Perspectives on Arabic Semantics

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Abstract

This research paper looks at Arabic Semantics and Meaning through several issues. It tries to state how Arab semanticists view semantics and meaning, semantics and language sciences, types of meaning and semantic components. It also discusses semantic development and provides variety of examples for elaboration.

Keywords: Arabic semantics, Linguistics, Semantic component, Semantic development.

Introduction

This research deals with the theme of "Arabic Semantics and Meaning" through several issues. First, it tackles the concept of semantics and the difference between semantics and meaning, semantics and its location among other branches of linguistics, and the types of semantics. Second, the development of semantics through three features: specifying semantics, generalizing semantics and transition. Third, it deals with the factors of semantics' development, and the most important features of these factors.

Definition of Semantics

So many Arab linguists tried a lot to define "semantics and meaning" as a branch of linguistics. Some used semantics to serve meaning, where they noted that it is the science that studies the conditions to be provided in the linguistic symbol in order to be able to carry meaning (Omer, 1988). Others hired the meaning to serve semantics, where they stressed the significance of overt semantics on the hidden meaning (Al Jahiz, 1965). The others have defined it as the branch of linguistics that tries to study the changes in the meaning through the analysis of linguistic structure, phonetically, morphologically, lexically and syntactically, taking into account the shift in usage over time (Abduljalil, 2001).

The Difference between Semantics and Meaning

Many definitions were put to Semantics and Meaning. Some say it is Semantics, others say the science of Meaning, while some others say /ʔassimantik/, from the English word *Semantics* (Khalil, 1993). Most of the definitions did not differentiate between the two terms - Semantics and Meaning- as there are who say: "Semantics or Meaning is defined as ... ,"using the conjunction "or" which means choice, and indicates that there is no scientific basis for the two different terms to differentiate between them. If there is a difference between Semantics and Meaning, it is an artificial one just to discover the role played by the utterance in sentences and in context. Arab Linguists found that meaning changes in accordance to the change of the word position in a sentence, and that this change has nothing to do with synonymy, but brings us back to the development of semantics and use (AL Hazimi, 2003). As for the difference between semantics and meaning, it is that semantics is the changes that take place in meaning.

Semantics and Language Sciences

How is verbal action understood? To determine the meaning of the verbal action, the speaker must observe linguistic relations as well as adequate experience of the listener/hearer to convey the appropriate meaning. Linguistic reference (semantics) is divided into four sections (Hilal, 1986):

1. Lexical Reference

Lexical words carry the original meaning of any word before witnessing any changes to language words or any increase in the need to attract new meaning to some of the old words. "Dictionaries" which means /maʕajim/ in Arabic contain the meanings of the words without noting the changes that were intercepted in the previous period, which is of course subject to change ,as in /ʃanab/ that originally means "whiteness and sparkle" in dictionaries, while in use means moustache ,and /ťawiil ?alyad/ that means in dictionaries ,"long hand" which is a "personal character that shows generosity and good decent", while in use the "thief" "and length of hand" mean *theft* (Abduljalil, 2001; Al Hazimi,2003; Hilal, 1986).

2. Phonetic Reference

Arab linguists and semanticists divided phonetic reference into two categories:

First, phonemes that distinguish a word from another, as in/ŝadda/ and /sadda/ that mean "repel" and "closed", and /naďaĥa/ and /naďaxa/ that mean "seep" and "pump", taking into account that the pronunciation of the two phonemes /s/ and /ĥ/ are easier than /ŝ/and /x/ ,and it is easier to utter the word /ŝadda/ rather than the word /sadda/ due to the place of articulation of /ŝ/ and /d/./ŝadda/ conveys strength and power, while /sadda/ conveys ease and convenience. We say: /ŝadda ?aljunudu hujuma ?al ?aʕda?/ , which means "The soldiers repulsed the enemy's attack", and say: / sadda ?alwaladu ?albab/ , which means "The boy closed the door" (Haider, 2005) .

