The Uncertain Future of Meaning in Language: A Study of English Semantics

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Introduction

T he definition of language tends to succumb to a utilitarian approach, universally speaking, and language is hardly viewed as a *sui generis* phenomenon. The latter view, which is generally attributed to narrow-minded theoretical linguisticians, is seriously pooh-poohed by sociolinguists and other language scholars. "Definitions of language have invariably appeared to be answering the tacit question 'language for what'? And in this way 'communication' has come to be considered as an important determinant [or consubstantial to it]" (Ngala 2000: 86). The justification seems to be that only the language's role as a channel of communication, or a carrier of meaning, actually matters and accounts for the tremendous interest it enjoys throughout the world.

Nonetheless, meaning, the most precious purpose of language, is at the same time the most vulnerable of its essential aspects, so much so that we are preoccupied as regards the direction our present language significance is going to take. An observation of the phenomenon, *i.e.* the apparent transience of the present meanings of words that we know, only deepens the worry we have. This situation warrants a study to, if not design remedial measures, at least, draw attention to the phenomenon for the purpose of raising awareness and restraining, to some extent, the tendency of users of language not to pay strict attention to the actual meanings of words which they often violate outrightly.

The Fragile and Controversial Character of Meaning

The type of discussion about meaning in language, such as the present one, is technically referred to as semantics, which constitutes one of the essential levels of language analysis; the others being phonology, lexis and syntax as adequately echoed by Stross (1981). As a matter of fact, meaning or semantics happens to be the most important level, for all the others only work for, or towards it, or are at its service. That such an important aspect of language does not enjoy any guarantees, or self conservation potential, calls for concern and justifies the sustained opinions that scholars, language re-

searchers and users generally, have volunteered on the issue. For instance, Ngala expresses his worry about the issue (2012 79; 93) by regretting that :

> Meaning [...] which can be considered as the 'blood' of language, or its most precious essence, and which therefore ought to be the most protected and respected aspect in language, seems to be, paradoxically, the most exposed and vulnerable aspect of the English language. (78)

In fact, some of the strong points of the English language, like its wide geographical expansiveness, its great number of speakers (about four hundred million) are, at the same time, its weaknesses, given that the unity, coherence and integrity of the language are jeopardized precisely as a result of its ubiquitous character.

Some Views of Meaning in Language

Meaning, which is the most vital aspect, as pointed out above, has been widely studied and various approaches to it have been proposed. Prominent literary critic and semanticist, I. A Richards in *Practical Criticism*, Part III, Chapter I, suggests four kinds of meaning, namely: "sense, feeling, tone and intention." "Sense," according to him,

> is the immediate significance of the words – names of the things, situations, incidents which are offered for the reader's consideration; [and feeling is] the writer's attitude towards these things, his special direction [or a "nuance of interest," which is inseparable from his presentation of the subject matter. Tone is that quality of the writer's voice which reveals or openly expresses his attitude towards the readers, his recognition of his relation to others [and, finally] intention is, of course, the writer's aim, the effect he is endeavouring to promote. (*in* Peet & Robinson: 1977 xvi)

Myers (*in* Anderson *et al.*: 1966 15-28) proposes three kinds of meaning: "what the speaker intends to indicate; what is suggested to a particular listener, and a more or less general habit of using a given word to indicate a given thing." Seemingly, highlighting the last model of semantic analysis, Myers cogently adds that "we could not communicate at all without some sort of agreement that certain words are to be used to stand for certain things." Expatiating upon this assertion, this time with a tincture of pessimism, as far as communicating meaning is concerned, Myers argues that

> we cannot understand each other unless we approximate the habits of those with whom we communicate; but we can only approximate. Until we find two people with identical physical equipment, nervous systems, and backgrounds of past experiences, we cannot expect to find even two people who use a language in exactly the same way. This is true of both individual words and of ways of putting them together. (19)

