

THE BABELIST THEORY OF MEANING

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delivered on.....

By

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Preamble

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, it gives me pleasure to stand before you and the academic community of this citadel of learning to bare my mind on a very controversial issue in my area of specialization – semantics, an aspect of the field of Linguistics. My topic of discussion ‘Meaning’ has generated a lot of debate among linguists and non-linguists all over the world; so much that specialists in the field have deliberately, ignored discussions on it, sometimes to avoid being called names or placed on the academic dissection table.

This situation notwithstanding, our topic today has given me a special challenge as far back as the 1990’s when I chose to specialize in Semantics, the study of meaning. It is for me therefore, a fulfillment of a dream, to express my own views and observations on this thorny issue of the meaning of meaning.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The definition of language is fraught with many varieties by linguists. We shall look at some of them in relation to our discussion. Language is a structured system of arbitrary vocal sounds and sequences of sounds which is used or can be used in interpersonal communication by an aggregation of human beings and which rather exhaustively catalogues the things, events and processes in human environment (Carroll 1953).

Language is one of the most important aspects of human attributes and its development into a defined instrument of expression and communication is to my mind one of man's greatest achievements. Language has to do with every means of communication in which thought and feelings are symbolized in order to convey meaning. It involves writing, speaking, and even gestures including all types of paralinguistic's devices.

Crystal (2008:265) sees language as the concrete act of speaking, writing or signing. He points out that there are other uses of the term language one of which is in reference to competence and performance. The former focuses attention on the native-speakers' ability to produce and understand sentences which are appropriate to the context in which they occur. This is as opposed to performance which refers to the actual use of language in specific utterances.

In generative grammar (see Chomsky 1957) competence has to do with abstract rule systems which a native speaker internalizes and uses to produce an infinite number of sentences in his language. Performance, on the other hand, is liable to blemishes associated with certain factors such as psychological, biological or social limitations or circumstances. These can manifest in the form of slips, memory lapses, environmental conditions, etc. Language is not contacted, learned or spoken in a vacuum. As Harris (1990) pointed out, language is first and foremost, a social process and its utilization imply social understanding and a variety of social skills.

The rapid development of different aspects of language studies has led to a widespread and growing interest in the activities of linguists, who at each stage have

sought to provide solutions or answers to new problems. Even though certain areas of language studies have become so familiar that they have continued to be expanded in terms of analysis and discoveries, there are others that are yet to lend themselves to definite definitions, answers and explanations. One of such areas is Semantics.

1.2 SEMANTICS AS A BRANCH OF LINGUISTIC STUDY

Most linguists shy away from semantics – the study of meaning. This is so because, they agree that the separation between syntax (the study of phrasal and sentence structure) and semantics (the study of meaning) cannot stand the test of time. In fact, Crystal (1976) contends that the artificiality of an abrupt boundary between syntax and semantics has become apparent. In what we may call an extension of the above view, Palmer (1977:44), commenting on the relationship between Semantics and Syntax writes:

... Some books on Semantics have devoted a great deal of space to investigation of meaning of what is essentially grammatical characteristics of language.

Implicit in the above view is the belief that it is possible to uncover the syntactic characteristic of any linguistic entity using a semantic approach. We are aware of the fact that of the three levels of linguistic investigation, phonology, syntax and semantics, the latter has generated a lot of controversy in recent times. Some linguists have even described it as a field where angels fear to tread. For this reason, any linguistic analysis based on semantics is usually skeptically received due to the controversy surrounding the description of what meaning should be.

Fordor, (1980:1) taking up the various shades of opinion with regard to meaning states:

It has been held impossible, trivial, the salvation of mankind, a harmless hobby – at various times by a variety of disciplines. However, all linguists agree that it is an aspect of language study and should be investigated.

If therefore, semantics, the study meaning is recognized as a branch of linguistic science, things must begin to change. The study of semantics is becoming popular and is being taken seriously as the study of phonology and syntax. To explain this present trend, Fodor, (1980:1) opines:

This may be due in part to the judgment that at least the fundamentals of syntactic and phonological structures are now understood so that attention can carefully be directed somewhere.

... the growing interest in semantics is attributed at least as much to the realization that further progress in syntactic theory demands some understanding of semantics.

The above observation has been manifested in several works now existing in the area of semantics. For many linguists, the objective of investigating meaning is to provide a component of grammar which can stand in line with other components such as syntax and phonology. But is this possible? Unfortunately, these two have been investigated to the point of almost perfection, whereas Semantic study is still trailing timidly behind. Bloomfield's (1942:8) assertion that it is not possible to place semantic analysis on the same scale of rigour as other descriptions of language, discouraged a generation of linguists from embarking on the study of meaning.

1.3 PLACE OF SEMANTICS IN LINGUISTICS

The term semantics has existed since the seventh century when philosophers used it to denote the science of prediction of fate on the basis of weather signs. A century ago, the Larouse's French dictionary defined 'semantique' as a science of directing troops with the help of signals. As far back as 1883, a French classical philologist Michal Breal, (1882 – 1915) published his work in which he asserts as follows:

The study where we invite the reader to follow us is of such a new kind that it has never been given a name. Indeed, it is on the body and form of words that most linguists have

exercised their acumen: the laws governing changes in meaning, the choice of new expressions, the birth and death of idioms, have been left in the dark or have only been casually indicated. Since this study, no less than phonetics and morphology, deserve to have a name, we shall call it semantics, (from the Greek verb 'schinainein' to signify) i.e. "the science of meaning"

The above writer wrote as early as the 1880's when researchers started bothering about the concept of meaning. Linguistic study in the 19th century was concentrated on the historical study of Indo-European languages. This period of Linguistics was championed by German scholars. The discovery of Sanskrit by European scholars formed the bedrock of this development in Linguistic study.

Plato and Aristotle discussed meaning in relation to words as individual elements, and Aristotle emphasized the semantic minimality and the independence of words. Indian linguists debated the question of the supremacy of the word against that of the sentence. A group of these linguists tended to lean towards the approach of Western analysts who stress the fact that sentences are built up of words, each of which as individual meaningful entities, contributes to the ultimate meaning of the sentence.

However, in a different view, particularly associated with Bhartrhari the author of *Vakyapadiya* (c. fifth-seventh century A.D), the sentence could be considered as a single undivided utterance "conveying its meaning 'in a flash', as a unity, notwithstanding subsequent analysis into its component coloured shape (Robins 1997). Given the concept of the word unit, Robins contends that sentences can be identified as one-word sentences or as many-word sentences, but for the speaker and hearer they are primarily single sentence unities, words and words meaning largely the creation of linguists and self-conscious speakers trying to analyze and classify sentence meanings in terms of smaller components.

