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Meaning and Reference: Inseparable Means of Understanding Language

Emmanuel Ndorimana
Student, Department of School of Philosophy and Humanities,
Arrupe Jesuit University, Zimbabwe

Abstract:
Language is the most used tool of communication, especially in human interaction. However, language remains very delicate in one way or another. If it is properly used, it generates harmonious human interaction; but if it is misused, it creates frictions. Thus, for one to better employ a particular language, one needs to understand it, which implies inspecting various rubrics that guide the entire linguistic enterprise. This enterprise mainly involves teachers, learners, philosophers and users of language. This paper focuses on the role of philosophers of language in the linguistic venture. It considers their meticulous scrutiny of the use of languages in search for better communication. In such a project, philosophers of language tackle various challenging topics, including meaning and reference. Following their discussions about meaning and reference, this paper aims at investigating the best way of teaching, learning, understanding and using languages, especially the new ones. In every intellectual field, when one understands something, one will prove it in the way he/she uses it in his/her subsequent daily transactions. This paper shall appraise how meaning and reference contribute in generating a better use of languages. Meaning and reference shall also be examined as being the main indexes of acquiring knowledge in numerous academic spheres on the one hand; and psychological and social entities on the other. All this project will be undertaken in the effort to demonstrate that meaning and reference facilitate the understanding of languages if they are used jointly, and harden it if they are used as separate entities in any linguistic enterprise.

Keywords: Meaning and reference, language, understanding, inseparable, philosophers of language

1. Introduction

In their diverse approaches, many philosophers of language have attempted to describe and clarify the use of meaning and reference in language. However, it seems that their efforts have not yet engendered fully plausible results in that matter. Yet, a number of these philosophers arguably find it difficult to talk about one and leave out the other. In this perspective, this paper intends to argue that meaning and reference are inseparable means of understanding language. The paper will prove that, used together, meaning and reference make easy the learning and understanding of new languages. In ordinary human interaction, one talks about something because one has its reference in mind, which one expects others to understand although they may not understand him/her. Thus, the paper will argue that meaning and reference should not be separated if they are to enable a comprehensible use of language. It will describe meaning and reference as inseparable ingredients of acquiring knowledge in new fields of study, given that each subject has its own language. Finally, the paper will consider and assess meaning and reference as psychological and social means of language teaching and learning.

2. Defining Some Key Terms

Given the complexity of meaning and reference in use, it is very difficult (most probably even impossible) to come up with definitions for these terms, which can satisfy every philosopher, teacher, learner and user of language. In fact, some philosophers of language deliberately replace these terms with other words, though referring to the same concepts. For example, Frege uses sense in place of meaning; Putnam uses intension in place of meaning, and extension in place of reference; and so forth. Moore defines meaning as an objective feature of how words are utilized and understood, while Quine views it as a matter of observable behaviour and dispositions to behaviour on the part of language users (Moore, 1993). Reference represents the object to which the speaker refers, which makes the understanding of a language possible and easy. Hence, meaning entails the intention/word, name or symbolic representation of an object whereas reference entails the object to which the intention corresponds in the world, that is, the object to which one refers while communicating. In this paper, object includes both concrete and abstract things. Meaning and reference are used as psychological and social means of interaction. Language entails the means of communication, which may be natural or subjective. Subjective languages stand for the languages used in particular subjects or fields of study, such as medicine, politics, science, religion, among others. Natural languages are the languages that we are endowed with naturally in our respective communities; they are also referred to as native languages.

3. Meaningand Reference: Sources of Effective Human Communication

In normal circumstances, language is the most efficient means of communication among people. Yet, language does not arise from vacuum. Language comes from a constitution of many things, such as words, expressions, symbols, sentences, and so forth. However, all these may not necessarily make sense on their own. Therefore, some theories become so crucial in order to generate some sense out of these language components.In this perspective, this paper refers to the theories of meaning and reference as 'central functions' in every linguistic project because, without these functions, human interaction will be more or less ineffective, if not impossible.