This leaves us with a very limited chance of communicating with one another in society. The reason for this difficulty in interpersonal communication through words is obvious according to Potter who points out that "meanings, as subjective phenomena, are especially unstable and elusive and have not yet been subjected to the scientific analysis that other aspects of language have undergone" (*in* Anderson *et al.*: 1966 113). Besides, meaning having not yet been subjected to strict scientific analysis, due to semantic instability, indeed unreliability, Potter goes on to explain that the "cause of shifting meaning in so many words lay in the impossibility of complete definition and in the varying complexity of the word-thing relationship" (*ibid.*)

THE EVANESCENCE OF WORD-MEANING

Far from prescribing seminal measures or criticising the state of flux in which meaning finds itself in language, some renowned intellectuals tackle the issue by providing enlightenment and rationalisation. But the only stance that comes close to a solution or remedy only consolidates the phenomenon by prescribing respect or submission to it. Mill, the famous English philosopher, offers such bland counsel under the section we caption "*Sensitization for Logicians*," below. The substance of Mill's scholarship on the issue is presented in Book Four of his immense work entitled *Operations Subsidiary to Induction* (1843)*,* in which Chapter Five, "*On the Natural History of the Variations in the Meaning of Terms,"* is analysed in the following lines.

THE LIABILITY OF WORDS TO SHIFT THEIR MEANING

It is not only in the mode which has now been pointed out, namely, by gradual inattention to a portion of the ideas conveyed, that words in common use are liable to shift their connotations. The truth is that the connotation of such words is perpetually varying, as might be expected from the manner in which words in common use acquire their connotations. A technical term, invented for purposes of art or science, originally has the connotations given to

it by its inventor; but a name which is in every one's mouth before any one thinks of defining it, derives its connotations from the circumstances which are habitually brought to mind when it is pronounced. Among these circumstances, the properties common to the things denoted by the name have naturally the principal place, and would have that sole place if language were regulated by conventions rather than by custom and accident. But besides these common properties, which if they exist are *certainly* present whenever the name is employed, any other circumstance may *casually* be found along with it so frequently as to become associated with it in the same manner and as strongly as the common properties themselves. In proportion, as this association forms itself, people give up using the name in cases in which those casual circumstances do not exist. They prefer using some other name, or the same name with some adjunct, rather than employ an expression which calls up an idea they do not want to excite. The circumstance originally casual thus becomes regularly a part of the connotations of the said word.

THE LIMITATIONS OF THE DICTIONARY AND THE SHAKY FATE OF SYNONYMY

It is the continual incorporation of circumstances originally accidental into the permanent signification of words which is the cause that there are so few exact synonyms. It is this also which renders the dictionary meaning of a word, by universal remark, so imperfect an exponent of its real meaning. The dictionary meaning is marked out in a broad, blunt way, and probably includes all that was originally necessary for the correct employment of the term; but in the process of time, so many collateral associations adhere to words that whoever should attempt to use them with no other guide than the dictionary would confound a thousand nice distinctions and subtle shades of meaning which dictionaries take no account of, as we notice in the use of a language in conversation or writing by a foreigner not thoroughly master of it. The history of a word, by showing the causes which determine its use, is in these cases a better guide to its employment than any definition; for definitions can only show its meaning at a particular time, or at most the series of its successive meanings, while its history may reveal the operations by which the succession was produced. The word "gentleman," for instance, to the correct employment of which a dictionary would be no guide, originally meant simply "a man born in a certain rank." From this it came by degrees to connote all such qualities or adventitious circumstances as were usually found to belong to persons of that rank. This consideration explains why in one of its vulgar acceptations it means "any one who lives without labour," in

another "without manual labour," and in its more elevated signification it has in every age referred to the conduct, character, habits, and outward appearance, in whomsoever found, which, according to the ideas of that age, belonged or were expected to belong to persons born and educated in a high social position.