Therefore going by Bhartrhari's postulation the sentence "nye ha ngwngwq" (Give them pepper soup) is not understood in terms of a sequence of words put

together because the full meaning of the sentence which includes the idea of giving, can only be grasped together with the meaning of all the component words including 'ngwqngwq' (peppers soup). Therefore a listener who does not know the meaning of ngwqngwq cannot by implication understand the meaning of the entire sentence. The listener understands the sentence in part i.e. give them (something) + concrete. This still boils down to understanding all the components or constituents of the utterance.

The debate about the semantic relation between a sentence and its component words is still raging. Some believe that sentences are by and large more than the sum of their juxtaposed words. The Western tradition tended to regard words as individual minimal bearers of meaning but see the sentence as the product of the juxtaposition of words in specific pattern.

Malinowski (1935) was of the opinion that "isolated words are in fact only linguistic figments, the products of an advanced linguistic analysis". This study partially leans towards the above argument after all, it is ultimately the words of a language that are arranged, rearranged, shuffled and reshuffled to build sentences. It is also this arranging and rearranging of words to build larger linguistic structures that is referred to as syntax.

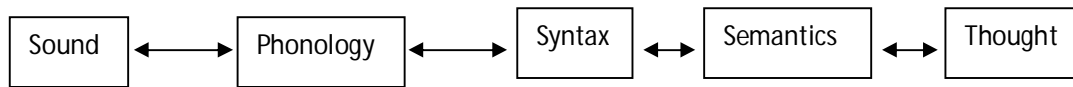
Still in reaction to the debate on semantics and the supremacy of words over sentences Robins (1997:176) says:

An inevitable problem in any linguistic thought is the relation between the perceived utterances, spoken and written, of a language and language itself, that is to say, what an individual speaker utters or writes on a particular occasion and in particular context, or the inherent competence in the language possessed by a native speaker and described by the linguist in terms of units, categories, and rules. Langue and parole, abstraction and exponent emic and etic unit, form and substance, are all examples of recent attempts to compass and express this relation.

The above author rightly asserts that it is a necessary corrective against the typical Western tendency to concentrate semantic enquires on the word as wholly independent unit only subsequently put in sentences.

For many linguists, the objective of studying semantics is to attempt to set up a model of grammar which can compare with other models of language studies such as phonology and syntax. Many linguistic analysts tried to represent what the model would be like. To achieve this, they had used boxes to represent the idea, thus,

Figure 1 Components of Grammar



If we take the above diagram for what it is, we might be tempted to believe that meaning starts at a particular level of linguistic description. Saeed (2007:9) believes that "... meaning is a product of all linguistic levels. Changing one phoneme for another, one verb ending for another or one word order for another will produce differences of meaning".

Cognitive grammarians as represented by Ronald Langacker (1987) see semantics as being a part of the inquiry into cognition. They are of the view that there is no separation of linguistic knowledge from general thinking or cognition. This is as opposed to the views of such scholars as Jerry Fodor (1983) or Noam Chomsky (1988) who see linguistic behaviour as another part of the general cognitive abilities which allow learning, reasoning, etc. Chomsky (1988) for example writing on language and cognition, is of the view that knowledge of linguistic structures and rules forms an autonomous module, independent of other mental processes of attention, memory and reasoning. He therefore tries to prove that different levels of linguistic analysis such as phonology, syntax and semantics, form independent modules. This means that one can discuss syntactic principles without reference to semantic content. This study is of the opinion that this is an over assumption.

Chomsky's 'famous' grammatical structure "colorless green ideas sleep furiously" which he himself agrees has no meaning, therefore cannot represent language since it does not fulfill one of the characteristics of language which is to communicate or inform. We opine that any utterance that does not communicate cannot be described as an aspect of language. This is so because when we talk of language our mind is drawn to communication. The above "syntactically fulfilled" structure is therefore not in line with what language is supposed to do. Ndimele (1999:5) rightly observes as follows:

... no linguist has been able to provide a precise and accurate definition of meaning. Most of the time we hear people say that a particular linguistic unit has or has no meaning, or certain linguistic units have the same meaning, share a central meaning, have different meanings, etc, but it is not clear to us what sort of thing or entity that meaning is. To define a particular word, we often end up using other words in that definition.

Because of the unstable nature of meaning, past analysts expressed doubts about describing something which is not directly observable. On account of this Bloomfield (1933) stated that meaning is but a linguistic substitute for the basic stimulus-response analysis of human behaviour. In his classical example, he describes the behavior of a hungry being, Jill. When she is hungry, (stimulus) and sees an apple (another stimulus), she picks it up and eats it (response). However, stimuli and responses need not be real-life states of affairs and action. They can be substituted for by language expressions (see *Ontological semantics and the study of meaning* (2004:4). Thus, in the situation above, Jill may substitute a linguistic response for her action by telling Jack that she is hungry or that she wants the apple. This message becomes Jack's linguistic stimulus and he responds with a real-life action. Bloomfield does not utterly reject the concept of meaning. However, he defines it in such a way that the only methodology of discovering and describing the meaning of a particular word is by observing any common features of the situations in which this word is uttered. (Dillon 1977).

Bloomfield's pronouncement that semantic investigation cannot be placed on the same pedestal or rigour as other levels of linguistic description served as one of the major reasons for the apparent neglect of studies in this area. We must, however recognize dozens of works based on semantics by linguists notably those by Chomsky (1957, 1965, 1968b, 1972a, 1972b, 1988) Katz, J. J. (1972, 1987), Jackendoff, R. (1972, 1983, 1990), Nwaozuzu, G. I. (1991), Leech, G. (1971, 1981), Lehrer, A. (1974), Lyons, J. (1963, 1977 in 2 vol.), Martin R. M. (1987), Palmer, F. R. (1981), de Swart, H. (1998), Ndimele O. (1999), Fillmore & Alkins (2000), Cruse (2004), Plag (2003), Saeed (2007), etc. The trend has continued with each author trying as best as he/she could to resolve the problem of the meaning of meaning. Some have proposed some theories that could help solve the problem. A few of these theories are discussed in the section that follows. Some of these theories however, suffered deadly blows as soon as they were 'born'.

2.0. SOME THEORIES OF MEANING

Since the concept of meaning is very illusive, many analysts in various fields of study have tried to see to what extent they could, through some known characteristics of language, grasp the meaning of meaning. Scholars such as philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists, logicians, etc have been accused of not giving the study of meaning the prominent position it deserves until very recently (Ndimele, 1999:1). We have earlier discussed the reason for this sorry situation and it hinges on the nature of the subject - meaning.