Communication can be done out of both oral and written materials. In oral communication, one needs to understand what a speaker tells, just as one needs to understand the message of an author in written communication. It seems that it is part of human nature that, by seeing something, one will immediately feel moved to find out what it means. Thus, the theory of meaning is called for. On the other hand, by hearing about something, one would like to understand what it refers to in the world. Thus, the theory of reference is called for.Above all, if one is to learn a new language, it becomes so complicated in the sense that he/she is blank about the language, and thus to communicate in that language is totally impossible, before he/she learns and understands it. Thus, meaning and reference becomevital pedagogic materials in acquiring new languages towards undertaking a certain communication. Not only that; even in written message, when one wants to make a sense of a certain text one comes across, meaning and reference become crucial in orienting the process. In fact, within the text, meaning tells what particular words, signs, expressions or sentences stand for, while reference points at what those words, signs, expressions or sentences refer to in the world. Hence, one can eventually manage tocomprehend the principal message of the author and, in turn,communicate to others what he/she has understood.

This shows that in written communication, it requires a systematic understanding of each part to understand the whole message, that is to say, the understanding of a whole text depends on the understanding of its constituents. Indeed, a text seems to be the biggest function of written communication, which is comprised of a systematic structure.Accordingly, for one to understand what the writer meant in his/her entire textual work, one needs to understand particular words, expressions, signs and sentences. In other words, it requires to refer to the background of the writer's work.Referring to Skinner,Ankersmit argues that, for one to understand the writer's message in a text, one needs to know first and foremost the writer's intention, which means to know the historical meaning that the writer had in mind when he/she produced that text. Indeed, Skinner claims, "To know what a writermeant by a particular work is to know what his primary intentions were when writing it" (qtd. in Ankersmit, 2012).

Now, meaning itself is an umbrella term. That is why Mark Bevir sees it as a triple variance. In fact, it comprises "linguistic meaning","semantic meaning" and "hermeneutic meaning". "Linguistic meaning"refers to what one normally gets when searching for the meaning of a particular word in a dictionary. "Semantic meaning" of a sentence is termed by the 'truth-conditions', which designate its truth value. "Hermeneutic meaning" refers to the process of inquiry through the examination of ideas conveyedby a particular utterance generated byinvestigations of statements based on questions like "What did an author mean when he saidsuch and such?"To ask what an author meant by aparticular word in a particular situation entails asking about the author's intentionin producing it.That is how the term of 'intentionalism' came about.According to Bevir, intentionalimis understood in two ways, namely, strong intentionalism and weak intentionalism.He states that strong intentionalists "argue that the meaning of an utterance to its authorexhausts its historical meaning".Bevir, thus, promotes weak intentionalism, "because utterances can have non-authorial meanings, they can come topossess public meanings of greater historical import than the meaning theyhave for their authors".In fact, he believes that a weakintentionalism gives room exclusively for explanations of a text written in the effort to comprehend the intention of the author of the text.For example, words and letters are both essential components of a text. However, the words have a meaning whereas the letters do not, despite the fact thatonly the letters can occasion the production of words and their meanings. By extension,authors produce texts so as to communicate the meaning of their intentions, simply as we use letters to construct words. In other words, from the intentionalist point of view, texts do not have meanings on their own(Ankersmit, 2012).

The above description of meaning seems to suggest that meaning remains incomplete if it is taken singlehandedly; for it cannot generate effective human communication. If this is the case, then meaning needs to be accompanied byreference in order to produce an effective human communication. In fact, a language without reference will be more or less useless in human communication simply because, without reference, one will be compelled to be voiceless. Thus, Ankersmit holds that reference is a special asset for human beings because it enables human language to refer to the world while guaranteeingeffective human communication. In fact, reference enables us to exclusivelypick outone specific individual thing from thegroup of things that exist in the world.For example, reference allows people to know what I mean when I mention the names that I have in mind like Nelson Mandela or Pope Francis (Ankersmit, 2012).