Second, tone and intonation that give significance to any utterance, such as the verse in the Holy Qur'an: /ma ?aġna ʕanhu maluhu wama kasab/(Al-Masad, 2), which means "His wealth and gains will not exempt him" (Pickthall, 2009).Without toning voice or punctuation mark in reading or writing, we will not grasp the true meaning . For we cannot know the exact meaning of /ma/ whether it is a question or negation.

3. Morphological Reference

To discern the meaning of the words /?istaġfar/ and /?istanŝar/ which mean "ask for forgiveness" and "ask for help" respectively , it is not enough to look up the word in a dictionary, but must look for the formula -/?alif/, /siin/ and /tah/- that means demand. Another example is the/ʃaddah/ -primary stress, as in /kassar/ which means "break" and many others in Arabic morphology (Omer, 1988;Wafi, 1972).

4. Syntactic Reference

Syntax specializes in the organization of words in sentences, and studies the structure of the sentence (Alkhuli, 2006a ; Wekker and Haegeman, 1987).It is known that Arab linguists divided speech into/?ism/ and /fiʕl/ and /ĥarf/ which mean "noun ,verb and letter", and made clear attributes of each and every one of them (Abu Sharifeh and Lafi and Okasheh, 1989). If we say /ʃakara musa ʕisa?/ that means "Mousa thanked Issa" , this means that Mousa must be the "thankful" not Issa as it is the order of the verb phrase . Another example is this verse from the Holy Qur'an, /?innama yaxʃa ?allaha min ʕibadihi ?al ʕulama?/ (Fatir, 28), which means "Those truly fear Allah among his servants who have knowledge…"(Ali, 2009).The meaning and Harakat of the verse made it clear that those who "have knowledge" fear Allah (God) not the opposite. We can conclude that syntax and semantics complement each other as we cannot understand the connotation of the sentence without both of them. An important question now is what we mean by the temporal evolution of the word? No one disagrees on the change in the use of words of language from time to time (Alkhuli, 2006 b) ,and so Arab linguists tried to limit this amendment and the shift in meaning , so they monitor some colloquial words as /jaba/ which means "brought" . Linguists believe that the verb was coined from /ja?a bikaða/ which means "came with something", as the letter /ba/ was considered the end of the verb (Anees, 1980). Another example is the noun /baġdadah/ which means "pampering" and that is almost exclusively used to describe women, came to us from the old use of /tabaġdada ?arrajul/ which means" The man belonged to Baghdad and its people", and became civilized in his behavior as society's view to Baghdad in that time is the same view for one of the modern cities of Europe nowadays (Anees, 1980 ; Ibn Manzour, 1968).

Types of Meaning

It is not reasonable that meaning is the only thing we get from flipping through the pages of the lexicon. Meaning has different types:

1. Initial Meaning

It is also called the primary, conceptual or cognitive. It is the chief means of linguistic communication (Abduljalil, 2001).This type of meaning should be the common denominator between the speaker and listener or hearer. For example , it is known that /ʔimraʔah/ which means "woman", is [+ʔinsan, –ðakar , +baliġ]which means [+ human, –male , + adult](Omer, 1988).

2. Secondary Meaning

It is also called additional or accidental. This type of meaning is implicated in the word and its initial meaning and has no constancy and inclusiveness, but changes with the culture and experience (Abduljalil, 2001). For example, /ʔimraʔah/ could mean (+ʔinsan , +baliġ, +θarθar, +jamal, +riqqah, +đaʕf, +ʕaʈifah) which means a "woman" that is: (+human, +adult, +talkative, +beauty, +tenderness, +vulnerable, +emotion) (Omer, 1988). Certainly we will not agree on these different meanings because of expertise and culture.

3. Stylistic Meaning

This kind of meaning reveals the social conditions and status of the user of the language, other levels such as specialization, the degree of relationship between the speaker and the listener/hearer and the rank of language being slang, literary, formal, and the type of language being poetry, prose, and whether it is speech or writing. Such can be said about words calling the wife in modern Arabic: (ʕaqilah, ĥurmah, zawjah) which all of them mean "wife"(Omer, 1988).

