

A SEMANTIC STUDY OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S LETTER TO HIS SON'S TEACHER

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Abstract

The concept of semantics involves the way words are interconnected in a given communicative unit to pass across a message. This is because the meanings of words are not taken in isolation, since most times, meanings are derived from the way words are connected in a given text to enhance the message of a given speaker or writer. This study therefore, is an investigation into the conventional meanings conveyed by the choice of words and sentences Abraham Lincoln used in the letter he wrote to his son's teacher. The

Carroll concept of semantic network model (2004) was used to carry out the investigation. Consequently, the study showed that there are additional semantic qualities of words that language speakers generally agree upon beyond conventional meanings.

Key words: semantics, synonym, antonyms, holonyms, meronym.

Introduction

Semantics is the study of words, including what they are made of, how we use them, and how we relate them to one another. Since we do not employ words in isolation when we talk, meanings are created by combining them with other words. According to Saeed, "Semantics is the study of meaning expressed via languages" (2003:3). Trask and Mayblin capture the definition of semantic succinctly:

But words don't have meaning only in isolation. Much of their meaning comes from the way they are connected to other words... clearly, the meaning we assign to words depend in important ways on the meanings of other words they occur with (2012:110).

These definitions can be further buttressed in the narrative of Humpty Dumpty:

"My name is Alice..."

"It's a stupid name enough!" Humpty Dumpty interrupted impatiently.

"What does it mean?"

"Must a name mean something?" Alice asked doubtfully.

"Of course, it must," Humpty Dumpty said with a short

laugh: my name means the shape I am – and a good handsome shape it is, too. With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost."

Lewis Carroll, through the Looking-Glass.

This story serves as a reminder that words are semantic tools, and that when they are employed, they convey meanings. But within a communicative network, these meanings are transmitted through the relationships that words make with other words. Fromkin and Rodman accentuate this fact "... words have many more properties which define their meanings than are shown" (1993:516). These descriptions and comparisons set the basis of the investigation carried out in this study which examined the semantic function of the words used by Abraham Lincoln to communicate his ideas to his son's teacher. This study is hinged on the theoretical model of Johnson Laird's Mental Model of 1983 and Lyons' 1968 Sense of a Word Means, Model. The Johnson Laird Mental Model is a cognitive structure that represents some aspects of our environment. According to him, such models are not limited to linguistic aspects. But it is a model of our visual environment, in the form of a mental image, which allows us to navigate our ways through our environment. He argues that if one is blindfolded and taken into a room in his house, he would probably be able to find his way around fairly well. But suppose they move the furniture while he is blindfolded, he would have a great deal of trouble moving around. However, if he is warned that he is about to run into something, he would in short, order, from vivid images of each piece of furniture in its new location (Johnson-Laird 1988). In a similar manner, we may have mental models of those aspects of the environment that correspond to words. When we hear a sentence, we may construct "a mental model of the

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particular state of affairs characterized by the utterance” (Johnson-Laird, Herrmann, & Chaffi, 1984:311). This model can be used to evaluate whether a sentence is true, by comparing the model with perceptual evidence, at least for those sentences that refer to our immediate environment.

Carroll (2004:107) shares this view when he says that reference is part of meaning, but he goes on to state that there is more to meaning than reference. Two different words or expressions may have the same reference but not mean the same thing; for example, the reference of the two-noun phrases:

The President of Nigeria and

The National Leader of the APC is currently the same, namely, President Muhammadu Buhari. But the meanings of the two expressions are different, as can be seen when a different party or a different candidate of the APC comes to power. The truth value of the sentences will vary with the referents of the two-noun phrases, but the meaning of the phrases and the sentences will remain the same.

On the other hand, Frege (1892|1952) states that the part of meaning that is not its reference is termed 'sense'. According to Lyons (1968:427), the sense of a word means “it places in a system of relationship which it contracts with other words in the vocabulary.” This model or theory has made linguists to identify several important relations. *Synonyms* exist when two words or expressions mean the same thing; for example, *intelligent* and *bright*. Co-ordination occurs when two words exist at the same level in a hierarchy; for example, *goat* and *sheep* are co-ordinates because both fall under the heading of animal. *Hypernym* deals with the relationship of *superordination* within a *hierarchy*; *insect* is *hypernym* of *mosquito*. *Hyponym* is just the opposite; *mosquito* is *hyponym* of *insect*. *Meronymy* pertains to the part of an object referred to in a word; for the word *table*, the legs and the top are *meronyms* because they refer to parts of a table. This reiterates the position of Katz and Fodor (1963:170) when they argue that “a full account of a language will have to include a systematic listing of all the possible meanings of individual words...”

