The paper further considers the sense of alphabets.

The Sense of Alphabets

Acronyms and abbreviations, as set of letters, are tools for effective communication. Though used during a communication process to convey intended meaning and ideas, the *duo* are not usually expressed in sentence forms. However, some abbreviations are capable of performing the role of qualifiers i.e., as adjectives. For example, the abbreviated form of 'MISTER' ('MR') is a title playing the role of an adjective when used with names of people like, MR. SMITH which tells more about 'SMITH'. Thus, both abbreviations and acronyms are limited in scope. They are limited because they stand for what they are designated to represent. Consider the following abbreviations and acronyms:

UNO – United Nations Organization

NUT – Nigerian Union of Teachers

BBC –British Broadcasting Corporation

WHO- World Health Organization

ASUU – Academic Staff Union of Universities

VOA- Voice of America

SON – Standards Organization of Nigeria

IRA- Individual Retirement Account

The abbreviations (IRA, UNO and ASUU) and acronyms (SON, WHO and NUT) are what Berry called the substances and forms of the English language. While the substances are the raw materials of language (letters) used in writing or speaking, the forms are the arrangements of the substances (letters) into recognizable and meaningful patterns (Berry1977:37). The major difference between abbreviations and acronyms is this; while abbreviations are letter-alphabets meaningfully fused together, acronyms are word letter-alphabets meaningfully fused together. Thus, while all acronyms are ambiguous with evidence of dictionary entry/meaning, not all abbreviations are ambiguous. For instance while the English abbreviation, 'SAN' given its linguistic setting stands for 'Senior Advocate of Nigeria' and nothing more, another abbreviation, 'IRA' can mean any of the following: 'Individual Retirement Account'; 'Irish Republican Army' or 'International Reading Association.' Unlike abbreviations that are not grossly ambiguous, acronyms exhibit ambiguity in its entirety given its nature. Therefore, the acronym, 'SON' apart from the dictionary meaning of a 'male offspring', can also mean, 'Standards Organization of Nigeria'. The logical connection that exists between abbreviations and acronyms confirms the meaningful relationship that holds among the various words(substances and forms) that make up the English sentence or expression (verbal/non-verbal). Little wonder every expression, verbal or non-verbal, takes into consideration the 'physical-social context' of its environment which to Kreidler, are the trio of 'circumstances', 'the individuals' and 'places of occurrence' (Kreidler1998:27). In other words, every linguistic expression must take into consideration, the relationship among people, places and circumstances of its production. What are the results or findings?

Conclusion

Having considered the three different senses of signs/symbols, affixation and alphabet, the paper discovered that three factors were tied to the meaningfulness and senselessness of an expression. First, the factor of empirical verification that considered the truthfulness or falsity of a sentence or proposition from the perspective of reference and sense. By implication, the different word combinations in a sentence or proposition must be definable or referentially determined to convey meaning otherwise, senseless. Second, the factor of meaningful alignment of some English letter-alphabets which; conferred meaningful letter-alphabets and meaningful word letter-alphabets on *abbreviations and acronyms* respectively. Thus, the abbreviations (IRA, ASUU) and acronyms (SON, WHO) would make sense to members of a language community who were familiar with what Berry called the substances and forms of the English alphabet. Third, the factor of affixation which identified the meaningfulness/senselessness of some prefixes/suffixes either singly or collectively. On

the affix; 'prefix', it was discovered that the prefix 'Ultra' would make sense either singly (Ultra) or collectively (Ultraviolet). Also on the affix; 'suffix', it was discovered that not all suffixes are grossly senseless. The suffix, '-able' as discovered in the paper made sense on its own. The same point, showcased the two suffixes, '-ful' and '-ness' which though senseless as discussed in the paper, could also be meaningful thus; on the one hand, when the two meaningfully occur together with certain root/base word like 'faith' as explicated in the paper and on the other, when the two suffixes; '-ful' and '-ness' are annexed i.e., fused together (without a root/base word) to produce 'fulness' which takes up a newer meaning, 'totality'.

Also discovered on the meaningfulness and senselessness of some verbal expressions is the English sentence, 'It is hot' which though senseless, would be meaningful based on context (Kreidler 1998:68). The senselessness of the sentence, 'It is hot,' as explicated in the paper showed that there is no referential connection between 'It' and 'is hot'. The paper therefore concluded by re-affirming the point that while it is true that every statement be opened to empirical verification, some verbal (lexical) and non-verbal (non-lexical) English expressions though not necessarily expressed in sentences or statements, could likewise express the idea of empirical verification given their meaningfulness in different linguistic environments.

The point as enunciated in the paper, revealed the possibility of some colours (instance of the sense of signs and symbols) attract diverse interpretations based on their meaningfulness/senselessness to different language users. This is the idea of the 'meaningfulness of a senseless expression' and the 'senselessness of a meaningful expression' considered in the paper.

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