It regularly happens that of two words, whose dictionary meanings are either the same or very slightly different, one will be the proper word to use in one set of circumstances, the other in another, while it is not possible to show how the habit of so employing them originally grew up. The accidental fact that one of the words was used and not the other on a particular occasion or in a particular social circle, proves to be sufficient to produce so strong an association between the word and some speciality of circumstances, that speakers abandon the use of it in any other case, so that the speciality soon becomes part of its signification. The tide of custom first drifts the word on the shore of a particular meaning, then retires and leaves it there.

SOME SPECIFIC CASES AND EXAMPLES

A case in point is the remarkable change which, in the English language at least, has taken place in the signification of the word "loyalty." The word originally meant in English, as it still means in the language from whence it came, "fair, open dealing, and fidelity to engagements;" in that sense the quality it expressed was part of the ideal chivalrous or knightly character. In England, the term became restricted to the single case of fidelity to the throne. The interval between a "loyal chevalier" and a "loyal subject" is certainly great. The word was, at some period, the favourite term at court to express fidelity to the oath of allegiance; until at length those who wished to speak of any other, and as it was probably deemed, inferior sort of fidelity, either did not venture to use so dignified a term, or found it convenient to employ some other in order to avoid being misunderstood.

SOCIOLINGUISTIC FACTORS

Cases are not unfrequent in which a circumstance, at first casually incorporated into the connotations of a word which originally had no reference to it, in time wholly supersedes the original meaning and becomes not merely part of the connotation, but the whole of it. This is exemplified in the word "pagan, *paganus*" – which originally, as its etymology imports, was equivalent

to "villager" – the inhabitant of a *pagus*, or village. At a particular era in the extension of Christianity over the Roman empire, the adherents of the old religion and the villagers, or country people, were nearly the same body of individuals, the inhabitants of the towns having been earliest converted. Like in our own days, and at all times, the greater activity of social intercourse renders them the earliest recipients of new opinions and modes, while old habits and prejudices linger longest among the country people, not to mention that the towns were more immediately under the direct influence of the Government, which at that time had embraced Christianity. From this casual coincidence, the word "*paganus*" carried with it, and began more and more steadily to suggest, the idea of a worshipper of the ancient divinities, until at length, it suggested that idea so forcibly that people who did not desire to suggest the concept avoided using the word. But when "*paganus*" had come to connote heathenism, the unimportant circumstance, with reference to the place of residence, was soon disregarded in the employment of the word. As there was seldom any occasion for making separate assertions respecting heathens who lived in the country, there was no need for a separate word to denote them, and "pagan" came not only to mean "heathen," but to mean that exclusively.

A case still more familiar to most readers is that of the word "villain" or "villein." In the Middle Ages, this term, as everybody knows, had a connotation as strictly defined as a word could have, being the proper legal designation for those persons who were the subjects of the less onerous forms of feudal bondage. The scorn of the semi-barbarous military aristocracy for their abject dependents rendered the act of likening any person to this class of people a mark of the greatest contumely; the same scorn led them to ascribe to the same people all kinds of hateful qualities, which doubtless, in the degrading situation in which they were held, were often not unjustly imputed to them. These circumstances combined to attach to the term "villain" ideas of crime and guilt, in so forcible a manner that the application of the epithet, even to those to whom it legally belonged, became an affront, and were abstained from whenever no affront was intended. From that time on, guilt was part of the connotation and soon became the whole of it, since speakers were not prompted by any urgent motive to continue making a distinction in their language between bad men of servile station and bad men of any other rank in life.

Two Mutually Exclusive Processes – Generalisation and Specialisation

These and similar instances in which the original signification of a term is totally lost – another and an entirely distinct meaning being first engrafted upon the former, and finally substituted for it – afford examples of the double movement which is always taking place in language: in fact, two counter-movements, one of Generalisation, by which words perpetually loose portions of their connotations and meaning by becoming more general acceptation; the other of Specialisation, by which other, or even these same words, continually take on fresh connotation, acquiring additional meaning, by being restricted in their employment to a part of the occasions on which they were properly used before. This double movement is of notable importance in the natural history of language.

