Speech Act Theory and Communication

Speech Act Theory and Communication:
A Univen Study

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CHAPTER ONE

FORM AND FUNCTION OF UTTERANCES

1.1 Introduction

The notion that language is used to create meaning is the central premise of this study. Creating linguistic meaning or achieving communication between language participants is a dynamic process involving units, such as the form, context and function of the utterance. Dell Hymes (1967, 1972b) coined the phrase 'communicative competence' to refer to the ability of interlocutors to convey and interpret messages, and to negotiate meaning interpersonally within a given context. James Stalker (1989: 182) defines communicative competence as that part of our language knowledge which enables us to choose the communicative system we wish to use, and, when that selected system is language, to connect the goals and contexts of the situation with the structures which we have available in our linguistic repertoire through functional choices at the pragmatic level. John Gumperz (1982: 209) also identifies communicative competence in interactional terms as 'the knowledge of linguistic and related communicative conventions that speakers must have to create and sustain conversational cooperation,' and thus involves both grammar and contextualization.

These two quotations underpin the point of discussion in this thesis, namely, that communication competence is the knowledge of both the structural and functional elements of a language. This study is an investigation into the communicative competence (Gumperz 1982; Stalker, 1989) of a particular group of English second language speakers, the Tshivendas. The argument of this research is that communicative competence involves the manipulation of the form, function and context of language. Hence the determination of Tshivenda English speakers' competence will rest upon an analysis of not only the structural form but also the function and context of their utterances. Such an approach is in accordance with functionalists' approach to language, that a syntactic

analysis of an utterance's form will only determine interlocutors' mental competence (Noam Chomsky, 1965), while an analysis which examines, in addition, the function and context of the utterance will present a more comprehensive picture of interlocutors' competence.

An analysis to determine the communicative competence of individuals can be done using a variety of approaches. A Speech Act/pragmatic approach, which is the approach to be followed in this study, focuses on the relationship between the linguistic form, the communicative functions which these forms are capable of serving, and the contexts or settings in which these linguistic forms can have those communicative functions (Charles Fillmore, 1981; Jenny Thomas, 1995).

Utterance analysis can be undertaken for any variety of purposes, to various degrees of 'delicacy'[1] (Berry, 1975: 177-196; Morley, 1985: 24) using a range of methods. For instance, sociolinguists usually use conversational analysis within an ethnographical paradigm to pinpoint how linguistic forms of language functions might change according to gender, age or the roles of speaker and hearer, while psycholinguists, using a pure grammatical analysis of the surface and deep structure of discourse, may look at the sequence of acquisition of communicative competence with its corresponding physical manifestations. In accordance with Fillmore (1981), this report employs Speech Act Theory, as an utterance analysis tool, to establish the connection between grammatical forms and language functions, in specific contexts.

The sections that follow introduce, for initial operational purposes, the notion of communicative competence and its components, namely, communication, language, context and meaning (function). The rationale for isolating these units/components of analysis rests on the fact that, in order to describe and analyse communicative competence, it is necessary to deal with discrete units of some kind, with communicative activities which have recognisable boundaries (Muriel Saville-Troike, 1982: 20). The three units suggested by Hymes (1972a) are: *event* (language and text), *situation* (context), and *act* (meaning). This same analytical format is exploited by this thesis. In other words, communicative competence centres on the premise that communication takes place when an individual uses a certain type of language, in specific contexts, to achieve certain meaning. The remainder of this chapter provides introductory comments

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[1] 'Delicacy', in this context, refers to analysing data according to the fineness of the distinctions in meaning which they represent.

on communicative competence and its unit of analysis; reasons for the formulation of the hypothesis; the objective; the practical procedures for collecting and analysing the data; and concludes by outlining what is discussed in each of the remaining five chapters.

1.1.2 Units of Analysis

1.1.2.1 Communicative Competence

Communicative competence involves knowing not only the language codes, but also what to say to whom, and how to say it appropriately, in any given situation. In other words, it comprises structural, social, cultural as well as functional knowledge that is required in verbal interactions. Language in this paradigm is not viewed as the property of an individual, but as one of the many shared codes or symbolic systems that members of a society use for their daily survival. This concept of communicative competence is consonant with a semiotic approach to language, which holds that language consists of arbitrary symbols whose semantic values have been agreed upon by its users. Known as the 'functional approach' to language, communicative competence is a reaction to the definition of language competence as more of a mental attribute (Chomsky, 1957, 1965, 1980).

1.1.2.2 Communication

That the main objective of any language is to communicate the wishes of its users, is an obvious fact which needs hardly any elaboration. The communication process involves a complex verbal behaviour where the participants have to accommodate a variety of interconnected factors before meaning can be generated. The principal meaning-generating tool of humans is their ability to signal their linguistic system or language. This linguistic system can be exploited for communication if the speakers succeed in making hearers aware of something (thoughts, opinions, facts, emotions and so on) which they were not aware of previously. Successful communication depends not only on the receivers' reception of the message and their appreciation of the fact that it is intended for them, but also upon hearers' recognising the senders' communicative intent and making an appropriate behavioural or linguistic response to it. However, for one to assume that if one can speak, then one can communicate, is a fallacy. In this thesis, communication is viewed as behaviour dependent on multiple variables, such as the nature of the language used, the context of

the utterance, as well as the function intended by the producer. Consideration of these variables is in addition to observance of general conversation maxims which govern natural language interactions (Paul Grice, 1975).

