

Semantic Gaps Are Dangerous

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Abstract

Language adapts to the environment where it serves as a tool to communication. Language is a social agreement, and we all have to stick to both grammaticalized and non-grammaticalized rules in order to pass information about the world around us. As such language develops and adapts constantly.

Recently both media and migrations have accelerated considerably. In Europe and thus in Denmark homogenous populations have developed into multicultural ones. Language has not kept pace with this development, and millions of people have to adapt to this new situation with lightning speed.

That seems not to be possible. We have to use words, metaphors and comparisons containing adverse connotations, and this situation creates ways of using unpolite language and tends to create dangerous relations where special language creates problems that could be avoided if we had better language tools at hand. But we do not have these tools of communication, and we are in a situation today where media and specially digital and social media, supported by new possibilities of migration, create dangerous situations.

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Language is a social construct. As language users we need to respect the grammaticalised as well as the non-grammaticalised rules of a language when we wish to create an identity, express feelings, and communicate information on relations and logic we think that we find in the world around us. Within this framework, all the world's languages develop and adapt constantly.

In the recent past, both the media and the migration habits of people have caused the speed of this development to increase exponentially. In Europe, and thereby also Denmark, ancient, very homogenous populations, have developed into a relatively heterogeneous group. People with disparate existential perceptions, new customs, and other and different ways to express themselves, are met more often and more intensively than we have been used to. The Danish language has been unable to keep up with this development; with the natural consequence that millions of people have needed to get used to the new situation with the speed of light, and this does not appear to be without problems. We have to employ words, metaphors, and comparisons, with opposing connotations, and this language situation is paving the way for the use of discourteous language and the creation of dangerous situations where language, in itself, is creating problems which might be avoided if we had better linguistic tools available. But we simply do not possess these linguistic tools, and today, we are in a situation where the media, and in particular, the electronic and social media, are creating dangerous situations; and all supported by the increasing speed of information and migration.

How then can we avoid these inappropriate gaps in our language? Should we keep quiet and stop discussing particular subjects, or are there other possibilities of ensuring us an adequately encompassing language? By stopping discussion we create taboos.

Science of linguistics

Is it possible to study language independently of other sciences? The intuitive answer must be – hardly. Nevertheless, linguistics, especially since Aristotle's linguistic achievements of formulating structuralistic works, has concentrated on creating a justification as an autonomous scientific discipline. Until the previous millennium, this gathered around ethnocentrically examining and exhausting the phonological and morphological corpus of the Indo-European language. Not until late in the exercise of the discipline of linguistics, did functionalism become an equal partner. This is despite the fact that already Plato denoted the function of language as an important object of scientific investigation and description. The thorough and in-depth scientific research of meaning in language is new, and in the heyday of structuralism, had been virtually banished from the area of linguistics. For example, in the approach of the American linguistic structuralist, L. Bloomfield, the description of semantics was neglected. Thus, semantics was abandoned in the shadows of linguistics for all too long.

A generally acknowledged description of a language sign leads to a dichotomy between a unit of expression and a unit of meaning, where the smallest units are phonemes, which separate meaning, and morphemes, which bear meaning. In this connection, it is interesting that structuralism so categorically rejects semantics from linguistic research and description, as semantics is a crucial factor in structuralism's

definition of those units which form the basis of structuralism's stratification. Without semantics and consensus on the nature of semantics, there is no structural definition of basic units. Semantics must be harnessed; similarly the function of language must be studied to understand why, and under which conditions, we have, associate, and use, language.

Why the sounds of language are found in the patterns we know, have always puzzled, teased and fascinated linguists. But it has not yet proved possible to come anywhere even close to answering this question.

The functional side of language is however completely different; here it is possible, concisely and at an overall level, to summarize four general functions that apply to all the world's languages. These are the intentions which lie in people's actions, when they use language:

1. To describe how we think the world actually is (indicative construction)
2. To inquire how others think the world is (interrogative investigation)
3. To command, with the aim of getting the world to be as we want it to be (imperative)
4. To set out thoughts and desired worlds (optative construction)

With the content element of language, it is the case that in the languages of the world, an anchoring is found in relation to the world, nature and culture in which the individual language has to function. Here, subjects such as food and danger have played a significant role from ancient times, as it has always been vital for people to survive. This is achieved by finding food and by avoiding becoming food for others. Therefore, in every language there is an anchoring in nature and culture, with the focus on having language for food items and for dangerous objects, for animals, and for the vicissitudes of life. The more common the food item or danger is, the greater is the probability that language has a rich vocabulary to describe, guide, and/or warn about it.

