

THE POTENTIAL MEANING OF LANGUAGE: RESTORATIVE PERSPECTIVES IN LINGUISTICS

MARIJA LIUDVIKA DRAZDAUSKIENĖ

Irrespective of the unfathomable amount of words in the field of language study today, it may not be extremely irresponsible to assume that the significant trends in the twentieth century linguistics which have had and embodied more or less accomplished conceptions of language will not exceed half a dozen. They are historical and comparative linguistics, descriptive linguistics, linguosemiotics and functional linguistics¹. Such definite areas of language study as diachronic linguistics, structuralism in all its guises, all kinds of grammar (traditional grammar, transgrammar, communicative grammar, etc.), contrastive linguistics and cross-language study, applied linguistics, pragmatics, even sociolinguistics (cf.: McDavid, 1981) and others are independent or only autonomous branches of the four major trends mentioned above (cf.: Anttila, 1972, esp. p. 22). Although their methods may be original, all the descendent trends generally owe to the major trends in linguistics for the principal conception of language.

As is the testimony of recent research in functional linguistics, it is the oldest of the four original trends, *viz.* historical linguistics (including traditional grammar), that appear to be the prospective fields of research again. It is not primarily because of their time-tested principles and universally accepted categories. It is rather because of the problems which had been conceived in them and received only tentative consideration before the boom of descriptive and transformational linguistics. Recent research singles out some forgotten areas as having scholarly value and human interest.

The way back to historical and traditional linguistics has been traced through the study of the function of fixed global units of meaning in modern English.

¹ Since the former two trends is common knowledge in linguistics, only the latter two may require explicit definitions in the present context. Linguosemiotics is a trend in linguistics which treats language as a system of signs and is, in principle, concerned with questions of meaning through the application of the general laws of sign systems to natural human languages (cf.: Ogden and Richards, 1923; Borzov, 1966; Akhmanova and Idzelski, 1979). Functional linguistics is a trend in linguistics which treats language as meaning potential and is concerned with the use of language, aiming to estimate how functions of language have shaped the system of language (Halliday, 1973, 1976).

This was only a partial question in a major research project investigating uses of English, which resulted in a discovery of the potential meaning of language (Drazdauskienė, 1983). The potential meaning of a language is historically and socioculturally inherited meaning latent in all fixed global units of that language, which becomes active in usage. As a historical category, the potential meaning of language promotes historical studies of concrete languages; it also appears contributive to the solution of the problem of synchrony and diachrony. Thus, the present paper defines and explains the concept of the potential meaning of language and related concepts for prospective research.

The research into uses of English was carried out traditionally analysing a large corpus of material from various fields of usage. Although the principal method was the semiotic method, the analysis focused on complete texts of spoken English, drama, prose and poetry and scholarly papers. In its approach it was a traditional investigation which strongly resorted to language studies of the beginning and the first half of the present century.

Having discovered a predominance of fixed global units of meaning in the phatic use of English, the author of the present paper focused on their meaning and use. It appeared that pure stereotypes (for instance: It's very kind of you. This is just a short note, etc.) concealed more significance than their literal meaning. For instance, the significance of 'This is just a short note...' or 'Thank you for your letter of...' becomes obvious when wrong openings in letters happen to be used. Paradoxically, even when not used, these units of meaning acquire the significance of letter openers which is their potential meaning. Another instance may be the wrong use of a title which, apart from its contextual dimensions, signifies the speaker's education, literacy and culture, in general.

The potential meaning of language may be reminiscent of connotation, but this would be a false association. Unless specifically defined (cf.: Арнольд и др., 1981, с. 4), connotation is, in principle, a term for evaluative aspects of meaning. It is because of its limited meaning that connotation was found fault with by Ogden and Richards in their famous work (Ogden and Richards, 1923, pp. 188–190). The term 'the potential meaning of language' has not been invented under the influence of "the demon of terminological invention". The potential meaning of a language means all possible aspects of latent meaning in the word or in any fixed global unit. It embraces connotation, too, merely as one aspect of the historical meaning of the unit and the word.

The fact that connotation is a limited term may be shown by considering the meaning of the word 'house'. When the meaning of the word 'house' is considered, it is usually explained through reference to the word 'block': a house is said to be only one kind of building for one family to live in. It is really embarrassing to treat this meaning of the word 'house' as its connotation. But it is quite relevantly be treated as the potential meaning of this

word. Thus the potential meaning of the linguistic unit is a neutral term to denote all historically relevant meaning which accompanies the unit.