1.1.2.3 Language

There is no shortage of attempts to articulate the unique qualities of language. (See, for example, Jakobson [1956], Noam Chomsky [1972 and1975] and John Lyons [1977]). However, one is inclined to concur with H. Robins (1979: 9-4) who notes that language definitions 'tend to be trivial and uninformative, unless they presuppose…some general theory of language and of linguistic analysis'. In other words, to attempt a perspective-free or bias-neutral expose of language is of limited usefulness and of doubtful relevance to most analyses, unless underpinned by some theories. This comment is well illustrated in a clinically objective semantic-syntactic explanation or meaning of the word 'language'. Exploiting the usual semantic-syntactic procedures of establishing meaning: componential analysis, identifying different relationships among lexical items, derivational backtracking, application in contexts, and so on, all leave one with a distinct feeling of dissatisfaction and bewilderment, according to Robins (1979: 9-14).

1.1.2.3.1 Socio-pragmatic versus structural-mentalist notions of language

The notion of 'language' adopted in the domain of discourse, and by this study, falls into two main paradigms: socio-pragmatic versus structural-mentalist. These classifications provide divergent claims about language; about the procedures for its acquisition and use; about the system for its study, as well as about the criteria for demonstrating competence. These two divergent approaches to language underpin the differences between communicative competence and its stress on social use of language as articulated by Hymes (1967), and the Chomskyian concept (1965) with its high regard for language as a mental ability. Language within the mentalistic domain is observable from interlocutors' mastery of the structural codes of the grammar of the language and competence is evaluated by the abstract handling of these codes. Little latitude is made for idiosyncratic cultural-oriented utterances or speech events with a strong bias for socio-cultural considerations. On the other hand, a socio-cultural view of language meaning starts from a premise that the ultimate criteria for competence is the ability to communicate in the

various social situations, therefore language is a dynamic functional attribute of the users not a passive, abstract ability.

To recap the above discussion, formalists tend to regard language primarily as a mental phenomenon as opposed to language being a societal attribute of the functionalists approach. Formalists explain language properties as a mental inheritance of human beings as against the functional view that a language's features is derived from its use in the society which develop from the communities communicative needs and abilities. Above all structural-formal notion sees language as an autonomous system rather than being functionalist and tied to social considerations.

For the purpose of this study, the functional/social definition of language is adopted. More detailed explanation of what constitutes a 'language' and how competence in it is demonstrated form part of the discussion in Chapters Two and Three.

1.1.2.4 Context

The next component in meaning creation, that is context, serves as the 'binding agent' or the channel through which the language of an utterance creates the intention (function) of the utterance. The study of the context of an utterance is based on the notion that utterances perform different functions or meaning because of their background and circumstance. Austin (1962: 100) notes that words are to some extent to be "explained" by the context in which they are designed to be or actually have been spoken in a linguistic interchange.

The context of an utterance has to be factored into communication activities as theorists recognise that speaker intent, sentence meaning and hearer interpretation are not always the same. Often we utter sentences that mean more than or are even sometimes apparently differently from what we actually say, as in innuendoes or sarcastic and ironical comments. Yet listeners understand the additional or altered meaning and communication is achieved. Communication does take place in such situations because meaning is not created solely by linguistic codes, but also by the commonality of the context of the interlocutors. (An elaboration of 'context' appears in Chapters Two and Three).

1.1.2.5 Functions of Language

In the simplest sense, the word 'function' may be synonymous with the word 'use' or 'meaning'. People perform activities with their language: that is, they expect to achieve an objective in speaking, writing, listening and reading. Competence in language is not simply the mastery of forms of language but the mastery of forms in order to accomplish the communicative functions of language, such as, to apologise, to greet, to disagree, to accuse, to warn and so on. Mastery of structural regularities of language remains a very passive asset if speakers do not exploit these forms for the purpose of transmitting and receiving thoughts, ideas and feelings between speaker and hearer or writer and reader. While forms are the manifestations of language, functions are the realisation of those forms. Douglas Brown (1987: 202) elucidates:

> Communication may be regarded as a combination of 'acts' with a purpose and intent. Communication is not merely an event, something that happens: it is functional, purposive and designed to bring about some effect - some change, however subtle or unobservable - on the environment of hearers and speakers.

This research uses the term 'functions of language' in accordance with the theories of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), where functions are equated with the intention and meaning of a speaker. (Language functions are discussed in Chapter Three).

1.2 Formulation of the Hypothesis

Corder's seminal work on interlanguage (1967) has generated considerable investigation into the developmental stages in language competence by non-first language speakers. The status of the interlanguage of second language users, in terms of its physical structure, pragmatic data, meaning and social acceptability has metamorphosed since the concept was advanced into language studies. But whatever the status accorded this mid-stage language, most language acquisition theorists, such as Corder (1967), Heidi Dulay, Marina Burt and Stephen Krashen (1982); Brown (1987) and Selinker (1992), agree that such a language displays distinct qualities, reflective, *inter alia,* of the learners' unique linguistic background.

