LESSON FOUR

THE PROTOTYPE THEORY

In the analysis of meaning, we use different approaches as discussed already. One other approach is the prototype theory. The prototype approach is the use of the best example. (human beings tend to categorize the universe of perception and these categories are called fuzzy categories). This means that a concept or an idea is represented by the best example. This best example is the representative of a category. People usually identify each category on the basis of a mental picture which typically represents all that the category stands for, and the best example of this idea is the prototype. In this approach, the inclusion of an item in the extension of a word depends on the resemblance between this word and the prototype. Members which bear a strong resemblance too the prototype are called **central** members while those that do not have a strong resemblance to the prototype are called **peripheral** members.

The prototype approach is community based, unlike the componential analysis approach. As a result, it changes from one place to the other. It can even change from one generation to the other. For e.g. A tall man in Ghana may be 5ft. 8", the prototypical tall man in America, Sudan or even Mali may be more than 6ft. Again, the prototype of dog, rich man, or horse in Ghana will be different from that on America or any other place. Every one of these is different from one community or society to the other.

In the prototype theory analysis, the members do not need to resemble one another, each member just need to have a relationship with the prototype.

It is not scientific, it is only psychological. Unlike the componential analysis approach, the prototype approach deals with resemblance, and this is all about degree. The componential analysis deals with belonging or not to the sense of a word or item. (if the satisfy or does not the set of characteristic features. For e.g., A metal worker's car will not be seen as a car becos it cannot move. However, in the prototype approach, this will be called a car becos it resembles the idea of a car by its structure, though not a central member. (a car with three or five tyres may not be considered in the componential analysis approach as a car but will be considered a car becos of its resemblance to the original idea of cars, though a peripheral).

Problems with this analysis

- It can only be used for concrete phenomenon. For e.g. how can we get the sense of love, kindness, hatred/hate, E.t.c. All these are abstract nouns, so how do we develop the picture of the best examples for these nouns? It may be used to arrive at the meaning of action verbs, adjectives and adverbs.

- This approach may be over applied. How will an item be different from the prototype in order for it to be excluded from the class of that item? A child will see orange and say it is a ball, shea butter as margarine, e.t.c. This is called **overextension of meaning.**

🍓 This approach will let people concentrate on the denotative features or meaning and ignore the associative meaning, and this is not complete.

SEMANTIC SPACE THEORY

This theory talks of the sense of a word as seen on a scale. These spaces are constituted in a kind of conceptual or psychological space within which an individual or a society plots various entries of concepts in some comparison.

This space is not universal but rather, on

🍓 The various entries which are seen as being members of an identified group.

🍓 The various attributes which individuals use to describe or characterize the members of this identified group. These entries we just talked about show the way in which concepts are arranged in the mind of a speaker or the society.

This semantic space can be illustrated in the form of an a two-dimensional chart like the atlas, where there is longitude and latitude. Any item that is being talked about is located at a point and this is seen as the meeting point for the entities talked about. (It is sometimes called the SEMANTICS ATLAS).

Chart: We can have a chart for any two entries about animals, food, and e.t.c.

This diagram mostly looks at comparisons. The space is the mind of a speaker and how meaning is made by comparing, etc.

This theory sees meaning as an impression of an item more than its denotation.

Problems

- It takes the denotation of words for granted. (it considers how the item is perceived and not what is made of or features). It uses the prototype theory to plot.

- The dimensions or axes are too restricted for a thorough or detailed description of a concept. Other attributes of the items or objects which are useful in their description are ignored.