

Proposition as Means of Polysemantic Meaning Understanding

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Abstract: The article deals with the problem of understanding the meaning of polysemantic verbs denoting perception. In accordance with the dominant cross disciplinary approach to the linguistic research the semantics of the verbs under study is analyzed in correlation with the relevant extra linguistic data. The interpretation of the latter together with lexicographical analysis and cognitive interpretation allows to work out the basic (obligatory) components of the proposition. The proposition is considered to be a mediator between the level of conscious and its language representation. Thus the meaning of polysemantic complex under study is revealed at the cognitive and syntactic levels. This sort of approach allows to work out some structures which predetermine the meaning of the word.

Key words: Polysemant % Syntax % Mental Structure % Cognition % Proposition % Representation % Verbalization % Meaning

INTRODUCTION

Recent linguistic research often deals with the problems of language representation and categorization of extra linguistic situation of cognition [1-3 etc.]. The latter includes perception, or the initial stage of cognition and some mental processes of reflection of the perceived knowledge [4, 5 etc.]. The named phenomena are verbalized by a variety of lexical and syntactic means. In order to study the language representation of perception scientists refer to semantic peculiarities of relevant verbs [6, 7 etc.]. They also pay a lot of attention to the role which perceptual experience plays in the formation of human knowledge about the world [8-10; etc.]. Moreover, taking into consideration the semantic diversity of verbs nominating perception in the modern English language, scholars constantly raise the question of their categorial status because any attempts to ignore this fact lead to no positive results as they exclude from the object of study verbs of voluntary mental activity and some lexical means of expression of unconscious perception, displayed by specific properties and the quality of its object.

The Main Part: As it is mentioned above the object of the ongoing research is constituted by the semantic group of verbs denoting perception in the contemporary English language. These verbs are seen as polysemants as they possess complex semantic structure. The answer to the question of the existence of semantic complexes and their semantic content, according to the postulates of the current cognitive linguistics, is hidden in the analysis of linguistic data in accord with the relevant extra linguistic information. In the case of the current research correlating with the verbs of cognition the most appropriate data is found in psychological scientific sources. This information allows to conclude that verbs of sense perception verbalize the extra linguistic situation equal to sensory experience perceived by the living being. This information involves not only recognition and analysis but also response to the outer stimuli. This data constitutes experience of surrounding world and is vital for survival.

The extra linguistic information also allows to state that “perception includes the five senses; touch, sight, taste smell and taste. It also includes what is known as proprioception, a set of senses involving the ability to detect changes in body positions and movements. It also

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involves the cognitive processes required to process information, such as recognizing the face of a friend or detecting a familiar scent” [10].

In other words the given psychological data emphasizes the fact that perception is a many-sided and many-facet phenomenon that can be reflected on the language level either by a variety of independent lexical means or polysemantic complexes. The latter reveal their complex character in their syntactic functions as a predicate and the functions of their arguments. And here one should pay thorough attention to their categorial status and omission of the categorial status of such words in linguistic research leads to the lack of its complexity and objectivity. This very fact can be easily proved with the help of linguistic analysis.

Thus, among the verbs of complex abstract semantics one can name, for example, the verb *smell* which in modern vocabulary sources has several interpretations:

- C [intransitive] *to have a particular smell*;
- C [transitive, no passive] (*not used in the progressive tenses; often with can or could*) *to notice or recognize a particular smell* [11];
- C [TRANSITIVE] *to experience the smell of something by putting your nose close to it* [12].