Biological versus cultural roots

Whether the meaning element in the various world languages can thus be related to the special biology of humans has been the subject of much discussion. The likelihood of this is low, even if it also possible to find hierarchies, for example, in relation to the relation of the colour scale to physical, observable elements in nature. All the world's language have root words for black and white; followed by red, then blue, then yellow/green, where the languages are distributed so the first-mentioned colour requires to be laid before the others can follow. The hierarchy has though special variants in African languages where nuances and main groupings are completely different.

The cultural roots in the semantics of languages are much easier to find, so that words and vocabularies are tied to the cultures in which the languages have to function. Danish has an extensive vocabulary for referring to domestic farm animals. Conversely, there is no distinction in Danish between female and male midges, or even for the young of midges. Nor do snakes have special words for males, females or progeny. Snakes are rare and only one is venomous. It has its own name, which is a

compound; 'striking worm' (adder). But the farm's domestic animals are important as sources of income and food. So cows are female, bulls are male, calves are the young animals, heifers have not calved, and so on. Cultural traces can be found in the grammar of a language, though in more irregular patterns.

Language and thought

These considerations lead naturally to a re-consideration of the Sapir-Whorf's hypothesis on whether language is a limiting factor for human thought, in that it is only possible to think about and consider elements in our existence for which our language has elements/words/grammar. It could be tempting to accept the hypothesis and its limitations on our thoughts. Nevertheless, the heated discussions which arise when cultures meet seem to say something else. We can think longer and deeper than the (Danish) language would appear to contain elements to handle. We see and acknowledge conceptualizations which the language does not contain the means to precisely express. Let us then continue into the description and understanding of the semantics and constant development of language, and its adjustment to the culture within which it has to function.

Illusion of translation

When separation in the linguistic sign between the expression element and the meaning element occurs, we see that it is the meaning element that might be translated to other languages and thereby possibly understood by people in other cultures. But there is much unclear "mapping" between word and meaning, and translation and synonyms are perhaps an illusion whereby misunderstanding and conflict frequently arise. The meaning of words is determined by context and cultural preconceptions as, for example, when the relative meanings emerge in the following simple examples *large ant vs large elephant; the sun is red; she resembled a sack; and we tootled around town*. Or in interactions between the single words of the following phrases which determine the meaning of the whole phrase:

- Man hits dog with meat leg
- Man hits dog with wooden leg
- Man hits dog with broken leg
- Man finds dog with binoculars
- Man shoots dog with binoculars
- Man sees dog with binoculars
- Man captures dog with binoculars

Problem of managing the world

Language meaning is closely connected to categorization, i.e. that we group things mentally, and all instances from a category have something in common. Phenomena in the world relate to each other, and a conceptualization is a mental representation of phenomena which relate to each other, and they form a category. Conceptualization specifies how category membership hangs together. All words in a language have thus an underlying conceptualization, for example, such as *dog, table, religion, children, and family*. But all conceptualization is not necessarily represented by words, and here arises the core of the problem domain. As humans we do have subjects

(conceptualizations) for which we have no words, but which nonetheless we have an acute need to talk about. Here, it gets difficult to give tangible examples, precisely because we lack words to be able provide them. This is explosive material, through which we must pick our way with extreme care. Danes generally just borrow words from other languages or compose their own words from already available language material. This is fine as long as we are precise and the subject is not inflamed. But the least linguistic imprecision can lead to the most serious consequences if the subject is adequately inflamed. In Denmark we have experienced serious situations in the debates on, for example, depictions of, and expressing opinions about, religion, pedophilia and modern warfare, where our language has no adequately recognized socially accepted norms which encompass these conceptualizations.

