

SIGNIFICATION AND THE SEGMENTATION OF WORDS IN ENGLISH

Abstract

When faced with grammatical analysis especially as it relates to syntagmatic relations, learners are usually faced with the difficulty of knowing how words can exactly be divided into smaller grammatical segments. Some linguists have suggested some methodological procedures, which are both representative and significative in nature; these could lead to proper understanding of the behaviour of such English words. In this article, the writer observes that there are indeed signs and styles in the English language which could be explored for proper communication.

Introduction

My interest in the word 'morphology' developed a long time ago. I can trace this fondness back to my early school days learning the English Alphabets. Although I didn't know the word 'morphology' until I got to high school, I have not forgotten my interest in the letters A for apple, B for ball, C for cat, D for dog etc. At such an early age I devised ways of recalling or relating the alphabets with the sounds that go with it; not just the phonemes but the shape of the mouth as each letter is pronounced.

The English Language has no straight forward rules. This makes it a particular difficult task for learners of English as a second language. Learners are presented with a series of morphological patterns and problems, which arise when some of these words are not easily segmentable. Let us take a cursory look at the structure of English. Everyone who had to study the English Language must study its grammar. Grammar is traditionally sub-divided into two different but inter-related areas of study-morphology and syntax.

Morphology is the study of how words are formed out of smaller units called morphemes while Syntax is concerned with the ways in which words can be combined together to form phrases and sentences – the former is our major concern here. How do the learners identify the signals and the stylistic nature of these words? This brings us immediately to the study of signs-semiotics. Cobley (2001:10) sees semiotics as the study of how meaning occurs in languages and other forms of communication through the use of signs. "The conceptual tools of semiotics are signs and codes. Semiotics views signs as the basic building blocks of communication". Let us examine the following expressions:

1. The boy-s walk-ed slow-ly up the hill
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
2. The men stood up to welcome their president
 1 2(3) 4(5) 6 7 8 9(9b) 10

Men – has two morphemes the singular and the plural
(not easily segmented)

Stood – has two morphemes, the present and the past
(not easily segmented)

Their – has two morphemes, the definite article (the) and the possessive (their)

We may temporarily call this study morphsemiosis Sebeok (2001:16) observes that for proper understanding, one must be seen to be playing an active role in the generation of the meaning of the text.

Our understanding of the nature of language seems to show quite convincingly that language is not a habit structure, but that it has a kind of creative property based on abstract formal principles and operations of a complex kind. In semiotics the generation of the meanings of messages is regarded as an active process; active in the sense of being creative Saussure (2008:10). Standish (1991:81) also suggests that the teaching programme be designed in such a way as to give free play to those creative principles that humans bring to the process of language learning. It is when a learner is creative that he can observe the signification embedded in the words.

These words can only be segmented by noticing these signals.

In support of the need for learners to be creative, Chomsky also argues that language cannot simply be learned by imitation, that is, learning a language does not simply involve rote learning a list of sentences or words produced by others and repeating them in a parrot like fashion. According to Chomsky (1972:12)

The normal use of language is innovative in the sense that much of what we say in the course of normal language use is entirely new, not a repetition of anything that we have heard before and not even similar in pattern ...to sentences, word or discourse that we have heard in the past.

The behaviour of words

The novelty of most sentences or words which we produce or hear provides a strong argument against the claim made by behavioural psychologists that language learning is a purely imitative process which involves the acquisition of a set of linguistic habits. If we then agree that language acquisition is a creative process we must also recognize the fact that this creativity is made possible through the signs and styles (in English particularly), which are both representative and significative. Danesi (1994:12) refers to them as codes (the process of conveying meaning). What are codes? Could they be equated with signification? If the word **boy** is interpreted to mean a singular human, then the word **boys** has the **s** signaling pluralization. The **s** therefore acts as a code too with a meaning attached to it. In the same vein the word **cooked** has **ed** signaling past tense. Danesi suggested that the semiotician's priorities must be to study signification first (in word formation) and communication later. This will inevitably remove the ambiguities facing learners in word segmentation. Ferdinand de Saussure proposed a dualistic notion of signs relating the signifier to the form of the word uttered: **boy** and the signified **s** as the mental concept (pluralization); **ed** as the past tense signification of the word **cooked**. Chandler (2006:1) says: "we seem as a species to be driven by a desire **to make meaning**: above all, we are surely **Homo_significans** – meaning – makers. Distinctively, we make meanings through our creation and interpretation of signs. Indeed, according to Pierce "we think only in signs. Signs take the form of words, images etc. Allen (2002:18) brings this closer to the subject of discourse when he says: Within the

language system, everything depends on relations. No sign makes sense on its own but only in relation to other signs. Both signifier and signified are purely relationship entities. For example we can recognize that a compound noun such as **screwdriver** is not wholly arbitrary since it is a meaningful combination of two existing signs. And so, how do we guide learners to look out for those signs that exist in the language, which could be explored for proper communication?

Empirical studies have shown how some linguists have experimented with children to find out how they acquired grammatical inflections. Grammatical inflection is the same thing as word segmentation. In trying to deduce if the language learning was acquired by imitation, the students were presented with a set of inflected forms, which they had encountered previously. The experiment was trying to prove the point that they would only be able to form plurals of a noun which they had previously heard. The result proved otherwise. By contrast, another set of experiment focused on the issue of creativity in language learning. The learners were taught to notice that there are signs. They went further to formulate a generalization to the effect that the plural noun is formed by adding an -s ending and the past tense with the ending ed or d. But such generalizations lead to errors.