4. Meaning and Reference: Keys of Learning and Understanding New Languages

From the above discussion, one can understand how close meaning and reference are in dealing with languages. Thus, to separate them would prevent one from fully understanding any language. Can one talk of something, which corresponds to nothing (concrete or abstract object) in the world, while one wants to be understood? Obviously not. In daily human relations, people communicate the messages that they have in mind, which corresponds to the objects in the world that they expect the audience to understand. This implies that, when one is engaged in a dialogue, in normal circumstances, one can only talk of something if one knows its meaning and its reference in the world, and not the other way around. Higginbotham pushes it further saying that, for one to be a competent speaker of language, one must know

the facts about meaning and reference of expressions. One must also know what other people know and are expected to know about the reference of expressions (Higginbotham, 1991).

For Frege, the meaning (which he calls sense) of a name or word, is what one grasps when one understands it, while the name, word or symbol expresses its sense or meaning. This paper argues that, even if the audience fails to understand the speaker's message, it does not confront the meaning or sense of his/her message and what it refers to in the world. Hence, Frege is right to argue that meaning is a social and transmissible sign/symbol while reference is in the world. Besides, Putnam believes that both meaning and reference are in the world, since reference influences the creation of symbols and names used for meaning. Therefore, meaning and reference are inseparable in doing language (Putnam, 1993).

Still, some philosophers of language understand meaning and reference as separate entities. If this is the case, then one can use them independently of each other. Now, can one who knows only the meaning or only the reference of something, easily convey one's intention and be easily understood by the audience (listener or learner)? Obviously, it will not be the case, especially if the audience does not know the language of the speaker. If meaning and reference are used separately, it will certainly be difficult to understand the new languages and subjects one is exposed to. In human intellectual development, people must learn natural and subjective languages. For instance, when a child learns how to speak, he/she is shown objects (reference) around him/her and told their names (meaning). This will serve as bridges for their understanding of other (natural or subjective) languages that they will encounter in life. When they go to school, they will use their native languages to understand the languages used there. In fact, the teacher uses the words of the school language to describe what he/she is teaching pointing at the objects he/she is referring to, hoping that the children know their meanings in their native languages. If there are no such objects around, the teacher uses drawings or pictures to help the children understand what they are being taught. This makes it easier for the children to understand not only the new languages, but also the subjects they are learning for the first time. Arguably, this is the most popular way that is used to acquire knowledge of any kind.

5. Meaning and Reference: Facilitators of a Comprehensible Use of Language

The aforementioned observation leads one to realize how the understanding of native languages is indispensable in acquiring knowledge in any new subjects. Therefore, one has to know the rules needed in learning and understanding natural languages. These rules include the use of words, expressions, symbols/signs and sentences. This can only be handled through the theories of meaning and reference. Now, Higginbotham argues that meaning applies only to sentences, while reference applies to expressions of all syntactic classes, and modes of syntactic combination. In fact, the reference of an expression is isolable since the expression carries its reference with it wherever it occurs. That is why Higginbotham, Davidson, Frege and McDowell argue that the parts of sentences (words or expressions) have no meanings apart from conctributing to the meanings of the sentences in which they occur. There can be no account for the meaning of the words or names, if not from their contributions to the meanings of sentences in which they feature (McDowell, 1993). However, this paper argues that, since sentences only arise from the combination of words and expressions, their meanings also should arise from the combination of the meanings of the words and expressions. In fact, this idea is acknowledged by Higginbotham himself. He admits that reference is a central support of meaning. That is to say, without reference, meaning will not hold. Moreover, he finds a relation between reference and meaning, that is, the psychological state of the language users, their knowledge of reference. Thus, the meaning of an expression is what a speaker is expected to know about its reference (Higginbotham, 1991). The knowledge of the meaning of each word and its reference in one's language is needed to understand further expressions and constructions in other natural or subjective languages. This implies that one needs to know a particular language used in particular academic areas which is facilitated by the mutual use of meaning and reference between native and subjective languages.

