MEANING IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

René Díaz H.
UCSH

Abstract
In this paper the author quotes Widdowson's work «Significance in Conventional and Literary Discourse» (1987) where he argues that there are differences between the way meaning is achieved conventionally (in everyday language) and the way it is achieved in literature. In his analysis, the author states the existence of three different levels of signification which correspond to: a) the linguistic sign in the sentence functions as a symbol (its meaning is stable); b) the linguistic sign in the utterance functions as index (its meaning is unstable); and finally c) the language of literature represents a reality which has no counterpart in the conventional world. Interpretation must achieve not reference, but rather representation; the signs take on an iconic character.

1. Introduction

When dealing with semantic analysis, the researcher can proceed from different angles and perspectives, such as from the level of the word to more complex units of analysis in semantics: the sentence, utterance, proposition and text.

Regarding meaning itself, it should be pointed out that: we are not dealing with the usual linguistic semantics, but rather with another type of semantics; and our interest is focused on the meaning that is conveyed through language, particularly on sense relations rather than references. The former being related to the language system itself, whereas the latter deals with the relationship between language and the world of experience.
Most of the applications and analyses carried out during a course of modern linguistic semantics employ the «normal» uses of language, that is to say, common texts which we encounter in our daily experience. However, there is an area of human experience which all of us teachers come across during our training at the undergraduate level: literature.

Despite the fact that literature is an area of human experience, not much is said about it. We must bear in mind that language is the raw material used by literature to construct meaning, Widdowson (1995) argues that there are differences between the way meaning is achieved conventionally (in everyday language) and the way it is achieved in literature.

2. Theoretical Framework

Literature is an interesting field of linguistic analysis, even though it takes us away from the contents we usually study during any course in semantics, to the extent that in literature, language plays a different role. If we have studied language during our academic years, exploring its semantic potential at the sentence and utterance level and so on, in literature we shall see that language plays the function of triggering or creating new worlds: the worlds of fiction.

Widdowson (1987) provides a refreshing insight for the understanding and analysis of conventional and literary discourse. The researcher argues that there is an essential difference between the way meaning is conveyed in literature and the way it is typically conveyed in conventional uses of language. Widdowson distinguishes three different levels of meaning when analyzing, providing two examples that refer to the way Linguists identify the linguistic sign in conventional discourse, while later he shows the way meaning is achieved in literary discourse.

The first level of meaning can be appreciated through the following sentence taken from Meaning in The Eye of the Beholder, as an example: He returned to the store. In this example, the linguistic sign functions as a symbol: its meaning is stable and subject to «centripetal» deciphering, that is, proceeding or acting in a direction towards a center or axis.

At a second level of meaning, the linguistic sign in the utterance functions as 'Index': its meaning is unstable and unspecifiable as it depends on the 'user' and the 'context' in which it occurs. It points 'centrifugally' from itself to discover through 'interpretation' its meaning. The meaning of the utterance proceeds or acts in the opposite direction from its center or axis.
Interpretation involves providing a symbolic variable with a particular indexical value. Let us remember that Chomsky suggested that there were two dimensions to language: performance and competence. Nevertheless, Hymes argued that it was not enough for somebody to be competent linguistically speaking; but also needed the linguistic and sociolinguistic competence. Thus, the person needs to know the conditions of possibility, feasibility, appropriateness and performability. These are the four judgements a communicatively competent person can make, according to Hymes.

Widdowson follows Hymes' four judgements, but adds that Possibility and Feasibility are features of the symbol, while Appropriateness and Frequency of Performance are features of index. The index serves to mediate between the known symbolic categories within the language system and the known schematic structures, which organize reality outside language. This leads us to «the semiotic corroboration thesis» described by Ruthrof (1995), in which the process of corroboration is regarded as the acquisition of meaning through negotiatory approximations or assimilations between signs of different systems. Everything that needs to be deciphered, interpreted or read must be considered as a sign system, and thus, treated as a form of signification. Besides, we must also consider that all we know is acquired through different signs, which, at the same time, come from different sign systems (visual, tactile, auditory, olfactory, etc.). Therefore, we not only perceive signs of an object in order to know, but also corroborate these signs with the signs of other systems in order to get the right image or knowledge of the world. In other words, as an intersemiotic perspective of the world.

As for the third level of signification proposed by Widdowson (1987), the language of literature is not used to refer to a familiar and verifiable reality, but rather to represent a reality of a different and alternative order that has no direct counterpart in the conventional world. Representation, then, is the essential feature of literature. To illustrate this, we can mention the popular novel A Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel García Márquez, in which the reality depicted has no direct counterpart in the conventional world.

