On the Factors That Influence the Meaning of Sentences

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Abstract: *Sentence meaning is a hot topic in semantics at home and abroad, especially in sentence semantics (Hu, 2016). In the context of linguistic studies, this paper explores factors influencing sentence meaning, including word meaning, word order, thematic meaning, hierarchical structure, and context. Word meaning is fundamental but not the sole determinant. Word order, governed by syntactic rules, can drastically alter meaning. Thematic meaning reflects speakers' intentions. Hierarchical structure requires understanding component grouping at various levels. Context, in linguistic, situational, and co-textual forms, is a powerful force shaping meaning. John Rupert Firth's "meaning is use" theory ties these elements together, emphasizing the inseparable bond between linguistic elements and their contexts. The five components of his theory contribute to the overall interpretation. The goal is to understand that sentence meaning is dynamic and context-dependent, enhancing linguistic competence and fostering more effective communication across cultural and social domains.*
Key words: *Sentence meaning; Word meaning; Word order; Thematic meaning; Hierarchical structure; Context; Firth's theory of meaning*

I. Introduction

In the field of linguistics, the study of sentence meaning is an indispensable cornerstone. Language serves as the primary medium through which humans interact, share knowledge, and establish social connections. As a student of this linguistics course, my goal is to dissect the complexities of language use, and sentence meaning has emerged as a critical area of focus that bridges the gap between abstract linguistic theory and real-world communication.

There are two modes of sentence meaning construction: grammatical-driven and meaning-driven (Meng, 2021). At its core, a sentence is more than a random assembly of words. While the meanings of individual words undoubtedly form the basis of a sentence's significance, they do not paint the complete picture. I've learned through my studies that numerous other elements come into play, shaping and refining the overall message a sentence conveys.

In this paper, I aim to systematically explore the key factors that influence sentence meaning. I will first consider word meaning, examining how the inherent definitions of words interact within a sentence. Then, I'll look at sentence structure, observing how the arrangement of words and grammatical rules impact interpretation. Thematic meaning, which highlights the information a speaker wishes to emphasize, will also be a focal point. Additionally, I'll investigate the hierarchical structure of sentences, where certain elements take precedence over others in conveying meaning. Lastly, I recognize the paramount importance of context, as it can drastically alter a sentence's implications.

Moreover, I will delve into John Rupert Firth's theory of meaning, which underscores the inseparable bond between linguistic elements and their contexts. By analyzing these aspects, I hope to gain a comprehensive understanding of how sentences acquire their distinct meanings.

II. Factors Affecting the Meaning of Sentences

2.1 Word Meaning

Word meaning is a fundamental factor influencing the meaning of a sentence. The meaning of a sentence is clearly connected to the meanings of the words used in it. A word belongs to a communicative semantic unit, and logically speaking, as long as all the smallest communicative semantic units in a sentence can be understood, the basic semantics of the whole sentence are understood (Chen, 2012). However, it's equally evident that the sentence meaning isn't just a simple addition of word meanings.

For example, consider the sentence "The cat sat on the mat." Each word has its own meaning: "cat" refers

to a small domesticated carnivorous mammal, "sat" indicates the past - tense of the verb "sit," and "mat" is a piece of material used for various purposes. When combined, they form a coherent sentence with a clear meaning. But if we take the words out of context, like just listing "cat," "sat," and "mat" separately, we lose the specific meaning conveyed by the sentence.

This shows that while word meaning is crucial, it's not the sole determinant of sentence meaning.

2.2 Different Orders

Word order is a pivotal determinant of sentence meaning, as even slight alterations in the sequence of words can completely transform the message conveyed. This phenomenon is deeply rooted in the syntactic rules of languages, which dictate how words should be arranged to express specific ideas.

A classic example is "The man chased the dog" and "The dog chased the man." By simply swapping the positions of "man" and "dog," the sentence's meaning flips from a human pursuing an animal to the opposite scenario.