6. Meaning and Reference: Inseparable Generators of Knowledge in New Fields of Study

One may still argue that meaning and reference are separable in doing language. This paper argues that this can only be possible if we all use one language, which is understandable by everyone, and is used in every field of study. Yet, we normally struggle to acquire knowledge in one subject or another throughout our intellectual development, in accordance with our individual interests and aspirations. Since every subject has its own language, we have to learn and understand this language before we can understand the subject per se. Accordingly, taken together, meaning and reference ease this job. In fact, Davidson sees the theory of meaning as an empirical theory, which aims at explaining the use of a natural language. Thus, only the speakers of a language can effectively define the meaning of subjective expressions (Davidson, 1993). If the meaning of sentences depends on their construction; and we understand the meaning of each part in the structure only as a concept from the totality of sentences in which it occurs, then we can give the meaning of any sentence or word only by giving the meaning of every sentence (and word) in the language. Not just a word has a meaning in the context of a sentence as Frege had argued, but also a sentence has meaning in the context of language (Davidson, 1993). For example, for one to do psychology, one needs to know the language used in this subject, which is different from one's ordinary language. However, this ordinary or native language will serve as one's bridge to easily understand the new language, and thus the new subject itself. One may know that, from mathematical point of view, 1+1= 2. However, it is possible that in biological, religious, or psychological languages, this is not the case. Therefore, one definitely needs to know what particular words or symbols mean in the languages used in particular fields of study one wants to do.

Furthermore, some (natural) languages are very close to one another to the point of being so compromising in communication. For example, Kirundi and Kinyarwanda fall under the category of the closest languages in the world. The

majority of the words used in these languages are similar. However, some of these words have different meanings and refer to different objects. Now, knowing that a word exists in both Kirundi and Kinyarwanda, a Burundian may pretend that the words refer to the same objects in both languages. Then, when he/she goes to Rwanda, he/she starts talking hoping that people know what he/she knows about the words, expressions or sentences he/she is using, which is not the case. Consequently, the person will mess up by using derogatory terms, which may even lead him/her to be severely punished. To avoid this, one needs to understand the meaning of the word, expression and sentence and what they refer to in Rwanda before speaking Kirundi there. Thus, one should never think that to know the meaning of a word in a certain language is enough if one does not know what it refers to in a particular place and context. That is what McDowell stresses when he says that to understand a language entails to know, here and now, the speakers' actions as a result of their particular behaviours in particular contexts (McDowell, 1993).

7. Meaning and Reference: Psychological and Social Indexesof Language Teaching and Learning

According to Strawson, the meaning of a word/expression/sentence cannot be identified with the object or assertion it is particulary used to refer to or make. For him, to talk about the meaning of a word/expression/sentence is not to talk about its use in a particular context, but about the rules, habits, conventions governing its accurate use to refer to or to assert (Strawson, 1993). For example, when you talk about a car, you can point at the object you are referring to, but you cannot point at the meaning of the word 'car'. This applies to the expressions like 'his book' and the sentences like 'the snow is white'. You can demonstrate the book you are referring to, and that the snow is white; but you cannot demonstrate the meaning of 'his book' or that of 'the snow is white' (Strawson, 1993). Yet, these two steps make understanding easy and certain. However, Russell denied this view in the sense that one cannot point at what the words like 'this, now, here' refer to. In response to that, Strawson argues that such terms serve to explain and illustrate the conventions governing the use of expression and sentences, that is, to give meaning to the expression or sentence. Strawson admits that such terms in themselves do not refer to anything; but they contain the rules, habits, conventions for their use in referring (Strawson, 1993). Therefore, the role of such words or expressions remain indispensable in sentences, and thus in languages.

