THE MEANINGFULNESS OF LINGUISTIC EXPRESSIONS FROM THE TRUTH-CONDITIONAL THEORY OF MEANING (A METALINGUAL SYUDY)

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ABSTRACT

Meaning is the essence of language. It has been one of the main concerns in the study of language since the age of Plato and Aristotle. There have been various theories of meaning but only a few explains 'what one knows when s/he is said to know the meaning of linguistic expressions'. Truth-conditional theory of meaning is one of them – not to say the only theory of meaning – which explains 'what one knows when s/he is said to know the meaning of linguistic expressions'. However, it has been little paid attention to by theorists working on linguistic meaning since the decline of the ideal language philosophy. It happens so because it is basically misunderstood, i.e. the misunderstanding between linguistic proposition and epistemic proposition in the correspondence theory of truth. This paper revives the significance of the truth-conditional theory of meaning in understanding what constitutes the meaning of linguistic expressions when one is said to know it.

INTRODUCTION

Meaning is undoubtedly the essence of language. It is the property of language that philosophers have never missed to ponder since Plato's (427–347 B.C.) Cratylus dialog. The philosophical studies of meaning in the ancient and the medieval times were

metaphysical in nature. Such study of meaning was dismissed when "sensory experience" or "direct experience" was believed to be the sole authoritative source of obtaining knowledge. The positivistic epistemology refused any scientific study which could not be directly observed and experienced. In order that the study of meaning could form a body of true knowledge, it had to comply with this epistemological tenet, i.e. meaning had to be verified empirically in terms that it can be observed directly as a sort of sensory experiences.

This epistemological supremacy reached its peak at the second half of 18th century and gradually declined at the beginning of 19th century. It does not mean that the positivistic epistemology has completely been defective, rejected and discarded. Searle (2008:11), for instance, still holds its strong version by saying that "mental phenomena are ordinary biological phenomena in the same sense as photosynthesis or digestion". Meanwhile, its influence on the study of meaning can still be traced in Bloomfield's (1933) theory of meaning for example. Bloomfield (1933:139) defines the linguistic meaning as "the situation in which the speaker utters it and the response which it calls forth in the hearer". His explanation on linguistic meaning is empirically verified as a part of human behaviors. However, Bloomfield (1933:140) also states that "[t]he statement of meanings is … the weak point in language-study, and will remain so until human knowledge advances very far beyond its present state". We can infer that he was not satisfied with his explanation on this matter and expected a better explanation to appear later.

If (i) immediate sensory experience is the authoritative source of knowledge, (ii) such knowledge is presented in a proposition, and (iii) the proposition is represented by a linguistic expression, we can now understand the problem of linguistic meaning which is directly associated with the positivistic epistemology. There are two separated realms blended into a single merged fact. The first one is related to the linguistic meaning and the second one is related to the propositional meaning. Philosophically the propositional meaning should be kept apart from the linguistic meaning to comply with the positivistic epistemology. In other words, empirical observation is applied to verify the content of proposition and not applied to verify the meaning of its linguistic expression. Based on the positivistic epistemology, the content of the proposition should be then verified by the truth conditions of its empirical observation. So far this explanation logically makes sense. The problem arises when we are aware that the content of a proposition is in fact represented by linguistic expression whose meaning lies in a different realm. How can we keep the propositional meaning apart from the linguistic meaning in a clear-cut separation?

Realizing this problem, Russels (1922/2001: xxii) says that "what has to be explained is the relation between the set of words which is the proposition considered as a fact on its own account, and the 'objective' fact which makes the proposition true or false".