As a general term, the potential meaning of a language is a cumulative continuum. It embraces all historical aspects of the meaning of the word and of all fixed global units (stereotypes, clichés, titles and forms of address, idioms and fixed word combinations). Although English words are exceptionally well defined and explained in countless dictionaries, historical aspects of meaning still require consideration even for the English word. That is why the word has been mentioned above as the first instance. Nor has this field of knowledge been entirely neglected (cf.: Barfield, 1954; Ellis, 1939; cf. also: Ларин, 1971; Будагов, 1971a; Fowler, 1927; Gowers, 1977).

It is true that in some cases the historical meaning of the English word may be confined to its history in this language and have only philological value. For instance, the fact that the word 'Manad' from Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' goes back to one of the several Greek words which were used to name a bacchant (cf.: Haigh, 1925, p. 7) is, in principle, only of philological interest. But it also indicates the author's education and the education tradition for Shelley's time, in general.

It will not be so when the potential meaning of the words 'hen' and 'style' is considered, and still less specifically for the phrases 'till second cocks' and 'to blow the horn' (Shakespeare). The potential meaning of these words and phrases will be closely connected with their denotation. But their potential meaning, if ignored, would make the speaker and the language much poorer. It should be explicated to accompany the primary meaning of these common words to expand their significance for the user and enlighten him, too.

Again, whatever the use of the specific historical meaning of the unit, what has been said applies only to the average user of the language. The potential meaning of the word and the fixed global unit is always indispensable in the language of poetry and politics. Thus the potential meaning of the unit is valuable and should be sought by the qualified user of the language.

The potential meaning of language is a general concept in theory. The concept of language as potential meaning accomplishes the conception of language in functional linguistics (see: p. 46, above) to state that language is not merely meaning potential but also potential meaning. In other words, language is not merely a system and a tool, but is also a historically conditioned system and concealed knowledge. So much for the general concept of potential meaning. In further uses language as potential meaning becomes a concrete concept because it is possible to maintain and investigate only the potential meaning of a concrete language. Denoting, in principle, the historical aspects of meaning of the word and of any fixed unit of meaning, the potential meaning of a language stimulates historical studies of the meaning of the respective units.

The concept of language as potential meaning also offers a tentative approach

in the solution of the problem of synchrony and diachrony which has been mentioned in a number of language studies (cf.: Будагов, 1971; Anttila, 1972). Having originated following Ferdinand de Saussure's famous work (Saussure, 1916), descriptive linguistics introduced and elaborated the concept of language system which is essential in language study and is indispensable even in historical comparative linguistics (cf.: Anttila, 1972, p. 3). As is common knowledge descriptive linguistics also proposed a rigid distinction of synchronic and diachronic planes in language study. Except historical comparative linguistics in which the two planes have remained naturally combined (cf.: Anttila, 1972, p. 3) this principal caused problems in empirical research. Taken as an absolute, it challenged the possibility of a purely synchronic interpretation of language facts. It also questioned the reliability of the category of relations in the treatment of the structural and the lexical in language. *In summa*, descriptive linguistics gave birth to a major problem of how far the separation of synchronic and diachronic planes might be taken and whether this separation should be maintained at all (see: Будагов, 1971, с. 25–63).

Approaching this problem with the concept of language as potential meaning in mind, it is possible to explain causes and issues of this situation. Prior to all else, the separation of the two planes must have simply been exerted. In this respect, two points may be of notice. First, not all the general principles of a theory should and may unconditionally be pin-pointed: not infrequently they can only orientate the scholar. Second, when a theoretical principle does not fully work in practice, it may simply mean that it should not be exerted any more and that the opposite approach may be required. The problem of the interdependence of synchronic and diachronic planes in language study may be approached along these lines to clarify the situation.

It cannot be argued that for technical reasons and up to a point synchronic and diachronic planes may be kept apart even in lexicology (cf.: Кушн, 1970, с. 40). However, if the diachronic plane is ignored continuously or absolutely, the synchronic plane alone leaves language studies barren of human interest and value. Indeed, linguistics has for long put up with purely descriptive works even in the field of usage. A purely synchronic approach which has rendered enormous amounts of purely descriptive, extremely partial and misplaced works in linguistics does seem to be inadequate in empirical research. It is only until the idea of a complete representation of language as a system on any level holds the focus of attention the synchronic plane is sufficient. Indeed, nobody could reasonably argue the possibility of a realistic representation of language as a system synchronically. It is the work on the synchronic plane that permits, for instance, a summary system "of all sounds made by human articulating organs" which is required in historical comparative linguistics to be worked out (see: Anttila, 1972, p. 8).

