

## THE POTENTIAL MEANING OF LANGUAGE AND ITS CONTENTS<sup>1</sup>

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In a study of language with significant resort to functional linguistics it was discovered that a language with a long sociocultural tradition possesses potential meaning which may be defined as historically and socioculturally inherited meaning latent in fixed macro units, which becomes activated in usage even when the concrete fixed macro units of meaning are not used in contexts in which they customarily occur. For example, when a letter in correspondence in English opens with the following statement: "I cannot say how sorry I am for having delayed this letter for such a long time", it becomes obvious that the writer is not familiar with the standard stereotypes in English letter writing, while they are required, and the necessity of such statements and of the straightforwardness of their meaning is felt even in their absence.

If the potential meaning of language as an entity *per se* is to stand in harmony with the profoundest modern concept of language as meaning potential which presupposes the restrictive factor in usage in its own right [Halliday, 1973, 1976, 1978], it has to be interpreted in terms relevant to the theory of functional linguistics. So far only the development of the potential meaning of English has been explained [Drazdauskienė, 1990], while its contents has not been summarized. Outlining sources of its development, the potential meaning of English was discovered in such fixed macro units of meaning as formulas, forms of address, stereotypes, response utterances and clichés. It was found related to extralinguistic concepts of history, society, culture, literary heritage and linguistic tradition. For example, if the form of address 'Mister Ambassador' is used addressing a British Ambassador, the form of address itself confirms that the speaker complies with the American style of address and ignores or is ignorant of the social structure of Britain and the respective form of address. The form of address chosen potentially can and in this case does imply, in part, the social structure of both countries and the respective sociocultural traditions of usage. Unlike the basic stock words, a single fixed macro unit can and does manifest its

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meaning overtly and, owing to the degree of its appropriateness, indicates the sociocultural tradition of usage of a society.

If somebody uses clichés, for example, 'blissful ignorance' or 'a thing of beauty is a joy for ever', he not only demonstrates his wit and taste or a lack of taste, but also confirms his actual or vicarious familiarity with the heritage of British literature. In the case of clichés the implications are less obvious than those in formulas or in forms of address, but nevertheless certain. It is just that the user of a cliché may not in fact know the actual source of its origin, and in such cases the cliché is likely to manifest the user's ignorance. As a macro unit of meaning, the cliché thus has a powerful potential to indicate either the user's knowledge or ignorance, both of which may be perceived quite clearly at its use.

The potential meaning of language was stated to exist not only in the fixed macro units of meaning, but also in the word which is the ultimate unit of meaning. Furthermore, potential meaning is also a property of all standardized texts of fixed layouts, for example, of letters in correspondence, of documents having fixed formats and of different literary texts of definite classical genres such as the sonnet, the ballad, the ode, etc. One of the aims of this paper is to consider the potential meaning of the word to some length. Unlike the potential meaning of the fixed macro units in which it is always considerable, the potential meaning of English words differs. Thus polysemic English words of the basic word stock have virtually no potential meaning. Words like 'box', 'rise', 'catch', 'part' and others of this kind have not got even the expository potential to indicate the reliability of their use. For example, if the speaker says 'These books pack easily' or 'He threw the ball up and caught it', the listener will not know if these statements are right or wrong nor anything about the speaker, because these words have no other but their conventional meaning. None of the words in the above sentences has the potential to expose the correctness of the speaker's choice of the words.

But there are words of a different kind in English, which are not as obscure as these in their potential meaning. For example, no speaker can use 'pecuniary' as in 'work without pecuniary reward' or 'paramount' as in 'of paramount importance', or 'lineament' as in 'the lineaments of a Mongol face' and get away with them in an informal conversation. These words have the potential to indicate by themselves the aptness of the speaker's choice. This is a property of all words marked in dictionaries formal, colloquial, archaic, old use, poetic and so on. These indices, known as style labels, mark in fact part of the meaning of the words and especially their

potentiality to imply respective contextual meaning. For example, if the words 'cot', 'palfrey', 'to burgeon' and others of the same kind are used in poetic contexts, their contextual meaning agrees with the context of their use and they are not marked. But if these words are used in routine, they mark the desirability of poetic contexts and stand out themselves as inappropriate. Similarly, if the words 'pal', 'chap', 'to peeve' and others of the same category are used in formal contexts, they mark their own inappropriateness by virtue of the sense 'colloquial' which is intrinsic in their meaning. So the words with marked contextual meaning have the potentiality to indicate appropriateness or inappropriateness of their use. Like extralinguistic categories of meaning in the fixed macro units, the contextual meaning of the word is only potential because it becomes activated only when the word is inappropriately used. Otherwise this meaning is not obvious.