Wittgenstein (1922/2001:25) says that "to understand a proposition means to know what is the case if it is true". In fact, the content of a proposition cannot be understood unless the linguistic expression which represents the proposition is understood. We can rephrase Wittgentein's statement in the same sense that to understand the linguistic expression means to know what is the case if it is true. Practically the propositional meaning cannot be kept apart from its linguistic meaning and the linguistic meaning and the propositional meaning should be verified simultaneously based on their truth conditions. However, we still have to keep in our mind that philosophically both reside in a different realm and what constitutes their truth conditions should also be distinguished. What constitutes the truth conditions of a proposition are "the objective fact" or a previously verified body of propositions. A proposition is said to be meaningful if it can be empirically observed or complies with a previously verified body of propositions. Meanwhile, what constitutes the truth conditions of a linguistic expression is the speaker's knowledge of how the world would have to be if the linguistic expression is true, regardless its nonsensicality of the world would be and its contribution to a body of scientific knowledge as well.

Recognizing the distinction of the aforementioned two types of truth-conditions is an important theoretical foundation to understand the meaning of a linguistic expression based on its truth-conditions. Missing this point will certainly lead to a misunderstanding and this is what has happened so far with the truth-conditional theory of meaning. This paper discusses how the truth-conditional theory of meaning is possible to be an empirical tool to investigate what one knows when s/he knows the meaning of linguistic expressions.

Since the second half of 19th century, the study of meaning has become an enterprise with a wide range of concerns. It is no longer exclusively attributed to linguistcs and philosophy of language. It has also been the concern of cognitive psychology, neuroscience, communication study, and social psychology to mention some. It is not surprising if interdisciplinary as well as transdisciplinary studies of meaning have been common practices lately. At least, a study of meaning in a certain domain of discipline should also pay attention to what the other disciplines have achieved in their investigation of meaning. The study of meaning in linguistics itself has not only been the concern of semantics. Pragmatics and cognitive semantics are two branches of linguistics whose

contribution to the study of meaning in linguistics can not be necglected. The studies of meaning having been developed by semantics, pragmatics, and cognitive semantics have created three loci of meaning based on which subsequent studies of meaning are developed. Those loci of meaning are (i) the underlying structure of the expression itself, (ii) the speaker's intention in her/his contextual utterances, and (iii) the cognitive structure of human mind. Respectively it represents the study of meaning in semantics, pragmatics, and Cognitive Linguistics. In a nutshell, the dominant contemporary theories of meaning can be presented in the following figure.
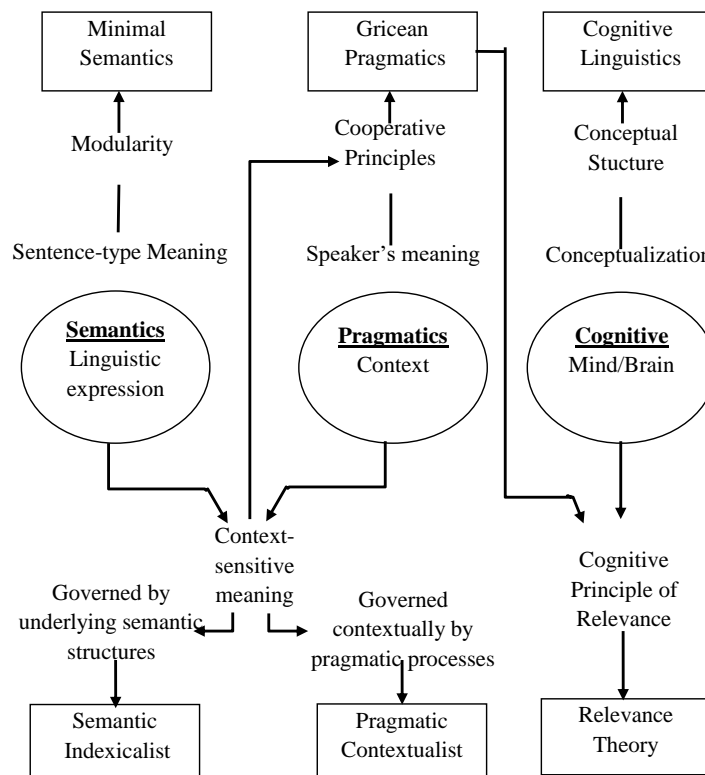

Figure 1. Three Dominant Theories of Meaning

Unfortunately, we are not in the position to discuss the contemporary teories of meaning in detail as the available room is not just possible to accommodate it. What we like to achieve here are, first of all, to show the map of the contesting theories of meaning and secondly to place where the truth-conditional theory is being on the spotlight.

