



Meaning in Linguistic Theories: From Semiotics to Semantic Fields

Yacine BAGHORA

University of Mohamed Elbachir Elbrahimi, Bordj Bou Arreridj,

Laboratory of Contemporary Linguistic and Literary Studies, Algeria,

yacine.baghora@univ-bba.dz

Elbachir AZZOUZI

University of Mohamed Elbachir Elbrahimi, Bordj Bou Arreridj,

Laboratory of Contemporary Linguistic and Literary Studies, Algeria,

Elbachir.azzouzi@univ-bba.dz

Abstract:

The issue of meaning has intrigued all prominent thinkers since ancient times, and this interest intensified with the development of linguistic theories. Modern semantic theories have placed a strong focus on meaning, as evidenced by the numerous and varied interpretations ranging from semiotic, conceptual, behavioral, contextual approaches, to the theory of semantic fields. This diversity reflects the sensitivity, complexity, and elusive nature of meaning, as well as the difficulty in precisely defining and fully encompassing it. In this paper, we aim to trace the semantic efforts that have utilized all aspects of language to achieve more precise interpretations and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of meaning.

Keywords: *theory, semantics, modernists, linguistic.*

Résumé :

Depuis l'Antiquité, la question du sens a fasciné tous les grands penseurs, et cet intérêt s'est intensifié avec le développement des théories linguistiques. Les théories sémantiques modernes accordent une place prépondérante au sens, comme en témoignent les nombreuses et diverses interprétations, allant des approches sémiotiques, conceptuelles, comportementales et contextuelles à la théorie des champs sémantiques. Cette diversité reflète la sensibilité, la complexité et le caractère insaisissable du sens, ainsi que la difficulté à le définir précisément et à le saisir pleinement. Dans cet article, nous nous proposons de retracer les efforts sémantiques qui ont mobilisé toutes les dimensions du langage pour parvenir à des interprétations plus précises et à une compréhension plus approfondie du phénomène de la signification.

Mots-clés : *théorie, sémantique, modernistes, linguistique.*



Introduction:

The significant contributions made by linguists and their deep interest in meaning have enabled them to attempt the establishment of a scientific foundation for the theory of semantics. The term “linguistic theory” suggests a high level of awareness and completeness in scientific perspectives; however, reality shows that linguistic and semantic studies still require further research and in-depth analysis to reach broader and more precise results and theories. Modern linguistic research has not yet completed all its stages; as scientific additions continue to provide new interpretations of linguistic phenomena related to semantics. Nevertheless, theories have been established that address the issue of “meaning” from all its aspects, leading to deeper and more diversified research into linguistic and extralinguistic aspects of meaning.

These theories have attempted to provide objective criteria to resolve all semantic issues that remain contentious among linguists. Yet, in doing so, they opened new avenues for research, discussion, and disagreement, expanding the scope of study and producing divergent scholarly opinions regarding the treatment, presentation, methods, interpretation, and criteria of semantic issues. Consequently, ideas emerged which, despite their importance, did not reach the level of a scientific theory, due to their lack of comprehensiveness and their confinement to the ideological and intellectual climate of their era. Differences in theoretical perspectives among scholars can be traced back to differences in methodology or the approaches adopted in study.

If we examine modern Western theories concerned with semantics, we find that they are distributed across five fields, each governed by a methodology adopted by linguists in theorization. The first methodology is the formal-structural approach, which describes signifieds according to syntactic, expressive, and stylistic considerations, focusing on the form that unites them into a single structure, derived from a common origin. ⁱ

The second methodology is the contextual approach, through which signifieds are classified according to syntactic, expressive, and stylistic considerations. The objective-situational-psychological approach determines the meaning of an utterance or linguistic discourse according to the speaker's state, position, and situation. The fourth methodology is the semantic fields approach, which focuses on identifying the internal structure of the signified and considering semantic and relational proximity between signifieds (concepts). The fifth methodology is the compositional analysis approach, which reveals the deep structure of discourse by analyzing the utterance into its components and elements. ⁱⁱ