Methods of structuring the world

People's conceptualizations are bound up with their way of perceiving the world, and perhaps they are also tied to cognitive economy – avoiding tautology. There seems to be a "trade-off" between economy, information loading, and retrieval time. One thing can belong to two categories simultaneously, such as, for example, *invisible thing* versus *believing in something*. What then separates things from one category, from things from another? Is there a hierarchy? We do not know. In any case, any hierarchies do not seem to be identical from one language to another. In connection with this organization of the world via language material, it is important to be aware that words both have a denotation and one or more connotations. Denotation is the word's basic meaning, i.e. the meaning that we have agreed upon for words such as for example, *horse*, *house*, and *nose*, while there is more doubt and disagreement on the connotations in words such as, for example, *caravan*, *pocket money* and *ageing burden*. Connotations are often conditioned by feelings or values and this creates a breeding ground for misunderstanding and a debate over the correct use of language. This can destroy a good atmosphere in a split second.

Colour of the moon

It becomes immediately much more difficult, or almost impossible, to ensure a good understanding of language when different cultures meet that each have their (physical) observable reality. In referential meaning theory, a word's *reference* (extension) is understood to be that which the word refers to in the wider world; objects are indicated via the extension. But a word's *meaning* (intension) is its underlying (abstract) concept. Intension is thus the abstract specification which determines how the word's meaning is related to other words. Intension defines the necessary and appropriate characteristics for a class membership.

- |Moon| refers to a shining object in the night sky (referent – extension);
- |Moon| is also defined by being a concept; it is a shining thing you can see in the sky at night. |Moon| has a place in language as such a concept, and |moon| relates to (is in opposition to) e.g. |sun| and |stars| in Danish.
- |Moon| is called |måne| in Danish and approximately the same concept forms the basis (same intension). And the referent in the wider world is the same (same extension).

- *|Queen| is called |dronning| in Danish; approximately the same concept which forms the basis for Danish and English (same intension). But the referent in the wider world is, on the face of it, probably not the same (different extension – Margrethe vs. Elizabeth).*

Prototype

But how do we explain the referential meaning of abstracts such as *security* and *justice*? Here, another possibility of explaining the meaning of language comes into the picture – a prototype, which is a typical family member. A prototype is an abstraction that represents the most common representative in a category – the mean representation for a category, in a Danish connection, for example, *sparrow*, *chair* and *hammer*. The degree of similarity with the prototype determines the member's status. The prototype is thus *the best example* from a concept, for example, such as *blackbird versus penguin; cow versus whale, dining chair versus camping chair*. A prototype forms a special kind of *scheme*, a framework for the organization of knowledge. But who decides what is prototypical? That is decided by a language community in fellowship, as a social process. Prototypes will thus vary from a society with one main culture to another with another main culture.

There is so much we do not understand

Metaphors are created to create understanding of, and for, the correlations in the world which people cannot grasp, and they build upon an extension of the similarity between two phenomena, for example, *a dishwasher can save time; life is a journey; she is up in the clouds; their love blossomed*. People have great difficulty in understanding phenomena such as *time, life, humour, and love*. We try to understand phenomena by comparing them with other, more tangible, phenomena, and by drawing on elements from these which we are capable of understanding. Metonymy builds on two phenomena typically, or in a particular instance, occurring (physically) together, and it is therefore possible to establish a connection between them, as in for example, *Karen Blixen is lying on the sideboard, or the kettle is boiling*. Metaphor and metonymy are two ways in which different meanings of one and the same word with several meanings can be related. This is a breeding ground for serious conflicts if the comparisons cross the boundaries for taboos in different cultures.

The same correlation is not found for synesthesia where there is a more indirect and abstract connection between conceptualizations such as, for example, *dark tones, black humour, light mood*. These connections between phenomena where language lacks specific words in particular categories, is, in many ways, culture specific. Translations and meetings of cultures can go horribly wrong if due care is not displayed in understanding both the sender's intention in relation to the receiver's preconceptions, and culture specific possibilities of understanding content and meaning. Do we then read and understand a text literally before we read and understand it figuratively? Many studies indicate that the answer is no.