4. Psychological Meaning

This type of meaning includes the words and their references and connotations for the individual which could be the speaker or the listener/hearer (Abduljalil, 2001). This type cannot be generalized among a certain society. For example /zawjah/ which means "wife" could have a different meaning, when a man living a stable family life with his wife that believes in love and cooperation, and another man living in another family with a wife that represents lack of cooperation, thus this kind of meaning affects the secondary types of meaning.

5. Connotative Meaning

This type of meaning is concerned with words of high ability to suggest and indicate some voices such as /ŝaliilu ʔassuyuuf/ , /muwaʔu ʔalqiʈʈah/ and /xariiru ʔalmaʔ/ which mean "rattle of swords" ,"cat's meow" and "purl" (Omer, 1988).

Semantic Components

Language is based on two essential elements "utterance and meaning" (Abduljalil, 2001;Hurford and Haesley, 1983; Omer, 1988), and their close association as if we know the word (utterance)we understand its meaning, thus we note three things (Al Hassan, 2001):

1. **Signifier** (ʔaddal):any utterance or utterances which are structured properly .
2. **Reference**(ʔalmadluul): it is the meaning or idea held by the structure of contexts, or words stored in the minds of the group and have been associated with their own meanings defined by the language dictionaries, or full knowledge of the meanings of the words that people know.
3. **Semantic Relation** (ʔalʕalaqatu ʔaddalaliyyah): it is the relationship between the utterance and its meaning , and depends significantly on the type of speech , the linguistic conditions , and the relationship of the listener/hearer, reader and speaker with the topic talking about, and experience in the meanings of words, as the relationship between word and meaning is complex (Palmer, 1981). Haider (2005) states that meaning does change and vary in accordance to linguistic situations, changing social aspects from time to time in individuals or groups, which requires renewal as some words and utterances could vanish and die and be replaced by others .

The Relationship between Signifier and Reference

The relationship that joins the signifier with the reference (signified) is the semantic relation, but how do we disclose this relation? This disclosure is based firstly on the condition of the speaker, and listener/hearer secondly; or the writer and the reader as the former must meet the adequate culture and should distinguish between high class words and utterances and inappropriate ones, and the second must be of vast experience. The question that could be raised -is this relationship the same as in colloquial Arabic which we use now a days? This semantic relation descends dramatically in present colloquial that we use, as it is replaced by the current knowledge of words and their meanings, with little role for this relation. If we underscore the colloquial among the public but not among the intellects and cultured, we will notice that the semantic relation is very clear. The public's words are not based on the knowledge of the relationship between word and meaning, but depend mainly on national or geographic basis. This basis is due to present time period that pervaded different colloquial and moved away from its ancient origins (Anees, 1980). He says that the Egyptian, for example, who uses the verb /buŝ/ which means " look" may not know that this verb originally means "What is striking because of its luster and shine". When we say in our Jordanian colloquial /taxbiiŝ/ which means "lying, slander or lack of understanding", most of us would not know that this word means mixing and blending things together. Saleh (2003) mentioned /ĥariim/ which means "women", was originally used for things that are not allowed or deprived to touch, so the relation between the signifier and the reference (signified) in the colloquial is a very small and limited as it is based on the primary and abstract meaning.

Semantic Development

Language is the mirror of social and intellectual life and is the means of expressing people's feelings and emotions , and community interaction at all levels of individual or public institutions or cultural and non-cultural (Alkhuli, 2006 b). This human interaction affects the language as it is the product of this interaction and leads to a change in semantic utterances to become able to represent the development and its interpretation. Arab linguists noticed this semantic development in the Arab language and thus put it in language dictionaries, to become note-keeping language heritage and absorbed interaction among civilizations and cultures.