Cognitive theory of meaning is cleary against the truth-conditional theory of meaning. The conceptualization of grammar in Cognitive Linguistics, for example, is the principle which, as mentioned by Croft and Cruse (2004:1), "is opposed to truth-conditional semantics, in which a semantic metalanguage is evaluated in terms of truth and falsity relative to the world (or, more precisely, a model of the world)". They also

recognize that the meaning of a linguistic expression does not necessarily have to be an actual truth as it may be true in possible words, a very old theory firstly introduced by Liebniz (1765/1981) to refuse Spinoza's idea of predeterminism. However, Croft and Cruse (2004:33) argue that "[P]ossible words pose metaphysical problem for many people.... Do possible worlds exist? If so – or especially if not – where are they?". Paradoxically, they (2004:33) have mentioned previously that possible worlds are identified with "a person's beliefs or wishes or some other mental attitude". It seems to us that they have failed (i) to distinguish the truth-value of linguistic meaning from that of the proposition represented by the linguistic expression and (ii) to acknowledge that the speakers' metacognition on their language can be designed as a verification tool in linguistic research.

Minimal semantics believes that the truth-conditional content of a linguistic expression is its context-independent meaning "which is a necessary precursor to analyses of communicated meaning" (Borg, 2004:19). It is the minimal proposition (or minimal truth condition) whose truth value needs a little or no pragmatic processing (Borg, 2007:340). The context-independent meaning is the the truth-conditional content, while the context-dependent meaning is the speech-act content. What is claimed to be the truth conditional content is, therefore, what is invariant across contexts. If it is true that "a theory of language is at buttom a theory of linguistic use" (Davidson, 1984:273), what is invariant across context must only be a meaning-potential. It does not yet have a truth value unless it is considered at least under the context of possible worlds. If it is only a meaning-potential and can not be evaluated based on its actual circumstances, is such kind of truth-conditional content plausible? Here, the notion of truth-conditions is not well-defined and does not follow the principle of formal semantics suggested by Wittgenstein (1922/2001:25) that "a proposition can be true or false only in virtue of being a picture of reality".

On the contrary, Gricean pragmatics argues that the meaning of a linguistic expression is the utterer's intention – known later as the speaker's meaning as opposed to the sentence meaning (Grice, 1957/1996, 1969). However, Gricean pragmatics admits that a sentence has a conventional meaning as the element of "what is said" which in turn may become the speaker's meaning as the conventional implicature (Grice, 1975/1996). In other words, Gricean pragmatics acknowledges that there is a kind of meaning which is context-independent meaning in nature. In fact, Gricean pragmatics denies the meaning of linguistic expressions in terms of their truth-conditions since it is a non-natural meaning. If

the speaker's intention constitutes the meaning of an utterance, what sort of meaning does the conventional meaning of a sentence bear and represent? What constitutes the conventional meaning of sentences then? The Gricean pragmatics clearly pays its attention to the use of language in a real time communication. The Therefore, as a matter of fact, both minimal semantics and Gricean pragmatics are being on the same bridge but standing on the opposing side. Both basically fail to distinguish the truth-conditional content of a linguistic proposition from the truth-conditional content of epistemic proposition.

In the meantime, indexicalist and contextualist agree that what varies with context is the truth-conditional content of utterances (Bezuidenhout, 2001; Stern, 2009; Recanati, 2004; 2010). Let us take the examples of attributive adjectives big and good. What is the literal meaning – if any – of big and good? Their meaning in terms of their physical measurement varies from one occation of utterance to other occations such as the attributive adjective big in (1).

(1) a. This is a big elephant.
     b. This is a big mouse.
     c. This is a very big fly.

