

Date de soumission : 24/09/2021 ; Date d'acceptation : 18/06/2021 ; Date de publication : 30/06/2021

## WORD UNDERSTANDING: A CRUCIAL COMPONENT IN READING COMPREHENSION

## LA COMPRÉHENSION DES MOTS : UNE COMPOSANTE CRUCIALE DE LA COMPRÉHENSION DE LA LECTURE

**Hemaidia Mohamed<sup>1</sup>**

Ibn Khaldoun University Tiaret / Algeria  
Mohamed.hemaidia@univ-tiaret.dz

**Founes Oussama<sup>2</sup>**

Ibn Khaldoun University Tiaret / Algeria  
oussama.founes@univ-tiaret.dz

**Abstract:** Learners' reading comprehension is very often hampered by their limited words of the target language. Understanding words to grasp the ideas of a text and attempting to use them to express their thought is the major problem which confronts them because of their misinterpretation of the exact meaning as well as the context of the situation in which these words are used. Meaning of words are parts of the decoded messages where the cultural aspects of language influence the learners' speech as well as writing and hence, they make serious mistakes by translating the forms and the meanings from the native language and culture to the ones of the TL. This may lead to the problem which arises when learners make efforts to acquire new habits and behaviour of the foreign language, and at the same time they use the background of their native language habits.

**Keywords:** language, word, denotative, connotative, iconic meaning, metaphor

**Résumé :** La compréhension de la lecture par les apprenants est très souvent entravée par leurs mots limités de la langue cible. Comprendre les mots pour saisir les idées d'un texte et tenter de les utiliser pour exprimer leur pensée est le problème majeur auquel ils sont confrontés en raison de leur mauvaise interprétation du sens exact ainsi que du contexte de la situation dans laquelle ces mots sont utilisés. Le sens des mots fait partie des messages décodés où les aspects culturels de la langue influencent la parole et l'écriture des apprenants et, par conséquent, ils commettent de graves erreurs en traduisant les formes et les sens de la langue et de la culture maternelles à celles de la TL. Cela peut conduire au problème qui se pose lorsque les apprenants font des efforts pour acquérir de nouvelles habitudes et comportements de la langue étrangère, et en même temps ils utilisent le fond de leurs habitudes de la langue maternelle.

**Mots-clés :** langue, mot, dénotatif, connotatif, sens iconique, métaphore.

\* \* \*

---

<sup>1</sup> Hemaidia Mohamed : mohamed.hemaidia@univ-tiaret.dz

<sup>2</sup> Founes Oussama : oussama.founes@univ-tiaret.dz

## 1. Introduction

The present research work is an attempt to describe and examine one of the problems learners of the foreign language face when interpreting, during their learning process, the words which they find difficult or alien. The possible reason behind the problem is the difference that exists between the foreign and native languages and cultures. To go further through the subject, some theories and definitions are cited to identify the relationship between language and culture and the possible influence which the native culture may exert on learners' understanding of the foreign language word-meaning.

## 2. Language and culture

Language does not exist in a vacuum. It is embedded in the culture of people and reflects the beliefs, customs and traditions of the speech community. Malinowski (1946:132) argues that language is essentially rooted in the reality of the culture; the tribal life and customs of the people. Every language has specific vocabulary items, the concepts of which are completely different in another language. The Arabic word 'جهاد' /ǧiha:d/ does not have the equivalent meaning of the French word “la Lutte” , nor is it exactly the same as the English word “fight” . Similarly, the English word “hypocrite” does not convey the exact meaning of the Arabic word 'منافق' /muna:fiq/. The French oath “Je vous jure” is not the same as 'أقسم بالله' /ʔuqsimu bila:h/. The meaning of a word is not absolute in any language. It is conditioned by social conventions. Most linguists agree on the fact that the full meaning of a word for an individual is the result of the experience that he has in the cultural milieu he has grown up in. It is difficult to establish exact equivalences between words and expressions in two languages because of the interrelationship between language and culture. Even if the words sometimes correspond in denotation; they may vary in connotation, or the emotional associations they may arouse (Rivers 1958:265).

Words represent the medium with which learners grasp the ideas depending on the different meanings in the different chosen contexts. Thus, it may be convenient to introduce, for more emphasis, the notion of “word” as a linguistic unit, both in isolation and in sentences.