Generalisation

It might seem unnecessary to dwell on the changes in the meaning of names which take place merely from their being used ignorantly, by persons who, not having properly mastered the received connotation of a word, apply it in a looser and wider sense than belongs to it. This, however, is a real source of alterations in language; for when a word, from being often employed in cases where one of the qualities which it connotes does not exist, ceases to suggest that quality with certainty, then even those who are under no mistake as to the proper meaning of the word prefer expressing that meaning in some other way, and leave the original word to its fate. The word "squire," as standing for the owner of a landed estate; "parson," as denoting not the rector of the parish, but clergymen in general; "artist," to denote only a painter or sculptor, are relevant cases in point. Such cases give a clear insight into the process of the degeneration of languages in periods of history when literary culture is suspended, and we are nowadays in danger of experiencing a similar "evil" through the superficial extension of the same culture.

Specialisation

While the more rapid growth of ideas than of names thus creates a perpetual necessity for making the same names serve, even if imperfectly, on a greater number of occasions, a counter-operation is going on, by which names become, on the contrary, restricted to fewer occasions, by taking on, as it were, additional connotations, from circumstances not originally in-

cluded in the meaning, but which have become connected with it in the minds by some accidental cause. We have seen above, in the words "pagan" and "villain," remarkable examples of the specialisation of the meaning of words from casual associations, as well as of the generalisation in new directions which often follows.

A generic term is always liable to become limited to a single species, or even individual, if people have occasions to think and speak of that individual or species much oftener than of anything else which is contained in the genus. Thus, by "cattle," a stage coachman will understand "horses" and "beasts," in the language of agriculturists, it stands for "oxen;" whereas "birds," with some sportsmen, for "partridges" only. The law of language which operates in these trivial instances is the very same as that which led the terms "*Theós*," "Deus," and "God" to be adopted from polytheism by Christianity to express the single object of its own adoration. Almost all the terminology of the Christian Church is made up of words originally used in a much more general acceptation. "*Ecclesia*," "assembly," "bishop," "episcopus," "overseer," "priest," "presbyter," "elder," "deacon," "*diaconus*," "administrator," "sacrament," a vow of allegiance, "*evangelium*," good tidings; and some words, such as "minister," are still used both in the general and in the limited sense. It would be interesting to trace the progress by which "author" came, in its most familiar sense, to signify a writer, and "*poíetes*," or "maker," a poet, without any further multiplication of examples to illustrate the changes which usage is continually making in the signification of terms.

The Negative / Dangerous Impact of "Pouchers"

So many persons, without anything deserving the name of education, have become writers by profession that written language may almost be said to be principally wielded by persons ignorant of the proper use of the instrument, and who are spoiling it more and more for those who understand it. Vulgarisms, which creep in nobody knows how, are daily depriving the English language of valuable modes of expressing thought. To take a present instance: the verb "to transpire" formerly conveyed very expressively its correct meaning, *viz*. "to become known through unnoticed channels" – to exhale, as it were, into publicity through invisible pores, like a vapour of gas disengaging itself. But of late a practice has commenced of employing this word, for the sake of finery, as a mere synonym of "to happen": "the events which have *transpired* in the Crimea" meaning the incidents of the war. This

vile specimen of bad English is already seen in the despatches of noblemen and viceroys – and the time is apparently not far distant when nobody will understand the word if used in its proper sense. In other cases, it is not the love of finery, but simple want of education which makes writers employ words in senses unknown to genuine English. The use of "aggravating" for "provoking" has crept into almost all newspapers, and into many books; and when the word is used in its proper sense, as when writers on criminal law speak of "aggravating" and "extenuating circumstances," its meaning, it is probable, is already misunderstood. It is a great error to think that these corruptions of language do no harm. Those who are struggling with the difficulty (and who know by experience how great it already is) of expressing oneself clearly and with precision find their resources continually narrowed by illiterate writers who seize and twist from its purpose some forms of speech which once served to convey briefly and compactly an unambiguous meaning.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF TRANSLATORS