However, indexicalist and contextualist differ in explaining what generates such truth-conditional content of utterances. Indexicalist explains such truth-conditional contents of utterances "in terms of underlying semantic structure in accordance with the principles of compositional semantics" (Stern, 2009:2). Meanwhile, contextualist explains that such truth-conditional contents of utterances as the result of top-down pragmatic process either primary pragmatic process or secondary pragmatic process (Recanati, 2004; 2010). After all, it is clear that the notion of meaning in terms of its truth-conditions is just really part of the term meaning which is "cannot be anything but what any such theory is a theory of" (McDowell, 1976/2005:42).

METHODOLOGY

The research applied qualitative design in three specific forms. The first is an analytical-descriptive perspective or some other researchers call it "interpretive-descriptive research" (Maykut and Morehouse, 1992:41). This research design is viewed upon the basis of its purpose of the study which is a combination of analytical objectives and descriptive objectives. The purpose of descriptive research in general is to get a "description of the state of affairs as it exists at present" (Kohtari, 2004:2).

The second is a conceptual-empirical perspective. This design is based on the type of data and how they were handled. This design was closely related to the previous design. The conceptual-empirical research here is a research based on observational data or experiences but simultaneously a certain concept implanted to the data was accounted. In other words, conceptual-empirical research applied here is a mix of data-driven and theory-driven research.

The third is a bibliographic-field perspective. It is a bibliographic perspective because, as stated by Zed (2008), it is research whose data were explored from related literatures and researches. The related literatures and researches investigated are not only to prepare the framework of the research, to deepen theoretical studies, and to sharpen methodology, but also at the same time to utilize the related literatures and researches as the sources of research data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. The Basis the Meaning of Linguistic Expressions

Meaning is basically "something" which is being verbalized by a linguistic expression. When a linguistic expression is said to have meaning, it is said to be meaningful. In other words, a meaningful linguistic expression is a linguistic expression which has meaning. We have to understand that the notion of "meaningful linguistic expression" should not be confused with the notion of "sensical linguistic expression". A meaningful linguistic expression may be nonsensical like Leech's (1981:6) example "my uncle always sleeps standing on one toe". This expression is certainly meaningful as we know the meaning of the expression though it does not make any sense in accordance with our logic. The notion of meaningfulness is related to the truth-conditional content of linguistic expressions and the notion of nonsensicality is related to the truth-conditional content of knowledge propostion. Now, the question is how we know that a linguistic expression is meaningful.

The meaningfulness of linguistic expressions is definitely identified based on the speaker's knowledge of their meaning. It is the most valid verification because the speakers of a language are the most realiable sources to evaluate certain properties of their language being investigated. If we encountered the Martian language and we did not know even its single word, whom would we be going to ask? Certainly, we would go to find a Martian. When we can not find any Martian, then we would go to find at least the one who has a native-like proficiency on Martian language. Therefore, the speakers' knowledge of the

meaningfulness of linguistic expressions is a rigorous instrument to verify whether or not a linguistic expression is meaningful. The problem is what we can have from the speakers' knowledge of the meaningfulness of a linguistic expression is only a kind of yes-no answers. When we ask whether a linguistic expression is meaningful, the answer will only be two or three options, i.e. (i) yes, it is meaningful, (ii) no, it isn't meaningful, and (iii) uncertain. The third option can be elicited to either the first option or the second one. This kind of speakers' knowledge is absolutely still superficial. We are more interested in the question of what kind of knowledge that enables the speakers of a language to identify whether or not a linguistic expression is meaningful.

Let us consider the meaning of the linguistic expression in (2).

(2)   X says to Y: "Petruk sedang belanja di pasar". 'Petruk is shopping at the market'

Y, as well as other speakers of Indonesian, understands very well the meaning of the linguistic expression (2) which is uttered by X. Is the utterance (2) meaningful? The answer is definitely positive. But, what is exactly Y's knowledge of the meaning of utterance (2) like? If we ask Y the meaning of the utterance (2), s/he will probably give us some of its paraphrases or her/his metacognition such as (3).