The function of language, be it the language of a native speaker or a second language user is, as stated earlier, to transmit speakers' wishes and intentions. Selecting a piece of language is governed by three main considerations: the function that the utterance is supposed to perform; the

physical structure of the utterance (morphemes and words); and the situation in which the utterance is to be utilised. That is to say, sentences are uttered for specific purposes, for example, to command, to request information, to question and to promise. And these verbal activities are recognised as such by the interlocutors, because of regulated procedures: syntactic, semantic and pragmatic. These regulations do not detract from a language's ability to be dynamic, productive, creative and open-ended. Speakers wanting to articulate any linguistic function may be as creative as they want. For example, one could construct an infinitely long list of ways of directly and indirectly requesting a hearer to shut the door:

- I want you to close the door.
- Can you close the door?
- Are you able by any chance to close the door?
- Would you close the door?
- Won't you close the door?
- Would you mind closing the door?
- You ought to close the door.
- Did you forget the door?
- How about a little less breeze?
- Now Johnny, what do big people do when they come in?
- Do us a favour with the door, love.

Levinson (1983: 264-265)

New situations arise, new objects have to be described so language users manipulate their linguistic resources to produce new expressions and sentences. Creativity is a salient feature of human language, but, conventions and regulations should also be known and applied by the users of a language if a similar meaning is to be created by all interlocutors in a verbal activity. So, however innovative or idiosyncratic a user may want to be, the basic objectives of communication, that is, transmitting the intention of the speaker, must not be compromised. Communication does not occur unless the same codes and signs are understood similarly by the users of a language, whether they are first or second language users. To achieve this degree of uniformity, certain formulaic rituals are carried out in the construction of the utterances. For example, to assert a fact or opinion one may use constructions which are declarative, negative or positive with a finite verb, while to request information or action, speakers may begin their utterances with an interrogative or invert the auxiliary with the subject. Users of the language usually adhere to these conventions to achieve a match between the form of their utterances and the function

they hope to achieve. Where language users lack proficiency in a target language (such as is the case with the sample group of Tshivenda mother-tongue speakers in this study) some language conventions pose problems for such non-native users. These problems, in turn, may become barriers to communication.

The Tshivendas originate from Venda, an area situated in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Tshivenda is one of the eleven official languages of South Africa. The people are known as Vhavenda (singular: Muvenda) and their language as Tshivenda or Luvenda. The term 'Tshivenda' is also used to refer to their culture. Historical accounts state that the Vhavenda immigrated into the area that later became known as Vendaland from Zimbabwe (Van Warmelo, 1932; Miti, 2004). For this study, the term 'Tshivenda' will be used for both the language and the people.

The region has a population of post-high school graduates whose English utterances are locale specific. Samples of these utterances are:

1. Stu: Please I have come for you for some assistance
   Lect: Oh?
   Stu: Yes, I need some pamphlets on Wuthering Heights
2. Lect: Is our appointment still on for Monday?
   Stu: I am seeing you.
3. Stu: What did she want? What happened when the lecturer called you.
   Stu: The lecturer said I was late but I refused/denied.
4. Lect: Would your group be able to help him (a newcomer to the class) with the work?
   Stu: I cannot do nothing for him.
5. Stu: He treats him like his own bloody child.

These non-sequential utterances merit some examination in terms of the relation between form and function of utterances, as is discussed in Speech Act Theory, (Austin, 1962). An analysis of samples 1-5 indicates that blemishes, both syntactic and semantic, may impact on the functions intended by the speakers of these utterances. In example 1, the phrase 'come for you' in the student's utterance would normally not be the chosen expression for a speaker seeking a favour, hence the juxtaposition of the two propositions, plus the courtesy subjunct 'please' may confuse a hearer, as is testified by the lecturer's response.   The student's initial

statement exhibits the structural features of a 'threat'. However, the shared experience and background information surrounding the interaction negates this interpretation, permitting the lecturer's uncharacteristic response to what may be seen as a 'threat'. It is obvious that an insertion of 'to' to replace the incorrect preposition 'for' would affect the structural status of the utterance and the interpretation by the hearer. Utterance 2 has the potential for multiple interpretation. Whether the student was confirming the appointment for a later date or for the immediate present, is not clear. In this instance, the inaccurate classification and semantic inappropriateness of the verb 'to see' have resulted in the blemished utterance. The function of this utterance, if it has a future reference, would be a promise, whereas if the student intends to see the lecturer immediately after the completion of the interaction then the statement is a mere assertion. The correct interpretation would only be possible if the lecturer seeks clarification with another question like: 'When?'

The semantic flaw in sample 3 arises because of the student's belief that the verbs 'to deny' and 'to refuse' are synonymous. Although these two words do share some semantic properties (for example, from a componential analysis of meaning) their syntactic-distribution patterns indicate otherwise. In addition, the student has also ignored the transitive nature of the verb 'to refuse', hence omitting the direct object, an indication that the verb poses some problem for the student. The verb 'to refute' would have captured the student's intention more appropriately. The one advantage with this utterance, despite these blemishes, is that the function (a representative asserting a negative state) has not been compromised, hence the opportunities for misinterpretation are minimal. In sample 4, the student's intention was that the group 'could not' assist as it already had the maximum number of members and not that they were 'unwilling' to do so. Part of the deviancy in this sample is due to the inclusion of two negative phrases next to each other. Although this type of sentence construction is colloquial, quite acceptable and unambiguous in certain linguistic circles, the context of its utterance does not permit such a clear-cut interpretation. Whether it was an emphatic negative assertion or a positive one is not clear without more interaction. Sample 5 was contributed by a student who wanted to describe the extremely humane treatment of Heathcliff in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. Despite demonstrating some awareness of English morphological processes (which has given us adjectives, such as 'skinny', 'dirty', 'touchy') the writer is unaware that the adjective from the noun 'blood' does not retain the same non-connotative meaning, hence its inappropriateness in this context.

