Old people’s adaptation to what is unfamiliar to their schemata

Feten Boubakri
University of Gabes, Tunisia

Abstract

The present research studies the way old people refer to some unfamiliar items like the way they call certain technological devices and some types of food. In this respect, a way is opened to see the relationship which exists between these items and the terms used on the part of old people to express them. In this context, this study shows that once these items are used, old people opt for generating the suitable linguistic structures to them relying on the sensory experience they are exposed to. It is found that the linguistic forms used by old people to refer to the newly known objects are usually influenced by certain feelings which are activated by one of the internal senses whether olfactory, tactile, auditory or mental. Then, old people opt for mapping this internal cognitive experience into the appropriate linguistic form to call these items. As a result, the way old people refer to the newly known items is a subjective process which depends on the way each person internally experiences them.

Key words: Lexeme, semantic meaning, sensory experience, cognitive processes
A great deal of research has been interested in the study of meaning, and linguistic semantics is a discipline which focuses on the study of sentences used by people to express meaning. Cann (1993) says that “a semantic theory should provide an account for the relation between linguistic expressions and what may be called ‘things in the world’ (Cann 1993: 1). Therefore, linguistic expressions are usually used to present extra-linguistic objects. In fact, each linguistic expression expresses a specific state of affairs in the real world; for instance, we can refer to ‘the correspondence theory of truth’ introduced by Cann (1993) which relies on the fact that “a statement in some language is true if, and only if, it corresponds to some state -of-affairs” (Cann 1993: 10). It is noticeable that there exists direct relationship between language and some state of affairs to consider that a specific statement is true. On the other hand, it is undeniable that such a correspondence between words and the world is not always that direct.

In fact, “the correspondence theory of truth” reminds us of De Saussure’s analogy between the signifier and the signified. De Saussure defines the term signifier as the word or the sound image which reflects the signified which is the concept or the meaning indicating the signifier. De Saussure asserts that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary since the signified varies from one language to another. In fact, such an idea has long been criticized due to the fact that there exists some internal links which make the signifier and the signified tightly connected, and the present research aims at proving the existence of some internal connections which tighten the signifier and the signified together in the speech of old people when referring to some technological devices and some types of food. On the basis of this, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is no longer completely arbitrary.

Another view asserts that linguistic expressions are used not only to express the world but more importantly to facilitate communication. In this context, Chierchia and Ginet (1991) say that “we will consider not only what linguistic expressions themselves mean but also what speakers mean in using them” (Chierchia and Ginet 1991: 5). In this context, the semantic meaning of linguistic expressions starts to be oriented towards pragmatic theories (Chierchia and Ginet 1991: 5). Consequently, meaning does not implicate the directed representation of the world through words, but the meaning obtained is a means of communication which reflects the thoughts of speakers and to exchange ideas.

Van Valin and La Polla (1997) admit that human language should be studied in relation to the cognitive processes such as reasoning and conceptualization and in relation to other cognitive systems such as perception and knowledge (Van Valin and La Polla 1997: 11). This view accounts for the perception of the external world through the use of language. Moreover, Fauconnier (1999) says that “language is only the tip of a spectacular cognitive iceberg, and when we engage in any language activity, be it mundane or artistically creative, we draw unconsciously on vast cognitive resources, call up innumerable models and frames, set up multiple connections, coordinate large arrays of information and engage in creative mappings, transfer, and elaborations”. In fact, Fauconnier stresses the relationship between the use of certain linguistic expressions and the cognitive processes taking place after the activation of certain cognitive abilities to percept the world. In fact, the meaning of linguistic expressions and the way they are used to express certain items is worth being studied from a cognitive point of view.
These views provide a variety of perspectives from which we can study the way certain linguistic structures present some facts existing in the real world. Some views admitted by “the correspondence theory of truth” and by De Saussure, opt for asserting the direct correspondence existing between words and the world. Therefore, linguistic structures are used to make a direct reflection of specific state of affairs. A different view stresses the importance of linguistic expressions and what they refer to in the real world to reach a communicative end. More recent views, assert the role of the speaker’s cognitive abilities which intervene with the relationship between linguistic expressions and what they refer to in the real world. In this context, the present research finds it interesting to study the relationship between words and the world from a cognitive perspective. In this respect, it is interesting to relate such a relationship to a variety of internal and external factors.