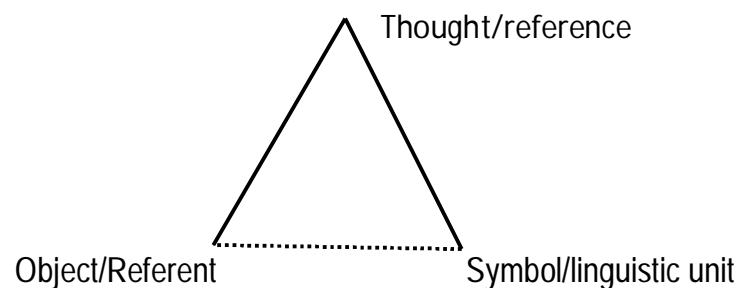
As soon as linguists entered the 'race' they tried to proffer theories that may help in unraveling the mystery behind the problem posed by defining meaning. This was done by the proposition of several theories some of which are discussed below.

2.1. THE REFERENTIAL THEORY

The referential theory of meaning is one of the earliest theories that tried to explain what this concept means. It was propounded by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards (1923) in a book titled *The meaning of meaning*. In their propositions, they maintained

that the meaning of any expression is the entity or object to which such expression refers in the real world. They referred to such object as the 'referent'. In their analysis Ogden and Richards argued that there is no link between expressions and the objects (referents) to which they refer. For them, the connection between a linguistic entity and its referent is only possible through thought. They demonstrated this using a semiotic triangle.

FIG. II. SEMIOTIC TRIANGLE



The broken base is used to illustrate the argument that there is no direct link between a linguistic unit and the object to which it refers.

The above authors listed some definitions of the term 'meaning' some of which are:

1. An intrinsic property of something.
2. Other words related to that word in a dictionary.
3. The connotations of a word
4. The thing to which the speaker of that word refers.
5. The thing to which the speaker of that word should refer
6. The thing to which the speaker of that word believes himself to be referring.
7. The thing to which the hearer of that word believes is being referred to.

It is pertinent to note that the above dimensions of the term 'meaning' vary and therefore none can stand for the meaning of meaning. Again about six out of the seven definitions given above refer to the notion 'thing' or 'something'. This is problematic in the analysis

of what meaning should really be because the term 'thing' or 'something' is usually associated with + concrete entity. We do know that uncountable linguistic entities are – concrete and therefore cannot be referred to as 'thing'. Nevertheless, the various definitions refer to many ways in which meaning can be seen.

Taking up some of these definitions Pushpinders and D. V. Jindal (2010:142 – 44) try to look at the different aspects of meaning such as:

- (a) Logical or denotative meaning which is the literal meaning of a word which indicates the concept to which the word refers. This is sometimes referred to as 'semant'
- (b) The connotative meaning, which is the additional meaning that a concept carries.
- (c) The social meaning that has to do with the meaning that a word or phrase conveys about circumstance of its use.
- (d) The thematic meaning which is communicated by the way in which a speaker organized his message in terms of focus and emphasis.

2.2. THE MENTALIST THEORY OF MEANING

This theory tries to improve on the referential theory and is associated with S. Glucksberg and J. Danks. In their work titled Experimental Psycholinguistics (1925:50) they assert:

The set of possible meanings of any given word is the set of possible feelings, images, ideas, concepts, thought and inferences that a person might produce when that word is heard.

The above scholars are of the view that meaning of a word or expression is the mental image or idea of the word or expression that is formed in the mind of the speaker or hearer when such expression or word is heard. Glucksberg and Danks in their definition of meaning cleverly dodged the definition of meaning that is based on the basis of physical images because of obvious problems that is associated with the term 'physical'. However they ran into a different problem which has to do with the idea of basing the

meaning of a word or expression on the existence of mental images as such functional words like 'but', 'so', 'if' etc may not be associated with any mental image.

2.3. THE COMPONENTIAL THEORY OF MEANING

This is a theory that tries to give an account of word meaning. It is based on the view that the total meaning of a word can be decomposed into its basic components. Each component of meaning is expressed by a feature symbol with a + or – mark to indicate the presence or absence of a particular feature. For example

Man is expressed as

- + HUMAN
- + ADULT
- +MALE

Woman as

- + HUMAN
- +ADULT
- MALE

Boy as

- +HUMAN
- ADULT
- +MALE

While girl is

- +HUMAN
- ADULT
- MALE etc.

The componential theory of meaning has been criticized in two ways The First has to do with the identification of semantic primitive which has been attacked from both philosophical and psychological angles. (See Fodor, 1970, Fodor et al. 1980). The above works stress that these semantic components are simply a variation of, and equivalent to, the necessary and sufficient conditions approach to word meaning. Secondly, it has been argued that it is impossible to apply the componential theory to the description of all types of words especially functional or grammatical words such as 'if', 'but' 'so', 'with',

'in', etc. The theory cannot be applied to sentence meaning. There are other shortcomings which cannot be handled in this write-up.

2.4. THE USE OR CONTEXTUAL THEORY OF MEANING

Not satisfied with the theories discussed above, a German analyst L. Wittgenstein proposed the Use or Contextual Theory of Meaning. He is of the opinion that it is wrong to regard meaning as entities. He rather opines that the meaning of any linguistic expression, be it word or sentence is determined by the context in which it is used.

Another aspect of the contextual theory is the one which deals with the meaning of words and sentences not as isolated entities but as related to situations of occurrence and use. One such theory is the Field Theory propounded by Trier. It explains the vocabulary or lexicon of a language as a system of interrelated networks or semantic field. (See Pushpinder Syal and D. V. Jindal 2010), hence words that are interrelated may belong to the same semantic field e.g. chair, stool, table, belong to the same field – that of furniture. Semantic field is defined by Finegan, E. (2012:542) 6th edition, as a set of words with an identifiable semantic affinity. Other contextual theories deal with the context of use of words and sentences by the speaker of a language. On this issue Firth (1957) says, "Language is only meaningful in the context of situation. It is on this premise that linguists tried to establish the link between syntax and meaning-in-context situation (see Halliday's (1978) functional approach). Thus the king died' is grammatical but can only fulfill its semantic function if and only if there is a king.

2.5. GENERATIVE THEORY OF MEANING

With the advent of transformational – Generative grammar which came on board with Chomsky's *Syntactic structures* (1957) and later *Aspects of the theory of syntax* (1965) another theory of meaning was proposed. The generative theory is based on the notion that the deep structure of a sentence and the meaning of words used in the structure represent the total meaning of such a sentence. At the level of deep structure,

lexical items are inserted into syntactic forms, with the application of 'selectional restrictions' and concepts such as subject and object are identified.