Without the benefit of more exchange, the interpretations of this statement may vary: one may have a student offering a positive evaluation or praise of a character in a literary work or a student exasperated and critical of a character: two totally different speech acts.

Some of these utterances, therefore, are deviant with regard to their internal arrangements (their structure) as well as their inability to convey the speaker's intention accurately (their pragmatic domain), or with regard to both aspects. It is features such as these that make a closer study of utterances by English second language Tshivenda learners both interesting and urgent.

1.2.1   Hypothesis

In this thesis, the proposition is that the correlation of form and function implicit in the pragmatic approach of the Speech Act Theory may not always occur in the utterances of non-native speakers of English (for example, in the utterances of Tshivenda speakers of English) because of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic blemishes but that these blemishes may not always result in a violation of the intended meaning and function of the utterance.

1.3   Objective

The aim is to investigate the communicative competence of selected Tshivenda speakers, at tertiary level, by describing the form and function of a sample of their English utterances.

1.4 Theoretical Strategies

In linguistics there are, as mentioned earlier, many approaches to the description of discourse, these being united by the shared conviction that language is more than a sentence level phenomenon. Hence it is inaccurate for a language description to limit its scope to the properties of individual sentences. Analysis of discourse can be undertaken in various paradigms - interactional, ethnographic, pragmatic, and so on. This study, as noted earlier, combines two very similar approaches, namely, a Speech Act analysis within a pragmatic framework.

1.4.1 Speech Act Analyses and Pragmatics

A Speech Act analysis is based on the premise that utterances are made for specific functions and that a certain structural arrangement of constituents is necessary to articulate these functions. Just what constitutes pragmatics is an open question, but there seems to be some agreement that pragmatics is a system of rules which defines the relationship of meaning to the context in which it occurs, that is, it matches functions with particular language choices in a particular context. A pragmatic investigation is a combination of a syntactic/semantic examination and the study of meaning in relation to speech situations. Pragmatic analysis deals with utterance meaning rather than sentence meaning. A practical example of the differences in sentence and utterance meaning will serve to make the point.

A mother who received no reaction from her TV-addicted children when she came home loaded with groceries could say:

> 6. Oh don't mind me. Don't go to any bother on my account. I am just the person who slaves in this house!

And the average child would accurately interpret that utterance as a chastisement and not an invitation to continue sitting in front of the TV! Hence the combined meaning of the physical lexical constituents does not equal the utterance meaning. Other types of discourse analysis would not be able to capture this specialised use of language, except a functional-biased one, that is, a pragmatic one. Brown and Yule (1983: 1) note that

> The analysis of discourse is, necessarily, the analysis of language in use. As such, it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purpose or function which these forms are designed to serve in human affairs.

This suggests that an analysis of language output cannot be independent of its purpose and context. Central to this research, therefore, is an approach to language that acknowledges the instrumentality as well as the autonomy of any language system or analysis (Halliday, 1978: 36). A pragmatic description of language relies on exploring the form and the function of an utterance within a given situation. The importance of context in any language setting can be demonstrated by using the same example as given above. In another situation these same words of the mother could have the function of an invitation to a hesitant visitor.

Although an utterance's formal or structural regularities may also be
examined in such an exercise, a functional interpretation alerts an analyst
to the way patterns of talk are put to use in certain purposes, in particular
contexts. Pragmatics explains the communicative competence of the users
of the language in terms of how they manuoevre their linguistic
competence and their linguistic needs in society.

1.4.2   Issues to be investigated

The main issue to be investigated is:

- The status of Speech Act Theory and pragmatics in establishing
  communicative competence of second language users of English, such
  as the Tshivendas.

   Questions to be asked include:

- What are the concepts of: semiotics, language, communication, and
  discourse analysis?
- How does a hearer decipher the intention or meaning of an utterance?
  In other words, what factors influence a hearer's interpretation of an
  utterance or the creation of meaning?
- What does linguistic well-formedness entail? Or, what is the
  difference between a meaningful string of words and a meaningless
  one?
- Can Speech Act Theory be used as an analytical tool for non-standard,
  but meaningful utterances?

1.4.3   Data Collection and Analysis

An empirical study was carried out to determine the English
communicative competence of Tshivenda speakers by using the functional
approach of Speech Act Theory to describe the form and function of these
speakers' selected utterances. The process involved the collecting of sample
utterances of directives and representatives from post-matriculation[2]
learners; these sample utterances were then given to a control group
(hearers) to see whether they could interpret the intentions of the speakers.

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[2] Matriculation level in the South African education system is the 12th year of
formal schooling and is also the entry level qualification for tertiary education.

The data obtained was then interpreted in accordance with Speech Act principles. A detailed account of the methodology, including the procedure for the selection of samples and respondents; the presentation of the results; the analysing framework and the interpretation of the results form the content of Chapter Four.