These scholarly models constitute the template used for this study because of the concept of a semantic network model of Carrol (2004:98). This model states that a word's meaning includes both sense and reference. Sense refers to a word's relationship with other words, whereas reference pertains to the relationship between a word and an object or event in the world.

Discussion

Semantic Knowledge

What is meaning? What is it that we know, when we know the meaning of a word? And how is the meaning represented mentally? Linguists, philosophers and psychologists have identified several aspects of a word meaning. Let us begin by examining some of the distinctive features of the letter.

1. “My son starts school today.”

When we understand the meaning of this sentence, then we grasp its *truth conditions*; the conditions under which the sentence may be said to be true. In this instance, there must be a *son*, who must be a *boy*, and who must be ready to start *school* and a *teacher* who is ready to receive and teach him at school. That is, we must assess whether the events in the world correspond to the referents of the words: *son*, *school* and *teacher*. *Reference* is concerned with what the word should be like if a given utterance is true. And in a broader context, it is pertinent to note that during this period in history, there was an American President who was known as Abraham Lincoln, and who was sending his son to school and who expects the teacher to guide his son to both academic and life success. We can further analyze the words by attempting to reveal their properties, or *semantic features*. By doing so, we will describe the meanings of these words either as plus (+) or minus (-) which will become their features;

	Son	school	teacher
human	+	–	+
male	+	–	+
female	–	–	+
young	+	–	–
inanimate	–	+	–

From the above analysis, we discover that words have more properties which define their meanings. These features can be further characterized in a word, to determine whether the word is a noun, verb, adjective, adverb etc. And for example, if the word is a noun, then it is expected that the word will either be a subject or an object of a verb. With the word's semantic feature, additional semantic aspects can be introduced:

The _____ is teaching my son.
N+ (human) = teacher

These analyses have enabled the classification of the

words used by Lincoln into semantic groups; those that are humans (+human) or inanimate (+inanimate). The ability of the writer, Lincoln, to use these words accurately, is based on the fact that these words exist in his thought which constitute his Logical Formation Process (LFP), and it is as a result of the lexicon he has stored in his mind set over the years.

It is important to state that not all references are easy to understand. Some words clearly have meanings, but it is difficult to know what they refer to. This group includes *gently, faith, love* and *courage*. Other words are meaningful but have no real referent, such as in the fifth paragraph with words like *birds, sky, bees, sun* and *flowers*. The referents of the words *birds, sky, bees, sun* and *flowers* might however refer to objects in another hypothetical world. According to Pavel (1986), the process of referring to imaginary world plays an important role. Furthermore, these words can be referred to as literary *metaphors*, and beyond the fact that metaphors enhance the rhetorical force and stylistic vividness and pleasantness of any discourse, they also permeate language and affect the way Lincoln perceives and conceives his worldview. Therefore, these words are carefully chosen to typify his value for *flowers*, which symbolizes his appeal for natural aesthetic; the *sky* and the *sun* reveal Lincoln's submission to the supremacy and the awesomeness of God while the *bees* and *birds* represent his love and passion for God's creation. As a way of deduction, Lincoln is asking his son's teacher to build in his son the ability to learn, the capacity for understanding and the ability to perceive essentials relation between things, and the insight into the workings of nature. These essentials of learning will provide the foundation of abilities in his son; from the highest abilities, such as the solving of mathematical equations, right down to the simplest, such as tying his bootlaces (Biesheuvel, 1974:221).

2. More of Form is More of Content

Conduit metaphors are the content of those containers. When we see actual containers that are small, we expect their contents to be small. When we see containers that are large, we normally expect their contents to be large. Applying this to the conduit metaphor, we get the expectation:

MORE OF FORM IS MORE OF CONTENT

As we shall see, this is a very general principle that seems to occur naturally throughout the world's

languages. Though the conduit metaphor is widespread, it is not known that spatialization of language would occur in every language, and whatever the details, it would not be surprising to find such correlations of amount.