A similar permanent deterioration in the language is in danger of being produced by the blunders of translators. The writers of telegrams and the foreign correspondents of newspapers have gone on so long translating "demander" by "to demand," without a suspicion that it means only "to ask" (the context generally showing that nothing else is meant), that English readers are gradually associating the English word "demand" with simple "asking," thus leaving the language without a term to express a demand in its proper sense. In like manner, "transaction," the French word for a compromise, is translated into the English word "transaction," while, curiously enough, the inverse change is taking place in France, where the word "compromis" has lately begun to be used for expressing the same idea. If this continues, the two countries will swap their phrases...

Independently, however, of the generalisation of names through their ignorant misuse, there is a tendency in the same direction, consistently with a perfect knowledge of their meaning, arising from the fact that the number of things known to us, and of which we feel a desire to speak, multiply faster than the names for them. Except on subjects for which a scientific terminology has been constructed, with which unscientific persons do not meddle, great difficulty is generally found in bringing a new name into use, and independently of that difficulty, it is natural to prefer giving to a new object a name which at least expresses its resemblance to something already known, since

by predicating of it a name entirely new we, at first, convey no information. In this manner, the name of a species often becomes the name of a genus, such as "salt," for example, or "oil," the former of which words originally denoted only the muriate of soda, the latter, as its etymology indicates, only olive oil, but which now denote large and diversified classes of substances resembling these in some of their qualities, and connote only those common qualities, instead of the whole of the distinctive properties of olive oil and sea salt. The words "glass" and "soap" are used by modern chemists in a similar manner, to denote genera of which the substances vulgarly so called are single species. And it often happens, like in those instances, that the term keeps its special signification in addition to its more general one, and becomes ambiguous, that is, two names instead of one.

Cultural Worldview

These changes, by which words in ordinary use become more and more generalised, and less and less expressive, take place in a still greater degree with the words which express the complicated phenomena of mind and society. Historians, travellers, and in general those who speak or write concerning moral and social phenomena with which they are not familiarly acquainted, are the great agents in this modification of language. The vocabulary of all unusually instructed as well as thinking persons, is, on such subjects, eminently scanty. They have a certain small set of words to which they are accustomed, which they employ to express phenomena the most heterogeneous, because they have never sufficiently analysed the facts to which those words correspond in their own country to have attached perfectly definite ideas to the words. The first English conquerors of Bengal, for example, carried with them the phrase "landed proprietor" into a country where the rights of individuals over the soil were extremely different in degree, and even in nature, from those recognised in England. Applying the term with all its English associations in such a state of things, to one who had only a limited right they gave an absolute right; from another, because he had not an absolute right, they took away all rights, drove whole classes of people to ruin and despair, filled the country with *banditti*, created a feeling that nothing was secure, and produced, with the best intentions, a disorganisation of society which had not been produced in that country by the most ruthless of its barbarian invaders. Yet the usage by persons capable of so gross a misapprehension determines the meaning of language; and thus, the words they

misuse grow in generality, until the instructed are obliged to acquiesce and to employ those words (first freeing them from vagueness by giving them a definite connotation) as generic terms, subdividing the genera into species.

SENSITISATION FOR LOGICIANS

As a practical rule, the logician, not being able to prevent such transformations, should submit to them with good grace when they are irrevocably effected, and if a definition is necessary, define the word according to its new meaning, retaining the former as a second signification, if it is needed, if there is any chance of being able to preserve it either in the language of philosophy or in common use. Logicians cannot *make* the meaning of any but scientific terms – that of all other words is made by the collective human race. But logicians can ascertain clearly what it is which, working obscurely, has guided the general mind to a particular employment of a name, and when they have found this, they can clothe it in such distinct and permanent terms, that people shall see the meaning which before they only felt, and shall not suffer it to be afterwards forgotten or misapprehended.