1.5   Outline of Chapters

Chapter One articulates the central premise of the study, namely, that language is used to create meaning, that is, how conversation participants create meaning linguistically. The premise was researched through an investigation into the English communicative competence of the Tshivenda, by describing the form and function of their utterances. Included in this Chapter are brief operational comments on the recommended units for an investigation into language users' communicative competence; the rationale for and the articulation of the hypothesis; a description of the data collection procedure and the format for the rest of the thesis.

Chapters Two and Three provide a discussion of the theoretical support for the research. Chapter Two is organised around sub-topics or units suggested for the evaluation of communicative competence, namely, event (language and text), situation (context) and act (meaning). Once these components of communicative competence have been established, the thesis continues, in Chapter Three, to give an account of the Speech Act Theory and its role in classifying the functions of language. In Chapter Three the discussion also includes the origins of the theory, the classification and the components of direct and indirect speech acts and the principles which enable meaningful conversation to take place. Rival theories on communicative competence, classification of speech acts and the creation of meaning are all accommodated in these two chapters.

Chapter Four reports on the application of the Speech Act theory in evaluating the communicative competence of selected Tshivenda speakers of English. In the introductory sections, details of the methodology such as cross-cultural discourse analysis, the selection of samples, the background of the respondents, the compilation of the questionnaire and the interpretation criteria are provided. The chapter continues by interpreting, in accordance with Speech Act principles, the results obtained in the analysis. The chapter concludes with an identification of the factors which

had influenced the interlocutors in performing their roles in the communication process.

Chapter Five concludes the study by using the results to discuss the research questions articulated in Chapter One. The discussion, in addition to commenting on the ability of the Speech Act Theory to evaluate the communicative competence of a group of English second language users, like the Tshivendas, also examines the conclusions that can be drawn about the respondents and the quality of the samples. The chapter concludes with an overview of the results in relation to the hypothesis.

Chapter Six, the final chapter, offers some recommendations deemed appropriate from the results obtained. The suggestions are geared towards the Speech Act Theory in general and also the type of empirical study undertaken in this research. A section is also devoted to possible areas of further research, all aimed at obtaining a better understanding of meaning creation.

CHAPTER TWO

CREATION OF MEANING
AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

2.1 Introduction

This thesis, as stated in Chapter One, is an examination of the creation of meaning as exemplified by selected utterances of a group of second language speakers of English, the Tshivendas. The quality of any linguistic meaning is dependent on the level of interlocutors' communicative competence, hence, the rationale for discussing communicative competence and its related topics in this chapter.

The concept of 'meaning' or 'to mean' can be understood in a variety of ways, even when narrowed to the area of language studies. Lyons (1977: 1-4) has identified at least ten different ways that the words 'to mean' and 'meaning' can be used. Lyons (1977: 2) has gone on to note that although these different meanings are distinguishable they are not unrelated but just how they are related is difficult and controversial. The next section examines the notion of linguistic meaning since this research focuses on the creation of meaning during verbal interaction.

2.2 Meaning

There is an intrinsic connection between 'meaning' and 'communication', for before a series of words can be pronounced as language or communication they must embody meaning, for both the sender and the receiver. 'It is meaning which must be present for communication to occur', states Lamont Johnson <http//wings.buffalo.edu/philosophy/ FARBER/johnson.html>: 14 March, 2002). The meaning of an utterance enables speakers to use language to articulate their intentions such as a request, a statement of fact, an expression of praise, an apology and so on, and enables the hearer to interpret utterances as such. An utterance

therefore takes on meaning, first, when the speaker uses it to express a thought; and second, in the receptive act when hearers interpret the utterance and assign meaning to it from their own knowledge and experience. Between the speaker and the hearer, therefore, there is the negotiation of the meaning of an utterance within a communication event.

Communication is 'meaningful language' and an evaluation of people's communicative competence is, in fact, an examination of their meaning-creating potential. A common definition of 'linguistic meaning', by both the writer and the reader will, naturally, facilitate such an examination. The discussion in this section will, therefore, continue with a review of what 'meaning' is in linguistics and how it is created.

Meaning seems the most obvious feature of language and yet the most complex to study because of its subjective nature. It is obvious because it is what we use language for: to communicate with one another, to convey 'what we mean' effectively. But the steps in understanding the meaning of something said to us are so nebulous and so difficult to categorise that we have little conscious feel for the principles and knowledge which underlie our meaning-creating ability.

The entry point for my discussions of 'meaning' is the 'word' level. Words have meaning. This seems a simple enough or straightforward assertion and is frequently stated. However, words are not 'objects' that have properties of their own in the same way that concrete objects do:

> Words are relational entities. Which is to say, that words are composed of parts that are not integrated by any form or structure intrinsic to the word itself. The symbols (marks/sounds) which taken together constitute a word, make the word real insofar as it exists outside the mind.   All that air or paper can carry is the symbolic representation of the actual form which is understood within the mind and not the form itself (Lamont Johnson <http//wings.buffalo.edu/philosophy/FARBER/johnson.html> : 14 March, 2002).