## 3. The word

For Crystal (1992:379) the words are units which one encounters in the stretch of writing, limited by spaces (orthographic words), or those used in speech where their boundaries are identified by phonological clues such as pitch, stress and length (phonological words). All words would be listed in a dictionary, yet there is a problem in identifying and defining

them. Words usually have different lexical meanings according to the context where they are used. Sapir states that “students should never make the mistake of identifying a language with its dictionary.” (1921:34-35)

Words are used to represent an idea; an object, or an action .For foreign language learners, words never function in the same fullness and freedom as they do for the natives. Dictionaries are used to facilitate the task of defining words, yet not all words have the same kind of meaning. Thus, foreign learners are, most of the time, misled to serious sense ambiguities.

When one uses the word “head” in the context “My head hurts”, the attention goes to the part of the body that contains the eyes, the brain and so on. Yet in the context of “head of department” it refers to the department chief. The source of information about the meaning of words comes from the context provided in any sentence or utterance. In the English example , Henry likes to swim , the meaning of “Henry” , “likes” and “swim” are very clear , but the word “to” is not . “Henry”, “likes” and “swim” can be substituted by “Jack”, “hates” and “smoke”, yet “to” may not be replaced by any word. If “to” is isolated from the environment it is in, no sense can be provided.

Sweet (1991:22) makes a distinction between full words and form words. For him ‘full words’ are words like tree, book, sing and blue. ‘Form words’ are words like it, the, of, and only the full words are expected to have a meaning that could be found in a dictionary. The form words are concerned with grammar and, therefore, have only grammatical meanings. Form words cannot provide meaning unless they are put in relation with other words. We might produce the form words in isolation when we answer questions like “Did you say ‘a’ or ‘the?’”, but this must necessarily be related to a question.

#### **4. Words and their aspects**

In natural languages such as English, words, together with other expressions (including phrases and sentences) have forms and meanings (Lyons 1996:23). But it is necessary to distinguish the ‘word’ from both its form and meaning.

##### **4.1. Form**

In languages, mainly those which have the same or approximately the same writing system such as English and French and English and German, words have both spoken forms as well as written forms.

Form words, according to Crystal (1992:142) are also called “function words” and whose role is largely grammatical. Richards and Schmidt (2002:116) use the concept “content word” which they divide into two classes:

4.1.1. **Content words:** refer to ‘thing’, ‘quality’, ‘state’ or ‘action’ and have a lexical meaning when they are used alone. They are: nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. For example, ‘book’, ‘run’, ‘musical’, ‘quickly’.

4.1.2. **Function words :** Which have little or no meaning when used in isolation. For example, ‘and’, ‘to’ and ‘the’. Form words are identified in speech and concern stress and intonation and would result in meaning differences (Lado 1957:76). This means that many pairs of words in different languages are phonologically distinguished only by “stress”. An example of that is the English word “subject” /sʌbdʒɪkt/ where the stress is on the first syllable and this is a noun defined as “a branch of knowledge studied as a system of education.” If the position of the primary stress is changed as in the case of subject /səˈbdʒekt/ another part of speech and a new meaning would result, i.e. a verb which is explained as “to cause to be controlled or ruled”.

**In French:** admirer, admirable, admirablement, admirateur(s). **In English:** response, responsible, responsibility, responsibilities

These forms of English and French which may resemble each other in affixes differ to some extent from the ones in other languages.

In Arabic one may say: 'مسؤول' /masʔu:l/ (responsible) as a singular noun, 'مسؤولية' /masʔu:liatun/ (responsibility) as also a singular noun. 'مسؤوليات' /masʔu:lia:tun/ (responsibilities) as a noun , but plural. What is noticed in the last word of Arabic is that the inflection plural /a:/ is used as an infix and not as a suffix.

The derived word usually results in a different part of speech from that of the underlying stem. Other languages such as Turkish permit more complex combinations.

## 4.2. Meaning

Different linguists agree on the fact that meanings are not the same in languages. Meanings are culturally determined and vary to a large extent from culture to culture. This means that some meanings which may exist in one culture do not exist in another. The Eskimos give different names to the word “snow” that covers the four seasons because of the cold and snowy weather. Similarly the words ‘sand’ and ‘camel’ would have different names in the Algerian Sahara. Lyons explains that

there are lexemes in their language that cannot be matched with descriptively equivalent lexemes in other languages. And yet it is true. Nor should be thought that it is only words denoting culturally or geographically restricted classes of entities (e.g., 'shrine', 'monsoon', 'willow', etc) that lack their descriptive equivalents in other languages. (Lyons (1996:89)

Meanings are parts of the decoded messages in communication. They are conveyed by the words in sentences or utterances used by speakers of different social classes in different geographical areas. Thus, meaning can identify the social class and the locality of the speaker.

