

**Formation of a Word:
A Semiotic, Syntactic, and Semantic Analysis as Viewed by
Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Heidegger, Fish, and Latour**

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Abstract

The paper answers the questions: What is a word? What contributes to the formation of a word? What are the components of a word? What is the meaning of the word 'word'? What is the meaning of the word 'meaning'? How do words acquire meaning? It analyses the questions from Semiotic, Syntactic, and Semantic points of view and answers them in the context of semantic analysis following Saussure, Strauss, Heidegger, Stanley Fish, and Latour. It introduces the readers to the meaning of the terms *Semiotics* and *Semantics*, the historical background in which these words are coined, Saussure's contribution to the study of language, the basic elements of Semiology, a letter of the alphabet, a word, the use of an image of a thing, a hieroglyph, and a character as signs to convey the meaning in specific contexts which are essential to the interpretation and understanding of the meaning of words used in communication.

Key words: semiotic, semantic, syntactic views, Saussure, Levi-Strauss, Heidegger, Fish, Latour

What is a Word? What Contributes to the Formation of a Word? And what are the Components of a Word?

If one tries to understand the meanings of the terms 'word' and 'meaning,' one gets an indeterminate, equivocal, ambiguous definition and gets confused. In order to understand the meaning of the terms 'word' and 'meaning,' one has to patiently take steps to seek the help of lexicons of various kinds. Sometimes, such an effort may end in futility. Therefore, one has to

refer to dictionaries of philosophical terms and resort to theoretical explanations rendered by many great thinkers of the world through various examples.

The Free Dictionary by Farlex, defines the term ‘word’ as follows: “A sound or a combination of sounds, or its representation in writing or printing, that symbolizes and communicates meaning and may consist of a single morpheme or of a combination of morphemes.” It defines the term ‘word’ further as “a unit of language, consisting of one or more spoken sounds or their written representation, that functions as a principal carrier of meaning, is typically seen as the smallest such unit capable of independent use, is separated from other such units by spaces in writing, and is often distinguished phonologically, as by accent or pause” (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/word>).

If one tires to look at a word from the viewpoints of ‘wordness’ or ‘wordhood,’ which refers to the quality of being a word, one can understand and answer the question confidently. It leads one to understand the fact that there are several and different ways of defining a ‘word’ as follows:

- 1. Orthographic Word:** It exists in visible graphic (written) form.
- 2. Phonological Word:** It exists in invisible phonic (speech) form.
- 3. A Lexical Item (or Lexeme):** If a word has more or less readily identifiable meaning(s) in a dictionary, then it is called a lexical item.
- 4. Grammatical Word-Form:** The word BOY has two grammatical forms. They are: BOY is in the singular form and BOYS is in the plural form.
- 5. Base Form and Inflected Form:** The word GIRL is the base form and the inflected form of GIRL is GIRLS.
- 6. The Citation or Dictionary Form:** Any dictionary form of a word is known as the base form and it is also known as the citation form because it is cited from the dictionary.
- 7. Inflection and Derivation:**

Inflection is the variation in form of a lexical item, which is carried out for grammatical purposes. For example, the lexical item ELEPHANT, has two grammatical forms such as ELEPHANT and ELEPHANTS.

Derivation is the formation of a new word from another word, usually by the addition of an affix. For example, 'ELEPHANTINE' is an adjective, which is derived from the noun 'ELEPHANT'.

8. Zero-Derivation or Conversion

Zero-derivation or Conversion happens when a word is shifted from one word-class to another without making any change to it. For example, STONE him to death. In the sentence, the noun STONE is converted into a verb.

9. Multi-Part and Discontinuous Words

In the following examples, "She turned on the light," or "She turned the light on," the sentences are constructed with phrasal verbs which also occur discontinuously.

10. Content Word and Grammatical Word

A content word has a complete meaning and it also has a referential and an identifiable meaning in a dictionary. For example, BETHLEHEM is a euphemistic term, which refers to a MENTAL ASYLUM.

A grammatical word has some identifiable meaning. It can also be translated in another language. It performs one or more grammatical functions. A dictionary will only give an account of their grammatical functions. It will not provide meaning of such grammatical words. For example, the phrase 'an association of teachers' contains two grammatical words such as 'an' and 'of.'