Putnam recognizes such words (now, this, here) as being indexical and having an extension which changes from one context to the other. Hence, he argues that, as regards to these words, intension (meaning) does not define extension (reference). In fact, the extension of a term is not determined by an idea that the individual speaker has in his/her head; but it is determined socially; and it is partially determined indexically. For him, the extension of terms depends on the concrete nature of the particular things that serve as standards; and this concrete nature is not generally fully known to the speaker (Putnam, 1993).

According to Quine, one can only claim to understand an expression (word/ sentence) or a language, if one knows its meaning and is able to convey its meaning to others. Yet, one cannot, for example, give the meaning of 'twenty-five'. Thus, for Quine, it is better to say that we understand an expression or the equivalence of expressions rather than talking of knowing the meaning, and of giving the meaning and of sameness of meaning. However, he admits that this is because the notion of meaning somewhat serves to explain the understanding and equivalence of expressions. In fact, one can understand expressions if one knows or grasps their meanings when one expression serves as a translation of another because they mean the same. Still, Quine defines this as a mentalistic explanation (Quine, 1993).

In this sense, Quine agrees with many other philosophers of language who argue that understanding a word or knowing its meaning is just a matter of being in a certain mental state. Instead, others like Frege and Putnam argue that meanings are social, not in the head. They are public properties, in the sense that the same meaning can be understood by many people at different times. Then, Quine identifies concepts as abstract entities rather than mental entities. However, this paper sees meaning, like reference, as both mental and social entity. In fact, social understanding is simply the combination of individual understandings. Hence, understanding abstract entities remains an individual psychological act (Putnam, 1993). Indeed, to convey the meaning of a natural term is to convey certain basic facts, like the facts that an ordinary speaker needs to know so as to use a natural term (Wiggins, 1993).

Now, there is a relationship between sense and meaning towards reference. According to Frege, each speaker who seeks to relate a reference to a word must attribute a particular sense to it. Thus, different speakers are not subjected to attribute the same sense to one word, as far as the sense they attribute to it defines the same reference. Therefore, if all speakers agree that meaning is something objective, then the sense of the word is not part of its meaning. In fact, Frege, Putnam and others argued that a speaker attaches meaning to the word through psychological judgment or the part of a psychological mechanism (Dummett, 1993). Yet, Dummett believes that to know the meaning of a term implies to know its reference. Hence, meaning is transparent, in the sense that, if someone ascribes a meaning to each of the two words, he/she must know whether these meanings are the same. One who knows the meanings of two terms can identify whether they have the same reference or not. As a result, sense was defined as an ingredient in meaning, as being something that is transparent in the way that clarifies the meaning, and as being that ingredient which goes to determine reference. If this is true, then Dummett is right to argue that it is important for an identity-statement to be instructive; and that someone who understands the senses of two terms may not necessarily know that they have the same reference. Hence, senses may vary even if the reference is the same (Dummett, 1993). Therefore, this can distract from the understanding of particular languages in learning or communication.

8. Conclusion

This paper has argued that meaning and reference are inseparable means of understanding language. The paper has proved that meaning and reference facilitate the learning of natural languages, and thus the acquisition of knowledge in any other fields of study. It has shown that, if they are taken separately, meaning and reference can be used interchangeably, and thus be compromising in use. In this case, they can make the understanding of (natural and subjective) languages difficult, if not impossible. The paper has illustrated this case through the teaching and learning of a new language (natural or subjective) whereby meaning and reference altogether serve as bridges. It has also demonstrated how important it is for one to know both meaning and reference of a term which is used in more than one language before speaking. Otherwise, one ends up compromising oneself by using derogatory words in one place or the other. Alternatively, the paper has demonstrated that to use meaning and reference as separate entities requires one language which is understandable by everyone, and which can be used in all fields of study. Yet, since we have plenty of subjects and languages, and we have different interests in studies, we definitely need to know the meaning of terms and what they refer to in natural languages and in the languages that are used in those fields of study. Therefore, this paper contends that meaning and reference remain inseparable means of understanding languages and other areas of intellectual development.

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