1. Research problem

With reference to the notion of truth condition, each linguistic form people use expresses life experience as it refers to a specific state of affairs existing in the real world. In this context, it is admitted that there exists a direct relationship between the signified presenting a real item and the signifier which is manifested in the lexeme used to refer to that real object. According to De Saussure, the relationship between the signified and the signifier is arbitrary because there are no internal connections between the signifier and the signified. On the other hand, a closer look at the way Southern Tunisian old people refer to newly known items like some technological devices shows that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is not that arbitrary, but a relationship between them is rooted in the speaker’s internal cognitive abilities which act as mediators between the two. Therefore, we should not gloss over the role of these intermediaries relating the signifier and the signified; for instance, we can refer to the emotional experience old people pass through in order to express linguistically such unfamiliar items recently intruding their life. Through such emotional experiences, made once these items are contacted, old people opt for mapping what they experience in their internal sensory makeup into the suitable linguistic forms. In this context, meaning lies in the act of mapping the external world into the internal feelings which decide about the suitable linguistic form to be used. In order to name an unfamiliar item, old people do not only make a linguistic form to the physical world, but they also describe their internal sensory emotions reacting to that physical world at that specific moment. In fact, old people do not make an objective description of the world, but it is rather a description of the way they experience this world with their internal sensory makeup. In what follows, a variety of examples taken from different conversations with old people are analyzed.

2. Methodology

The first part of this section presents the framework and the second part presents the type of study.

2. 1. Framework

The present research is based on Heritage & Atkinson (1984) Conversational analysis.
2. 1. 1. Conversational Analysis

Conversational analysis studies people’s everyday speech which deals with everyday problems. One interest of conversational analysis is to see the way interaction taking place in society and its analysis leads to a variety of insights about the influence of a specific social context on the way people interact. In this respect, Heritage & Atkinson (1984) say that “The central goal of conversation analytic research is the description and explication of the competences that ordinary speakers use and rely on in participating in intelligible, socially organized interaction” (Heritage & Atkinson 1984:1). In this context, the present research shares the same tendency of explaining the competences which influence people’s interactions in a specific social context. In this respect, a variety of detailed utterances taken from different conversations are used to study the way Southern Tunisian old people present the world with words, and more specifically the way they refer to unfamiliar items.

2. 2. Type of study

This study is a conversational analysis with a focus on turns taken by old people.

2. 2. 1. Corpus description

This research is interested with the study of different conversations between old people speaking about different issues. A number of these conversations are between an old person and an adult or a teenager. These conversations are available in the appendices.

2. 2. 2. Selection criteria

This research is interested with the interpretation of different conversations where the two speakers or one of them is an old person. These conversations reflect the spontaneous speech of old people and this provides the study with credible findings.

2. 2. 3. Research instruments

Note taking is used as a way to collect data, and to recall the oral conversations to be studied.

2. 2. 4. Procedure

The conversations are divided into different types according to the topics they deal with. Each conversation is analyzed to show the competences ordinary old people use to refer to a number of unfamiliar items.

3. Examples showing the way adults call a number of technological devices

At such a late stage of life, old people are obliged to cope with technology which dominates their life. Throughout their childhood terms belonging to the field of technology did not exist, so it is only now that adults start to acquire these terms, when the acquisition of
their mother tongue had already been finished. Consequently, neither the acquisition of these terms nor the time of acquiring them is going to be a natural process. In this context, the present research studies the way Southern Tunisian old people refer to a variety of newly known technological devices.

*Example 1: Air conditioning

Usually, children and middle-aged people refer to the “air conditioning” using the French word “climatiseur” or the Arabic word “مبرد،”， and these terms are acquired from the environment throughout their childhood. On the other hands, such an item did not exist in the childhood of a number of old people, that is why some of them refer to it now using the word “الصقع = cold”.

An old man met in the bus station wants to enter the bus, but he wants to check if there is an air-conditioning there, so he asked the bus driver. Therefore, instead of saying “is there an air-conditioning in this bus? = هالكار فيها مبرد = هالكار فيها الصقع”， he said “is there cold in this bus? = الصقع الکار فيها ها”. In order to refer to the air-conditioning, the man did not call it using its conventional name, but he rather describes the emotional experience he passes through whenever the air-conditioning is opened. This process is manifested through the use of the word “الصقع” because the old man used to feel cold whenever the air-conditioning is opened. It is important here to show that the relationship between the signifier “الصقع” and the signified “air-conditioning” is not arbitrary. With reference to De Saussure’s view, we can admit that there exist some internal connections which relate the signifier and the signified. Therefore, these connections are manifested through the emotional experience of feeling cold, and this feeling enhances the old man’s use of the lexeme “الصقع = cold” instead of the lexeme “air-conditioning”. Consequently, the relationship between the item and word used to express it is neither direct nor arbitrary. It is important to acknowledge the importance of the speaker’s internal feelings which function as mediators between the internal sensory makeup of the speaker and the linguistic word chosen to express the item. Being exposed to a specific item in the real world, the old man opts for mapping the existing sensory experience he passes through whenever the air-conditioning is opened onto the convenient linguistic expression “cold = الصقع”. It is worth being said that the old man calls the air-conditioning in a funny way relying on his internal sensory experience whenever the air-conditioning is opened.