This lexicographical information as it is mentioned above shows the complex nature of semantics of the studied verb and reflects its characteristic features which influence its further linguistic study. In other words it contradicts to the term *ambivalence* which is the most relevant for the characterization of the verb able to nominate the cases of voluntary and involuntary perception simultaneously. It happens because this very term sets aside the peculiar semantic features of this verb, which prompt qualitative characteristics of the object. However, not only the named word *smell* can be characterized by some semantic peculiarities. There also exist other words of sense perception, for example, the verbs *feel*, *taste* etc, which are identical to the verb *smell* not only in ability to nominate sense perception but also because of their semantic structure:

feel

- C [LINKING VERB] *to be in a particular state as a result of an emotion or a physical feeling*;
- C [LINKING VERB][NOT USUALLY PROGRESSIVE] *if something feels nice, good, strange etc, it gives you this feeling*;

- C [TRANSITIVE] *to touch something with your hand so that you can discover what it is like* [12]).

taste

- C [LINKING VERB] *to have a particular flavour*;
- C [TRANSITIVE] *to eat or drink something and to experience its flavour*;
- C [TRANSITIVE] *to experience something for a short time* [12].

As it can be seen from the definitions above the similarity of the verbs is exposed in their ability to refer to three qualitatively different situations of perception. This fact rises a question concerning the conditions of their functioning while describing one of the named situations in particular. It seems that the answer to the question of rendering various meanings by one and the same the verb should be sought in the occasional categorial status modification of the named verbs within a certain contextual environment on the syntactic level. The latter supposition leads to recent researches in cognitive linguistics, semantics and syntax.

Taking into consideration the theory of the dominant position of the verb in the sentence we assume that the future framework of the sentence turn directly to the analysis of the recurrent syntactic structures typical of verbal lexemes under consideration. At the same time as typological unit for comparison we choose a proposition structure which consists of the required components of the mental structure of perception. Due to its consideration we are supposed to come closer to the description of the process of understanding the meaning. The latter is determined on the basis of the lexicographical analysis, cognitive interpretation of lexemes nominating perception and the study of the relevant extra linguistic data. The latter is extremely important in the analysis of the data which is encoded in the language signs.

For example, the verb *perceive* according to the dictionary definitions seems to be the most neutral to nominate the process of perception (*to notice something using your senses* [12]). According to the interpretation of the given lexicographic information the semantics of the verb reveal/imply the information about the participants of the extra linguistic situation of perception as subject, object, means of perception. Identical number of participants characterize situations described by all the verbs under consideration. The only exception is the fact that in other cases the nature and the type of perception are specified.

It is quite obvious that the information obtained during the lexicographical analysis stands together with the extra linguistic information on the process of perception, which, according to psychology and cognitive psychology, serves as one of the primary forms of reflection of objective reality in the mind of the individual. This fact leads to the conclusion that the language reflects human knowledge. In order to distinguish between conceptual and extra linguistic level of description of the process of perception we will capitalize the names of the components of the proposition. Thus, the situation of a typical perception and in this case we are talking only about its obligatory components, includes components of the SUBJECT, PREDICATE, OBJECT, MEANS OF PERCEPTION.

As it is clearly seen from the lexicographic material presented above the dictionaries sometimes give opposite definitions to one and the same verb speaking about its actional and statal nature. It is also mentioned above that the fact of their categorical status influences the semantics of their arguments. But building up the basic structure of proposition we deliberately omit the fact of their actional/statal character and leave the matter to the stage of context interpretation. It is also necessary to mention the fact that the number of components of the proposition listed above, describe the situation of perception in a general and stylistically neutral form. While the occasional growth of the proposition members (due to the optional components) specifies one or another facet of the mental process.

It is also necessary to mention here that the proposition which consists of the named components correlates with the extra linguistic situation of perception reflected at the conceptual level acts as a mediator between the level of consciousness and language. Accordingly, it is clearly seen that the direct identity between the propositional structure and syntactic structure, which describes the situation of knowledge, is a priori impossible. Consequently, further linguistic analysis will be based on the interpretation of syntactic structure and finding correlations between linguistic and mental components of the description and presentation of the situation of perception. Thorough analysis of linguistic data shows that verbs like *smell*, *feel*, *taste* etc, characterized by complex semantics, can be found in several types of structures on the syntactic level.

Each syntactical structure reveals one or another specific feature of the complex structure. Nevertheless, the word order of the main members of the sentence,

specific for most languages of ??analytical type, is preserved which is resulted in a sequence of elements of subject, predicate (object).