Generative theory of meaning seeks to link meaning with syntax and phonetics through a set of transformations from deep structure to surface structure. In this model, restrictions are placed at the deep structure level concerning the choice of certain grammatical items in relation to other grammatical items. An example is the rule which indicates whether a verb is transitive or intransitive. The sentence 'Ada laughed' can be generated but not 'Ada loves', unless there is another noun phrase.

Even though the generative theory of meaning achieved a lot by using both the deep structure and the surface structure to arrive at some meaning, however meaning is more than what is contained in the deep level of syntactic structures. The theory is incapable of arriving at the meaning of such structures as metaphors for example.

2.6. THE TRUTH-CONDITION THEORY OF MEANING

The above theory stems from the belief that sentences have meaning As Leech (1983:73) says:

Many semanticists today assume that the main purpose of semantics is to explain that primary, conceptual aspect of meaning called 'conceptual' or 'logical' meaning, and that in particular, we have to account for certain semantic categories and relationships which apply to sentences: synonymy, entailment, contradiction, semantic anomaly, etc. These may be taken to be intuitively 'given'. They can be called BASIC STATEMENTS... because semantics has to explain them, by constructing theories from which they can be deduced.

We have to understand that for the above theory (truth-conditional) to reflect what meaning is really all about, our procedure for checking the truth value of sentences we hear, must be a reliable yard stick for doing so. As Saeed (2007:305) rightly puts it,

... Our procedures for checking the truth value of a sentence must reflect the compositionality of meaning. If this is done correctly, then we will have shown something of how the constituents of a sentence contribute to the truth value of the whole sentence.

The above author uses three basic types of sentence namely, a single statement, a compound sentence with \square 'and', and sentences with the universal and existential quantifiers, \forall and \exists to illustrate what he proposed. In spite of this, linguistics has not supplied an absolute answer to what should be the truth value of a sentence.

Whatever is regarded as truth should not be liable to argument nor a shift of stand. It must be observed scientifically or else it could be faulted anytime, anywhere. Again, if semantic truth is a reality, why should we have ambiguous sentences, entailment, inconsistency, absurdity, contradiction, synonymy, etc. Pushpinder and Jindal (2010: 153) have this to say

The basic statement of a logical proposition is either TRUE or FALSE. Its truth or falsity is dependent or conditioned upon the truth or falsity of other statements.

The above statement supports our belief that we cannot, categorically, as in other areas of linguistics, verify scientifically what is a true or false sentence. This is not to say that there is nothing like truth and falsity but we have to be very careful not to assume that the analysis of what is truth and False can be subjected to the same scholastic evidence as we observe in phonology and syntax. Hence our proposition of an alternative theory.

2.7. THE PROTOTYPE THEORY (PT)

This theory dates back to the era of Aristotle and is based on a model called 'necessary and sufficient conditions' (NSC). The model tries to identify a set of necessary conditions which a category must fulfill to qualify as representing such category. Hence, 'man' is defined by three conditions of being human, male and adult. Each of these categories is necessary for the entity 'man' to represent exactly what it is.

If any of these categories is missing then the entity cannot be 'man'. NSC model has been used to categories such things as colours, birds, furniture, fruits, clothings etc. (See Lo_bner, 2002: 174 – 200).

PT faced so many challenges as not every lexical category can be subjected to NSC test. Lo_bner mentions a few of the weaknesses. He writes,

- A category may have prototypes, but they need not be reference points for categorization.
- Graded structure is not necessarily linked with graded membership.
- Category membership is not necessarily a matter of similarity to the prototype.
- Category membership may be a matter of necessary conditions as assumed in the NSC model.

We can see that there is no easy way of arriving at the meaning of words and sentences. Every expression has at least one meaning while others may have more than one. We also see that understanding a word or sentence depends on the speaker and the hearer both of which may not agree on each other's interpretation. We have observed the various problems encountered by trying to pin down the meaning of linguistic units. The question is, why is it that of all the branches of linguistics, one has defied prompt analysis, with the result that scholars are discouraged from patronizing its study. This is the question this study tries to address.

3.0. THE BABELIST THEORY

3.1. INTRODUCTION

During the scholastic period, we see linguistic topics being handled by different researchers whose main concern was not linguistic science so to speak. Linguistics later came up as an observable scientific subject which does not have to rely on assumption. A need then arose for thorough investigations into the intricacies of all aspects of language, including meaning. The later as has been observed, has proved to be

problematic in subjecting itself to systematic and scientific analysis. At the phonological level, the analysts found no problem in decoding an “unmeaningful” (a sound which does not exist in a language) sound segment in a given language. In the same token a native speaker’s competence will enable him know when an “unmeaningful word is uttered in his language. But at the syntactic level, the concept of the word ‘meaning’ starts getting confusing. Hence the existence of such phenomena as, ambiguity, presupposition, entailment, etc in language.

Language is all about meaning. There would be no language if there was no need to make ourselves understood. Therefore, the whole essence of language is meaning but this objective has been fraught with problems starting with the issue of the existence of different languages each of which becomes meaningless to those who do not speak it.

3.2. THE CONCEPT OF BABELISM

Many theories and reasons have been deduced for the existence of different languages which are mutually unintelligible. Maffi (1998:12) says that among the Acoma Pueldo Indians of New Mexico, some religious traditions believe that a diversity of languages and cultures is a good thing, as the mother goddess Latiku causes people to speak different languages so that it will not be easy for them to quarrel.

Among the Igbo of South Eastern Nigeria, the linguistic diversity among the peoples of the world is explained by the myth which says that the many wives of a hunter – *Xrxukwu* used to elude each time he had intimate conversation with his concubine *Qy[mma* and planned against this. Worried about this situation, he consulted a diviner who gave him some charms which he used on his wives that made them no longer understood neither his (*Xmxukwu*) speech nor one another’s speech. However each of them was only understood by her children and of course, by the husband.

The story continued that as the women failed to understand their co-wives’ speeches and that of their husband, they became disunited, frustrated and decided to go

their ways with their children. They then established themselves in different parts of the world; hence the existence of diverse languages.

Haugen (1987:1) gives the Biblical report of the origin of language diversity in the whole world. He makes reference to the King James Authorized Version of the Holy Bible in the Book of Genesis 11-1-9 where the intriguing story of the Tower of Babel is told as follows:

... the whole earth was one language, and of one speech.
But pride filled the hearts of men, and they were misled into trying to build 'a city and a tower whose top may reach unto heaven'. The Lord found this project to be a presumption, being perhaps, concerned that men might usurp His omnipotence, "for now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do". God therefore, decided to "confound their language that they may not understand one another's speech. They were no longer able to co-operate in the building of the tower, and were "scattered abroad upon the face of the earth".