*Example 2: personal computer

In order to speak about personal computers, the majority of old people use different names like the word “taktaka = طكطاكة”, “box of learning = صندوق القراءة” and “albarbach = البرایش”. The majority of our grand-mothers did not know personal computers in their childhood. Looking at people using this strange machine now, old women try to call this item from their own point of view. In this context, they opt for using the word “taktaka= طكطاكة” as a signifier to the signified “personal computer”. In this example, old women rely on the tactile experience they pass through and this experience plays the role of the mediator between the signifier and the signified. To refer to this item, old women attempt to describe the tactile sensations taking place whenever they touch the keys of the personal computer. Consequently, the use of the word “taktaka= طكطاكة” depends on that specific internal
sensory experience these old women pass through when they touch the keys of this item. It is important to say that this item is called on the part of old people in a ridiculous way.

*Example 3: Radio

Referring to the radio, a number of old people opt for using the word “الجو = joy”. Old women used to use the expression “حلى الجو = Open the radio, please” instead of saying “حلى الراديو ترى = Open the radio, please”. As a result of what they hear, these old women use the word “joy = الجو” due to the influence of such machine on their auditory stimulus. Consequently, the auditory and emotional experiences they felt are combined together resulting in the use of the signifier “الجو = joy” to express the signified “radio”. Initially, a mapping between the item radio and the feeling it leaves on their internal sensory make up takes place, and at a second stage these old women attempt to map this emotional experience onto the suitable linguistic structure presenting this item. In fact, it is obvious that the process of presenting items existing in the real world is a complex process and the relation between the two is not neither direct nor arbitrary. In this context, old people usually pass through complex cognitive processes whenever such unfamiliar items are used and then an attempt is made to choose the suitable lexeme for them.

*Example 4: internet and rooms of chat

Internet is a strange term for the majority of old people now let alone the word ‘skype’, though the fact that old people use rooms of chat daily to speak with their relatives living abroad. To express this item, the majority of old people try to simplify the term «skype» according to their own cognitive abilities, and what is meant here is according to the existing schemata in their mental makeup. We can refer to the example of an old woman who asked another old woman who recently get access to this service saying “ديتو وتشبحو = did you start watching?”. In fact, the second woman understood the question, and she answered conveniently. The old woman who asked the question uses the verb “تشبحو = see” to refer to the signified ‘skype’. In this respect, it is possible to refer to Piaget’s theory which studies the way children adapt to their environment, showing that this process is mastered by the mental organizations known as schemata used by children in order to present the world. In fact, this theory is also applicable to adults who start to acquire the language of technology at such a late age. In this context, ‘skype’ as an item coming from the environment, is accommodated on the part of the old women with a pre-existing schema usually consisting in the act of seeing people in television, and this exists in their internal mental makeup. In fact, the woman refers to the item ‘skype’ making use of the visual sensory experience she passes through whenever internet enables her to see someone living faraway. Consequently, the old woman activates her cognitive abilities to name the item ‘skype’, and this takes place in a ridiculous way.

4. Examples of the way adults call some fruits

South Tunisia is not a suitable environment in which a banana tree can grow, so this fruit is most of the time imported. In the past such commercial transactions were not that frequent, so it is only recently that old people start to consume this type of fruits regularly. In what follows, there is a description of the way old people refer to this type fruit.
*Example 5: Banana

In the dinner, a grand -mother says to her daughter “ترا اعطيني هكا الي ما يديرش الحس” = give the one which does not make a sound”. The woman uses the verb phrase “الي ما يديرش الحس” = which does not make a sound” to refer to “banana”. In fact, the old woman uses this complex verb phrase to refer to the simple noun “banana”. She describes the process she passes through when she eats this fruit. The old woman ultimately describes the internal feelings taking place when she eats a banana, as she highlights the absence of any auditory mechanism once such fruit is eaten. Since eating a banana does not leave a sound, the old woman uses the suitable linguistic expression depending on this sensory experience. We can notice here that the relationship between the signified “banana” and the signifier “الي ما يديرش الحس” = which does not make a sound” is not arbitrary, but we have to account for the internal sensory experience the woman passes through which dictate the use of this specific lexeme and not the conventional one usually used by younger people.