REMARK

Yet, it is very difficult for purists and other respecters of the sacred nature of language (meaning) to yield to the foregoing blandishment or sensitisation prescribed for logicians by Mill as far as the phenomenon is concerned. More so because it is hard to imagine to what extent the attitude (disrespect for genuine meaning) can be carried. One such deep misgiving is expressed by Ngala (2012) who, after enumerating the dangers of the disrespect of the meanings of words, makes the following concluding remark:

> this would make nonsense of the whole exercise or activity of language teaching which is a process of learning words and their meanings essentially and this is the principle on which lexicography – a sacred linguistic operation – is based.

Opposing the random or sudden shift in the meanings of words (language) would if not halt the trend, at least slow it considerably given the obstacle which this opposition would constitute, rather than allowing the phenomenon a smooth boulevard where it would unfold speedily.

Not Meaning What We Say and not Saying What We Mean

Saying what we do not mean, or meaning what we do not say, for instance, is a degenerate attitude on the part of language users tending to give the communicative language a very bleak future. Instances of the manifestation of this unfortunate attitude range from transitory or punctual everyday interactive activity or communication by language users to whole enshrined values or principles in language. On the former level, each and every user of language can confess to often using language to say or imply something else than what the language means, or meaning something different from what the language says. In fact, in most contexts, statistically speaking, language is deliberately misused or dishonestly used, partly as a sign of sophistication or elegance. On the latter level, entire conventions and teachings exist in language where the rule is not only to misuse language, as it were, but to hail the rationale or suitability of language use, not paying attention to what the words mean; in fact, it is prescribed and encouraged. On the former level, examples like the following, abound :

- A gas dealer or seller tells a client : "Sorry, I have no gas left." But the client, upon departing, catches the same dealer selling gas to someone else!
- An enterprise director posts a sign saying : "No job offers here please; applications are not accepted." But a job seeker discovers that, after informing his peer (job-seeker) that the enterprise has no job vacancies, his peer has been employed by the same enterprise!
- A boy confesses to a girl : "I love you!" But indulges in battering the girl shortly afterwards!
- A girl confesses to a boy ; "I love you!" But is soon caught having sex with another boy!
- A bride and bridegroom mutually confess love and fidelity : "For better, for worse!" But they soon divorce when hardship strikes!
- A political candidate tells the electorate: "I will bring you prosperity if you vote for me." But he is soon seen tabling a bill in Parliament to increase taxes and the prices of basic commodities!
- A doctor tells a patient : "This drug will cure you." But it causes anaphylactic shock in the patient leading to death!

- An examiner tells candidates: "Your performance was excellent." But later on the published results are catastrophic.
- A client tells a trader : "I will pay for the goods tomorrow." But owes the trader for ever!
- A ponce tells a prostitute : "I will give you money tomorrow morning." But he fails to do so!
- An advertiser tells dark and obese women: "This product will make you light and slim." But they remain dark and obese after using the product!
- A football organisation tells the players : "You shall be paid half a million for each match won." But they are not paid a franc after winning the match!

In fact, it is of course impossible to give an exhaustive list of instances where we use language with a different (wrong) meaning from what the language says or signifies.

On the latter level, it is rather unfortunate that one of the conventionalised values of language is to enshrine expressions whose meanings, to varying degrees, differ from what the words express. This is the case of figurative expressions. As a matter of fact, the latter represent a deliberately elaborated violation of meaning. The resulting arbitrariness represents a very risky steep slope leading away from the logical meanings of language expressions. Examples abound in language. Some of them in English are the following:

Figurative Expressions	Actual Meaning
A bad egg	A worthless or law-breaking person
A big fish in a small pond	A person who seems more important than he/she is because he/she operates in a small location
A blank cheque	Permission to do exactly what one wants.
A blue-stocking	An educated intellectual woman
Above someone's head	Too difficult to understand
A cat may look at a king	There is nothing to prevent an ordinary person from looking at someone important.