### 4.3 Distribution

By distribution, it is meant the range of positions in which words or any other units can occur. The distribution of words is very important in the change of meaning of sentences. In English, for example, a part of speech such as the noun can change into a verb or an adjective according to the position it takes in the sentence, without a change in its form. In English the word "still" can belong to different parts of speech according to the different situations it takes in the sentence, i.e. it changes from one part of speech to another. In the sentences :

- 1) "In the still of the evening." 'still' is used as a noun which means (quietness or calm)
- 2) "The milk stills the baby's cries." 'Still' is used as a verb which means (makes the baby quiet and calm)
- 3) "Keep still when I fasten your shoes." As an adjective which means (don't move).
- 4) "Are you still here?" As an adverb which means (until this moment).

In English the word "room" which is a noun can have different meanings depending on the position it takes in the sentence. In the sentences :

- a) He wants a double room.
- b) Ask room 18 if they need coffee.
- c) Move along and make room for me.

In sentence a) "room" is a division of a building separated by walls. In b) it is referred to "the people in one such division of a hotel or large office building." In c) it means "space for occupying or moving in".

However, this case may not be applied to all words, since there are grammatical restrictions in distribution for different languages. Not all words can belong to different

parts of speech. The English word 'water' may be used as a noun in 'glass of water', as a verb in 'water the garden', a noun adjunct as in 'water meter', but not as an adjective. (see Lado 1957:79)

## 5. Meaning of words

Linguists study meaning and use it as a criterion to study other aspects of language. Meaning in the context of language necessitates reference to non-linguistic factors such as thought, knowledge, situation and intention. These factors are used in every utterance in people's speech or in any piece of writing. Kramsch states that:

“meaning is never achieved once and for all; it must be conquered

A new in every utterance through the verbal actions and interactions of speakers and hearers, writers and readers.” Kramsch (1998:25)

The words people exchange in communication are associated with the situational and cultural context in which they occur. Thus, for example an Algerian will not understand the English tourist's question “Would it bother you if I had a chat with you for just a moment?” unless he knows English and is able to grasp the meaning of each word of this utterance. If one or two words such as “bother” and “chat” are not understood, the message may not be well decoded. The foreigner's request in which words are related to the pragmatic context of their utterance leads, at once, the Algerian to recognize that his interlocutor is not from his society because those non-verbal signs he uses such as gestures, smiles, tone, and voice belong to a foreign culture which is not his. Contextualization cues as explained by Kramsch (Ibid:3) very often evoke the cultural background and the social expectations which are necessary to interpret speech. For her: ‘any communication or any written utterance is interpreted in accordance with how the situational or cultural context is perceived.

### 5.1. Denotative Meaning, Reference and Sense

The meaning of words which refer to a definable reality and can be looked up in a dictionary is referred to as “denotative meaning”.

The meaning of 'horse' in 'a speedy horse' refers to the type of large and strong animal which man rides on. Crystal (1992:97) explains that this kind of meaning involves the relationship between a linguistic and a non-linguistic entity to which it refers. However, some linguists, such as Palmer (1981:29) draw a distinction between reference, denotation and sense. Palmer argues that the term reference contrasts with denotation and sense,

though they aspects of meaning. For them reference deals with the relationship between the linguistic elements, words, sentences etc., and the non-linguistic world experience. Sense relates to the complex system of relationships that hold between the linguistic elements themselves (mostly the words); it is concerned with intralinguistic relations.

## 5.2. Connotative Meaning

When communicating, people very often use their emotions in order to express their thought. Beyond the central meaning of words or expressions there is an additional meaning referred to as 'connotative meaning' that shows the individual's attitude towards the word or expression, i.e. what this individual wants to refer to. Identifying the connotation of a term is to identify the community attitude towards it. Some connotations may be shared by a group of people of the same cultural and social background. The meaning of 'rose' in 'a beautiful rose in the garden' is understood as that beautiful, sweet-smelling and colourful flower, yet this 'rose' can also refer to love, beauty or passion depending on how it is expressed by the speaker, or writer and the way it is evoked in the mind of the listener or reader. Connotation exists across all cultures and dwells in almost all words of arts and literary genres. It involves the semantic or deep structure of words, expressions and texts and is, therefore, related to literature and culture.

## 5.3. The Metaphor

Words do not have the same meanings in all languages. Meanings into which we classify our experience are culturally determined and thus, they vary from culture to culture, i.e. some meanings which exist in a particular culture may not exist at all in another. Other meanings, although they exist in both cultures, are not exactly the same.