We see related stories of this kind in many cultures as we saw above. Among the Hebrews, it is said that their own version of the myth was associated with Babylonians and Assyrian empires who claim that they scattered because the speakers could not understand one language. In the Near-East a multilingual region, the belief is that all peoples have languages but all so different because God decided to inflict the world with language diversity as a curse upon men for their sinful pride.

The monogenesis of all world languages continued to be accepted in Hebrew for many centuries. However this was challenged by subsequent analysts. Notorious among the arguments as which language is the first world's language was that of Goropius Becanus who argued that the 'first language' 'Cimmerian' survived in Dutch – Flemish (Antwerjo, 1569 in Robins, 1997:174).

Monhoddoo's suggestion that society may have existed long before the invention of language is not acceptable. The reason being that speech as one of the essential attributes of man couldn't have been invented later than human existence. If man as a homo sapiens invented language after many years of his existence, one would expect other higher animals to follow suit after so many years of their own existence. At least Apes could have gone far in their invention of one form of language or even languages according to their types.

Analyzing the above suggestion Robins (1997: 152 – 188) suggests that Monboddoo shared in the opinion of 18th century scholars like Cadillac and others who see the origin and development of human language as based on gradual passage of independent naturalistic cries to structured and highly organized languages.

Calvet (1998: XV) while reporting on the inter ethnolinguistic violence in Greece, Turkey, India, Norway and other parts of the world, observed that violence is the great midwife of history. We writes:

If there have been language wars, this is because multilingualism exists, a world with only one language would have no knowledge of this kind of conflict, hence the pacifist illusion which has led some to invent artificial languages.

One may ask if the above author ever recognizes other areas of conflict in human society. Communities speaking just one language have been known to sometimes be in conflict for one reason or the other. The situation would have been worse if human beings spoke only one language. There would have been no national or individual secrets, no bonds or affinities based on language differences between one group and another. Discoveries would be minimal unless such single-world language would be so developed that it can handle all aspects of scientific, technological, political, religious and cultural issues. Societal ties would be loose and less committing. Anita and Haruna (1997) posit that language is at the fore front of most racial conflicts, which they say characterize multilingual societies. If this is so, then it means that 'meaning' is at the centre of all wars and conflicts among people of different linguistic backgrounds. A

person, whose speech patterns do not convey any meaning to a hearer, only succeeds in annoying him (the hearer) in the event of an argument.

Our focus in this work is not on the origin of language or the issue of diversities of human languages. We are concerned with the issue of meaning as an aspect of linguistic investigation which falls within the area of semantics. The study of the meaning of meaning is as tedious as it is varied. The study of meaning is sometimes fraught with unbelievable over-lapping and interacting dimensions. Meaning is a delicate and intricate issue because what a listener thinks is the meaning of a linguistic unit may not after all be the meaning intended by the speaker. Culture has a lot to contribute to meaning and culture cannot lend itself totally to scientific investigation.

A theory of meaning that is scientific must have the enabling apparatus to first of all unite all cultures and have the instrument to augment lapses and over lapses. It must be able to identify areas of agreement and disagreement and thereby identify scientifically every aspect of discrepancies.

A friend once told me how, as a student in Britain in the 1970's; he received a message from here in Nigeria informing him of the death of his six months old first and only child. (Born after 10 years of unfruitful marriage). He naturally became moody. His landlady who shared the same block of flats saw him in this state and tried to inquire from him what the matter was. My friend told her what happened. The landlady retorted "what a shame!" This reaction did not go down well with my friend who (because of his cultural background) thought that the landlady was being sarcastic and meant he should be ashamed that he lost a child (perhaps out of some negligence or other reasons which she might have imagined).

From my friend's cultural back-ground, he expected his landlady to say, "Sorry for that" or 'take heart' – expressions that would have brightened him up and brought some consolation to him. He packed out of the house on account of what he thought the landlady meant. It was later that somebody to whom he complained, told him the full 'meaning' of what the landlady said. There are other examples.

Among the Tiv of Central Northern Nigeria, it is customary to say to a bereaved person what might be translated into English as 'Hard luck'. A bereaved Igbo person would take offence at being told 'Hard luck' at the death of a dear one. Culturally he knows that it is hard luck to lose a dear one, but he wouldn't like to be reminded that 'hard luck' has befallen him. Hence Ferdinand de Saussure (1974:115), whose ideas have so much influenced the development of modern linguistics is of the opinion that meaning of linguistic expressions derives from two sources: the language they are part of and the world they describe.

Faced with unattainable answer to and resolution of the question of meaning, as well as the confused nature of the subject, we propose what we have here termed the theory of Babelism which is in analogy to the confusion which many cultures associated with the origin of diversity of human languages. The concept of the biblical tower of babel as narrated above has been chosen, to explain the chaotic and various prescriptions which have failed to offer any answer to the question of the specific meanings of linguistic elements. In the light of this, we are left with no choice except to go back to where we started, thus that meaning is beyond definite definition. Linguists, however do not associate language diversity to a curse but rather see it as a source of blessing that solves the problems of communication.

3.2.1. THE SUPREMACY OF MEANING

It is certain that researchers have not found a definite answer to what meaning really "means". All the theories we discussed are in various states of disarray and criticism. This does not suggest that the situation is hopeless, as there are still other approaches to the study. As researcher we are not deterred by the present limitations on what is meant by meaning, hence we are of the opinion that meaning goes beyond man's simplistic analysis and that is the reason for the inability to subject it to finite or scientific analysis. The intricate nature of meaning is not always amenable to exact description as many factors usually come to bear on its analysis.

Meaning, of all aspects of language, is 'supreme' and should be seen as such. It is the outcome of human thinking faculty. It is therefore from thought and "meaning" of thought that various aspects of language take their bearing. Meaning could be expanded to include the realization of human thought as well as the interpretation of other natural and artificial phenomena e.g. the songs of some species of birds are interpreted by humans as having some definite/occultic meaning. For example in the culture of the Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria, there are birds whose songs signify a looming death in the community. Whenever such birds sing in any neighbourhood people are scared and agitated that someone is about to die or that something very terrible is bound to happen. This situation demands that the hearer/s utter some incantation to reverse or avert whatever calamity that might be impending. The cry of a wild cat in the same culture is interpreted as bad omen. Even a cock crowing at mid-night portends abomination and so is a goat jumping onto the roof.

We have gone this far in an attempt to show that meaning is not an exclusive attribute of language. Signs, cries, symbols are also meaningful. Therefore for linguistic analysts to assume that they can arrive at the solution of what meaning really is, is a task that is not only untenable but impracticable. To try to study meaning is for me the issue of "the more you look, the less you see". One can liken meaning to a container while other elements of linguistic structures are the contents. As the content cannot grasp or comprehend the container, so it is for humans to comprehend meaning by studying just the various elements of linguistic units.