Figurative Expressions	Actual Meaning
A closed book	Something about which one knows nothing, something that one does not understand.
Across the board	Applying to everyone or to all cases
A feather in one's cap	Something of which one can be proud
A fish out of water	Ill at ease and unaccustomed to a situation
A hard nut to crack	A difficult problem or person to deal with
An open book	Something that is easily understood
A piece of cake	Something easy to do
As the crow flies	Measured in a straight line
A skeleton in the cupboard	A closely kept secret about some cause of shame.
A snake in the grass	A treacherous person
At the eleventh hour	At the last possible minute
A wet blanket	A dull person who makes other people feel depressed
A white elephant	Something which is useless and troublesome to look after
Behind one's back	Without the knowledge or permission of the person concerned
Big guns	The most important people in an organisation
To bite the dust	To die or cause to operate or function unsuccessfully
To carry the can	To accept blame or responsibility usually for something that someone else has done.
Go to the country	To hold a general election
To have a green eye	To be jealous
Hot air	Boasting; empty or meaningless words.

Figurative Expressions	Actual Meaning
In the same boat	In the same situation
To keep the wolf from the door	To prevent poverty and hunger
To know all the answers	To have all the information that is required to deal successfully with a situation.
To ring a bell	To bring back vague memories
To spill the beans	To reveal secret or confidential information
To take the biscuit	To be much worse than anything that has happened so far
To throw dust into someone's eyes	To attempt to confuse or deceive.
To burn the candle at both ends	To work and /or play during too many hours of the day.
To carry coals to Newcastle	To do something completely unnecessary, to take something to where there is already a great deal of it. (Refers to Newcastle in England, which was a large coal-mining center)
To have a bee in one's bonnet	To have an idea that one cannot stop thinking or talking about, to have an obsession.
To kick the bucket	To die
To let the cat out of the bag	To reveal something secret or confidential
To see the back of someone/something	To get rid of him/it, not to see him/it again.
To send to Coventry	Collectively to refuse to associate with somebody (from an incident in the English Civil War where Royalists captured in Birmingham were sent to the stronghold of Conventry)
To sit on the fence	To refuse to take sides in a dispute
To take the bull by the horns	To tackle something boldly
To take the cake	To be much worse that anything that has happened so far.

Figurative Expressions	Actual Meaning
To take the chair	To preside at a gathering or meeting

Three remarks can be made here: first, these expressions, though not having the logical meaning of the words, still make sense when taken literally – hence their misleading character; secondly, some of them taken literally yield their real meaning simply by interpretation, just by some reasoning. Then, considering the two remarks above, these expressions have other (extrinsic) meanings or are capable of expressing other additional equally useful meanings.

EXPERIMENT

As a French/English bilingual teacher and researcher on the two languages since 1988, I administered the above list of figurative expressions on my Third Year students reading for the Bilingual Degree in English and French of the University of Douala in 2013, with the instruction that they translate them into French. The finding was that the students, who were predominantly of French background, translated the logical or surface meanings of the expressions. To further guarantee the finding that the students all faced a fundamental pitfall of misunderstanding the figurative meanings of these expressions, I instructed the few students of English background to make sentences with the expressions and I discovered that these expressions had only extrinsic or literal meanings for them.

The consequence is that both non-natives and natives of a language alike face a very dangerous communication pitfall in the language, a situation further compounded for the learner who is deprived of logical touchstones to internalise and rely on as far as meaning in the given language is concerned. Furthermore, the experience is a dangerous betrayal and deviation from a sacred language pedagogy – words and their meanings.

That the students are on the verge of graduating from the university with the combined Bachelor's Degree in French and English only points to the disturbing fate of the general English-speaking public as far as understanding figurative expressions is concerned.