For example, the sentence: *The earth smelt clean and sweet* <...> [13] from the point of view of classical syntactic theory may be characterized by the following required component structure: subject (the earth), the predicate (smelt clean and sweet). In this very case (in the function of the predicate) the verb *smell* serves as a link-verb in a complex predicate and specifies an adverbial modifier of manner. Cognitive interpretation of the given sentence clearly indicates the situation of perception and emphasizes the corresponding meaning of the verb *smell* ([LINKING VERB] *to have a particular smell* [12]); this meaning correlates with the meaning of Russian verb "*pahnut*". This meaning explicitly refers to the meaning of the verb under study which actualizes in the person's consciousness the situation of unconscious perception and reveals such components as OBJECT (which correlates to the complex "smelt clean and sweet" on the language level) and PREDICATE. The component OBJECT being relevant to the description of the situation of the unconscious perception is characterized by relevant conceptual features and special characteristics which are also typical to the object of the same extra linguistic situation. The named conceptual features of the component OBJECT also predetermine the actualization of the component MEANS OF PERCEPTION. The obligatory component SUBJECT as seen from the analysis of the sentence in this very case is implied i.e. supposed to be. The latter fact indicates and intentionally specifies the nature of unconscious perception, neutralizing the functions and the specific features of the component SUBJECT which in its turn in this case is seen as a non-agent.

And if to present the named component in the form of a schema to illustrate the given point of view it will correspond to the following model: O + P, in which P corresponds to the means of verbalization of the component PREDICATE, O corresponds to the means of verbalization of the component OBJECT. To present other schemes typical for syntactic-conceptual level of representation of the situation of perception we also use the following symbols with their definitions: S corresponds to the means of verbalization of the component SUBJECT, MP corresponds to the means of verbalization of the component MEANS OF PERCEPTION, OP corresponds to the means of verbalization of the optional components of the proposition.

As it is mentioned in some ongoing linguistic studies the necessity of scheme-modeling in syntax aims to generate common meanings implied typical propositions [14]. Schemes become individualized only when their content is expressed by certain semantic means, which help to verbalize (reveal/imply) obligatory and optional components of the proposition.

Nevertheless, the structural integrity of the presented model, despite the semantic content, is fixed in the conscience of the certain linguocultural community as a base frame of the future sentence, which is verbalized. The following syntactic structure, organized on the basis of such main parts of the sentence as a subject (she), a predicate (verb smell), an object (a sickening odour), find their verbal expression and correlate to conceptual components SUBJECT, PREDICATE, OBJECT, MEANS OF PERCEPTION. Each of these components is expressed, so that the level of correlation of verbal and conceptual levels can be represented in the following schema: S + P + MP + O, for example:

... she ... smelt a sickening odour [13].

The current sentence also refers to the unconscious (involuntary) process of perception; and this very fact also predetermines certain conceptual qualities the component OBJECT which are verbalized on the syntactic level by an attribute (sickening). In other words, due to the qualities of the component OBJECT (it refers to the specific features of the object of the extra linguistic situation of perception) the verb *smell* can be perceived by the recipient as a synonym to the word "*feel*" (2. [TRANSITIVE] [NEVER PROGRESSIVE] *to notice or recognize the smell of something*).

Negative connotation of the adjective *sickening* implies involuntary perception of the object of the situation which is equivalent to the Russian variant "*Ona pochuvstvovala toshnotvornyj zapah.*"

It is also should be mentioned that the grammatical aspect of the problem also seems to be very interesting in this case. Here we may mention the use of the indefinite article which in its turn indicates unknown, but identified information correlating with the unpleasant smell (in terms of the cognitive experience of the subject of the situation).