The mysterious nature of meaning renders it near impossible for scientific analysis. Scholars who have tried to study meaning from whatever angle came out more confused. Ndimele (1999:1) agrees with this when he says:

Meaning is not a stable phenomenon. An expression can be subject to a number of interpretation depending on the speaker, hearer, or context. So a phenomenon which is as illusive as meaning cannot be easily investigated with some degree of objectivity.

The above assertion agrees with our theory which we have in this study termed babelism and which shows that the study of meaning is fraught with confusion and subjectivity.

Mcgregor (2009:129) is of the opinion that meaning in linguistics concerns that which is expressed by sentences, utterances and their components. Meaning, for him is the content conveyed in communication by language, the message or thought in the mind of a speaker that is coded in language and sent to a hearer who decodes it.

In a more concise statement Crystal (2008:298) among other things asserts that meaning in the context of language necessitates reference to non-linguistic factors such as thought, situation, knowledge, intention and use.

We can only say that it is the involvement of these complex and intricate factors that makes meaning highly uncapturable and slippery. Meaning is synonymous with thought. Hence according to Steinberg and Sciarini (2006:177):

People throughout the ages have wondered whether speech
or language is necessary for thought. Can we think without
language?

To this we may ask, if language precedes thought, then people with speech defects cannot think. The deaf and dumb cannot acquire knowledge or education. The much we can say is that language in combination with thought helps to develop the intellect faster. This is so because the reaction of people when we talk, helps us to acquire more experience and react. This in turn helps us to strategies and come up with more sophisticated and intricate thought which we again translate into language.

Whorf (1956) argues that language actually determines the way we think. Santrock (2000:17) says that Whorf's linguistic relativity sees language determining the structure of thinking and shaping man's basic ideas. He maintained that there is a thin line separating meaning and the function of the mind. This is not absolutely true. Mentally challenged individual illustrates how meaning can be linked to the mind and therefore speech.

Chomsky N. (1972a) insists that language and thought are independent of each other and for the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, language and thought arise

independently but fuse in early childhood to create specifically human modes of thinking and communication. We seem to go with Chomsky's thesis that the discussion on which comes first, language or thought is like the question on which is older, the egg or the chicken. Language is essential for thought and thought is also essential for language.

The babelist theory of meaning therefore states that man can never use thought independently to arrive at the finite meaning of linguistic structures such as words and sentences. Thought, which helps man to decode linguistic elements can only have expression in language in order to arrive at 'meaning'. This, unfortunately is very illusive. Again 'thought' is an abstract tool which is individualistic. As many as there are human beings so are the varieties of thought, even on the same issue, situation and position. This is why we look at the issue of meaning as shrouded in confusion – hence babelism.

Grice (1969) is well known for his analysis of speaker's meaning. He is known for what he termed conversational implicature and his project of intention-based semantics. As a result of the above analysis by Grice the focus of the philosophical debate on the nature of meaning shifted from linguistic representation to mental representation. Hence he draws a distinction between what he calls natural meaning and non-natural meaning. Accordingly, natural meaning is the kind of meaning that we have when we say 'Those sports mean measles' and non-natural meaning is exemplified in such sayings as 'Those three rings on the bell (of the bus) mean that the bus is full'. We shall come to this later. Lo_bhner (2002:1) rightly states:

Meaning is a notion with a wide range of applications, some of which belong to the field of semantics while others lie beyond it. Meaning is always the meaning of something. Words have meaning, as do phrases and sentences. But deeds may have meaning too.

In the above excerpt, we see the word 'meaning' re-occurring. For example, the author says, "Meaning is always the meaning of something". This does not answer the question "what is meaning". Trying to establish what he means by 'meaning', Lo_bner goes on to

emphasize the fact that many other human and even non-human activities have meaning. He asserts,

... Semantics is exclusively concerned with the meanings of linguistic entities such as words, phrases, grammatical forms, but with the meanings of actions or phenomena.

Again this does not delineate what 'meaning' is, linguistically. What cannot be described with definite exactness is therefore beyond the realm of human intelligence and situation. The process of interpersonal communication is carried out by means of sounds whose choice and relationship is arbitrary. Therefore if human language is arbitrary it is impossible to fix permanent or ridged meaning to utterances.

Caron (1992) is of the opinion that language has a mental reality and that the mental reality exists by virtue of the activity of speech by which it is generated. He confirms that because of this, in spite of the above situation, language can be said to be neither a simple external object nor a purely mental activity but both. This explains the reason why we say that language cannot exist independently without thought. By virtue of the implication of a mental attitude in a physical/biological phenomenon, the issue of discovering or analyzing what exactly is meaning, opens a ponderous door of confusion. That is why the definition of this term is a very difficult task to perform.

3.3. SELECTIVE INTERPRETATION

Meaning is all about interpretation. As one utters some words, phrases and sentences, these linguistic elements are prone to different interpretations by the hearer. As the human mind/thinking is encoded in speech, the speaker always has some intended meaning. This intended meaning may or may not be represented in the encoded linguistic elements. The encoder's intention may be to communicate positively, deceive or mislead.

At the point of reception, many things could happen, depending on the disposition of the decoder. Interpretation may be faulty or correct. The decoder may misinterpret the message. Several factors may contribute to the misinterpretation of the message.

For example the hearer may have hearing problem. He may understand the exact opposite of what the encoder intends for him to understand as the meaning. Cultural background may also contribute to the misconception of what the message may mean. Again, the decoder may not be accurate in his interpretation. The intended meaning is outside the control of the decoder; at the same time the exact meaning of an utterance is not fixed as the fixed/actual meaning may be thwarted by the encoder's manipulation of language and thereby deceive the decoder.

There are many variables that may affect meaning. Some of them are (i) motive of the speaker or hearer. Motive here include, (a) to deceive. There are many factors that may give rise to deceit such as, difference in intellectual capability, specialized code (as in the case of cult language or professional language. (b) the use of euphemism etc. Other variables that may affect meaning include (ii) domain of speech (iii) age, (iv) prestige, (v) precision, etc. Domain of language here has to do with social context, semantic change, including other aspects of linguistic change.

Sometimes, mixed language (here represented by code-mixing and code-switching) may affect interpretation by the hearer. There may be different motives for code-mixing and code switching, but in a country like Nigeria, the phenomena tend to indicate the pluralistic nature of the people's personality which is largely symptomatic of linguo-cultural hybridism.