Enshrined Traditions in Language Pedagogy

The above phenomenon gains entrenchment as an entire subject or teaching on language is based on it. In summary, sociolinguistics teaches, indeed prescribes the very approach to utterances or communication where the tendency, on the part of the hearer or listener of language, is to disbelieve what words say and set out rather looking for some hidden or indeed opposite meaning in the name of a sacrosanct concept known as "context" of which fetish is generally made in the said subject. A close ally and teaching on this concept is the sub-discipline known as pragmatics which in summary means taking liberties with language or semantic rules. High premium is placed on these teachings and the education, communication, competence and the intelligence of language users is actually evaluated according to how far they can construe language or words away from their scientific meanings, and the idea of reference or connotation only provides an additional impulsion to the arbitrary approach to language meaning.

Consequent Vulnerability of English

The radiance of the English language worldwide not withstanding, the language's strength can be seen as its Achilles' heel. Ngala draws attention to this situation as follows:

> Giving in to centrifugal pressures from various sources the world over, the English language has finally become diversified into varieties or new Englishes. This is one of the consequences of the language's major assets, some of which are its expansive geographical spread and the tremendous number of its users […] these great assets of the English language might, however, not be totally enviable […] in the final analysis it seems that some of the strengths of the English language are the source of its internal weakness. (2012 2)

It is true, as generally upheld, that the English language undergoes change in all its compartments but, unfortunately, it seems that this is understood as a sort of poetic license users claim to take liberties with the rules of the language; moreover, there is no agreement at any one time or period as to what a word, for instance, should now mean for all the users in a harmonious manner so as not to take segments of these users unawares without their having the possibility to trace or keep abreast of changes. This results

not only in controversy and disagreement among users, but it actually results in communication breakdowns.

Some Measures to Keep Abreast of Global Changes

Users of the English language today enjoy considerable advantages from globalisation and one of its mainstays – the internet. We ought to avail ourselves fully of this instrument to keep abreast of changes in the language where all and sundry would obtain information equitably as to new words or the new meanings of old ones. A website could be created to serve this important purpose in order to avert the impending Tower of Babel in the language, guarantee its future, and pursue the reliance on the language as a reliable medium of shared comprehensible significance for the entire English speaking community.

Conclusion

The English language is an indispensable tool of communication for mankind, and it owes this role or importance to its ability to transmit meaning. The latter is invariably the content of the words of the language. An essential approach or process of language acquisition is the internalization by learners or users of the inseparable link between the words and what they stand for, or their meaning. It follows that meaning is the most important information borne by language: without it, the latter would be simply useless and needless, thereby leaving human society in a quandary.

Notwithstanding the foregoing reality, words are subjected to a dangerous process of giving up or losing their substance too soon and illogically. The loss consists in two processes, both of them inimical *viz* either having additional meanings grafted on them, or shedding their original meanings entirely to the advantage of new ones which are not only sudden but also bring about semantic controversy and communication breakdown among users.

It is, of course, agreed that language undergoes change, but the phenomenon seems to be misconstrued as a sort of poetic license users self arrogate to consider the word as an empty vessel which they fill with content or meaning following their whims and caprices.

Furthermore, there is an immanent process in the language which seems to allow users to say what they do not mean, on the one hand, and to mean what they do not say, on the other. Their attitude, which seems to stem

from the arbitrary dimension of language where entire traditions in it are pre-scribed and teach the asymmetrical correspondence between language and what it means or expresses, is an illegitimate extension or expansion of the controversial "poetic license" provided by the said traditions. The latter are implemented by momentous teachings embodied by sociolinguistics and sub-subjects like pragmatics and figurative expressions whose mastery seems to be the sign or proof of superiority, intelligence, elegance and elitism in the language.

The desirability potential of the above tradition is unfortunately the corol-lary and the mainstay of the vulnerability characteristic of the language as a shared meaning system, thereby greatly jeopardizing its future to the great detriment of mankind.

Globalisation and one of the greatest forces nurturing it, *viz* the internet, could be used to keep all and sundry abreast of the semantic evolution of the language so as to avoid controversy and the breakdown of communication among users the world over.

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