11. Clitic

A Clitic means a grammatical word form. It cannot form itself into a phonological word all by itself, but only with the help of other clitics. For example, the articles 'a' and 'the,' which are bound to the following: 'a plan' and 'the book.'

12. Short Forms

a. An abbreviation is a short way of writing a word or phrase, using only letters of the alphabet. For example, the word 'Mister' is usually written in its abbreviated form 'Mr'. 'Mr' is

also a title derived from ‘Master’ as the equivalent female titles ‘Mrs’, from ‘Mistress’ and ‘Ms’ from ‘Miss’.

b. A logogram is a written character, which is not a letter of the alphabet, but it traditionally represents a word, or a sequence of words. A logogram is a representation of a lexical item or of a grammatical word-form. For example, the monetary symbol ‘₹’ that stands for Indian Rupee or @ that stands for grammatical word for ‘at,’ or the digits ‘666’ that stand for a sequence of words such as ‘six hundred and sixty six.’ If it is restricted to refer to ‘letters of the alphabet’ such as ‘X,’ a logogram cannot be considered an orthographic word.

c. A contraction is a brief way of pronouncing or writing a sequence of two or three words together. It is always a single orthographic word and a single phonological word. But it represents two or three words and two or three grammatical word-forms. For example, ‘I’ll’ for ‘I will’ and a question tag ‘aren’t I?’ instead of ‘am n’t I?’

d. Acronyms are pronounced by spelling them out letter by letter. For example, ‘UNO’ stands for the ‘United Nations Organization.’ With regard to Initialism, the word results from spelling the word out letter by letter, as ‘FIFA,’ for ‘Federation of International Football Association.’ ‘FIFA’ is pronounced like an ordinary word.

13. Clipped Forms

A clipped form of a word is an item which is obtained by extracting a piece from a longer word or compound word. A clipped form of a word has the same meaning as the longer form from which it is clipped. A clipped form of a word is not an abbreviation. It is a genuine lexical item, just like any other lexical item. Sometimes, a clipped form of word can also displace its original longer form. For example, the clipped form of word FAN, CYCLE, VET, LAB, etc., have completely replaced their source words FANATIC, BICYCLE, VETERINARY, and LABORATORY. A clipped form of word can also enter into compound words like any other lexical item such as HANKY and NIGHTY, which have displaced their source compound words—HANDKERCHIEF and NIGHT WEAR or NIGHT DRESS. Thus, any part of a longer word can be clipped for the sake of making one’s communication easy and convenient (“What Is

a Word?” <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=essay--what-is-a-word.Pdf&site=1>).

What is the Meaning of the Word ‘word’?

One’s common sense prompts that the meaning of a ‘word’ is a combination of phonological and graphical symbols created arbitrarily as a token of an identifier to denote an abstract idea, a place, a person, an animal, a thing, etc. If a person who does not know any language and who has no understanding of the connection between words, objects and people, cannot understand what is communicated through the words of the language. In order to overcome the difficulties of understanding the meaning of words used in a specific language, a person resorts to the following methods:

(a) No one learns words in isolation but tries to figure out the meanings of words based on the context of utterance in which they are used.

(b) The power of observation and listening to the way a word is pronounced and used in contexts of communication is pivotal in understanding the meaning of words.

(c) By associating or correlating new words with familiar objects and contexts with the principle ‘from the known to the unknown’, one can understand the meaning of words.

(d) By using social and emotional cues, one can derive the meaning of words. For example, a learner improves and progresses when he/she receives second language ‘input’ that is one step beyond his/her current stage of the ability to communicate accurately in the target language without being conscious of the rules of the language. Understanding the meaning of others’ communication can happen even when the learner does not know the meaning of the words used by the communicator. It can be made possible by negotiation of meaning through the context in which they are used, by formulating self-explanation, by rewording or replacing the ambiguous parts of others’ communication in the listener’s mother tongue, and through the use of visual or non-verbal cues.

What is the Meaning of the Word ‘meaning’?

In the past, Western thinkers like Heraclitus (535-475 BC), the Stoics in the early 3rd century BC, Plato (428/427 BC-348/347 BC), Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), St. Augustine(354 – 430

Language in Indiawww.languageinindia.comISSN 1930-2940**17:4 April 2017**

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AD), John Locke (1632-1704), an English philosopher and physician, and Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), a German philosopher, discussed sign and the function of sign, but did not treat it as a separate study. It is Gottlob Frege (1848-1925) who said that all meaningful human languages could be reduced to logical formulae: abstract symbolic expressions that look rather like algebra. Frege attempted to systematize human language, opened the way for the modern science of language and linguistics. His new philosophy of language influenced Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) and his pupil Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951).