What is being stressed here is that meaning cannot be put in a straight jacket for analysis. Many issues come to play when deciding the actual or real meaning of a single linguistic element. Hence, an utterance which originates in the brain begins with thought and then language. In terms of speech, these two are termed initiators. Even though the initiators initiate the linguistic operatives involved in a most simultaneous and instinctive manner, we can still represent facts as follows; the encoder/speaker builds up sounds into morphemes, phrases and sentences, which here result to an initial or intended message. The initial meaning is an abstraction having not been "contaminated by other factors. Along the line, there is an intermediate meaning which could be the same as the initial or intended meaning. At this stage, two things could still happen. First, the

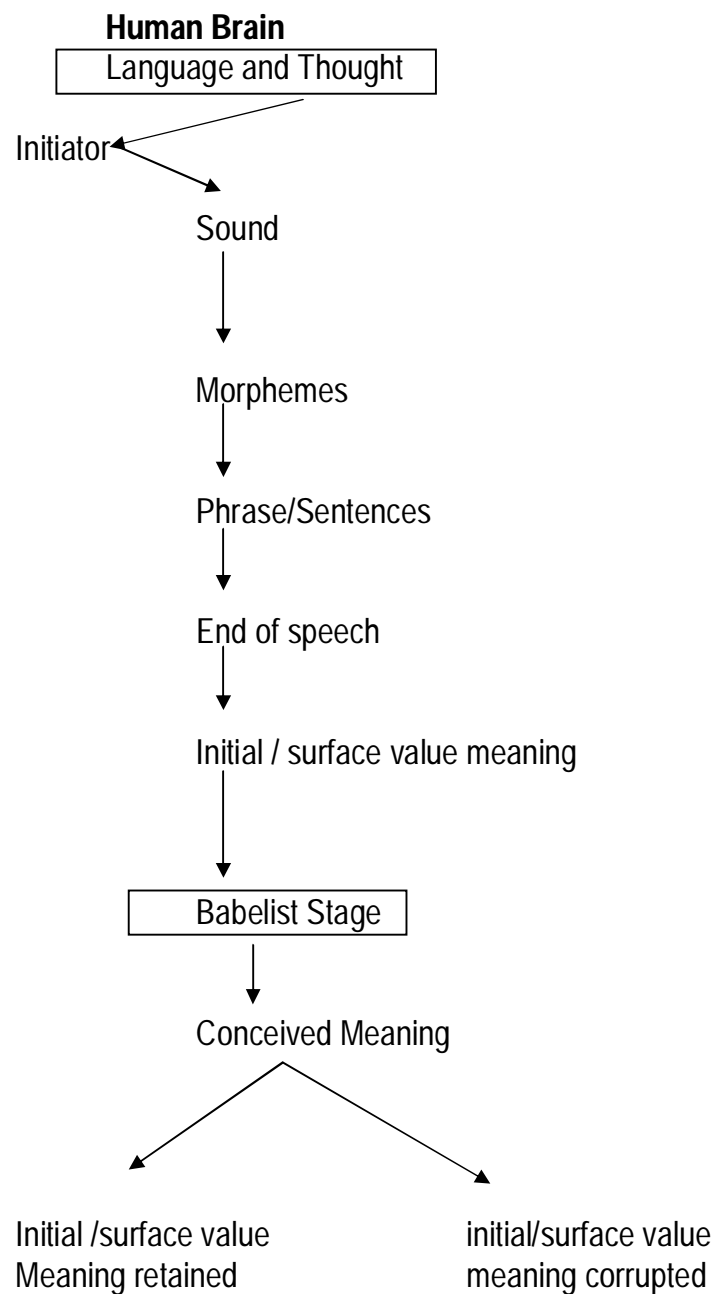
intended meaning could be retained or changed as we mentioned above. Then there is the final meaning. Yet at the stage when speech has stopped, there is the final output which remains the final meaning attached to whatever was uttered. Here again, this may not match the initial input. This is termed the external output. At this stage the intended meaning could be retained or corrupted by will and can again be subjected to further interpretation by the decoder/hearer.

The decoder/hearer here, must have the faculties needed for processing the speech directed at him/her, hence the ears and brain must be functional. These are attached to the decoder who, albeit, instinctively perceives the sounds, the morphemes, phrases and sentences uttered by the encoder. Immediately, the initial interpretation begins. This initial interpretation is seen as the abstract interpretation. The abstract interpretation which enters the stage of babelism is followed by an expected interpretation which finally depends on the disposition of the decoder who may, for one reason or the other, not capture the envisaged interpretation. All changes in meaning occur at this level. Then there is the final interpretation which is linked to the 'final meaning'. The final interpretation could be correct or corrupted. It is correct when it is backed up with the right response by the decoder but corrupt if it is followed by a wrong response. Put in another way, if the decoder's response corresponds with the abstract or initial meaning, then it is judged right, if not it is said to have been corrupted.

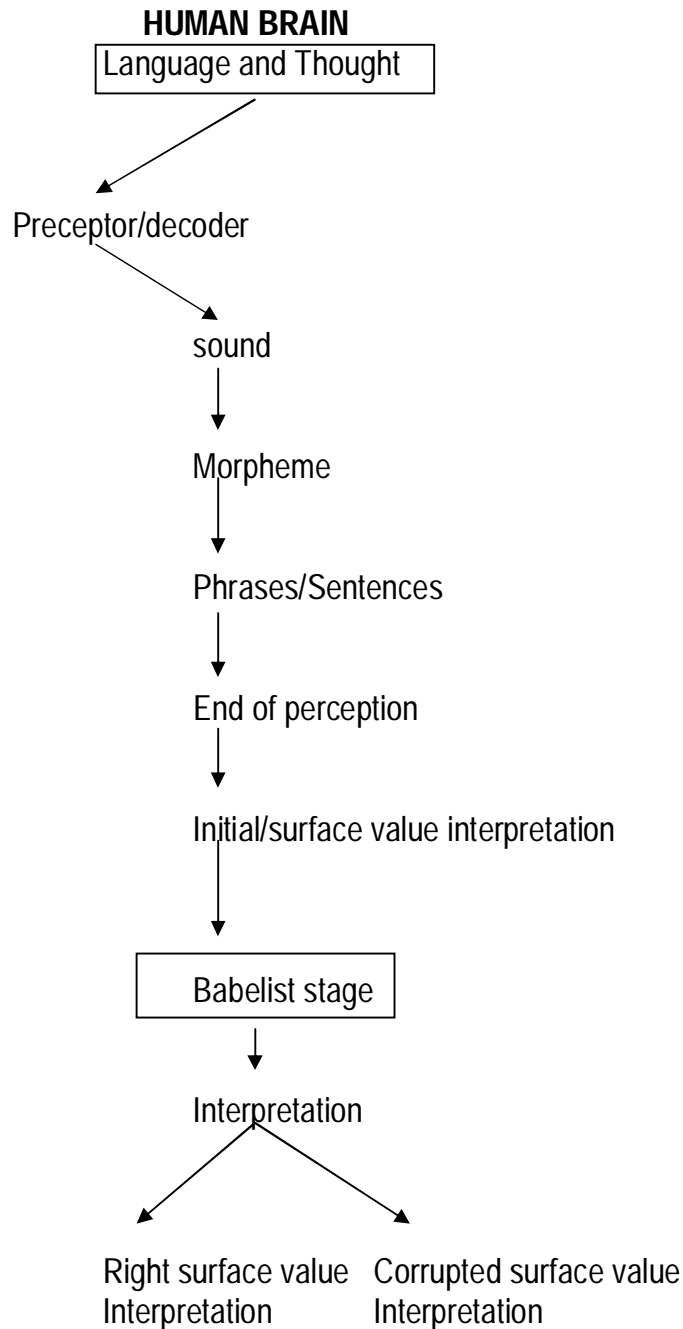
The hearer makes a special effort to arrive at the meaning intended by the speaker since there is no one to one correspondence between what the speaker wants the hearer to take as the meaning of his (speaker's) utterance and the hearer's interpretation of what he hears from the encoder.