(3)   A man whose name is Petruk is doing a certain kind of activity such as buying at a certain place where various things are sold.

What is described in (3) is only more or less what would be the meaning of utterance (2) in Y's mind and other speakers of Indonesian as well. There is not yet any tool which can decode verbally what exactly happens in Y's mind. So far it is only a kind of neural activity.

Though the use of metacognition opens up a way to investigate the meaning of linguistic expressions, it is epistemologically challenging. The meaning of an utterance in terms of its speaker's metacognition tends to vary to a certain extent. If the speakers' metacognition of an utterance meaning varies, it again raises a philosophical question about the nature of the meaning of linguistic expressions. Which one out of many variations is true to be the meaning of an utterance if the meaning of the utterance in terms of its metacognition varies? There are two answers for that question. Firstly, the speakers' knowledge of the meaning of a linguistic expression in terms of their metacognition does

not directly constitute the meaning of the linguistic expression being investigated itself. Metacognition is only a kind of methodological tool to verify that one really knows the meaning of a linguistic expression. Secondly, the metacogntive variations indicate that the meaning of linguistic expression in fact comprises a set of properties that enable the speaker's of a language to know the meaning. Additionally, they explain why the meaning of a linguistic expression modulates.

We can accept then that the variations of the speakers' metacognition of the meaning of the utterance (2) do not necessarily represent various meanings of utterance (2). Though we accept such variations, it does not mean that every speaker's metacognition of the meaning of the utterance (2) is verified to be the meaning of the utterance (2). For instance, Y describes that the meaning of utterance (2) is (4).

(4)   A man whose name is Petruk is doing a certain kind of singing activity at a certain place where people save and withdraw money.

Now we can ask Indonesian speakers whether the metacognition (4) will potentially be the meaning of the utterance (2). Surely the answer will be negative. In other words, the metacognition (4) is false to be the meaning of the utterance (2). If we provide more metacognitions, competent Indonesian speakers will be able to judge whether or not a metacognition of the meaning of the utterance (2) is true. The competent language speakers' ability to judge whether or not a metacognition of an utterance meaning is true directly implicates that it is the speakers' knowledge of the utterance meaning. In that case the competent language speakers must know what conditions of a metacognition to be true as the meaning of an utterance. The language speakers' knowledge of such conditions is the speaker's knowledge of what conditions of an utterance would be if it is true. Once again, it should be clear that we are talking about the meaningful linguistic expression not about the sensical linguistic expression. The speaker's knowledge of what conditions of an utterance would be if it is true is above all the speaker's knowledge of whether or not a linguistic expression is meaningful.

2. Truth as a Semantic and Pragmatic Concept

Truth-conditional theory of meaning is frequently misunderstood as a correspondence theory of truth in terms of an actual correspondence. This misunderstanding is rooted in the epistemological believes of positivism, particularly the radical positivism. A proposition

which can not be verified or immediately experienced either in reality or in experiment is claimed to be a meaningless proposition. When a proposition fails to satisfy the positivistic verification, it is a meaningless proposition. In fact, a proposition is represented by a linguistic expression which Wittgenstein (1922/2001) calls as the propositional signs. Unfortunately, the meaningless proposition is also frequently understood as the meaningless linguistic expression. We have to understand that what is meaningless is the content of the proposition in terms of its contribution to scientific knowledge not the content of the linguistic expression. How can one know whether or not a proposition is meaningless if the linguistic expression which represents it is not meaningful?

The above explanation can only apply if the context of linguistic truth is different from that of propositional truth. The context of linguistic truth is possible worlds and that of propositional truth is the "actual world". What is meaningless in "actual world" may still be meaningful in a possible world. What is meaningless as a propositional truth is nonsensicality in the "actual world". As far as the positivistic knowledge is concerned, both kinds of truth must satisfy the positivistic epistemology of verification. Now, the problem lies in the identification of instruments which is reliable to verify the truth of linguistic proposition and that of epistemic proposition. It is just exactly like the verification of the electricity current. The evidence that there is electricity current is not because we can see, smell, touch, taste, and hear it; but because we are able to present an instrument which logically proves its positivistic existence. Therefore, what is nonsensical and, hence, meaningless in the "actual world" can still be proved to be meaningful in possible worlds.