What in conventional discourse can be a referential failure, in literature is representationally appropriate since language sets up the conditions for forward projection whereby the context is created within the literary work itself. Interpretation then, must not achieve reference, but representation: the signs take on an iconic character.
The referential process, as Widdowson conceives it, may be shown diagrammatically as:

Widdowson states that the symbol relates to reality by denotation, the index by reference, and the icon by representation. He also claims that literature is relevant to the description and learning of language since in literature the meaning potential inherent in the language system is given a fuller realization than is required by conventional reference.

Learners can be aware of the meaning of linguistic forms by directing their attention to meaning potential as representation when there is a sequence of events. In this case, learners are confronted by a forward projection whereby the context is created within the literary work itself, and not when there are unrelated sentences as these only account for their symbolic value as a sentence.

Rather than presenting expressions which demonstrate its symbolic character as sentence, such as: «He returned to the store», «She returned to the store» and «He went back to the store», we could present it with other sentences that direct the attention to its meaning potential as representation, as for: «He returned to the store. The assistant did not recognize him. He took out his gun. Then, he pointed his gun at everyone in the store.»

3. Methodology

The strategy followed to attain the goals of this work can be described by indicating the steps taken throughout the work.
Step 1: In order to select a sample, the context in which the literary material could be set should be determined. The context has both formal and informal settings; the former could take place in the classroom, as a literary seminar, and the latter could take place when any avid reader chooses some literary work to read just for the fun of it.

Bearing the purpose mentioned previously, a fable by Aesop was chosen as a piece of literature to suit either purpose. The text transcribed from this literary piece represented a formal written register; however, had the aims of this research work been of a different nature, a fable transcribed from an informal setting would have been obtained, but that was not the case.

Step 2: Widdowson’s semantic theory, which has been already dealt with, was applied to detect and analyze semantic items at the utterance level, confronting it with Searle’s influential approach on illocutionary acts (1969). At the sentence and literary level, it was necessary to make a clear definition on the phenomenon of significance between conventional and literary discourse.

4. Objectives of this project

Given the complexity of the topic, a descriptive research work was chosen in relation to the semantic theories postulated by Henry G. Widdowson. In this line, the central objectives of this project are:

a To describe Widdowson’s semantic theory.
b To apply his theory by analyzing a given text, at the sentence, utterance, and literary levels.
c To relate Widdowson’s findings to other semantic theories postulated by other authors.
d To conclude with a critical discussion on the phenomenon of significance in conventional and literary discourse.

5. The Text

Crystal, D. (1987:100) argues that «...only in certain fields – such as literature – do we tolerate personal deviations from the semantic norms of the language...»—. He states one of the favorite quotations of semanticists from Lewis Carroll’s book Through the Looking Glass (1872, Chapter 6), in which Humpty Dumpty turns our conventional understanding of meaning on his head, and makes us see more clearly what it has to be about:
«When I use a word», Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, «it means what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less».
«The question is,» said Alice, «whether you can make words mean so many different things».
«The question is,» said Humpty Dumpty, «which is to be master–that's all».

Hurford, J. and Heasley, B. (1988) make the following comment on Carroll:

«Lewis Carroll had brilliant insights into the nature of meaning (and into the foibles of people who theorize about it). In the passage above, he is playfully suggesting that the meanings carried by words may be affected by a speaker's will. On the whole, we probably feel that Alice is right, that words mean what they mean independently of the will of their users, but on the other hand it would be foolish to dismiss entirely Humpty Dumpty's enigmatic final remark».

Lewis Carroll's aim was to amuse, and he could afford to be enigmatic and even nonsensical. The aim of serious semanticists is to explain and clarify the nature of meaning. For better or for worse, this puts us in a different literary genre from Through the Looking Glass. The time has come to talk seriously about meaning.

The meaning that an individual places on a particular word is not part of the general study of semantics. Of course it is important for the purposes of this work to see how and why an individual chooses to diverge from the normal pattern. This is necessary in the study of literature – the writer may well not 'mean' what you and I mean.

One of the best ways to illustrate these literary concepts of meaning is by quoting a literary work, in the style of a fable by Aesop, a Greek writer, «The lion and the mouse», in which there are many linguistic elements involved.

The role of a fable in language teaching may have different settings or contexts. For example, if we want to reinforce the issue of 'kindness toward your peers', a fable dealing with this moral would suit perfectly. Another very recurrent context for a fable is when you want to reinforce the love for animals, then it would even be appropriate for adults.

«The Lion and the Mouse»1 (A fable2 by Aesop)

One day a mouse went out to find something to eat. He ran carelessly through some tall grass. He ran into a fierce lion. The lion caught
the mouse. He held him tightly and would not let him go.