Courtesy or its absence is, to a great degree, language and culture specific. Almost nothing general can be stated on this subject, and within the area of courtesy, the meaning of individual words is vacated and complete intentions must be expressed, more or less, obscurely. If these rules are not mastered then language does not

function, and the danger of conflict is imminent. In Danish, for example, it is polite to ask about the abilities of the recipient rather than willingness, when imperatives need to be expressed; for example, *can you reach the salt?* And *are you wearing a watch?* Both speech acts are quasi-imperatives. Give me the salt, and, tell me the time. A quite precise amount of overlap must be created for metaphors, metonymy and courtesy to function – not too much nor too little. We draw on metalinguistic language ability where we demand that the receiver be able to reflect on, and manipulate, language. On the one side is the phonological element, and on the other, the semantic.

Semantic gaps in cultural anchoring

Semantic gaps can be best understood from all the strata from which language is constituted and is used. Language is a living organism under constant development, and it is being continuously influenced by the social and cultural environment in which it is used. Ergo, we always meet language in use, with all forms of verbal interaction. And language dies out when it is not used or re-interpreted. The semantics of language is not a closed, self-propelled, and absolute system with one ultimate truth, but a resource which we scoop out when we use it. Semantic gaps are therefore extra dangerous, because the linguistic resources are thereby constrained and, in turn, trigger more gaps at all language levels included in the interaction. In this connection, the Australian linguist M.A.K. Halliday argues that language is built up from three kinds of meaning, and they are realized simultaneously in a semantic complexity with an *experiential*, an *interpersonal* and a *textual* aspect. These aspects distinguish themselves, precisely by a set of choices in a culturally anchored semiotic system, which falls apart when there are too many gaps, such as, for example, between parallel societies. This leads to the principal question of the range of the semiotic gaps, i.e.:

- (i) How do people use language?
- (ii) How is language organized for use?

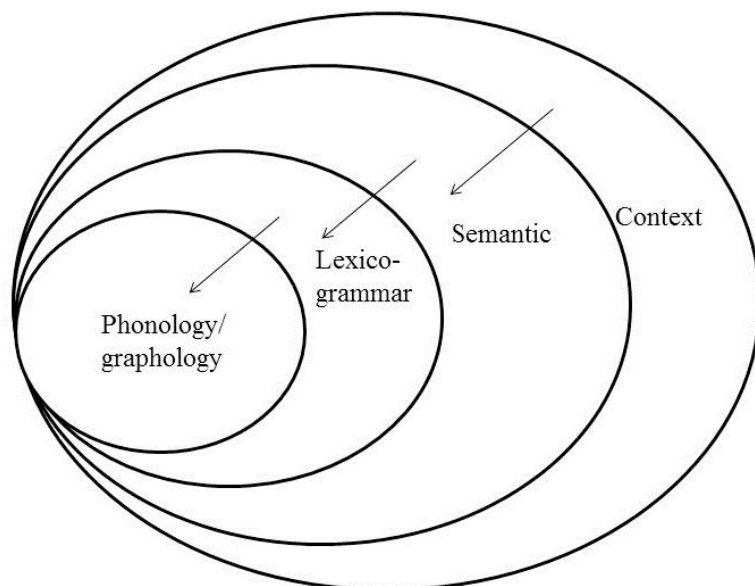
Regarding question (i), people use language to attain culturally appropriate goals, based on what a given genre encompasses of potentials. A novel can tell a story, a drama can outline conflicts, a philosophical text can discuss existential questions, a textbook can provide us with knowledge, and a journalistic text can deliver news from the great big world etc. All of these genres are the result of the cultural contexts in which they are anchored. Some genres will potentially contain more dynamite in those parts of the world that do not celebrate diversity and tolerance, but instead are fixed in a particular existential philosophy. Much has been attempted to limit the exercise of language resources and choices but it appears that this is becoming increasingly difficult in line with technological developments. The gap between an absolutist existentialist interpretation and the real world is growing day by day. Some still claim that the world is flat and the earth is the center of the universe, but the numbers who advocate these views is hardly likely to grow.