It should be noted that Arabic semantic studies have their historical and intellectual references and are subject to particular social perceptions that cannot be excluded from any scientific observation. Western theory itself drew its spirit, rules, and applications from foreign languages. This does not prevent benefiting from its ideas in dealing with the Arabic heritage, given that Arabic is one of the natural languages and shares with others several phonetic, syntactic, and semantic features, governed by constraints and principles that also regulate other languages. ⁱⁱⁱ

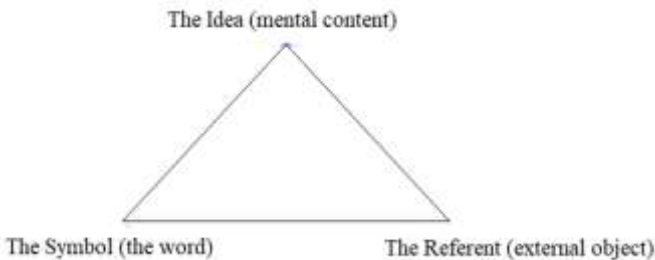
The most important theories concerned with meaning are:



1- The Semiotic Theory:

This theory is considered the first step in the stages of scientific consideration of the language system. Its proponents are credited with distinguishing the components and elements of meaning, relying on the results obtained by Saussure in his linguistic research, in which he focused on the linguistic sign as the unit of language composed of a *signifier* (dāl) and a *signified* (mādlul). The signifier refers to the psychological perception of the spoken word, while the signified is the idea or set of ideas associated with the signifier. Despite differences in views among the proponents of this theory, most of them referred to it as the “nominal theory of meaning”.^{iv}

The English scholars Ogden and Richard are credited with giving the semiotic theory a scientific character through their triangle, which distinguishes the elements of meaning, beginning with the idea or mental content, then the symbol or signifier, and ending with the referent or external object.^v



This distinct division of meaning gave semantic research new impetus and laid the foundation for new theories and important ideas. Modern semantic studies revolve entirely around the Ogden-Richards triangle. Their research focuses either on one of the three elements, two of them, or all three,

based on the principle that “the meaning of a word is its reference to something other than itself,” which gives rise to two perspectives:

- a) One view holds that the meaning of a word is what it refers to.
- b) Another view holds that the meaning of a word is the relationship between the expression and what it refers to.

Studying meaning according to the first view requires focusing on only two sides of the triangle: the symbol and the referent. The second view requires examining all three sides, since reaching the referent occurs through the idea or mental image. ^{vi}

Thus, this division played a key role in the emergence of theories of the *signified*, whose subject was meaning and its categories. It also contributed to the development of theories concerned with the study of the linguistic sign. In this context, the notion of the *sign* or *feature* emerged, giving birth to a new science: semiology. The study of the “mental image” posed a challenge for researchers, opening a wide field for their investigations and uncovering hidden factors, which some called the “world of concepts” and others termed the “semantic worlds.” These represent one of the main pillars of the theory of situations, which constitutes the natural extension of the semiotic theory. ^{vii}

According to the theory of situations, the source of meaning lies in the references present in the external world. A certain meaning is revealed for a given expression through the network of interrelated situations: “The natural place of meaning is the external world, because meaning emerges in the consistent relations between situations, and linguistic meaning must be considered within this general picture of the



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world—a world full of information and objects suitable for capturing parts of this information”.^{viii}

Meaning is not reached through dictionaries but by observing the set of relations determined by situations in the external world. Thus, “the guiding idea in the semantics of situations is that the meaning of a sentence is determined by the relationship between speech and the described situation”.^{ix}

Putnam argues that the world of concepts embedded in the external world is much larger than what exists in the mind. Concepts form the foundation of the theory of situations, which views meaning as the relation between produced speech and described situations. This theory also relies on the external semantics of language and the integration of linguistic information into the informational flow. This is because meaning is not located solely in the external world or the mind, but rather in the world of concepts.