Example of MORE OF FORM is MORE OF CONTENT in English is *iteration*: he ran and ran and ran and ran. This expression indicates more running than simply saying that he ran. And they are examples of this feature in the letter; from the first paragraph to the last:

Teach him, teach him, teach him

This feature is the morphological device of reduplication which Lincoln employs to strengthen his message to his son's teacher. It is a repetition of one or two syllables of a word or the whole word. By using this technique, Lincoln re-emphasizes the need for his son's teacher to properly teach and guide his son. All cases of reduplication in the languages of the world are instances which stand for *more content*. And the implication of this by Lincoln to his son's teacher can easily be interpreted to mean:

"I expect nothing less from you (teacher), but qualitative education for my son."

3. Lexical Relations or Semantic Network

Words in a communicative unit cannot be taken in isolation; they behave like family trees whose relationships are tied by family bonds. Carroll reinforces this when he affirms that "the main idea regarding the organization of the lexicon is that it is set up as a semantic network of interconnected element". Similarly, not only can words be treated as *containers* or as fulfilling *roles*, they also have *relationships* in our everyday talk. To give the meaning of the word *seek*, our reply will simply be *find*, or to give the meaning of *deep*, the opposite of *shallow*. In doing this, one is not characterizing the meaning of a word in terms of its component feature but in terms of its relationship with other words. This technique has always been used in the semantic description of languages, and is usually treated as the analysis of *lexical relations* or *semantic network*. This type of lexical relation abounds in this letter. These are analyzed thus:

a) Synonyms

Synonyms are two or more forms with very closely related meanings which are often but not always inter-substantial in sentences. This style

abounds in this letter. In the first paragraph, the following examples are found:

Lincoln uses words like *wars*, *tragedy* and *sorrow*. In the same paragraph, these choices of words can also be referred to as synonyms; *faith*, *love* and *courage*. In the second paragraph, the phrases, *not just* and *not true* are also synonyms. It should be stated that the idea of sameness of meaning used in discussing synonyms is not necessarily total sameness. This clarifies why some of the words above are not actually the same. One may raise objection to why the word *war* is classified along with *tragedy* and *sorrow*, the same applies to *faith*, *love* and *courage*. However, a critical examination of these classifications reveals their sameness with regard to the message Lincoln passes across to his son's teacher.

b) Antonyms

Two forms of words with opposite meanings are called antonyms, and are commonly used in speeches. Example of antonyms also abound in this letter:

In the second paragraph there are phrases like:

for every *enemy* there is a *friend* (**enemy and friend**)

for every *scoundrel* there is a *hero* (**scoundrel and hero**)

for every *crooked* politician – there is a *dedicated* politician (**crooked and dedicated**).

In the third paragraph, there are phrases like gracefully *lose* – enjoy *winning* (**lose and win**). In the fourth paragraph, there are phrases that also connote antonyms; *gentle* with gentle people – *tough* with tough people (**gentle and tough**). In this paragraph there is also a phrase that connotes antonyms; to *laugh* when he is *sad* (**laugh and sad**).

Similarly, there are also phrases like, *glory* in *failure* and *despair* in *success*.

What Lincoln has done with his choice of words is to create the effect of drama and irony with the aim of achieving a deeper interpretation of the text because he has mainly juxtaposed opposing words (oxymoron) in these phrases. By so doing, he creates an impression that enhances a concept of a friendly environment between him and the teacher. But in a larger spectrum, he also entertains those who continually read the letter. These choices are what Corcoran (1986) refers to

as the language balanced. It is a language balanced between the static *nouns of earth* and the quickened *pure verb*. These words are like intoxicating brew that gets the reader muse for perpetual reading.

c) Denotation and Connotation

The denotation, objective or diction and meaning of a word which is usually a dictionary definition includes phonological information (pronunciation), orthographic information (spelling), syntactic information (part of speech), semantic information (various meanings), and connotation. This suggests certain aspects of meaning beyond that which it explicitly names or describes. Two words may have the same denotation but differ in their connotations. A good example exists in the second sentence of the first paragraph of the letter:

It is going to be *strange* and *new* to him for a while.

According to Smith (1978:104) from the standpoint of dictionary definition, the terms are comparable, in the context of this letter; both could mean being introduced to a new experience. But connotatively in this context, *new* 'could mean *teething troubles*, *cradle*' while '*strange* could mean *unpleasant* and *uncomfortable*'. While *new* and *strange* may have close meanings denotatively, in this context, Lincoln uses them to express his fear for the unknown with regard to a new environmental experience that his son will be facing in school.