Features of Semantic Development

1.Generalizing Specific Reference

This type of generalization is used when using the word that signifies an individual or a particular kind of gender to indicate many individuals or the whole race. An example of this is the word /ʔalġab/ which originally means /ʔalqaŝab/ in Arabic ,and "jungle" in English ; /kullu multaf/ which means "all wrapped" was called /ʔalġab/. Thus, the word /ʔalġab/ which originally means /qaŝab/ ,"reed", was generalized to mean /kullu multaf/ (Hassan, 1997). The basis of this generalization is that reeds grow wrapped in a very thick area, so that a/ʔalġab/ (jungle) means in "Lisan Al Arab" /ʔajamatu ʔalqaŝab/ which means "a clump of reeds" where /ʔajamah/ means "lot of wrapped grass". The linguistic usage borrows one or more of the features of the discriminatory component of the term and neglects some others, then generalizes the word/term on everything available in these features regardless of compatibility or disparity in the other features. The linguistic usage has kept on the feature of /ʔiltifaf/ which means "act of wrapping" and dropped the feature /qaŝab/ ,"reeds", and then released this word/term to all things that have the same available features when this feature is similar to many *spears*. It is said in "Lisan Al Arab" /ġabatun min ʔalrimaĥ/ which means "jungle of spears" to mean the many long sharp ends of spears, or the number of spears held together the same as a jungle. Another word is /ʔalqawm/ which means "a group of people", was used to mean men only, then was expanded to include men and women, and the proof is that the Holy Qur'an distinguished men from women, saying the Almighty:/ya ʔayyuha ʔallaðina ʔamanu la yasxar qawmun min qawmin ʔasa ʔan yakunu xayran minhum wala nisaun min nisain ʔasa ʔan yakunna xayran minhun…/(Al-Hujurat,11), which means "O ye who believe! Let not a folk deride a folk who may be better than they (are), nor let women (deride) women who may be better than they are"(Pickthall,2009). The word /qawm/was confined to mean "men" ,then was extended to mean" men and women" and recently to mean the whole nation. Another example, when it is said / rafʕa ʕaqiratah/which means "raised his voice". It is originally said that a man hurt his leg badly, raised it and shouted loudly because of pain, and then they called everyone who raises his voice /rafʕa ʕaqiratah/ (Saleh, 2003). Anees (1980) and Saleh (2003) noted some words that change specific references to public ones, and a nominal(name) to an adjective such as /qayŝar/ which means "Caesar" for /ʔalʕaqiim/ and /ťaġiyah/ ,for those who are "infertile and tyrant" , and /nayruun/ which means "Nero" for who is "unfair and insane", and /ĥatim/, an Arabic name for who is /kariim wa miđyaf/ which means "kind and

hospitable". Anees (1980) explained psychologically that people tend to free their minds from seeking precision in expressions, so they hardly insist on using specific references and use ones to facilitate themselves.

Addayeh (1985) also mentioned a number of examples that have had special reference then widened. For example /ʔiir/ which means the caravan of "feminine convoy", "camels carrying food ", and then to mean every caravan . Al Zubaidi (1968) mentioned /ʔal ʔistiĥmam/ which means " bathing" on using hot and cold water while its original meaning in Arabic is using / maʔ saxin/,"hot water" only, so they say /ĥumma/, "fever" on person's high body temperature.