2- The Conceptual Theory:

The roots of this theory trace back to the English philosopher John Locke, who called it the *mental theory*. He argued that the use of words should serve as a sensitive indication of ideas, and the ideas they represent constitute their direct, specific meaning.^x Some researchers have referred to this theory as the *intellectual theory*, because a word points to an idea in the mind, and this idea is the meaning of the word.^{xi}

Due to the abstract nature of the conceptual theory, later scholars based their ideas on observable and perceivable data, attributing all meanings to those mental conceptions that produce a scientific effect. It is worth noting that the ideas of this theory are quite accurate and closely resemble the

behavioral theory, which is based on the principle of stimulus and response. However, the conceptual theory differs in that it traces the reference of effects to mental representations. ^{xii}

Peirce argued that our conception of something consists of our conception of its practical effects. For example, electricity does not mean the passage of an invisible wave through a substance; rather, it refers to a set of phenomena, such as the possibility of charging a generator, ringing a bell, or causing a machine to rotate. Thus, the meaning of "electricity" is what it does. Different conceptions that produce the same practical effect represent one concept or meaning, whereas conceptions that produce no effects have no meaning. ^{xiii}

The world of ideas is independent in itself; meanings are uniform across all languages, and differences arise from variations in tongues. Modern linguists have hypothesized the existence of semantic worlds whose features and laws should be investigated based on semantic structure. Some later linguists even considered that conceptions and ideas are independent entities that could exist without language if individuals chose to do so:

"The ideas circulating in our minds possess an independent existence and function separate from language. If each of us were satisfied to keep our ideas to ourselves, language could potentially be dispensed with." ^{xiv}

Since the conceptual theory considers meaning to be the mental representation carried by the speaker and received by the listener for communication to occur, the world of things is not homogeneous, and conceptions vary from person to person. For example, the concept of a "tree" may carry a range of different meanings that vary depending on the presence of this conception within the world of things. Some words,



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however, carry no conception because they do not belong to the world of things, such as tools, letters, and so on.^{xv}

Thus, the scope of the conceptual theory is based on the principle of mental representation, which constitutes meaning in the mind, unlike the semiotic theory, which focused on studying the sign as the basis for accessing the study of the elements of meaning.

3- The American Behavioral School:

The behavioral theory developed and followed its natural course under the American linguist Leonard Bloomfield,^{xvi} who was influenced by the behaviorism of Albert Paul Weiss as presented in his book *The Theoretical Basis of Human Behavior*. Proponents of this approach argue that human behavior can be described most completely and accurately by considering physiological and other material phenomena that accompany individual behavior. According to them, a scientific study of human phenomena is not possible except in this way. Since language is a human phenomenon, its study should follow the same principles applicable to other human phenomena. In Bloomfield's linguistic studies, we find terms such as *response*, *substitute response*, and *substitute stimulus*.

When Bloomfield discussed the meaning of a word or the meaning of utterance in general, he argued that it should be understood through associated physiological or physical events. For example, the meaning of "hunger" in the statement *I am hungry* is known through muscular contractions and stomach secretions, as well as any accompanying thirst. Bloomfield proposed that we can understand a word such as *salt* through its chemical components. The clearest illustration of Bloomfield's idea is

his famous example known as “*Jack, Jill, and the apple*”: Jack and Jill are walking along a path; Jill feels hungry and sees an apple on a tree, producing noises in her larynx, tongue, and lips, prompting Jack to jump over a fence, climb the tree, and bring the apple so that Jill can eat it. ^{xvii}

Behaviorists explain that when Jill is hungry, the muscles of her stomach contract, digestive juices flow, and seeing the apple produces light waves falling on her eyes – this is the stimulus. The direct response would be for Jill herself to climb the tree and get the apple. Instead, she performs a substitute response in the form of a series of vocal sounds through her speech organs. These sounds act as a substitute stimulus for Jack, causing him to behave as if he were hungry and had seen the apple. ^{xviii}

Several objections have been raised to this explanation, the most important being that Jack may not respond. Jill may know from past experience that Jack would refuse to fetch the apple. In this case, hunger affects whether she asks in a way she expects to be rejected. Thus, Jill may produce minimal movements in her throat and mouth, generating a small noise – *speech*. Jack responds with actions that exceed Jill’s own physical ability, resulting in Jill obtaining the apple through Jack. Therefore, language enables one person to produce a reaction when the stimulus exists in another person. Bloomfield argued that the organization of human society is largely mediated through language.

