

Md. Solaiman Alam*

A Study on the Conceptual Meaning through Semantic Feature Analysis

ABSTRACT

This paper aims at the qualitative study of conceptual meaning through semantic feature analysis. As a basic unit of meaning, the semantic feature may be related to associated meanings, yet it has been argued that the feature is fundamentally a component of a conceptual meaning. In this study, the semantic components have conceptually and contrastively been analyzed to justify the sense relations among the words and examined how a word is made up of its own components which set its referential meaning. Following Katz (Saeed, 2003) and Leech's (1981) theories respectively the paper also tried to exemplify how the semantic units fixed with the conceptual meaning make a word distinct from other words. The conceptual framework of a language is determined by a limited set of principles and such finiteness of the conceptual meaning which makes the linguistic system accessible was explored and measured in the inquiry. Finally, the feature analysis in relation to linguistic organisation was interpreted to analyze the determinateness of conceptual meaning which may allow the users to be coherent to generate basic senses and comprehend the existing possible meaning of any basic unit of a language.

Keywords: Conceptual Meaning; Semantic Feature Analysis; Semantics

None can determine whether a meaning of an expression is absolute or not, but it is absolutely true that meaning is definitely a complex notion. Divergent disciplines treat meaning differently. They explicate meaning in their terms, but which approach or discipline would be more acceptable for the treatment of meaning cannot easily be expressed. As every creation is unique, so is the idea of meaning which is always changing or being preserved or restored in the areas where it is studied. Though there is not any historical or archaeological reference for the genesis

* **Md. Solaiman Alam:** Lecturer, Department of English, Bangladesh University of Business and Technology (BUBT), Dhaka, Bangladesh.

of meaning, and not even for when the humans started their first verbal communication, we can agree that meaning foremostly and literally is the component of a language. It does not mean that other disciplines are without any language or they cannot examine meaning, yet meaning as a matter of study in the study of language had not come before the nineteenth century. As meaning is fundamentally connected to language, linguistics can have the right for the meaning analysis because the focus would be on the language and its meaning, and none but the field attempted to investigate meaning in such a way much sophisticatedly. There can be the effect of one discipline on the other, and that is why the study of meaning also allows the involvement of other disciplines other than linguistics. What distinguishes linguistics from other disciplines for the study of meaning is that linguistics can attach significance to meaning more. Semantics and pragmatics, the levels of linguistics, are concerned with the meaning of linguistic expression and its use in a particular context accordingly. To understand the nature of meaning a broad range of topics in semantics and pragmatics would provide more insight, but this paper tried to investigate into the study of conceptual meaning of words and expressions from semantic perspective only and focus on the study of the basic units of the meaning which provide or form speaker's conceptual construct.

Defining a word or communicating conceptually has always been a sophisticated task. What speakers mostly do in their daily use of the language is that they try to associate another concept with the referential meaning and that results in distorting the meaning which is real or widely accepted. In the use of the language, it is quite normal when people do such amalgamation, and that is how a meaning or language eventually changes. If someone wants to consider a language as a coherent system, s/he has to accept its finite nature of the language which is specified by the set of rules. In real world, the person cannot hold such view for long and thus rely on his own idiolect, and like the structure of the language, meaning is also manipulated or affected by some factors. Except the referential meaning, all the types of meaning encompass indeterminateness where meaning varies according to culture, time and the personal factor (Leech, 1981). Though each feature or component of a referential meaning can carry a communicative or connotative value, the major focus is more on the features which are literally or consciously set.

A semantic feature is usually the basic unit of a conceptual meaning. Without an accurate semantic feature, meaning of any expression remains inadequate. It is noteworthy that the feature is fixed with the referential meaning of any expression, mostly of any word or any collocated group of words. Though a semantic feature is usually considered as a component of a conceptual meaning, the feature can also be extracted from a non literal



meaning which is open-ended. Saeed (2003) identified three reasons for studying semantic feature analysis. He thought that the units or components may permit “an economic characterization of lexical relations”. They are useful to evaluate any “range of syntactic and morphological processes” and could justify the perspective of “conceptual framework” (p. 248).

Semanticists analyse the meaning components of any referential meaning by the principle of contrastiveness. They examine that each word is made up of its own components which set its meaning and the semantic units fixed with the conceptual meaning make a word distinct from other words. Both the verbs “hasten” and “move” share the feature “movement”, but “quickness” is only shared by “hasten”. Without the conceptual narrative or componential analysis of a referential meaning, the accuracy of the features cannot be determined. It would be difficult to approach the stylistic or connotative meaning conceptually and paradigmatically. Two words can be interchanged or share a conceptual ground. It is also true that words have their own stylistic overtones (Leech, 1981) or can collocate with specific words. As the verb “to confuse” is less extreme than “to flummox”, and “to bewilder” causes someone to be confused emotionally which is not attributed to the former two verbs, but all of them share the same conceptual ground which is the act of confusing. Even though the above three words have a common sense, they are not used in a same context for the reason that not all senses or features they have in common. The range of interchangeability is often hard to trace if the user does not have the conceptual notion of the words.