Even more than question (i), question (ii) places the focus on the extent of semantic gaps in a given, situational context and interaction. A given culture has specific potentials for a given genre. We feel most secure when a news programme on TV corresponds to our expectations regarding build up, choice of subject, anchor, dress,

word choice etc. and can fill in the semantic gaps ourselves, but someone with an immigrant background is completely unable to crack the code. Instead, they cocoon themselves because, otherwise, they feel in danger and insecure. This is a global phenomenon. Everywhere, it is precisely language resources that swing between something dangerous, or something that is innovative by setting an expression on something that has not been formulated before. Thus, new 'semantic slots' are created. The dynamic and usage of language can be described thus:

- (iii) Language usage is functional
- (iv) Language functions create meaning (semantics)
- (v) Semantics is influenced by the context in which it is included
- (vi) Language usage is a semiotic process in which semantics is created through potentials

Point (vi) indicates that the lack of language tools minimizes the semantic potentials in interaction and leaves gaps. Other forms of expression take over as symbols for content; whether as forms of dress, type of clothing, choice of hairstyle, or use of make-up, for example. Language transforms a potential for action to a semantic potential, as the essence is to create meaning, (point (iv)), either with the aid of an experiential (experience exchange) an interpersonal (between individuals) and/or a textual (through texts) basis. These global metafunctions individually organize a series of semantic dimensions and language layers that can be used for orientation of where we can determine various forms of gaps, which must be anchored in a given context. This can be illustrated thus:



The central stratum in any language is the lexico-grammatical, a language's engine room, where one of language's two content strata, is found. Lexico-grammar constitutes a language's resource to 'put into words'; i.e. express the semantic slots which are realized through a language's grammatical structure and lexis (word choice). When words are lacking for conceptualization, semantic gaps, and language potential, is constrained, and symbols take over, which is a much more dangerous

form of interaction. Lexico-grammar leads into the semantic stratum – the second of language's content strata. Semantics is language's 'pumping station' – many semantic slots give greater capacity and thereby meaning resources, while semantic gaps, have a corresponding constraining effect; a kind of hole in the heart, which starves language of oxygen. When people wish to act in, or reflect on the world, they are provided with possibilities through semantization to slots; known or new. The semantic stratum connects lexico-grammar and the context, which is why the semantic slots, first and foremost, are impinged by the demands that contextual factors set out regarding putting extra-linguistic realities into words. Furthermore here we can identify inappropriate gaps in our language, which either cannot keep up, or are not allowed to be filled in.

Context's meta-linguistic make-up, is determined by the global and local circumstances (situational context) in which a language must function or collapse because of a lack of resources. Three variables have influence on the extent of semantic gaps in the situational context, as set out by Eggins ((1996): 36):

- (vii) Field (= subject choice)
- (viii) Tenor (= relation between sender and receiver)
- (ix) Mode (=method of adduction)

These three variables constitute the choice of metaphor and connotations. Field focuses on a social and cultural situation regarding a language interaction and denotes the semantic-bearing social interactions in the context itself and in the choice of subject. In many contexts, a subject is designated as religious existential philosophy and thus as blasphemous and subject to prohibition and edicts. Here, very many semantic gaps can be found. Field similarly includes those activities which fill in a subject with semantic meaning between inter-acting parties, or which makes them relevant for everyone. Ergo, field focuses on everything that can be communicated, or absence thereof.

Tenor puts the relations between sender and receiver in the centre, with the potential for the interacting parties through a pin pointing of their role functions and role relations, seen in a social and cultural perspective. These could be permanent characteristics for all the interacting relations created between them in a specific situation. Tenor thus focuses on those relations the interacting parties have with one another. In the Danish education system 'open ended' discussions are fundamental to everyone, while a religious philosopher's interpretation of edicts/prohibitions in many cultures constrains a potential for interaction for the receiver. The semantic slots for representations are minimal and not in any way open to debate.

Mode marks the role of language in the interaction as mode is a variable for language potential and special status in a situational context. Put another way, how language, as a whole, is used in a given situation context, is put under the microscope. The internet contains many modes, which is why the net globally is seen by many as dangerous because it is here that it is not possible to impose total prohibitions/edicts. The sending tenor can no longer be totally dominant but must accept semantic slots, for example through an extension of the interaction on the social network.