Error in generalization

A case in point are over-generalized past tense like **comed, goed, seed** (from the verb **see**) **buyed, bringed** frequently used by young children. Such forms could not have been learned by imitation of adult speech since they do not really occur in adult speech. Instead we hear **come, went, saw, brought, bought** etc. So, how is it that children produce such forms? The obvious answer is that on the basis of pairs such as **love/loved, close/closed, use/used** etc children create for themselves a generalization to the effect that "you form the past tense by adding +d or +ed to the stem of the verb and such generalization is applied also to irregular verbs". How do we reduce these errors. We could attempt to do this through signification Lyons (1998:181).

Solving the problem of word segmentation with semiotics

Earlier on, we had referred to semiotics as the study of signs and symbols. It also includes the study of how meaning is constructed and understood. This process of carrying meaning depends on the use of codes that may be the individual sounds or letters that humans use to form words. The importance of signs and signification as it relates to word segmentation has been recognized by linguists like Algirdas Julius Greimas (2006:10). He developed a structural version of semiotics by trying to shift the focus of discipline from signs to systems of signification. Sebeok (1991:12) also agrees that the field of semiotics involves the use of codes within a context. These codes are meant to generate meaning. When faced with grammatical analysis, especially as it relates to syntagmatic relations, the learners are often faced with the difficulty of knowing how exactly words can be divided into smaller grammatical segments. First, the learners need to know the theory of syntagmatic relationships. From this, they'll learn that any word made up of more than one morpheme has its constituents joined in a syntagmatic relationship, that is, the morphemes are syntagmatically related.

How are words syntagmatically related?

In the formation of utterances, a number of linguistic units are joined in a structural bond according to the rules of utterance formation. Such units are said to be in a syntagmatic relationship. Let us take a look (phonologically) at the words tell, day, and weak. The first is made up of three phonemes /t/ /e/ /l/, the second has two phonemes /d/ /ei/ while the third is made up of three phonemes. /w/ /I:/ /k/. These sounds that constitute each of the words are joined together in a structural bond to give the phonetic shape of the word. Words are also bonded together structurally at the morphological level.

Signification and segmentation

While making a reference to how words can be properly interpreted through segmentaton, Chandler (2004:10) says: "The meaning of a sign is not contained within it, but arises in its interpretation". With some words there is a clear segmentation. The English word **respectable** is a good example. This can be clearly segmented into two morphemes **respect** and **able**. Phonologically, they can be easily separated since they belong to separate syllables. Many words in the English language behave this way.

Yet there is another group of words that cannot be segmented as clearly as we did above. The word **redemption** has two morphemes. What is the base of the word? In this case, signification comes in.

The learner has to first of all, learn the signs and styles that are associated with these words. For example, in the word **redemption**, the learner must isolate the last morpheme and identify it as one of the common morphemes for forming nouns in the English language. There are other words, which have the same behaviour – **relation**, **education**, **examination** etc. As earlier mentioned, the word **redemption** can be easily segmented. There is a linguistic theory propounded by some linguists, which says that **redemp** is a bound alternant of the morpheme **redeem**. The form **redemp** – does not occur alone. It is meaningless on its own – this is a sign of signification. This is the only way to explain to learners what we mean when we say that **redemp** is a bound alternant of the morpheme **redeem**. We can attach some meaning to the latter and not the former. The word **retention** behaves the same way. Segmentation of such a word can only be done through signification too; that is, noting the fact that **reten** is the bound alternant of the morpheme **retain**. It does not occur alone except in a bound form as in the word **retention**. To reiterate what Chandler said earlier on, Guller (2002:12) explains that the signifier or representamen is the form in which the sign appears in the word whereas the sign is the whole meaningful ensemble.

There are a separate group of words which pose a different kind of problem in relation to segmentation and learners are further confused. Words such as **went**, **stood** are the past tense of **go** and **stand**. They cannot be segmented into their component morphemes. We know that the forms **went** and **stood** include the meaning of the forms **go** and **stand** which convey the idea of the past tense – but the past tense morpheme cannot be isolated from it in a linear fashion. Tomori (1997:31) observes that some morphemes must necessarily undergo some phonetic changes before combining with others. This was the case with **redeem** /ridi:m/ which changed to /ridem/ in **redemption**. It is the same rule (morpho phonemic rule) which applies in **stand/stood**.

Change of sound within a word is sometimes problematic. Such rules are hardly mastered by learners of English as a second language. Lyons (1981) observes that some of these words actually present problems of segmentation. In the word **man** or **men** there is at least some phonological as well as orthographical resemblances in them. The same applies to **mice** and **mouse**. At this point we must state that the phonological / orthographical resemblance could be referred to as the method of signification. These are the areas the learners should focus on while learning.

Conclusion

The primary duty of an instructor in a classroom situation is to impart knowledge. Where there are constraints, he/she tries to create some methodological procedures which could lead to a better understanding of the subject matter. Learning English language especially with syntagmatic relationship has increasingly become problematic with learners in second language situations. This article has attempted to explore some ways in which learners could identify those signs or codes that are contained in the words. They do perform a function, they are both representative and significative.

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