An English language learner can even be misled by a multi-word expression if s/he does not know that the expression is also conceptually constrained as in idioms and phrases. Can a belly have ears? When s/he initially hears, “a hungry belly has no ears”, what would be his/her impression? Natives could understand the fixity of the senses and their sense of collocation is preternatural compared to the English language learners, but not all the natives are language cautious. Yule (2010) elucidated that the oddness of any sentence can be found either by its syntactic pattern or by its semantic realization. One can avoid such justification in understanding or learning idioms and proverbs where forms and meaning are primarily fixed.

Not only to fix the oddness or to realize the stretch of syntactic and morphological process, the semantic feature analysis is also required to understand the sense relation between words. A person is considered as “reprehensible” because s/he deserves rebuke, but s/he is called “despicable” when s/he is treated as morally reprehensible. Without componential analysis, such differentiation cannot easily be made because language users do not always need such sophistication for the purpose of communication and they could use either of them. The antonym of the words above could be

“praiseworthy” and what makes the word their opposite is that the word's distinguished features which “reprehensible” or “despicable” do not have, but the analysis would mark all of them as adjectives. In terms of semantic features and principle of contrastiveness, the illustration could be depicted in the following diagram- figure 1:

Words 	Reprehensible	Despicable	Praiseworthy
Features 			
Adjective	+	+	+
Deserves high praise	-	-	+
Deserves rebuke	+	+	-
With respect to moral principle	-	+	-
Censure	+	-/+	-

Saeed (2003) postulated that a word can be defined as a hyponym of a hypernym if “all the features” of the hypernym are “contained in the feature specification” (p. 248) of the hyponym. One can find that the word “love” is the hyponym of the hypernym “emotion” because the features of “emotion” like “strongness” and “feeling” are fundamentally included in “love”. Because of the incompatibility between different emotions, “love” remains one of the hyponyms of a single hypernym.

“Katz's Theory” (Katz & Fodor, 1963; Katz & Postal, 1964; Katz, 1972; cited in Saeed, 2003) suggested that the semantic rules have to be recursive like syntactic rules, and their possibilities in the use of language are infinite in nature. He also believed that meaning can be studied syntagmatically as the relation between a sentence and its meaning is compositional. In addition, the constituent parts of a sentence combinatorially determine the meaning of a sentence though the immediate or ultimate constituents have their own meaning value. Katz and his colleagues tried to establish “part of a word's meaning is shared with other words, but part is unique to that word” (p. 251). Since the theory is mostly generative in tone, through the identification of semantic components a sentence or expression could entail multiple possible senses. Following Katz's Theory one can observe the example: the word “friend” has different

entries. It is used either as a noun or a verb. As a noun the word seems polysemous since it has multiple meanings. Cambridge Dictionary would give at least five entries for the noun in its British and American usage:

- a) a person you know well and like a lot, but who is usually not a member of your family, b) someone whom you are talking to, c) a person or organization that is a friend to/of a group or organisation helps and support it, d) someone who gives money to an arts organisation or charity in order to support it, e) someone who is not an enemy and who can trust.

The possible semantic features for the first definition of the word are {N}, (animate), (human), (male/female), [someone whom you know], [someone whom you like], and [someone who is not your family member]. According to the theory, the first feature is the grammatical information in curly brackets, the next two are semantic markers in parentheses, the last three are distinguishers in square brackets. If we put this word in a sentence as in *He is a great friend*, the sentence has the ability to generate multiple senses which can be realized at a time in a syntagmatic way. The entailment between the sentence above and all the sentences below could be recognized:

- a) He is animate.
- b) He is a human.
- c) He is a male.
- d) He is someone whom I like most.
- e) He is someone whom I know.
- f) He is someone who is not my family member.
- g) He is great.

The incompatibility would come up when the key sentence is not consistent with the sense which is unsuitable. Thus a person cannot be a “friend” and “enemy” at the same time. The entailment of the words is only possible in non literal sense. A person may call his own “wife” a “squirrel”, but the incompatibility could literally be sensed where one cannot be a hyponym of another. It may be realized that how a non-criterial feature is attached to the quality of an unrelated referent. In the sense of “creature” which is their superordinate or hypernym, they may share common features, but they are still incompatibles due to their distinct and unrelated features.