The meaning of a word is simply projected onto it by the custodians of the language, in their roles as speakers and hearers, writers and readers:

> We cannot assume that there is any God-given meaningful connection between a word in a language and an object in the world. It cannot be the case that we know the meaning of the word *chair*, for example, because this label has some natural 'God-given' connection to the object you are sitting on …. Instead a more reasonable approach would lead us to see the

> word *chair* as a term which is arbitrary (that is, has no natural connection
> to the object), but which is conventionally used by English speakers when
> they wish to refer to that type of object that we sit on (Yule, 1985: 91)

This quotation from Yule (1985), a rephrasing of Plato's debate on 'the real' and 'the really real' is in line with the notion that the meaning of a word is only joined to the word in the mind of the users. Martin (1994: 20) quotes first Aristotle (*De Interpretatione* 16) as saying, 'Spoken words are the symbols of mental experiences' and then Locke (1689, bk. 2, chapter: 3) as noting that 'Words in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideals in the mind of him who uses them'. Meaningful communication occurs between participants, because there is, at least, some inter-subjective agreement as to what a particular word means, in a particular context.

> If one adopts a broad notion of meaning, it follows that words or even
> sentences, considered as abstract entities do not have meaning. It is
> communicative acts that have meaning because meaning only becomes
> attached to words or sentences through the actions of a speaker or hearer.
> (Johnson   <http//wings.buffalo.edu/philosophy/FARBER/johnson.html>:
> 14 March, 2002).

2.2.1 Linguistic Meaning

It is customary in linguistic philosophy to recognise three areas within language studies or semiotics. Montague (1968: 68) provides a useful articulation of these divisions as syntax, semantics and pragmatics - that may be characterised roughly as follows: syntax is concerned solely with the relations between linguistic expressions; semantics with relations between expressions and the objects to which they refer; and pragmatics with the relations among expressions, the objects to which they refer and the users or contexts of the use of the expressions.

A discussion of meaning, therefore, within a linguistic context, usually examines meaning as communicated by the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic values of an utterance. This three-fold classification goes back ultimately to Peirce (1931), but was first clearly drawn and made more familiar by Morris (1938: 6). There are slight terminological differences in the way the distinctions are drawn among authors. Carnap (1944: 9) also distinguishes the three branches by outlining what part of an analysis is relevant to each branch:

> If in an investigation, explicit reference is made to the speaker, or to put it in more general terms, to the user of the language, then we assign it to the field of pragmatics….If we abstract from the user of the language and analyze [*sic*] only the expressions and their designata, we are in the field of semantics. And if, finally, we abstract from the designata also and analyze [*sic*] only the relation between the expressions, we are in (logical) syntax.

Stalnaker (1972: 383) formulates the connection between syntax and semantics more simply but also extends the definition of pragmatics:

> Syntax studies sentences, semantics studies propositions. Pragmatics is the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed.

While these different authors have all contributed to streamlining the distinctions among the different branches of language study, Morris's (1946: 218-19) revised version 'interpretable within a behaviorally oriented semiotics' is the definition which has general acceptance:

> Pragmatics is that portion of semiotics which deals with the origin, uses, and effects of signs within the behavior in which they occur; semantics deals with the signification of signs in all modes of signifying; syntactics deals with combination of signs without regard for their specific signification or their relation to the behavior in which they occur.

Fillmore (1981:143) is only in partial agreement with these accepted divisions. He believes that although there are some justifications for classifying linguistic meaning under three distinct categories, whether this classification is desirable and should be rigidly applied in linguistic analysis is debatable.

> I assume three ways of looking at linguistic facts, whether the three are viewable as independent from each other or not, depends on whether we are thinking of classes of facts or explanation. In the broadest sense, I believe that syntactic, semantic and pragmatic FACTS can be distinguished from each other but I also believe that some syntactic facts require semantic and pragmatic explanations and that some semantic facts require pragmatic explanations. Put differently, interpreters sometimes use semantic and pragmatic information in making judgements about the syntactic structure of a sentence, and they sometimes use pragmatic facts in making semantic judgements.

This quotation is also an indication that the distinction between the different aspects of linguistic meaning is not as definite as one would like it to be. What seems not to be a problem is the syntactic meaning of

utterances. However, distinguishing between semantic and pragmatic meaning is an ongoing debate. Bach (1997: 3) also stresses the difficulty in assigning facts exclusively to the domain of either semantics or pragmatics:

> The distinction between semantics and pragmatics is easier to apply than to explain. Explaining it is complicated by the fact that many conflicting formulations have been proposed over the past sixty years. This might suggest that there is no one way of drawing the distinction and that how to draw it is merely a terminological question, a matter of arbitrary stipulation….Although it is generally clear what is at issue when people apply the distinction to specific linguistic phenomena, what is less clear, in some cases anyway, is whether a given phenomena is semantic or pragmatic, or both.

Although language theorists have continued to operate within the three-fold paradigm proposed by Morris (1946), there have been objectors, not only to the type of meaning apportioned to each section but also to the whole philosophical basis of the notion. For example, Petrofi (1976: 111) notes:

> Concerning the relation of "semantics" and "pragmatics" no such universal or general conception concerning the theory of language can be imagined where these two aspects can be handled separately. In other words the pragmatic aspect cannot be left out of consideration when setting up a theory of language, however it is impossible to handle it independently of the semantic aspect.