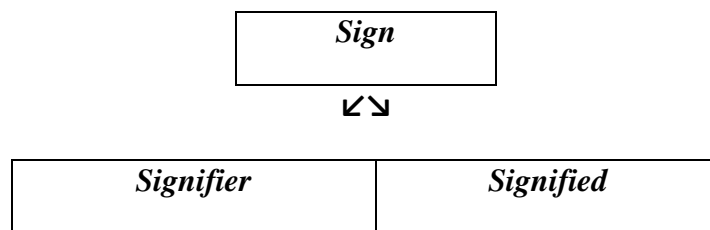
Ludwig raised a question “What makes language meaningful?” He revealed in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), how words get their meaning (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/>). A word represents reality like a picture. A sentence has sense if it accurately depicts a possible state of affairs. This is called ‘the picture theory of meaning’. Duncan J. Richter, in section 43 of *Philosophical Investigations*, cites Wittgenstein’s definition of the word ‘meaning’ as follows: “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/wittgens/#H5>).

Understanding the Terms—*Sign, Signifier and Signified*

Literary theory is an interpretive tool that helps the readers think more deeply and insightfully about the literary work they read. Literary theory is known for its complex thoughts which are expressed through inaccessible jargons. *Semiotics* is one such jargon used for the study of using signs and symbols as elements of language, and the ways in which communication functions through syntax, semantics and pragmatics (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Symbol+%28semiotics%29>). A *sign* can even be a mark of quality as ‘ISI’ is a certification mark of quality for industrial products in India. Signs and symbols used in the study of Mathematics and Science, the flag language of the sea-pirates, code language of traders and smugglers, a bow before an elderly person as a sign of reverence, the red, yellow, and green signals of traffic rules, and a nod can be considered a cue to convey a message or instruction. *Sign* can also be a letter of the alphabet, word, hieroglyph, and character. *Semantics* is the branch of linguistics that studies the meanings of words and phrases in a particular language and context (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/semantics>).

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), a linguist born in Geneva, Switzerland, talks of ideas on structure in language which is the foundation for progress of the linguistic sciences in the 20th century. While he was teaching general linguistics (1907–11) at the University of Geneva, he delivered a series of lectures on linguistics. His lectures were reconstructed based on the notes carefully prepared by his students and his junior colleagues Charles Bally and Albert Séchehaye and published in the form of a book titled *Course in General Linguistics* in 1916. The publication of this book is considered the starting point of 20th century structural linguistics. Saussure and the American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), examined the function of sign and evolved a new theory (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferdinand_de_Saussure).

Language is not a name to refer to things which already existed, but a set of labels because language existed before the existence of independent signs. It makes things intelligible by differentiating between the meaning of a word with the help of the graphical and the sound forms of the same word. According to Saussure, language is a system of signs. Therefore, a word is a sign. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, ‘sign’ in linguistics denotes a combination of a concept with a graphical symbol of a sound-image. The connection between language as a sign and its meaning is fixed arbitrarily because the language is based on random choice or personal whims and fancies, rather than any reason or system. It is a convention accepted by all users of a given language (*signifier*) to refer to a *sign*. It is the verbal sign that necessitates a systematic structure for language.



Ferdinand de Saussure was the first to elaborate on the tripartite relationship among *sign* = *signifier* + *signified*. He perceived a word/phrase/sentence/a work of art as a *sign*. For example, the word *dog* acts as an indicator of the image of the animal one refers to. The term *sign* has a

‘double’ entity namely *Signifier* and *Signified*. In other words, the meaning of the word *dog* is embedded in the *Signifier* which refers to the combination of the graphical and the acoustic forms of the word *dog* and the *Signified* which refers to the meaning of the word *dog*. Neither of these entities exists outside the construct called *sign*. They are separated or shown as two different entities in the diagram above for the sake of the convenience of the readers. Literature and culture are embedded in language. All in the same culture share the same language. Claude Lévi-Strauss, a French social anthropologist, viewed cultures as systems of communication. His reorientation of linguistics underscores the fact that language must be considered a social phenomenon and a structured system. According to him, though the function of sign is basic to both language and literature, the meaning of the language varies according to the context and time in which it is used. For example, one is always “confused by the terms *washroom*, *restroom*, *bathroom*, *lavatory*, *toilet* and *toilet room*. ...The Canadians use the word *washroom* to refer to a toilet while the Americans colloquially refer to it as *bathroom* or *Saint John’s in the same situation*”(http://english.stackexchange.com/Questions/8281/washroom-restroom-bathroom-lavatory-toilet-or-toilet-room).