Categories of the description of the potential meaning of the word are in principle extralinguistic categories of contextual meaning such as formal, informal, colloquial, poetic, archaic, old use and others. These categories agree with the categories in the potential meaning of the fixed macro units. Stereotypes, response utterances, partly formulas and clichés were found to be marked by extralinguistic categories of meaning, such as contexts of their use. So the potential meaning of the word may be said to be additive to the potential meaning of the fixed macro units in English.

The contextual meaning which has just been referred to as the potential meaning of the word does not exhaust the potentialities of English words. There is one more category of meaning in the word, which may be called emotive-evaluative meaning. Here belong words with contemptuous and derogatory meaning such as 'pelf', 'brat', 'pack' as in 'a pack of liars', 'blackamoor' or 'barn' as in 'What a barn of a house!' Words with the senses of emotive-evaluative meaning differ greatly from words with contextual meaning. In usage emotive-evaluative meaning may be only confusing, whereas contextual meaning is plainly indicative of appropriateness. So that contextual meaning is stronger because it exists as an independent sense in the meaning of respective words, whereas emotive-evaluative meaning, even when it is a separate sense, is related to the principal meaning of the word. Cf., for example, humour in the meaning of 'a paw' used to mean 'a hand'.

As the definitions of words in contemporary Oxford English dictionaries indicate, figurative use of some of the words is also close to emotive-evaluative meaning. For example, 'cat' used to mean figuratively an excitable woman or 'to cement' to mean 'to strengthen, unite firmly' or 'peck' to mean 'a lot' as in 'a peck of troubles'. Like in the case of emotive-evaluative

ative meaning of the English word, the concept of potential meaning does not extend over figurative uses of the word, because these uses are related to the principal meaning of the word and do not indicate the acceptability of the word's choice in usage.

It is customary to use roughly the term 'connotation'<sup>2</sup> to refer partly to what has been called the potential meaning of the word, as well as to the emotive-evaluative meaning and figurative use of the word. In the context of this consideration the nature and range of the word's connotation remains to be questioned. Connotation is usually defined as the additional or peripheral meaning of the word. This definition would be very much in line with what we described as emotive-evaluative meaning of the word together with its figurative uses, but not with the word's contextual meaning. The term 'connotation' cannot cover the contextual meaning of the word because it stands out as one of the principal and decisive senses in its meaning. Since the term 'connotation' was found to be "a misleading and dangerous term" by famous scholars [Ogden and Richards, 1923, 92] and since it remains indiscriminately applied to the differentiating and exposing meaning of the word, this term may be recommended for the use in interpretation rather than description, while the potential meaning of language, which embraces virtual and semantically decisive aspects of the basic and supplementary extralinguistic meaning of verbal units, may apply for description.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf.: "Connotative meaning is the communicative value an expression has by virtue of what it *refers to*, over and above its purely conceptual content. To a large extent, the notion of 'reference' overlaps with conceptual meaning. /.../ A second fact which indicates that connotative meaning is peripheral compared with conceptual meaning is that connotations are relatively unstable: that is, they vary considerably, ..., according to culture, historical period, and the experience of the individual. /.../ Thirdly, connotative meaning is indeterminate and open-ended in a sense in which conceptual meaning is not. Connotative meaning is open-ended in the same way as our knowledge and beliefs about the universe are open-ended: any characteristic of the referent, identified subjectively or objectively, may contribute to the connotative meaning of the expression which denotes it." [Leech, 1976, 14-15]. Connotation: the special shades of meaning (based on emotional and other factors) that a form has for its individual users (the evil connotation of *profits* for labor leaders, as against its favorable connotation for management executives). See also 'Semantic potentialities: (virtualités) All the possible meanings of a sign, realized only separately and individually in a context (the various meanings of *house* in "he is in the house", "the House of Hapsburg", "he represents a business house", etc.) (Martinet), [Pei, 1969, 50, 242-243].

However, as is obvious from the works quoted, connotation and even semantic potentialities mean individually associated meaning to the authors. What we call the potential meaning of the unit is the extralinguistic meaning, primarily contextual, which the unit can potentially manifest objectively when and if its use is inappropriate.

This consideration was based on a discovery of potential meaning in the English word, which was much in line with the potential meaning of the fixed macro units. In both cases potential meaning comprised extralinguistic categories such as contexts of usage, the sociolinguistic tradition of usage, culture, attitude of the user and others and could be described in identical terms. The potential meaning of English now may be defined to include into its contents not only historical and sociocultural categories of meaning, which derive from such fixed macro units as forms of address, formulas, response utterances and, partly, clichés, but also socio-linguistic categories of meaning, which derive from such fixed macro units of meaning as formulas, stereotypes and, partly, clichés, and from the word. The potential meaning of the word now has been interpreted as an integrated part of the potential meaning of language, described and treated in the same terms as the meaning of the fixed macro units, which are acceptable in sociosemiotic description of language. The contents of the potential meaning of language, its nature and character is identical in the fixed macro units of meaning and in the word. It consists of socio-historical, -cultural and -linguistic notions and contextual features and may be credibly described in respective categories.