The truth of the epistemic proposition is an actual fact, while the truth of the linguistic proposition is a conditional fact. A conditional fact may turn to be an actual fact and may remain to be a conditional fact. When one utters "It will rain tomorrow", Indonesian speakers know the meaning of the utterance because they know the truth-conditions of the utterance though it is not an actual fact. However, the truth-conditions related to the meaning of a linguistic expression will only be possible to apply if they have been previously stored in memory. It is a kind of, in general term, an ordinary knowledge which is acquired by speakers of a language through the socially and culturally conventionalized use of linguistic expressions. To some extent the concept of truth here seems to be similar to what Tarski (1944/1996) proposed in his writing, i.e. truth as a semantic concept; nevertheless we also consider truth as a pragmatic concept. We, therefore, have a different explanation from what Tarski have done. Truth as a semantic and pragmatic concept may be used to explain the truth conditions of any implicated meaning. In sum, the truth-

conditional theory of meaning can explain the meaning of "what is said" and "what is implicated". Because philosophically it is not really a matter of an absolute true or an absolute false, we consider the appropriateness as part of its truth-conditions.

Let us define meaning in a simple notion as "aboutness, either ideational or interpersonal aboutness, which is verbally represented by a linguistic expression" and represented by symbol α. A, as having been explained previously, is the language speakers' knowledge of its truth and or (hereafter &/) appropriateness-conditions of α in a language L. If X is the meaning of Y in L, the language speakers know the truth-&/appropriateness-conditions of X in L. If β is the language speakers' knowledge of the truth-&/appropriateness-conditions of α, we will have the equivalence as in (5) then.

(5) a. If, β = 'the speakers' knowledge of the truth-&/appropriateness-conditions of α in L',

b. Then, X = α(Y) in L « X:⟺ β(Y) in L
'X is the meaning of Y if and only if X logically equivalent with the speakers' knowledge of the truth-&/appropriateness-conditions of Y in L'.

Since the meaningfulness of linguistic expressions lies in the speakers' knowledge of their truth-&/appropriateness-conditions, we can conclude that the meaning of linguistic expressions are properties that enable the language speakers to know their truth-&/appropriateness-conditions. Such properties are deduced from, again, the speakers's knowledge of the truth-&/appropriateness-conditions. However the notion of "meaning" and "meaningfulness" can be distinguished based on their level of abstraction.

Now we can define "meaning" and "meaningfulness" differently but related to each other. "Meaning" is defined as "the properties that enable the language speakers to know the truth-&/appropriateness-conditions of linguistic expressions. Meanwhile, "meaningful-ness" is defined as "the language speakers' knowledge of the truth-&/appropriateness-conditions of linguistic expressions". It is clear that the term meaning has a more abstract notion than the term meaningfulness. In the long run, the question what is it to know the meaning of linguistic expressions can be answered. To know the meaning of linguistic expressions is to know the properties of the truth-&/appropriateness-conditions of linguistic expressions. The description of what one knows when s/he knows the meaning of a linguistic expression is the description of what s/he knows about the truth-&/appropriateness-conditions of a linguistic expression.

CONCLUSION

The significance of the truth-conditional theory of meaning is clear enough to be the theory which can explains what one knows when s/he is said to know the meaning of a linguistic expression. Despite its achievement in explaing 'what one knows when s/he is said to know the meaning of a linguistic expression, there are still many related problems which have to be solved by the truth-conditional theory, particularly problems pertaining to interpersonal and grammatcal meaning. However, the modified version as we have proposed enable it to include the notion of the appropriateness as the element of truth as a semantic and pragmatic notion of truth. More researches are absolutley required to strengthen the theory.

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