Mey (1993: 43) also questions the sharp demarcations particularly between semantic and pragmatic meanings. In his article "The Pragmatization of Semantics" (1999), Peregrin also criticises the sharp three-fold Carnapian distinctions from what he terms 'internal' and 'external' challenges. By internal he means developments within linguistics which extends Carnapian semantics far beyond its original boundaries to swallow up much of what originally counted as pragmatics. In his notions of external challenges, he questions Carnap's (1944) whole concept of language as a system of communication. Some of Peregrin's (1999) concerns had been raised earlier by Searle (1979b) when he challenges the notion that the literal meaning (semantic meaning) of an utterance can be construed as the meaning it has independent of any context whatsoever (when it has 'zero' context or 'null' context). Searle argues that for a large class of sentences there is no such thing as the zero or null context for the interpretation of sentences, for interlocutors understand an utterance only against a set of

contexts in which the utterance could be appropriately uttered. Since one of Morris's (1946) fundamental differences between semantics and pragmatics is the fact that pragmatics deals with language 'use' (which presupposes a role for context), such concerns must be unequivocally dealt with if the whole notion of a three-fold division is not to break down. Peregrin (1999) believes this has not been done, resulting in an absence of a sharp division between two aspects of linguistic meaning: semantic and pragmatic. In attempting to solve this problem recent developments in language are exploring ways in which semantics 'interfaces' with pragmatic knowledge in concrete contexts to determine utterance meaning. In the introduction to the book, *Semantics/Pragmatics Interface,* Turner (1999: 19) notes that:

> [The aim of the volume is] to take some steps to reduce the heat of some of these discussions and to begin to increase the light that might profitably be shed on some of the problems of interdigitating content and context.

Although discussions on how these three branches synchronise to create meaning may well be ongoing, one cannot refute the fact that competence in a language is not a single attribute. Deviance in an utterance is also possible at different levels or branches, as is illustrated by the following sentences:

   7. *Each one of the students possess a textbook.
   8. ? We really cannot afford to go to the bank.
   9. 'You're a bloody jackass, Mr MP', shouted the MP for Limpopo Province.

Sentence 7 is unacceptable at the structural level because of the non-observance of the grammatical rule of concord; sentence 8 is semantically unacceptable because of the lexical ambiguity arising from the word 'bank'; while sentence 9 is pragmatically offensive as such language is frowned upon during formal proceedings (though perhaps, acceptable, between intimate friends, in a particular context). How each of these deviancies was identified and classified is the source of the debate. Although Kachru (1979 and 1982) and his cohorts of the school of New Englishes might take exception to the classification of sentence 7 as deviant, general consensus would have it otherwise. As to whether different criteria were used or needed to be used to evaluate sentences 8 and 9 underpins the controversy surrounding the distinction between semantic and pragmatic meanings. Hopper and Traugott (1993: 68-69) make a similar point:

There is a vast literature on semantics and pragmatics but as yet very little consensus on exactly where the boundaries between the two areas lie, or even whether there are indeed boundaries. Nevertheless there is a pre-theoretical sense in which it is clear that a distinction needs to be made between the sentence (semantic) meaning of *Can you pass the salt?* (= 'Are you able/willing to pass the salt?'), the expected response to which would be *Yes or No*, and the utterance (pragmatic) meaning (= 'Please pass the salt'), the expected response to which is the non-linguistic action of passing the salt.

The fact that linguistic theory accepts that linguistic competence is not monotype and utterance status is describable using different norms, is a clear indication of a multifaceted approach to meaning, communication and language. The implication of this is the existence of three distinct linguistic branches all aimed at describing the nature of language. Although, as mentioned earlier, there are calls for linguistic theory to provide an integrated account, particularly for a semantic and pragmatic interface, one must admit that such segmentation of the branches of language predisposes it more readily to theoretical discussion. Analysts can, granted with some effort, identify and interrogate the boundaries (however nebulous) of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic meaning. That is only possible if one operates on the controversial assertions that observations that belong to syntax more or less without question, are observations about the structural organisation of sentences and the distribution properties of lexical items within grammatically defined contexts; semantics, by contrast, is concerned with linguistic forms and their value; while pragmatics combines the two properties within a context that is appropriate to the intention of the utterance.

The sections following will interrogate each of these types of linguistic meaning as outlined by Morris in his seminal text (1938) as the assumption in this investigation is that all three types of meanings need to be accounted for when examining the utterances of second language speakers of English. In other words, the sustained hypothesis in this study is that the creation or miscreation of meaning is possible on various levels or in different areas of language.

2.2.1.1 Syntactic Meaning

The term 'syntax' is from the Greek *syntaxis,* a gerund meaning 'arranging' or 'setting out together'. It refers to the branch of language study dealing with the way in which words are arranged to show

connections of meaning among the constituents of a sentence. Syntactic analysis of language, using its metalanguage, is usually limited to its objective description of sentences, in relation to the rules. Such an analysis enables language users to determine the status of an utterance, syntactically.

Over the years the expediency of this objective type of analysis has been questioned by the representation of language as 'social semiotics' (Halliday 1978: 1). The same concerns had triggered the insistence that proficiency in language should include communicative competence (Hymes, 1972b), a concept which directly challenged some of the ideas of Chomsky (1957, 1965). The notion of communicative competence advocates that a purely syntactic analysis of language is wholly inadequate in describing what goes on with language usage. While syntactic know-how is an indication that the speaker is familiar with the internal arrangements of the elements of a sentence, there is no indication that such competence extends to the use or application of these arrangements. Rather an inclusive picture of language competence is obtained by the exploration, as well, of the semantic and pragmatic properties of the utterance.