Style labels which mark virtual and semantically decisive aspects of the meaning of the word are very useful indices and apply in lexicography. In a theoretical description of the potential meaning of the word the point is to single out extralinguistically relevant aspects of meaning such as contextual or attitudinal markedness which signify the sociolinguistic tradition and culture of society and which can objectively limit the use of the word. In such interpretation these aspects of meaning are intrinsic in the word rather than additive as the style labels would imply. They are also basic rather than peripheral as the term 'connotation', if used, would designate. Contextual and attitudinal markedness of the word is its historically and socioculturally inherited meaning, latent until the word is appropriately used. This meaning is potential because only the word's inappropriate use can activate it.

Similarly, the potential meaning of the fixed formats of texts and of literary genres may be interpreted and showed contributing to the potential meaning of English. The use of fixed formats in such texts in English as the letter in correspondence, the research paper, the monograph and various documents mean conformity with the culturally accepted standards and correctness in general. Moreover, a significant feature or a single stereotype from the fixed format of papers in English can evoke associations with the whole text even when the text is absent, while failure to conform with the fixed formats in the texts themselves imply a lack of culture or literacy. Thus

the fixed formats of texts and even their constituents can potentially signify the texts themselves and the user's culture and contribute to the potential meaning of English.

Literary genres identified by the fixed formats of texts such as the sonnet, the ballad, the essay and other contain in themselves respective meaning. For instance, the form of the sonnet, among other things, means gallantry, while the essay form means a laconic and vigorous expression what in actual fact it is – a short, often incomplete and usually witty writing in prose. This meaning can potentially be rendered by the very form of the text, which implies an individual, lively and sharing writing on any subject. The contents of the potential meaning of the texts of fixed formats and genres in English in summary would include a sociolinguistic tradition of usage, culture and sociocultural heritage as these are respectively reflected. One's usage in accordance with the fixed formate and genres means sharing in culture, while one's failure to comply with them means illiteracy or alien culture, which the presence or the absence of the formats can potentially imply.

Generalizing it may be said that the potential meaning of language abides in the word, the fixed macro units of meaning and in the fixed formats of texts including genre forms. It instils conventions of usage by the potentiality of all the mentioned units, formats and forms of texts to expose the user's literacy, correctness and culture in general. The contents of the potential meaning of language consists of contextual, attitudinal, conventional and traditional constituents of meaning in the fixed macro units, the word, and in the fixed formats of texts, which are related to historical, sociocultural and sociolinguistic heritage of language and society.

## POTENCIALIOJI KALBOS REIKŠMĖ IR JOS TURINYS

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### Re z i u m ė

Tam, kad potencialioji kalbos reikšmė derėtų su fundamentaliausia šiuolaikine kalbos koncepcija, bylojančia, kad kalba yra reikšmės potencialas, ją reikia atitinkamai interpretuoti ir aprašyti funkcinės kalbos teorijos terminais. Iki šiol tebuvo paaiškintas potencialiosios kalbos reikšmės išsivystymas, o jos turinys nebuvo reziumuotas. Buvo tariama, kad potencialioji kalbos reikšmė egzistuoja ne tik stabiliuose makro vienetuose, bet ir žodyje, tik šioje sferoje ji nebuvo aprašyta. Iš dalies šis straipsnis yra skiriamas potencialiosios kalbos reikšmės žodyje ir standartinių formų tekstuose aprašymui.

Analizuojant žodžių apibrėžimus šiuolaikiniuose Oksfordo Žodynuose, buvo pastebėta, kad stilistinė žodžio vertė yra dviejų rūšių – emotyvinė-vertinamoji ir kontekstinė.

Nediskriminuotai vartojant terminus, visos šios ir dargi figuratyvinės žodžio reikšmės vadinamos konotacija. Bet konotacija – tai periferinė žodžio reikšmė, susijusi su individualiomis asociacijom, o kontekstinė ir vertinamoji reikšmės yra tolygios pagrindinei žodžio reikšmei ir potencialiai gali objektyviai liudyti žodžio vartojimo tikslumą ir kalbančiojo raštingumą, korektiškumą ir kultūrą apskritai. Remiantis žymių autorių pastabomis dėl termino 'konotacija', yra siūloma šį terminą palikti interpretavimo praktikai, o ekstralingvistinius reikšmės aspektus, tokius kaip kontekstinės, vertinamosios ir tradicinės reikšmės, kurios gali objektyviai identifiikuoti kalbą ir kalbantįjį, vadinti potencialiąja kalbos reikšme. Potencialiosios kalbos reikšmės turinį sudaro kontekstinės, vertinamosios, konvencionalios ir tradicinės reikšmės, susiję su istoriniu, sociokultūriniu ir sociolingvistiniu kalbos ir visuomenės paveldu.

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