Another linguistic environment in which words carry cultural and semantic meaning consists of the "metaphors". It is "the result of the community's store of established knowledge", (Fowler, 1986:19) that includes both semantic and cultural meaning of words. Metaphor is what is literally meant with something else, whether explicitly or implicitly. In the Arabic sentence 'الربيع يبتسم' /erabi:ʕu jabtasi mu/ (spring smiles) the word 'يبتسم' /jabtasi mu/ is a metaphor which refers to the nice weather with its flowers, plants and beautiful scenery. In English, the expression 'He was lucky' can be expressed metaphorically a 'Fortune smiled on him'

Sweetser (1990:18) sees that in simple words, a polysemous word (word having two or more closely related meanings) usually has a 'core' meaning and all the other meanings

come from it by means of metaphor. An example of that is the word 'leaf' which is a usually green, thin and flat piece of a plant attached to a stem. The 'core' meaning of 'leaf' is, then, the thin and flat structure on the stem of the plant. From that comes the next usage referring to anything that resembles a plant leaf, such as pages of a book, a piece of metal, especially gold or silver (in a very thin sheet), etc., that may slid or can be folded. From the meaning of a page of a book, it is extended to mean a period of a person's life, which is often recorded in a book. This can be found in some expressions such as "turn over a new leaf", or "take a leaf out of somebody's book." In Algerian Arabic (AA) it is often said when someone dies, 'الوردة نتاعو طاحت' /el warqa nta:ʕu ta:ħet/ (his leaf fell down). Similarly, by the word 'foot' it is meant 'the lower part of the human leg that is in direct contact with the ground, yet it has other expanded meanings which are related to the original core: 'foot' can be linked to length and measurement as in 'ten feet'. It can represent location as in 'foot of the mountain', i.e. the bottom part of the mountain. It can also be based on shape as in 'foot of sewing machine', etc.

## 6. Conclusion

Learning a foreign language means learning new behaviour patterns. This involves the process of understanding and adapting the norms of a different culture. It also means to a great extent knowing new vocabulary in different situations. However, various factors interfere to influence negatively the learner's ability to acquire new words, since there are certain meanings of words which cannot be easily grasped. These would be the learners' use of their background knowledge (based on their native culture), their learning strategies and transfer effects. Linguists consider the "word" as the basic unit of communication. They measure language learning by how much vocabulary has been memorized so far. They talk about words in isolation as parts of speech like nouns, verbs, adjectives and so on. These words have exact meanings and grammatical functions only when they are used in sentences. In most languages, each word has more than one meaning in different situations depending on the sentence in which it occurs and on its relationships with other words in the same sentence. In order to understand what is going on between two speakers, it is not enough to understand the meaning of words, but to grasp why they say, what they say and how they say it to who in a specific context of situation, i.e. the link of words to context of situation is a necessity. In communication, words form the basic elements to express thought, yet their usefulness appears when arranged to provide meaningful sentences.

## Bibliographical references

- CRYSTAL D 1992. *A dictionary of linguistic and phonetics. The Language Library*. T.J. Press. Pad slow
- FORGIEL M.1984. "The English Handbook of Grammar, Style and Composition." Research and Education Association, New York.
- FOWLER R. 1986. *Linguistic Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- FRANCIS N. W. 1958. *The Structure of American English*. New York, Renald Press.
- FRIES C. 1952. *The Structure of English*. An intr. to the construction of English. New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World.
- GREEN G. 1989. *Pragmatics and Natural language Understanding*. Laurence Erlbaum.
- LADO R. 1957. *Linguistics across cultures. Applied linguistics for language teachers*. Ann Arbour. Michigan: University of Michigan.
- LYONS J. 1996. *Linguistics and Semantics. An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MALINOWSKI B. 1946. *The Meaning of Meaning. Ogden and Richards*. London: Trubner and Co.
- PALMER F. R.1981. *Semantics*, Second Ed. J.H. Schumann and N. Stenson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- RIVERS W. 1968. *Teaching Foreign language Skills*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- SAPIR E. 1921. *Language*. New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co.
- SWEET, H. (1991), *A New English Grammar*, Part 2. Oxford: Clarendon.
- SWEETSER E. F. 1990. *From Etymology to Pragmatics. Metaphorical and Cultural Aspects of Semantic Structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- YULE G. 1991. *Pragmatics. Oxford Introduction to Language Study*. Series Ed. H.G. Widdowson.