In linguistic and lexicological studies, such word - order effects are ubiquitous. For instance, "I love the red rose" emphasizes the speaker's affection for a particular rose, with "red" as an adjective modifying "rose." But the sentence 'The red I love rose' is grammatically non - standard in English, if we adjust it to a more plausible order like "The red rose I love," the focus shifts. The original well - ordered version naturally highlights the rose as the object of love, while the misplaced - adjective - like starting example (if corrected) could momentarily confuse before the correct meaning is parsed, showing how word order guides our understanding.

Another example: I saw the man with the telescope."

Interpretation 1: I used a telescope to see the man.

Interpretation 2: I saw the man who was holding the telescope.

2.3 Thematic Meaning

Thematic meaning, which reflects the speaker's intention and the thematic focus of a sentence, significantly influences the overall interpretation of its meaning. It's not just about the literal words but what the speaker wants to highlight or achieve through the sentence structure and word choice.

Take these two sentences as examples:

A. I've already seen that film.

Analyze： In this sentence, the subject "I" comes first, followed by the verb phrase "have already seen" and the object "that film." The thematic meaning here is centered on the speaker's action of having watched the film. The emphasis is on the fact that the experience of watching is complete, implying that there's no need to watch it again.

B. That film I've already seen.

Analyze： Here, "That film" is placed at the beginning, becoming the thematic focus. This structure suggests that the speaker is more likely to shift the conversation towards discussing details about the film, such as its plot, actors, or personal opinions. The intention is to introduce the film as a topic for further communication rather than simply stating the act of watching.

Above examples vividly and explicitly showcase that varying sentence structures can directly give rise to distinct thematic meanings and underlying speaker intentions.

2.4 Hierarchical Structure

When it comes to understanding sentence meaning, merely knowing the linear order of words isn't enough; we must also grasp the hierarchical structure. The hierarchical structure of a sentence reveals how different components are grouped and related at various levels, which significantly impacts the overall interpretation.

Take the phrase "more expensive clothes" as an example. In a linear view, it appears as a simple sequence. However, hierarchically, ambiguity arises. "More" can modify "expensive," emphasizing a higher degree of costliness, as in "I want to buy more expensive clothes for the party." Here, the focus is on the quality of the clothes in terms of price. But in a less common and more convoluted interpretation, if we stretch the hierarchical analysis, one could theoretically think "more" might modify "clothes" in a non - standard way, like implying a greater quantity of a specific type of clothes that are already associated with being expensive, though this is highly unconventional in normal usage.

The sentence "The son of Pharaoh's daughter is the daughter of Pharaoh's son" further illustrates the importance of hierarchical structure. It has two distinct meanings based on how we parse the possessive "'s". In one interpretation, it could mean "The daughter of Pharaoh's son is the daughter of Pharaoh's son," which is a

rather trivial and redundant statement. In the other, more meaningful one, it can imply "The son of Pharaoh's daughter is the daughter (in a different sense, perhaps metaphorically) of Pharaoh's son," where the possessive relationships are nested differently at the hierarchical level.

This demonstrates that to truly comprehend a sentence, we need knowledge of its syntactic hierarchy. Word meaning and sentence structure are intertwined in this hierarchical framework, and without considering it, we may misinterpret the sentence's intended message.

2.5 Different Contexts

The meaning of the sentence is relatively complete. The meaning of the sentence itself is not the full meaning of an actual sentence, and its full meaning depends on the context (Chen, 2013). Context, an invisible yet powerful force, exerts a profound influence on the meaning of sentences. It encompasses various elements such as the speaker, the addressee, time, place, scenario, and characters involved. Even a seemingly simple sentence can take on entirely different connotations when these contextual factors change.

2.5.1 Linguistic Context

The linguistic context refers to the words and phrases that surround a particular sentence, creating a semantic environment that guides our interpretation. Consider the sentence "I can't bear it."
Example 1: In a conversation about a thrilling horror movie, Person A says, "The ghost scene was so scary! I can't bear it." Here, "it" clearly refers to the terrifying experience of watching the ghost scene. The linguistic context, filled with words like "horror movie" and "ghost scene," helps us understand that the speaker is expressing their inability to endure the fear triggered by the movie.
Example 2: If the conversation is about a long - distance relationship, and Person B says, "I haven't seen my partner for months. I can't bear it," then "it" represents the pain of separation. The preceding words about the long - distance relationship set the linguistic stage for this interpretation.