5. How adults call some types of clothes

In the past, women did not use to wear trousers. Once exposed to such experience they start to call this type of clothes in a specific way.

*Example 6: trousers

An old woman speaks with her daughter, who asks her to try on her jeans, says “ما نلبسش حاجة تشقني على ثنين” = I don’t wear something cutting me into two”. The old woman refers trousers using the expression “حاجة تشقني على ثنين” =something cutting me into two ». The woman does not directly use the simple noun phrase “trousers”, but she rather uses a complex noun phrase describing the tactile experience resulting in wearing trousers. Consequently, it is the internal tactile experience which enhances the woman’s use of this specific linguistic form to refer to the signified trousers.

6. How old people refer to black people

Old people who are still influenced by slavery, opt for using a variety of structures to refer to blacks. The majority of them still call black people “عبد = slaves”. In what follows, a similar example carrying the same funny tone is presented.

*Example 7: black people

One day, two old men entered the bus, but seats are not available. One of them shared the seat with a black boy. Once the boy left, the other man came to him and says:

“شبيك قعدت مع الضلمة” = why did you sit with darkness?”.

To refer to the black boy, the old man uses the word “ضلمة = darkness”. Though the relationship between the signifier “ضلمة = darkness” and the signified “الولد الأسود” = black boy “looks ambiguous and arbitrary, but it is not the case. In fact, the old man uses the signifier “ضلمة = darkness” which expresses the mental, visual and emotional experiences he passes through when his mental makeup starts to look for the suitable linguistic expression to refer to
the black boy. The process of mapping these internal sensory processes onto the suitable linguistic form shows that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is not arbitrary. It is rather manipulated by some internal and external factors. Therefore, the man’s internal mental and sensory experiences in conjunction with the external social and political contexts work together to enhance the use of the subjective expression “ضلمة = darkness” and not the conventional one to refer to the black boy.

These examples show that meaning lies in the way things are referred to by old people. Moreover, the majority of them refer to unfamiliar items by describing the sensory effect such items leave on their biological and cognitive perceptions. After contacting certain items, a variety of cognitive processes are activated. As a result, old people rely on their internal sensory experience and on a number of external factors to choose the suitable linguistic forms to express such unfamiliar items.

7. Conclusion and implication

The study of the different techniques used by old people to call different items recently intruding their life, shows that old people usually depend on their internal sensory experiences which decide about the suitable linguistic structures used to name specific unfamiliar items. It is true that this finding is not representative enough, but it is also undeniable that this phenomenon is worth being studied whenever it is noticed.
References


Online references


Appendix A

Example 1

- الرجل "السلام عليكم"
- سائق الحافلة "السلام"
- الرجل "هالكار فيها الصقع"
- سائق الحافلة "ضاحكاً أي فيها حاجة"  

Example 2

- البنت "يسرى وينها"
- الجدة "هونيها في بيتها شادة الطكطاكة مناعها"
- البنت "تو نشوفرها"

Example 3

- "ندتيني" الابن
- الجد "اي ترى حلي الجو"
- الابن "باهي"

Example 4

- الامرأة الأولى "أشنوا بديتو تسبحو"
- الامرأة الثانية "أي بكري حكيت مع سامي ولدي"

Example 5

- الجدة "ترى مدبله هكا الي ما يديرش الحس"
- البنت "خوذي صحة"
Example 6

- البنت "ترى البسي الدجين متاعي ماما".
- الام "الطفل غالبا ما نلبس حاجة تشقتني على اثنين".

Example 7

- الرجل الأول "نبيك قعدت مع الصلمة".
- الرجل الثاني "ما فماش بكلاص بذاك عاد".
Appendix B

Example 1
- The old man “hello”
- The bus driver “hello, can I help you?”
- The old man “Is there cold in this bus?”
- The bus driver “(laughing) yes, Sir”

Example 2
- The daughter “did you see Yosra”
- The grandmother “she is in her room holding her taktaka”
- The daughter “ok, I will see her”

Example 3
- The son “did you call me?”
- The grandfather “open the joy, please”
- The son “ok”

Example 4
- The first old woman “did you start watching”
- The second old woman “yeah, I have just spoken with my son Sami”

Example 5
- The grandmother “give me the one which does not make a sound”
- The daughter “ok”

Example 6
- The daughter “try on my jeans, mum please”
- The mother «No, I don’t wear something cutting me into two »

Example 7
- The first man « why did you sit with darkness”
- The second man « no vacant seat beside you »