“A pair of words may be partially similar in meaning and partially different” (Cruse, 2000, p. 240). Both “meat” and “vegetable” are edible, but they are different as “vegetable” has a feature which “meat” does not have vice versa. The multiplicity of meaning is also shared by a single word *delicacy* as in *I sensed the delicacy of the matter*, *The delicacy of a flower is pure*, and in *The guests were served with local delicacies*. The partial

similarities between the meanings of the noun have not only been observed, the differences of them have also been traced in a delicate manner if the meanings of polysemous *delicacy* are identified. The features for the entries are as follows:

Delicacy {N}

- a) (+ physical object) [easy to break or harm] [attractive] [graceful]
- b) (+state) [difficult to handle] [needs careful attention and sensitive treatment]
- c) (+substance) [expensive] [rare] [nice to eat]

The components have been extracted from the selected definitions of the word by the unabridged collinsdictionary.com (2022). The noun has more meanings in British and American usage than what have been given above and its meanings also vary from dictionary to dictionary to some extent. The objective was also to show that the correlation or partial similarities are not only carried by two or more words, a single word can also convey such characteristics in the sense of polysemy, but “only one of its sense is intended to be operative” (Cruse, 2000, p. 241) in a particular context.

The exact features of the meaning are not always accessible. Yule (2010) suggested that to differentiate certain words may be unsuccessful. Someone may try to find out the features of *hide*, *conceal* and *cover*, but the extraction of their features seems redundant and laborious. It is true that meaning is not always studied by their features only and there may always be more to it. The finiteness of meaning is also set by the principle of collocation. The words can be used interchangeably, but their impeccable use would be determined by their collocation. If the collocation is marked in the feature analysis, the sense becomes more accurate. One could break or fracture a bone, but no one could atomize it. Still one may hide or conceal someone's secret; kids would not play “conceal” and seek.

Language users' conceptual construct is governed by a limited set of principles. If it is not set by a finiteness of conceptual content, the representation of the language would be chaotic. It does not mean that the users are always heedful to the use of the language, yet collectively they prefer a coherent linguistic system which allows them to use the language at ease. Semantic feature analysis may not be a quintessential approach to understand meaning in that system; it may allow the users to be coherent to generate basic senses and comprehend the existing possible meaning of any expression. The existence of other types of meaning which is incoherent and open-ended can also be justified in the study of language.

This paper tried to signify the significance of conceptual meaning and its treatment in semantic feature analysis. The essence of referential meaning

has the plausibility that it carries multiple fixed senses. Whether in lexical formation or any syntactic structure, the coherent establishment of meaning postulates the determinateness of comprehensibility. As discussed above the genesis of form and meaning relation is hard to trace. Theologically the naming of objects or referents could be found when Allah “taught Adam the names- all of them” (The Qur’an, 2-31)[†]. An expression is only understood when it is attached to its meaning and referent, otherwise, it is not an expression at all. It could also be argued that some referents are not always there with symbols and descriptive meaning. Humans have the tendency to assign a specified name to any object or idea. In this fashion, they coherently try to limit the structure of the language and develop their linguistic system “so as to construct the simple possible system” (McNeill, 1966, cited in Brown, 2007, p. 28) out of the linguistic data they encounter. For utilizing linguistic competence Leech (1981, p. 11) acknowledged at least three levels of representation: phonological, syntactic and semantic. In semantic representation, the conceptual meaning could only be conveyed by the organization of abstract symbols which matches “that meaning” with correct “syntactic and phonological” manifestation. It can also be contended that the linguistic performance of a user would always be interrogated by the “performance variables” (Brown, 2007, p. 36) means that beyond conceptual or referential meaning there can be intervening of ideas which lures, flouts or violates the actual meaning of an expression. It is a quest whether the decomposition or componential analysis for such meaning is unattainable or not. Either paradigmatically or syntagmatically, there has always been the conceptual necessity of semantic feature in the study of meaning. The investigation into the conceptual meaning might pose difficulty, nevertheless the fixity and determinateness of the semantic components would generate delicate sense relations of words and the senses' obligatory participation in morphological and syntactic processes would bring up the conceptual configuration for language use.

References

- Brown, H. (2007). *Principles of Language Learning & Teaching* (pp. 28-36). Pearson Education, Inc.
- Cambridge Dictionary Press. (2022). Friend. In *Cambridge Dictionary*. Retrieved July 28, 2022, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/friend>
- Collins Dictionary Publishing. (2022). Delicacy. In *Collins Dictionary*. Retrieved July 30, 2022, from <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/delicacy>

1. The Qur’an (2-31) translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali

- Cruse, A. (2000). *Meaning in Language: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics* (pp. 240-241). Oxford University Press.
- Leech, G. (1981). *Semantics: The Study of Meaning*. Pelican Books.
- Saeed, J. I. (2003). *Semantics* (pp. 248-251). Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Yule, G. (2010). *The Study of Language*. Cambridge University Press.