2.5.2 Situational Context

The situational context includes the physical and social circumstances in which a sentence is uttered.
Example 1 - Speaker and Listener: In a classroom, when the teacher says, "Open your books to page 50," it's a direct instruction to the students to start a new lesson. But if a student says the same thing to a classmate during a group, it might be a friendly reminder or a suggestion to follow the study plan.
Example 2 - Time: Saying "It's cold today" in winter implies a need for warm clothing, while in summer, it could be a comment on an unusually cool day or an ironic remark about air - conditioning.
Example 3 - Place: In a library, "Be quiet" is a polite request to maintain a peaceful environment. But if someone yells this in the middle of a noisy party, it's more of a desperate plea to stop the racket.
Example 4 - Scenario: During a job interview, when the interviewer says, "Tell me about yourself," they expect a professional summary. However, at a social gathering, a friend asking the same question might just want to start a casual chat.

2.5.3 Co-textual Context

The co-textual context is the flow and progression of the conversation or text.
Example 1: In a story, the sentence "He took the key and opened the door" might seem straightforward. But if the preceding text describes a locked treasure chest, then "the door" becomes the chest's lid, and the sentence takes on a sense of adventure and discovery.
Example 2: In a debate about environmental protection, when someone says, "We need to act now," the co-textual context of the debate, filled with arguments about pollution and climate change, makes it clear that "act" refers to taking measures to protect the environment.
In conclusion, context is an indispensable element in understanding the meaning of sentences. It acts as a lens through which we interpret the words, allowing us to grasp the speaker's true intentions and the underlying message.

III. Firth's Theory about the Meaning of Any Sentence

Firth, a prominent British linguist, proposed the idea that "meaning is use," suggesting that the meaning of a linguistic element, including a sentence, is determined by its relationship with its context at the same level. This theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how various contextual factors interact to shape the meaning of a sentence. Let's delve into each of the five components of Firth's theory with examples.

3.1. The Relationship of Each Phoneme to Its Phonological Context

Phonemes are the smallest units of sound in a language. Their meaning is not inherent but arises from their interaction with neighboring phonemes within a phonological context.

In the word "pin" /pɪn/ and "bin" /bɪn/, the initial phonemes /p/ and /b/ are distinct. The different phonological environments here, mainly the articulatory place of the consonants (bilabial /p/ vs. bilabial but voiced /b/), give rise to different words with different meanings. If we mispronounce "pin" as "bin," the entire meaning of the sentence changes. For instance, "I need a pin to fix this" and "I need a bin to throw this away" convey completely different messages. This shows how the relationship between phonemes and their phonological context directly impacts the sentence's meaning by altering the words it contains.

3.2. The Relationship of Each Lexical Item to the Others in the Sentence

The meaning of individual words (lexical items) is highly dependent on their co-occurrence with other words in a sentence.

Consider the sentence "The old man kicked the ball." Here, the word "old" modifies "man," giving us a specific image of an elderly person. If we change the sentence to "The young man kicked the ball," the meaning shifts as the relationship between "young" and "man" creates a different mental picture. The words around "man" influence our understanding of who is performing the action and the overall context of the event.

3.3. The Morphological Relations of Each Word

Morphology deals with the internal structure of words, including inflections, derivations, and compounding. These morphological changes can alter the meaning of a word within a sentence.

Take the base word "book" and its plural form "books." In the sentence "I have a book," it refers to a single volume. But in "I have many books," the plural suffix "-s" changes the quantity indicated. This morphological difference is crucial for conveying the correct meaning of the sentence. Similarly, the verb "run" and its past tense "ran" in "I run every morning" and "I ran yesterday" show how morphological changes in words affect the temporal aspect of the sentence's meaning.

3.4. The Sentence Type of Which the Given Sentence Is an Example

The type of sentence, such as declarative, interrogative, imperative, or exclamatory, plays a significant role in determining its meaning and function.

Example:

A declarative sentence like "The sky is blue" simply states a fact.