Therefore, Semiotics is relevant to the study of literature because literature uses language which is the primary system of sign in human culture. *Symbol* is a mark or character used as a conventional representation of an object, function, or process. The letter or letters that stand for a chemical element or a character in musical notation are the examples. *Symbol* is a thing or a word which denotes or stands for the *referent*. Saussure deliberately ignores the *referent*, which, in other words, is the thing that is referred to because a word which refers to a specific object in one cultural context refers to either the same object with the same word or a different cultural object with a different word as in the afore-cited example.

The Basic Elements of Semiology

Saussure introduced two terms in linguistics namely ‘*langue*’ which means “language considered as an abstract system or a social institution, being the common possession of a speech community” (http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/langue) and ‘*parole*’, which means language as manifested in the actual utterances produced by speakers of a language (http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/parole). In a semiotic analysis of any text, ‘*parole*’ plays

a pivotal role. Furthermore, all texts/signs consist of words, which are depicted in the form of graphic (written/printed) and phonic (sound) units, gain their meaning via the constant clashes between these systems. Therefore, semiological analysis aims to identify the principle at work in the message or text, and ties together all the elements to determine the rhetoric or the grammar.

The Use of an Image of a Letter of the Alphabet, a Word, a Thing, a Hieroglyph, and a Character in Communication

Example-1: The letter of the alphabet such as ‘X’ is used to represent a number or the name of a person, place or thing that is not mentioned.

Example-2: Ecclesiastically, the word ‘Gospel’ means “the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ” (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/gospel>), which is epitomised by the evangelist, John, in his gospel with the help of the following words: “For **G**od so loved the world, that he gave his **o**nly begotten **S**on, that whosoever believeth in him should not **p**erish, but have **e**verlasting **l**ife” (<http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/John-3-16/>). The bolded and letters of the alphabet for emphasis in the above-cited passage can be grouped together and the word ‘Gospel’ can be coined as an acronym from them to bring out the crux of the meaning of the passage quoted.

Example-3: The ‘Holy Ash’ on one’s forehead is considered a mark of impermanence of worldly life which is embodied in “Genesis” as follows: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return”(<http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Genesis-3-19/>).

Example-4: The word ‘hieroglyph’ is a system of writing in which pictorial symbols are used to represent meaning. It is an artistic and pictographic representation of an ‘esoteric idea’ which is intended for or likely to be understood by only a small number of people with a specialized knowledge or interest (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/hieroglyphic>).

Example-5: The character Caliban in *The Tempest* is delineated as an analogous being of lower status. Thus, Caliban is depicted as a synonym of a subaltern.

In physical science, matter is the substance of which all material is made and energy is the potency that is stored in order to be used (“Matter and Energy Facts”, <https://kidskonnnect.com/science/matter-energy/>). All oral and written communications of the humans are made up of words and they do serve as images, possess matter and energy, evoke emotions, and leave indelible impact on communicators, listeners, and readers by igniting variegated human emotions, ideas, actions and reactions. Like literary images, symbols, and signs employed in creative writings, the words are also filled with vitality and energy.

A word is a combination of a phonic sound to be heard, a graphic sign to be seen and a meaning or meanings. When words are used in communication, they serve as images, possess matter and energy, and thus, they are able to evoke meanings and emotions on the part of the communicators, the listeners and the readers. All oral and written communications are made up of words. They ignite diverse human emotions, ideas and actions. The literary images, symbols, and signs employed in creative writings are filled with vitality and energy. They perform the task of ‘gathering’ in Heideggerian sense and of ‘representation’ in Latourian sense (“Matters of Fact”, <http://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/understanding/>). They do so because they are charged arbitrarily with multifarious meanings possible. Words do acquire multiple meanings based on the intentions of the communicator, the listener and the reader. The imposed meaning is present even in the word and in the absence of the same word. When things as well as words are made to ‘represent’ concepts, they are made to ‘gather’ meaning. This concept can be explained further. Just as a mosaic tile is made to bear multiple coloured dots or designs on it, a word is also made to bear multiple meanings and is made to perform its task of ‘containing’ and ‘disseminating’ meaning through the act of communication.