2. Specifying General Reference

There were so many words that have had broad and public connotations but were narrowed and became limited and so moved from general reference to specific ones. Some of these words and terms /ŝalah ,ĥaj , ʔiman , kufr , rukuʕ , sujuud, ĥariim/,which mean "(prayer, pilgrimage, faith, disbelief, bowing, prostrating and women)"(Abu Sharifeh and Lafi and Okasheh, 1989;Saleh, 2003;Wafi, 1972). One of them is /ʔalĥaj/ which means /ziyarah/ in Arabic and "a visit" in English . Islam then made certain rites and rituals for/ĥaj/ which is "visiting the Sacred Mosque in Mecca at a certain time of the year". The connotation of the word changed from the general meaning, paying a visit to the particular one - paying a visit to perform a certain duty at a certain time and at a certain place. And /ŝalah/ which originally means "prayer, any prayer" and then was narrowed to denote worship prayer while bowing and prostration at certain times. /ĥariim/ was used on every /muĥarram/ that is "taboo", now is used to mean women, and the mental reasoning is to escape from the whole concepts to nearby objects of the senses. Anees(1980) stated that people averse to those words that do exist only in the minds, due to laziness and seeking the easiest ways. Omer (1988) explains that customization as the result of adding some discriminating features to the word, as the more features you add for something the fewer of its members becomes. It appears that securing confusion and rationalizing efforts are two primary factors in this type of semantic development especially among people in their normal and public lives. An example of this is /ʔassabt/ which means " Saturday". It means in Arabic /ʔaddahr/ which means in English "eternity or age ", then singled in use to mean one of the days of the week, which is also a member of the eternity or age (Saleh, 2003; Wafi, 1972). It is noticed that the process of change or transition is accompanied with etymological activity.

3. Semantic Transition

This form of Semantic change depends on a metaphorical relationship that could be a similar relationship through metaphor that is using the word in non-original meaning as of the existence of this relationship, and could be a non-similar relationship that comes through metonymy. This type of un real meaning is called metaphorical or transferred meaning. An example of transition of connotation because of similar relationship is /bayt/ to mean "house" then /baytu ʔaʃʃaʕr/,"tent of the Bedwins". Another example of transition of connotation as a result of non similar relationship is /ʔassama?/ which originally means "the sky", but later is used to mean "rain" (Haider, 2005 ; Saleh, 2003).

Reasons for Semantic Development

1. Need

Users of the language resort to classical words that they remember their connotations and use them with modern inventions and discoveries (Haider, 2005). This means that they have been using words of an old gloss with modern meanings, and therefore the meaning changed. For example,/ʔalmidfaʕ, ʔaddababah, ʔassayyarah, ʔalqatirah / ,which they mean "cannon, tank, car, tractor" (Ibn Faris, 1997).These words are used now differently , and this process is done usually by bodies and language academies or some talented individuals as poets and writers . Some of these words are accepted and become familiar such as /ʔalmidfaʕ, ʔassayyarah, ʔaddababah/, and others disappear from use. Some others may be widely used that people forget the old meaning of the word as in /ʔassayyarah/ which originally means the convoy in the desert (Omer, 1988).

2. Social and Cultural Reasons

The evolution of social life produces a new gloss on the words and their connotations. This is clear in the following pictures:

a. The form of transition from semantic sensory to semantic abstract as a result of the evolution of the human mind.

For example, the word/raťanah/ which means "jargon", originally means "a group of camels producing vaguely sounds", and then is used to signify speaking unknown language that listeners/hearers cannot understand (Omer, 1988).

b. The form of an agreement between a "group" of different cultures to use words of specific semantic features defined in line with the things and experiences and concepts appropriate to their new culture such as some religious words, as in /?aŝŝalah/,which originally means/duʕa?/ ,"prayer", was modified to mean performing certain rites five times a day in accordance to Islamic Sharia .The word /ĥaj/, "pilgrimage" that is specialized in "visiting the Sacred Mosque in Mecca to perform certain rites" instead of visiting any place in general (Haider, 2005 ; Mujahid, 1985).

c. The form of using old words and their meanings on modern connotations as it is felt they denote the same job or meaning despite the difference in shape. /safinah/ for example , which is a" ship" that has not changed although existing ships nowadays are different from old ones (Haider, 2005).

3. Emotional and Psychological Feelings

Languages prohibit the use of certain words because of their unacceptable connotations, or explicit significance on what bothers .This led of course to the change of word connotations as in words of filth and phrases related to sex. It is noted that all languages lose some of their words that reflect these aspects and are replaced by less obvious words in their connotations and more obscure or blinding (Haider, 2005 ; Omer, 1988).