At the same time, the analysis of the linguistic material allows to conclude that in most cases the use of the definite article in identical syntactic structure (P + S + O) proves the volitional character of the process. For example, it is clearly seen in the sentence: He smelt the book [13] - *On ponjuhal knjigu.*

In this case, the third case of the semantic complex is revealed; it emphasizes the volitional character of the process which is also vividly seen in the third dictionary meaning: 3. [TRANSITIVE] to touch something with your hand so that you can discover what it is like [12]. In this case the component SUBJECT is characterized by the conceptual features of an agent being able to control the mental activity as a whole.

Concerning the problem of changing of the conceptual features of the component SUBJECT in correlation with its function in situations of conscious and unconscious process of perception, J.G. Testelet notes the existence of the principle of the uniqueness in the language. This principle justifies the impossibility of coexistence of two agents or non-agents [15].

Regard to the situation of sensory perception, this situation can be interpreted as the so-called change of mode of controlling force: in the case of voluntary perception the control and agentive function is conferred to the subject, in the case of unconscious perception the main focus coincides with the basic characteristics of the component OBJECT which serves as the main factor determining involuntary perception.

The ambivalence or the ability of a lexical unit to verbalize voluntary and unconscious sensory perception can be mentioned in case with the verb taste, which is treated in lexicographical sources as 1. [LINKING VERB] to have a particular flavour; 2. [TRANSITIVE] to eat or drink something and to experience its flavour [12].

At the level of semantic syntax the structures profiling voluntary processes can be represented in schemas of the type O + P. On the language level component SUBJECT is verbalized by the subject pronoun *it*, component PREDICATE is verbalized by the verb *taste* and component MEANS OF PERCEPTION is verbalized by the semantics of the verb under study.

Component SUBJECT in this case is neutralized, as it happens in all cases of unconscious perception. This fact correlates with the need to emphasize the specific parameters of the component OBJECT. Therefore it reduces the agentive role and controlling functions of the subject, for example:

It tasted sweet [13].

This cigarette tasted different; it was a Gauloise and it tasted of France, as pungent, as unacceptably alien as that knotty sausage [13].

The verb *taste*, as well as any other verb capable of nomination of voluntary and involuntary process of perception on the systemic level, on the functional level

being the principle predicative unit of propositional structure, determines the semantic content of the rest of the required components and it naturally affects the syntactic level and reflects in the following location of the main elements: S + P + MP + O, for example:

He tasted his brandy [13].

The given sentence reveals voluntary activity of the subject towards the object. This activity is not only cognitive. In this case we notice the change of the quantitative parameter of the object towards its reduction. The subject in this case fulfills purposeful control of taste with the corresponding analyzer and his consciousness. Moreover, the process includes the corresponding purposeful physical activity. Consideration of such factors helps to treat semantics of the verb taste as a verb of voluntary perception.

It should be noted in conclusion that the interpretation of the meaning of the sentence in correlation with a particular structure allows the recipient of the text to comprehend the appropriate meaning of the polysemant. In other words, a recipient while reading the text unconsciously associates the information of a sentence with semantic mental structures; and this process provides an adequate understanding of meaning. Similar analysis applied to the verbs of other semantic groups will allow to work out basic structures that will help to comprehend the meanings transmitted with syntactic structures. This fact will help to come closer to the description of the problems of the intellectual sphere.

Findings: The ongoing linguistic study showed that verbs of abstract semantics, lexemes verbalizing perception, in particular, may be studied as semantic complexes because of their semantic structure. Thorough lexicographical analysis helps to state the fact of the ability of the verbs under study to change not only the meaning in accordance with situation they describe but categorial status as well. This fact can be proved by some extra linguistic data which reveals the nature of perception as an active and a passive process of perception. To find out the correlation between the meaning and categorial status we appeal to proposition as a mediator between the level of syntax and the level of consciousness. This kind of research allows to systematize the constructions that reflect this or that meaning of the verb accentuating its categorial status. In other words the phenomenon of meaning of polysemant comprehension that allows the recipient to comprehend the information unconsciously,

can be studied and explained due to the linguistic analysis taking into consideration proposition which is seen as a mediator between consciousness and language.

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