Now, considering the second part of the example – *speech* – and using physiology and physics, we can understand the process of speech from an acoustic perspective. Jill’s speech organs perform specific muscular movements to produce sounds. These muscular movements are “reactions” to a stimulus. The reaction here is not actual



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physical action, as it would be if Jill were to climb the fence herself; instead, it is a *linguistic substitute reaction*, meaning that speech replaces the action that might otherwise occur. The sound waves emitted from Jill's mouth disturb the surrounding air in the form of similar waves, which finally strike Jack's eardrums, causing them to vibrate and affect his nerves. Jack hears the speech, which produces a stimulus in him, leading him to perform the behavior described. Jill's sensation of hunger is a strong motivating factor affecting Jack's practical behavior.

From the perspective of a speaking person, reactions occur in response to two types of stimuli: one being practical stimuli (hunger and seeing food) and the other being speech or *substitute stimuli*—vibrations acting on the listener's eardrums. In conclusion, Bloomfield considers certain non-linguistic elements connected to speech as essential for understanding the meaning of utterances. This school does not ignore social elements, but expresses them in its own terms. It also accounts for the personalities of speaker and listener, as well as contextual conditions surrounding speech. By focusing on physiological and physical phenomena, this school directed linguists' attention to linking meaning with non-linguistic domains that require analysis on specialized levels. ^{xix}

Thus, the concern of the behavioral school was primarily focused on how linguistic units are distributed in the speech chain, how they perform their functions, and the behavior they induce in the speaker, which must be considered when studying meaning and language. ^{xx}

4- The English Contextual (Social) Theory:

J.R. Firth is considered the actual founder of this school. He developed its doctrine and argued that accessing meaning requires analyzing a linguistic text phonetically, phonologically, morphologically, syntactically, and lexically, while also accounting for the context of the situation, including the personalities of the speaker and listener, as well as all surrounding circumstances of speech. This includes identifying the type of speech function, such as wishing, persuasion, encouragement, or intimidation, and revealing the effect that speech produces on listeners, whether sadness, pain, joy, or delight. ^{xxi}

Upon closer examination, this theory relies heavily on the views of Bronisław Malinowski, the Polish anthropologist, whose studies led to the development of a value-based theory of language, particularly in the study of speech. He concluded that language is a type of behavior and a form of action, performing many functions beyond mere communication. Contrary to the traditional definition, language is not merely a means of transmitting ideas, emotions, or expressing them. Malinowski introduced the term *context of situation* (*context* had been used among linguists before him, but he refined it), and Firth further developed this term in his linguistic studies. For Firth, the context of situation represents a form of abstraction from the environment or setting in which speech occurs; this abstraction is carried out by linguists to conduct their analyses. ^{xxii}

The context of situation encompasses all types of linguistic activity, both speech and writing. Proponents of this approach study words while largely bypassing the origin of meaning and the relationship between signifier and signified, focusing instead on the role words play in context and how



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they are used. Some even strip words of meaning entirely unless they appear in context, a view that, while influential, involves some exaggeration. ^{xxiii}

The context of situation consists of the set of elements that make up the speech situation or communicative context. These elements include:

1. The personalities of the speaker and listener, their cultural background, and the personalities of any witnesses to the speech, if present, along with their role in linguistic behavior and whether they merely observe or actively participate in the speech act, as well as the verbal texts they produce.
2. Social factors and phenomena related to language and the linguistic behavior of participants in the speech situation, such as the atmospheric conditions if relevant, political context, or location of speech, etc. This also includes any emotional responses or other types of reactions occurring during speech, and any aspects related to the speech situation regardless of their degree of relevance.
3. The effect of the verbal text on participants, such as persuasion, pain, encouragement, or laughter, etc. ^{xxiv}

Thus, one of the key features of the context of situation is highlighting the social role played by the speaker and other participants in the speech situation.