4. Linguistic Deviation

Speakers of the language sometimes deviate the use of certain words to mean a relative or similar meaning which is a matter of metaphor, or may be a deviation resulted from misunderstanding or confusion or ambiguity. The word /?almaktabah/ which means "library", could mean to others "bookshop" (Omer, 1988) .

5.Metaphoric Transition

Speech is divided into: (real and metaphorical). Real means "the original denotation of the word" and the first inserter of the language is responsible for it; and metaphorically means "the other meaning that is not set in the origin of language". Linguists divided words to real and metaphorical. Some believe that words are real and true, and some see that they are all metaphors, and some consider them to be true and metaphoric at the same time. Only the hearer/listener can judge the truth and metaphoric meaning because the truth is widely used and is familiar, while metaphor is a deviation from the usual and common (Anees, 1980). An example of this is /hađama ?aťťalibu ?addars/, a sentence that is always used by school teachers, which means "the student understood the lesson". This sentence is deviated from its original utterance /hađama ?aťťalibu ?aťťaʕam/ which means "the student digested the food" , and is used metaphorically to mean understanding the lesson . Another example is /labisat ?al ?arđu zinataha/ which means "the earth has taken on adornments " , is shifted from the basic meaning - "wearing clothes" to metaphorical meaning "greenery".

6. Historical Reasons

The transition of language from the past to present causes changes in the meanings of words which either narrows the meaning or expands it , or even changed to dislocate any relation between the new meaning and the old one , as connotations are in a growth and development through time (Anees, 1980). An examples is /zindiiq/ , a "heretic", which is in Persian "the person who studied the book of Zoroaster", but this word changed to indicate the agnostic departure from the Islamic religion in general (Abduljalil, 2001).

7. Innovation

Innovation is a reason for changing the meaning, and is mainly performed by two types of people:

a. The gifted who are the poets and writers, and the need to clarify the semantic meaning or to strengthen its impact in mind oblige them to resort to innovation (Omer, 1988) .

b. Language academies and scientific bodies, where there is a need to use a word to express a certain idea or concept, and this creates a new meaning (Hassan, 1997 ; Omer, 1988 ; Saleh, 2003).

Conclusion

This research paper has shed light on Arab semantics and meaning as a branch of linguistics.

It differentiated between semantics and meaning, discusses semantics and language sciences, semantic components and their relationships as well as features and reasons of semantic development. Lots of examples from the Arabic literature were presented and discussed.

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Appendix (1)
Arabic English Transliteration

Arabic Script	Description	Symbol
ء	Voiceless glottal stop	?
ب	Voiced bilabial stop	B
ت	Voiceless dentoalveolar stop	T
ث	Voiceless interdental fricative	θ
ج	Voiced postalveolar affricate	J
ح	Voiceless pharyngeal fricative	ĥ
خ	Voiceless velar fricative	X
د	Voiced dentoalveolar stop	D
ذ	Voiced interdental fricative	ð
ر	Voiced alveolar flap	R
ز	Voiced alveolar fricative	Z
س	Voiceless alveolar fricative	S
ش	Voiceless alveopalatal fricative	ʃ
ص	Voiceless emphatic alveolar fricative	ŝ
ض	Voiced emphatic dentoalveolar stop	đ
ط	Voiceless emphatic dentoalveolar stop	tʼ
ظ	Voiced emphatic interdental fricative	ż
ع	Voiced pharyngeal fricative	ʕ
غ	Voiced velar fricative	ġ
ف	Voiceless labiodental fricative	f
ق	Voiceless back velar stop	q
ك	Voiceless velar stop	k
ل	Voiced alveolar lateral	l
م	Voiced bilabial nasal	m
ن	Voiced alveolar nasal	n
ه	Voiceless glottal fricative	h
و	Voiced labiovelar glide	w
ي	Voiced palatal glide	y

Arabic Vowels

i	Short high front unrounded vowel
ii	Long high front unrounded vowel
u	Short high back rounded vowel
uu	Long high back rounded vowel
a	Short central unrounded vowel
aa	Long central unrounded vowel