Linguists believe that the meaning of a word is not embedded in the word itself and it can exist even outside the word. But the meaning of a word can come into force only in relation to other words. An object is made up of many ingredients; it cannot be entirely in itself. Similarly, no word has an unequivocal or determinate meaning in itself. As in the case of objects, words too gain meaning either in the presence and absence of other words or in relation to other words. Words have meaning in themselves and do not have meaning in themselves at the very same

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:4 April 2017

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time because meanings are attached to words and at the same time meanings are not confined to words. Therefore, it is very clear that words are made to bear meaning arbitrarily by humankind. No word can come into existence without a distortion of the abundance of wordiness of another word. Thus, one can understand the fact that words gain meaning only in relation to other words, and they don't contain meaning in themselves.

Even though it is believed that the meaning of a word is not embedded in the word, a word undeniably means. A word is impregnated with multifarious meanings because of the variegated contexts in which it is used. So, it is clear that word as a container is poured with only referential and contextual meaning and it doesn't contain meaning in itself. This is the reason why human beings are able to understand the specific meaning of a single word in a single context or multifarious meanings of the same single word in different contexts. Therefore, it is said that there are as many meanings as possible for a single word as there are many users of the same word in different contexts for different purposes. But the various meanings are available to those who know the context in which the single word is used. It is an act of futility to intend to use any word by any human being independently of its context because a word attains meanings only in contexts.

Thus, it is clear that the meaning of a word does not lie in itself, but in the context in which it is used. The users of a word are endowed with the right to confer any meaning on the word that is chosen to be used. The meaning of the utilized word is understood or misunderstood based on the clarity of the context in which it is used. In the process of using, listening to, and reading a word, the user, listener, and reader may assume to convey or understand the meaning of a word. This act of assumption leads to either understanding or misunderstanding of the meaning that is intended to be conveyed or understood. The assumption of the using, listening and reading of a word and its meaning can be challenged by another user, listener and reader. Thus, the misunderstanding of the meaning of a word becomes possible. Many times, the users, the listeners and the readers of a specific word may mispronounce, mishear and misread it. Sometimes, the users, the listeners and the readers of a specific word may misprepronounce, "misprehear" and mispreread it.

Language in Indiawww.languageinindia.comISSN 1930-294017:4 April 2017

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According to Stanley Eugene Fish, either understanding or misunderstanding of the meaning of the word is possible due to the intention on the part of the user and the act of using a word in a context and the effort taken by the listener and the reader to organize the words and their functions. When the users, the listeners and the readers agree on the use of a word in a specific context and meaning, it acts as a sign that the acts of using, listening and reading of a word happen within the same system of communication and frequency of understanding from which the word and its meaning emerge (Sethuraman, 1989, pp. 276-292).

Conclusion

It can be deduced from the argument above that Saussure's claim rejects the concept that a word or symbol always corresponds to an outside object or referent, need not be correct. Instead, meaning is the interpretation of a sign which can exist only in relationship with other signs. In other words, a word does not refer to any object because meaning is not embedded in the object that is referred to, but in the word which is used as a 'sign' to refer to the object. That is why, especially in postmodern writings, a word as a 'sign' does not refer to the 'signified' through the 'signifier,' but often refers to another 'signifier.' Due to this function of language, a word or sentence gets 'deferred' endlessly from acquiring any definite meaning. Thus, multifarious meanings are possibly attached to a single word or sentence. In spite of this linguistic game, communication and understanding of the meaning of a word happens because the phonic and the graphical structures of a word are not made abstract and independent, but social. If the words are not made abstract, independent, and not social, they will fail to communicate the intended meaning of the communicator and enable the listener or the reader understand the intended meaning. The listener or reader is able to understand the intended meaning of the word communicated because the meaning the word is made to bear by the communicator is not based on the communicator's, the listener's, and the reader's private interests and views, but on the shared agreement of the society in which the communicator, the listener and the reader live. Therefore, the meaning assigned to a specific word is the authentic voice of agreement of the members of the society. Thus, communication takes place confidently which is based on a set of beliefs, practices and conventions of the society.

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