For Firth, meaning is a composite of multiple linguistic functions. The most important element of this whole is the phonetic function, followed by the morphological, syntactic, lexical, and functional-semantic roles within the context of situation. Each of these functions requires its own methodology for study. It is important to note that linguistic

analyses at these various levels are not themselves meaning, nor do they constitute the study of meaning. Accessing meaning requires integrating the results of all these analyses.^{xxv} The social study of meaning thus departs from the traditional binary of form and meaning, or word and content, treating speech as a type of social behavior connected to elements beyond language alone.

5- The Semantic Fields Theory:

This is one of the oldest theories in analyzing elements of linguistic meaning. Its beginnings were indications and hints connected to certain uses of the term *field* or the concept of a *linguistic field*, or ideas related to the notion of a field. “Linguistic domains were defined by linguists as classifications of words used in a text or a language, which are interconnected through a specific semantic relationship. The semantic or lexical field is an integrated set of words whose meanings are linked to a domain they collectively express. The relation of this theory to meaning is that knowing the field to which a word belongs helps in defining its meaning. Similarly, the position of a word among its siblings in the field indicates the degree of differentiation of its meaning relative to other fields”.^{xxvi}

The semantic field refers to a set of words close in meaning, united by a general shared category. This theory focuses on integrating lexically related units within a single semantic field, for example: *green, red, blue, black*—all of which belong to the field of *colors*.^{xxvii} “This linguistic term refers to the existence of certain words that can be grouped under a general meaning, allowing most words of a language to be classified into sets, each belonging to a specific semantic field. Each word’s elements are defined in relation to the others



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according to their position within their respective semantic fields".^{xxviii}

Many words in Arabic, for instance, fall under the concept of *semantic fields*, such as words denoting plants, birds, foods, and animals. The application of the semantic fields idea began with Western linguists in the 1920s in Germany and Switzerland, particularly followers of Wilhelm von Humboldt, and pioneers such as Trier, Ipsen, Jolles, and Prozig.^{xxix}

Tegner used the term *field* in an article titled *Presentation of the Ideas of the Linguistic Field* in 1844. Humboldt is regarded as the intellectual forefather of this theory and, together with Herder, was a pioneer in Germany. Humboldt advocated for studying language as a mental phenomenon, emphasizing that the mind cannot apprehend anything without comparing it to something else; thus, the idea of linking language with thought originates with him. The term's use as a linguistic concept initially comes from Husserl and Ferdinand de Saussure, who believed that every word is surrounded by a network of thoughts and ideas, connecting it to other words. These associations relate to both concept and form, extending to meaning and structure. Saussure's idea of *linguistic value* is connected to the semantic field theory, as the value of some words increases through their relation to others. Moreover, a word's value differs between languages.

Ipsen referred to the semantic field concept by stating that some words never stand alone in language but are always linked to a semantic group, which does not necessarily mean a derivational group. Studies and research continued, mostly as indications, until Trier formalized the theory and is considered its founder. Trier used the terms *linguistic field* or

word field, where a field represents something between the single word and the general lexical stock.

Trier focused on the concept through words, first selecting the language – e.g., English, German, or French – and then linking words. Humboldt did not specify the language, while Saussure and Trier did. Trier's interest in the lexical wealth of German and the changes it underwent over time motivated his focus on fields. He was influenced by Humboldt, Saussure, and Weissgerber, who dealt theoretically and practically with constructing word fields, distinguishing layers or sectors within a single field. Research on semantic field theory was not limited to the pioneers; other linguists also contributed, including lexicographers who organized linguistic material thematically. ^{xxx}

We find that Leibniz was among the first to propose compiling a dictionary organized according to types of things or subjects. The first scientific realization of a dictionary arranged by semantic topics was made by Roget in 1852, and this dictionary served as a model for German, French, and Spanish dictionaries, until studies reached the creation of a more recent lexicon applying the semantic fields theory, such as the *Greek New Testament*.