An interrogative sentence "Is the sky blue?" seeks information.

An imperative sentence "Look at the blue sky" gives a command or a request.

An exclamatory sentence "What a beautiful blue sky!" expresses strong emotion.

Each sentence type has a distinct purpose and meaning, and using the wrong type can lead to miscommunication. For instance, if someone says "Is the sky blue?" in a situation where a statement of fact is expected, it may cause confusion.

3.5. The Relationship of the Sentence to Its Context of Situation

The broader situational context, including the participants, time, place, and the overall topic of conversation, has a profound impact on the meaning of a sentence.

For instance, in a classroom, if a teacher says, "Open your books," the students understand that it's an instruction related to the ongoing lesson. But if the same sentence is said in a library by a stranger, it might be confusing or even alarming. The different situational contexts: the classroom with a teaching-learning dynamic versus the library with its quiet atmosphere, changing the interpretation of the sentence.

In conclusion, Firth's theory provides a multi-faceted approach to understanding sentence meaning. Each of the five components contributes to the overall interpretation and emphasizes the intricate relationship between language and its use in context.

IV. Conclusion

The exploration of the factors influencing sentence meaning and the in-depth analysis of John Rupert Firth's theory of meaning have collectively illuminated the intricate and multifaceted nature of how sentences acquire their distinct significance in human communication.

Sentence meaning partly derives from grammatical meaning and partly derives from lexical meaning of words (Yao & Song, 2012). From the fundamental building blocks of word meaning, I have seen that while individual word definitions lay the groundwork for sentence interpretation, they are far from the whole story. Words gain their true communicative power through their interactions within a sentence. A simple list of words lacks the cohesive meaning that emerges when they are arranged in a particular order and context. This highlights the importance of considering words not in isolation but as parts of a larger semantic whole.

Word order, as a crucial determinant of sentence meaning, underscores the role of syntactic rules in shaping our understanding. The subtle yet significant changes in meaning brought about by altering the sequence

of words demonstrate that language is not just a random collection of sounds and symbols but a highly structured system. The classic examples of "The man chased the dog" and "The dog chased the man," as well as the ambiguous "I saw the man with the telescope," clearly show how word order guides our cognitive processing and interpretation of the events being described.

Thematic meaning adds another layer of complexity, revealing that speakers use sentence structure and word choice to emphasize specific information and convey their intentions. Whether it is a straightforward statement about having seen a film or a more topic - oriented introduction of the film for further discussion, the thematic focus of a sentence can greatly influence the listener's or reader's perception and response.

The hierarchical structure of sentences further complicates the interpretation process. It forces us to look beyond the linear order of words and consider how different components are grouped and related at various levels. The ambiguity in phrases like "more expensive clothes" and the two - fold meanings of the sentence "The son of Pharaoh's daughter is the daughter of Pharaoh's son" highlight the need for a deep understanding of syntactic hierarchy to avoid misinterpretation.

Context, in all its forms (linguistic, situational, and co-textual context), emerges as the overarching force that can drastically alter a sentence's implications. The same sentence can take on entirely different connotations depending on who is speaking, to whom, when, where, and in what scenario. It acts as a lens through which we filter the words, allowing us to grasp the speaker's true intentions and the underlying message.

Moreover, Firth's theory of "meaning is use" provides a comprehensive framework that ties all these elements together. By emphasizing the inseparable bond between linguistic elements and their contexts, it offers a holistic approach to understanding sentence meaning. The five components of his theory, including the relationship of phonemes to their phonological context, lexical items to each other, morphological relations within words, sentence types, and the relationship of sentences to their situational contexts, contributing to the overall interpretation.

In essence, sentence meaning is not a static or predetermined concept but a dynamic and context-dependent phenomenon. It is the result of a complex interplay between words, their arrangement, the speaker's intentions, and the surrounding circumstances. As a language learner and user, a deep awareness of these factors enables me to communicate more effectively, understand others more accurately, and appreciate the richness and versatility of human language. This understanding not only enhances my linguistic competence but also enriches my cultural and social interactions, as I become more attuned to the subtle nuances and underlying meanings in the sentences I encounter and produce.

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