The following sections differentiate between 'semantic meaning' and 'pragmatic meaning' since the semantic and pragmatic properties of an utterance are, in fact, the variety of meanings possible in an utterance. Discussion of semantic and pragmatic meanings of natural language is, relatively speaking, more complicated than a syntactic one. As mentioned earlier, part of the complication is generated by the debate on the distinctions between the two types of meaning as well as on the relevance or the necessity of a semantic-pragmatic notion of meaning as sometimes a linguistic phenomenon is not straightforward semantic or pragmatic or both. Bach (1997) notes that the distinction has enabled analysts to separate strictly linguistic facts about utterances from those that involve the actions, intentions and inference of language users.

Despite these misgivings, it is an accepted notion in philosophy of language that the conventional or literal meaning of a sentence forms the focus of the study of semantics. The next section explains 'semantic meaning' by illustrating how distinct that area of language study is from the others.

2.2.1.2   Semantic Meaning

> In the tripartition of semiotics, the proper task of semantics is to study
> relations that exist between expressions in virtue of their linguistic
> meaning. Thus semantics is only concerned with literal utterances. Every
> semantic interpretation reduces speaker meaning to sentence meaning …
> (Daniel Vandereveken, 1990: 71).

Semantics, the second category in the three-part division of language, is
usually limited to the study of the meaning of linguistic expressions (as
opposed to, for example, their sound, spelling and use). Generally,
semantics is the study of meaning and linguistic semantics is the study of
meaning as expressed by words, phrases and sentences in conjunction with
their syntactic arrangement. Like many theorists, Katz (1977:14) defines
semantics by contrasting it with its nearest rival, pragmatics:

> [I] draw the theoretical line between semantic interpretation and pragmatic
> interpretation by taking the semantic component to properly represent only
> those aspects of meaning of the sentence that an ideal speaker-hearer of the
> language would know in an anonymous letter situation…where there is no
> clue whatever about the motive, circumstances of transmission, or any
> other factor relevant to understanding the sentence on the basis of its
> context of utterance.

Cann (1993:1) refines Katz's definition by noting that

> It is however, more usual within linguistics to interpret the term (i.e.
> semantics) more narrowly, as concerning the study of those aspects of
> meaning encoded in linguistic expressions that are independent of their use
> on particular occasions by particular individuals within a particular speech
> community. In other words, semantics is the study of meaning abstracted
> away from those aspects that are derived from the intentions of speakers,
> their psychological states and the socio-cultural aspects of the context in
> which the utterance was made.

In her book on semantics, Kempson (1988: 139) sums up one of the
main assumptions about the meaning of natural /ordinary language: that a
complete account of sentence meaning is given by recursively specifying
the truth conditions of the sentences in the language or, as Lewis (1972)
puts it: 'semantics = truth conditions'. Kempson (*ibid.*) elaborates that, in
this truth-conditional view of semantics, the central property of natural
languages is that we humans use language to communicate propositions:
information about the world around us. A specification of the propositional
content of a sentence is a specification of the minimal set of truth

conditions under which the particular proposition would be true. So on the view crudely expressed by the equation, semantics = truth conditions, it is assumed that the semantic content is exhausted by determining its propositional content. Kempson (*ibid.*) concludes this section by saying:

> It is uncontroversial that the meaning of a sentence is made up of the meaning of the words which it contains and their syntactic arrangement in that sentence. Accordingly, the semantic component of a grammar is, on this view, assumed to be a formal algorithm which assigns propositional contents to a sentence on the basis of the meaning of the expressions it contains and the syntactic configuration.

Hopper and Traugott (1993: 69) write in the same vein that

> Semantics is primarily concerned with meanings that are relatively stable out of context, typically arbitrary and analyzable in terms of the logical conditions under which they would be true.

Truth-conditional semantics is better understood if one realises that it was a reaction to the logical positivism of Russell's era (1905). Logical positivism is a philosophical system which maintains that the only meaningful statements are those that are analytical or can be tested empirically. Logical positivism therefore was principally concerned with the properties of language the truth or falsity of which can be established, hence the term 'truth-conditional semantics'. Truth-conditional semantics (also known as conventional or conceptual or literal meaning of utterances) therefore covers those basic, essential components of meaning which are conveyed by the literal use of a word or sentence without the benefit of context (Yule, 1996). Truth-conditional semantics is usually contrasted to the more 'flexible' meaning of utterances as used in specific speech settings, or within pragmatic domains. Van Dijk (1976: 69) captures this distinction, in this quotation:

> Taking semantics, firstly in its usual linguistic sense, a semantic theory is to explicate the "meaning" of phrases, sentences and texts e.g. in terms of semantic representation or in terms of semantic "interpretations" of lexico-syntactic sentence structure. Such semantics is different from a semantics trying to account for the meaning assigned to expressions in individual communication by speaker and hearer *(pragmatics)*, if these assigned "meanings" do not have some equivalence relation with the "general" meanings of expressions in the language, but are based on ad hoc features of situations.