Thus, semantic studies continued, all serving the semantic fields theory, conducted by German, Swiss, French, Spanish, Danish, American, and English linguists, each in their own field and from their own perspective. These studies contributed to the development of semantic fields theory.

The German linguist Trier is credited with crystallizing the semantic fields theory and turning it into a comprehensive framework. This theory provided several key propositions:

- The lexicon is composed of groups of closely related concepts, represented by groups of words. These



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conceptual groups are arranged from the general to the specific, and the meanings of words within each field are determined and specified based on their relation to other words in the same field.

- Each semantic field consists of two elements:
 - The first is conceptual, and the second is lexical.
- The semantic field consists of a set of meanings or closely related words, distinguished by shared semantic features. Thus, a word gains its meaning in relation to other words; for instance, the meanings of evaluative terms such as *excellent*, *very good*, *good*, *acceptable* are understood only by comparing them with each other.
- Semantic fields consist of core words with central concepts and peripheral words. The meaning of core words is not derived from others; for example, Arabic color terms: *white*, *black*, *red* are basic colors whose meanings are not derived from others, whereas *gray*, *orange*, *brown* are secondary, derived from other words such as *ash*, *orange*, *coffee*.
- The size and scope of semantic fields vary according to human domains and interests. The domain of entities and objects is among the largest, followed by events, then abstract concepts, and lastly relational terms. The lexical material in a field varies according to culture and era; for example, the camel field in Classical Arabic is very large, whereas in Japanese or Eskimo it may contain only one word. Conversely, terms for *ice* and *snow* in Eskimo languages form a lexically rich field, while in Arabic the lexical scope is much smaller. ^{xxx1}

Many dictionaries have been compiled according to this theory. The most studied fields include kinship, diseases, cooking, furniture, and sound terms. The most notable modern dictionaries are Roget's and the *Greek New Testament*. The study of a word's meaning in this theory is through the words semantically related to it; its meaning is the sum of its relations with other words in the field, according to John Lyons. Saussure also discussed this idea in his lectures, noting associative relationships between words such as *doubt*, *fear*, *dread*, and that "the word *sun*, for example, can only be understood within its surrounding context". xxxii

Accordingly, one cannot study this theory by isolating a word as a lexical unit (*lexime*); instead, the word must be treated as part of the *situation* in which it occurs, with its meaning determined relative to other elements in the sentence. The grammatical structure that defines a word's function—such as object, subject, predicate, or possessive—must also be considered.

Semantic fields are divided into three categories:

1. Connected tangible fields, such as color terms.
2. Tangible fields with separate elements, such as kinship terms.
3. Abstract fields, such as terms of thought and culture.

Abstract fields are the most important in semantic field theory because most language words are abstract. Accordingly, words can be classified into three types: connected tangible words (*red*, *green*, *yellow*), tangible words with separate elements (*uncle*, *aunt*, *father*, *mother*, *grandfather*, *grandmother*), and abstract words (*intelligence*, *intuition*, *imagination*, *good*, *faith*). Trier argued that these types of semantic fields are interconnected, forming larger fields, thereby encompassing all words. xxxiii



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Ahmed Mokhtar Omar commented on this by suggesting that “it is possible, accordingly, to designate a field for letters and professions, a field for sports, a field for education, and then group all these fields under a single field encompassing all of them: human activities”.^{xxxiv}

Thus, the classification of knowledge and semantic field theory prompted linguists to create dictionaries arranged according to meaning and conceptual relationships, compiling linguistic works that grouped semantic fields relevant to specific subjects.

In this way, theories of semantics became linked to meaning, explaining its nature, classifying it into different types according to various criteria.

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