Language as a system is feasible descriptively. More than that, language as a system is perhaps basic in any linguistic conception. It has been basic

even in functional linguistics in which all units and relations have been interpreted in terms of meaning. But the representation of language as a system is terminal irrespective of the framework chosen. A continuity in theory and practice may be provided either by a very profound conception of language or such a system which presupposes causal relations among its elements. The diachronic factor in a conception of language completes both of these conditions. The conception of language as meaning potential and as potential meaning incorporates both the synchronic and diachronic categories, whilst, interpreted in terms of meaning, elements of the system presuppose causal relations of their own.

It is essential at this point to realize the role the conception of language plays in the development of causal relations within the functional framework. Until the focus is on the system like in Professor Halliday's works (Halliday, 1973, 1976, 1978) sociocultural aspects of meaning come to be considered without the desired continuity (cf. Professor Halliday's "break through to literacy"). Irrespective of the refinement in the presentation of the elements of the system (cf.: rank, exponence and delicacy), the functional theory of language lacks the continuity of causal relations. It is only natural because the major goal in it is the explanation of how the system of language has been shaped by the functions language has developed to serve (see: Halliday, 1973, p. 35; 1976, p. 29). The function of language thus is the initial and the terminal category of meaning.

Causal relations are naturally implied in the functional theory of language which treats the use of language as the principal category of meaning. The use of language is not only a dynamic category but also the category which integrates causes of verbal use. Thus potential meaning is an essential accomplishment in the conception of language as meaning potential. It lays a stress on how meaning in language developed and how it handicaps the system due to its historicity. Finally, it is simpler to describe the system and its relations than to estimate the historical development of meaning. Hence the necessity to study historical aspects of meaning in all fixed global units of language including the word as the ultimate unit of meaning.

The conception of language as meaning potential and as potential meaning is a complete conception of language to date. It does not only explain the complexity of verbal relations but also calls for relevant research in a motivated way. The subtler the knowledge of all fixed units of a language the more delicate and exact communication may be, although its attainment might surely be more difficult.

Within this conception of language both synchronic and diachronic planes are combined into one: the synchronic plane (Halliday, 1973, 1976) provides an explanation of the instrumental aspects of language, whilst the diachronic plane introduces (Drazdauskienė, 1983) the restrictive factor in language use.

That is why this conception of language is complete and realistic, although complicated and requiring further development.

The explained conception of language directs further research into the historical aspects of meaning through a resort to the existing traditional studies (see p. 48, above). Such studies will necessarily require a review history of a question. It will be a condition *sine qua non* for all works within the functional-traditional framework. This condition alone will reduce purely descriptive works which often neglect even a review introduction. Furthermore, generalizing purely methodologically, the principal criteria for the work of the beginner might have to be a statement of the conception of language pursued, his framework and a review history of the question. Provided these conditions, no beginner's work will ever be misplaced or descriptive for the sake of description. This is how an integration causal of the diachronic factor may complete a language conception and clarify the methodology of work in language study today.

POTENCIALIOJI KALBOS REIKŠMĖ:
RESTAURACINĖS PERSPEKTYVOS KALBOTYROJE

M. L. D R A Z D A U S K I E N Ė

Reziumė

Straipsnyje aiškinama bazinė kalbos koncepcija funkcinėje kalbotyroje, kurioje kalba suprantama kaip reikšmės potencialas ir kaip potencialioji reikšmė. Kalba kaip reikšmės potencialas apima tikrai kalbos kaip sistemos sąvoką. Šią sampratą autorė papildo kalbos kaip potencialiosios reikšmės sąvoka, be to, straipsnyje kalba studijuojama naudojantis sinchronijos ir diachronijos metodais. Autorės koncepcija pagrįsta priežastiniais kalbos elementų santykiais ir atkreipia dėmesį, kad kalbotyroje derėtų aiškinti istorinius reikšmės aspektus. Toks kalbos koncepcijos aiškinimas gali būti pritaikytas metodologiškai: jis nubrėžia būtinas sąlygas pradedančiųjų kalbininkų darbams.

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Vilniaus V. Kapsuko universitetas
Anglų filologijos katedra

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