'Please, let me go, Mr. Lion', said the mouse. 'One day I will help you'.
The lion laughed. 'How could a little mouse help a big lion?', he thought.
'Very well', he said. 'I will let you go. But you must walk more carefully'.
The mouse was very grateful. 'Thank you', he said. 'You are very kind'.
The next week the mouse was again looking for something to eat.
He saw the lion under a tree. He was tied tightly in a net of strong ropes.
He could not move.
'I will help you', said the mouse.
He bit through one of the ropes. His teeth were sharp.
Then he bit through another rope, and then another.
Soon the lion was free. He was very pleased.
'Thank you', he said. 'Thank you very much'.

6. Analysis of the Text
6.1. At the Sentence Level

According to Widdowson (1987:10), signification can be specified in a sentence by indicating how the linguistic sign—which functions as a symbol—enters into sense relations, thus arguing that its meaning is stable and subject to 'centripetal' deciphering. Thus given a particular sentence from the text: «He was very pleased».

Signification can be stated explicitly by indicating that he denotes a singular male person—in the case of our fable, a male animal—that he enters into sense relations with she and they as terms within the noun system, contrasting with she in gender and with they in number. It can be shown how was contrasts with is, will be and so on within the tense/aspect systems of English; it can be demonstrated how the whole combination of symbols as a sentence enters into paradigmatic relations with other sentences. And so on.

To round up, the dissociation of elements from their context in order to specify the denotation and sense of linguistic items is to show their signification as symbols. «The complex rules...» states Widdowson, «which define these systems and which determine the ways in which signification is given formal expression are the business of the grammarian to describe». (pp. 9–10, ibid.).

6.2. Meaning at the Utterance Level
«Utterance meaning includes all 'secondary' aspects of meaning, especially those related to context. It is this distinction that allows us to 'say' one thing and mean another». (Palmer, F.R., 1981:8).

This fable may 'look for' its meaning, 'centrifugally', if we, for example, place it in an instructional concept in the classroom, where the intention of the teacher may be, for instance, to instill respect for animals. Then every utterance becomes indexical because all students look for meaning, but here meaning is unstable and unspecifiable as it depends on the user and the context in which it occurs.

In this context every utterance can be analyzed from the perspective of the different functions they may perform through the lenses of the speech act analysis in which the intention of the speaker is also considered. As an example: «I will help you», said the mouse.

According to Searle's influential approach on illocutionary acts (1969), the utterance above would be commissive because the speaker the mouse in this case is committed, in varying degrees to a certain course of action. This interpretation may differ from others because the linguistic sign here is indexical and it depends on each reader's interpretation.

6.3. Meaning at the Literary Level

At this level of analysis, even though we still have the sentence and the utterance, we need to make a further distinction. Literature takes the full text in itself and creates a whole world in and of itself. Somehow, it legitimizes itself in the text because in the fable a lion is kind, a mouse speaks, or begs for mercy, which leads us to consider that what in conventional discourse is a referential failure, it is representationally appropriate since language sets up the conditions for forward projection whereby the context is created within the literary work itself.

At the literary level of analysis, the signs take on an iconic character, which means that interpretation, then, must achieve not reference but representation.

In the fable, when we read that the lion was tied tightly in a net of strong ropes, and the mouse saved the lion, we know the characters are fictitious but, as readers, we have to believe it. We must think it is all true for us to create or construct the meaning that supports the whole fable. We engage in a willing suspension of belief.

We need to make a representation of the storyline or plot of the fable where this particular lion speaks and has other human features, i.e., to
project the symbolic and indexical levels to create a represented reality. In opposition, in a scientific report—conventional language—a lion would be described in a different way. Conventional discourse would refer to the lion's habitat, the food it eats, its scientific name, and so on and so forth.

Summing up, we can say that the symbol in a sentence relates to reality by denotation, the index in the utterance relates to reality by reference and the icon in literature by representation.

7. Conclusions

A further area of analysis somewhat contrary to Widdowson's thinking, which expresses a distinct delineation between the real world and the world of literature, would be to examine the ways in which these other rules, which apply to the specific world of the literary work, are informed by our real world notions coming into conflict with the other reality depicted in the literary piece. For instance, our appreciation of and reaction to a world in which, for example, objects or persons float, is derived from and informed by the real world with its law of gravity. In order for magic to exist in its literary context, there must be some real world laws, preexistent in the consciousness of the reader, which the magic violates. The magic has its own reality, true, but it requires the context of the real world for the reader to regard it as magical. In this area, Widdowson is less than convincing. Ruthrof's aforementioned corroboration thesis would be a likely starting point for such an analysis for it would seem that the degree of separation between those worlds, conventional and literary, is often and possibly always crucial to the literary pieces' effect and, ultimately, its meaning.

NOTAS
1 (Taken from 'Start with English'. Book 5. By D.H. Howe. P.15).

2 Fable: (n) A fictitious narration in which animals speak and act like human beings intended to enforce a useful truth. (Webster's).

8. Bibliography