4. Hierarchical Network

In 1969, 1970 and 1972, Collins and Quallian came up with concepts similar to the words which are represented as distinct nodes in a network of taxonomic and attributive relations. According to them, taxonomic relations are those that deal with **hyponym**, **hypernym** and **coordination**. Attributive or property relations indicate what characteristics may be attributed to the items at various levels in the network.

In the third paragraph of this letter, there is an example of coordination: "Teach him if you can that *10 cent* earned is of far more value than a *dollar* found." *Cent* and *dollar* are currencies of the United States and they are coordinates of money; while *cent* is a lower denomination of the American *dollar*, the latter is a higher denomination. However, Lincoln

uses this money symbol to urge his son's teacher to inculcate in his son the dignity of labour, the virtue of hard work and the principles of honesty. In other words, Lincoln is asking his son's teacher to instill in his son the principles of hard work as reflected in the letter:

*Teach him if you can that **10 cents** earned is of more value than a **dollar** found.*

With this statement, Lincoln is only showing his son's teacher some scriptural ethics as stated in Proverbs (22:1) that "A good name is better to be chosen than great riches..."

In the fifth paragraph of the letter, Lincoln asks his son's teacher to teach his son **the wonder of books**. It may be concluded that Lincoln was only *asking the son's teacher to teach his son to be a voracious reader*. No wonder, earlier on in the letter, Lincoln, highlighted the need for his son to identify and accept these types of characters as part of society:

*Teach him that for every enemy there is a friend
That all men are not just; that all men are not true
Teach him also that for every scoundrel there is a hero
That for every crooked politician, there is a dedicated leader.*

Lincoln's son will be able to relate to these types of personalities stated above when he encounters them in real life through reading; hence it is the teacher's responsibility to instill in him the value and knowledge of reading. Semantically, the words *pages, paragraph, covers* and *chapters*, are all **meronym** of books, because they are parts of a book, while the book itself is **holonym**. This is another scriptural standard that Lincoln employs in the letter as reflected in *Daniel* (9:2):

In the first year of his reign I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem.

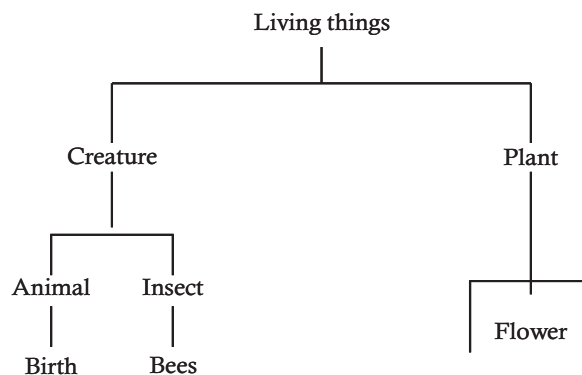
According to the scriptures above, books helped the prophet Daniel realize that the children of Israel should have just spent the first 70 years of their exile in captivity. The ability to read will therefore aid Lincoln's son in navigating through life.

Furthermore, hyponym is the meaning of one form included in the meaning of another. For example, daffodil - flower, dog - animal, poodle - dog, carrot - vegetable, banyan - tree. These examples

abound in the following sentence of the letter:

Teach him if you can the wonders of books, but also give him to ponder the extreme mystery of birds in the sky, bees in the sun and flowers on a given hill.

The diagram below is used to bring out the hyponym in this clause:



From the diagram above, bird, bees and flower are two or more terms which share the same superordinate (higher-up) term, which are co-hyponyms. So, birds (animal) and bees (insect) are co-hyponyms of the superordinate term 'creature'. From the diagram above, it can be inferred that Lincoln is expecting his son's teacher to impact in his son a holistic education that will help his son to appreciate nature. The teacher should build in his son the quality that will help his son to develop the power of the mind and the skills through which this power could be expressed. And one way by which this can be achieved is when his son appreciates the beauty of God's work around him.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the fact that words are not utilized in isolation but rather have connective relationships whether they are spoken or written. Every message is better understood when words are viewed as well-organized networks of communication. Consequently, the main focus of semantics is on how words interact with one another within a given sentence to make meaning. However, this study has shown that there are additional semantic qualities (properties) of words that language speakers generally agree upon beyond conventional meanings. And due to the partisan relationship that Lincoln had with his son, it is possible that his choice of words is better appreciated in the underlining semantic features of the letter. Every good communicator makes conscious effort to make his message clear and explicit and in doing so, they employ the use of words which has been affirmed in this study.

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Notes

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