The three contextual variables are the central factors that represent the social context as semiotic environments in which language contains the realization of semantic intentions and goals. The contextual variables realize the semantic and the lexicogrammatical stratum. Field has its linguistic parallel in the experiential, tenor in the interpersonal and mode in the textual metafunction. The first two metafunctions express experience and inter-subjective interpretations thereof, i.e. areas that need to be put into words. The absence of words triggers semantic gaps which has the consequence that formulating content, for example, through a text or expression, is never achieved. All levels gain significance for how much can be drawn upon when wishing to express oneself on content or point of view.

A number of different cultural and social situational contexts can illustrate these relations regarding semantic gaps:

In a Danish context, the former prime minister, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, during an election campaign, in a statement on the Danish People's Party (a right wing, populist party which had little electoral support at that time) said:

The Danish People's Party will always be beyond the pale

Nyrup's statement never triggered any real discussion such as, for example, *Why that?* His 'mode' made a verbalization which could have put words to the arguments and interim results, impossible. The semantic gaps became too dangerous. His 'field' leads up to such a verbalization because the Danish People's Party draws voters from the Social Democrats, but his 'tenor' polarizes. Many consider that this statement is politically correct and have no inclination to continue the discussion because it would enter into an area of 'touchy' political subjects such as, for example, immigration and integration. It is better to attempt to kill it through silence, also because language lacks the nuanced words that refer to conceptualizations. Instead the media makes it a question of personalities, and thereby shifts the focus.

The right-liberal politician, Søren Pind, when taking up his position as minister for integration and equality, was asked by a journalist, how he understood 'integration of immigrants' and replied, that for him, the aim was not 'integration' but 'assimilation'. 'Integration' was only a step on the road. Søren Pind attempted to open up for further discussion of his 'field' by putting a goal into words through a series of 'modes', from speeches in parliament to interviews. The supporters said 'courageous' and 'bravo' while his political opponents used terms such as 'intolerance' and 'stigmatization' of a particular group of the population. Others thought that that it was a question of religious freedom without however being able to fill in the semantic gaps on why a particular philosophy of life closes itself off.

Art can express semantic gaps that are difficult to define through language alone. In Denmark a young poet, Yahya Hassan, with a Palestinian background, aroused a furore with his collection of poems of the same name. It became the best-selling debut collection in the history of Danish literature, with a run of more than 100,000 copies. In his poems, Hassan critically examines his upbringing which was marked by violence, neglect, and criminality. He puts words to taboo 'fields' against a Muslim cultural background, and puts into words his conceptualizations on social fraud, violence against children, and the lack of integration in Danish society, all intertwined

with religious dogma. As ‘tenor’ Hassan triggered emotions ‘for’ and ‘against’. Some people feel validated, while others are sceptical or become angry, as religion, to them, is dogma with no potential for discussion.

He must now be protected by an extensive security operation and receives death threats and is assaulted in Copenhagen’s main railway station, and in Palestine. The experiential semantic complexity, in religious existential philosophies, is filled in by Hassan with words of great interpersonal impact. The poetic metafunction codes open for the controversial interpretations and identifications, and in this connection, Hassan states in an interview:

I am not on an errand to criticize Islam. My criticism is more a criticism of religion. Those things I criticize Islam for: religious indoctrination, intransigence, and a patent on the truth, are fundamental to all religions. (...)

Previously, this here was local and family business which affected only me and my immediate circle. Then it turned into a public event and then the reactions became violent.

(Berlingske e-newspaper: 7 June 2014)

Yahya Hassan’s poems, with their transformational semantic consequences, display that it demands courage to stand up against these kinds of Fields, Tenors and Modes.

Summary

Language develops continuously and normally incorporates new semantic of the world. But the fast growing media world and the increasing number of immigrants into Europe, has resulted in a normal organic development ending in an imbalance where homogenous cultural areas have been split into multi-cultural, sub-segments. The result of this is that there are semantic gaps at all linguistic levels; theoretical, methodological, and practical. Our cognition has been unable to meet the furious tempo of this development or also, development has been rejected and people have instead retreated into a time long gone, where things were comprehensible, but which is completely unable to encompass the realities of the modern world. Both conditions mean that an analysis of certain subjects’ ‘field’, ‘tenor’ and ‘mode’ and associated communicative metafunctions, clearly indicate that we must either keep quiet and accept that certain fields are taboo, or words must also be applied to new conceptualizations. The future tends to resemble the past: linguistic change takes time.

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