Figure (ii) Process of encoding and decoding linguistic elements

(a) Encoder. Linguistic Elements – Interpretation and Meaning



(b) Decoder



From the above illustrations Fig. III (a) & (b) we can see that at various stages of semantic interpretation there is some element of uncertainty or confusion which seems to be a replica of the type of confusion experienced in the story of the tower of babel – hence the babelism stage. The stage of babelism starts mainly after the initial or surface value phase of interpretation. Here the encoder or decoder is free to change the initial

interpretation of words, phrases or sentences. He is also at liberty to retain and maintain the initial meaning which is usually based on perceivable linguistic composition of words, phrases and sentences. In other words, participants are free to base their meanings on what Partee (1984a) describes as semantic compositionality which deals with the contribution of sentence constituents to the truth value of a proposition expressed by a sentence. The basic process of calculating truth value again is akin to syntactic analysis in categorical grammar in which sentence constituents are assigned labels but where the syntactic category S, is replaced by the truth value t. (see 2.6).

Human thought has a lot to contribute at the babelist stage. This is so because, the encoder's/decoder's decision to change from one 'meaning' to another, originates from the mind. The decision to change from one semantic interpretation to another has been discussed earlier.

3.2.2. THOUGHT, LANGUAGE, MEANING AND BABELISM

There has been a lot of argument on issues about language and thought. Out of this has arisen the idea of linguistic relativity which is rejected by many linguists and researchers in cognitive science. Saeed's (2007: 43 – 44) language of thought hypothesis, dismisses as a fallacy such a strict identification of thought and language. Saeed identifies two main types of argument to support his views. He shows that there is evidence of thinking without language. This line of thinking can be supported with the case of the deaf and dumb who have achieved a lot without verbal language. Again there is evidence of mental processes that do not involve language. Linguists also argue that cognitive processes do not employ spoken language. Soldiers maneuvering in a war front, do not involve verbal language, but make use of meaningful sketches. This could be termed language of thought.

Pinker (1994:59) in his work presents various kinds of evidence that thinking and language are not the same thing. He gives evidence of thought processes such as remembering and reasoning which have been identified in psychological studies of human babies and primates as showing example of beings without language.

Of course, from the babelist theory, more evidence abounds to show that thought and language are separate phenomena. Meaning hinges on these two. Language exists because there is thought. However, thought could exist without language. No speaker will be able to voice out 50% of his thought in a day. Hence the saying, "He's a man of few words". Being a man of few words is never the same as a man of less thought. If an individual voices out all his thought, he would do no other thing except talking. In this situation no one would have any secret. Every conscious and rational man thinks. Thought is a continuum, out of the myriads of thoughts one chooses those to vocalize.

Language is coded and vocalized/written-out thought. One could choose not to vocalize or write down this coded thought. When a speaker encodes his thought, him and only him can attach conceived meaning to what he says because the latter originates from his thought and no other's. The intention of a hearer insisting to decode the coded thought of an encoder exactly and correctly, is seen as human arrogance, as manifested in the Tower of Babel. This breeds confusion as also seen in the story of the Tower of Babel.

Thought is intricate and complex, so is meaning which is attached to coded thought – language. If words and sentences have meaning, many professions will be out of job including lawyers, psychologists, literary critics, anthropologists, theologians, etc. If there are finite meanings for structures, linguists will have no need of researching into the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. Legal documents including, national constitutions, would need no interpretation. Christ's apostles even challenged Him for speaking to them in parables. If words and sentences have meanings, then parables, anecdotes and other metaphoric expressions would need no interpretation.

The real problem is that linguistic units, at all levels, may or may not serve as part of the general enterprise to communicate meaning. This assertion hinges on associative meaning which is variable, unstable and unpredictable. This type of meaning depends on social, psychological and contextual factors. Associative meaning accompanies and attaches itself to language because its use depends so much on the real-world experience.

Even though we agree that in one sense, meaning is a product of all linguistic levels but these levels have their minimal components. To be subject to scientific analysis, each of the minimal components that constitute part of a level must be amenable to scientific analysis. In this view, we realize that it is only at the phonological and to some minute extent the syntactic levels that this can be possible.

As the brain generates thought, the latter may be encoded according to the need of a speaker. The systematic encoding of thought is here referred to as language. This is the level referred to as langue or as competence (See Chomsky 1957). Here the speaker uses his knowledge of the pattern of speech of his language to organize and encode the message that has been generated through the brain. The encoded systematic vocal symbols are supposed to be bearers of meaning/s, the surface value or initial meaning (as represented by the various linguistic items or components that combine to build the unit). This stage of 'meaning' takes the encoder to another level – babelist stage. Here many things could come to bear on the final semantic realization of the encoded message. The result could be the surface value meaning, or the manipulated meaning. The speaker may come up with the exact surface value meaning of the linguistic structure which may coincide with the actual or anticipated meaning or he could consciously or unconsciously interfere with the surface value meaning to suit his own purpose.

On the part of the hearer, the process starts with hearing the message as uttered by the encoder. The message is thus registered in the brain, which in turn stimulates the hearer's thought. Through the thinking process, the decoder tries to fix meaning to what he perceived. The first to be decoded is the surface value meaning of the linguistic structure. This takes him to the stage of interpretation here referred to as the babelist stage. The decoder could come up with the surface value meaning that coincides with the linguistic make-up or structure as presented by the encoder. The decoder is free to go back to the brain for help in order to decipher whether the encoded message coincides with what he really understands to be the meaning of the linguistic units involved or not. In doing this he could come up with actual/ surface value or

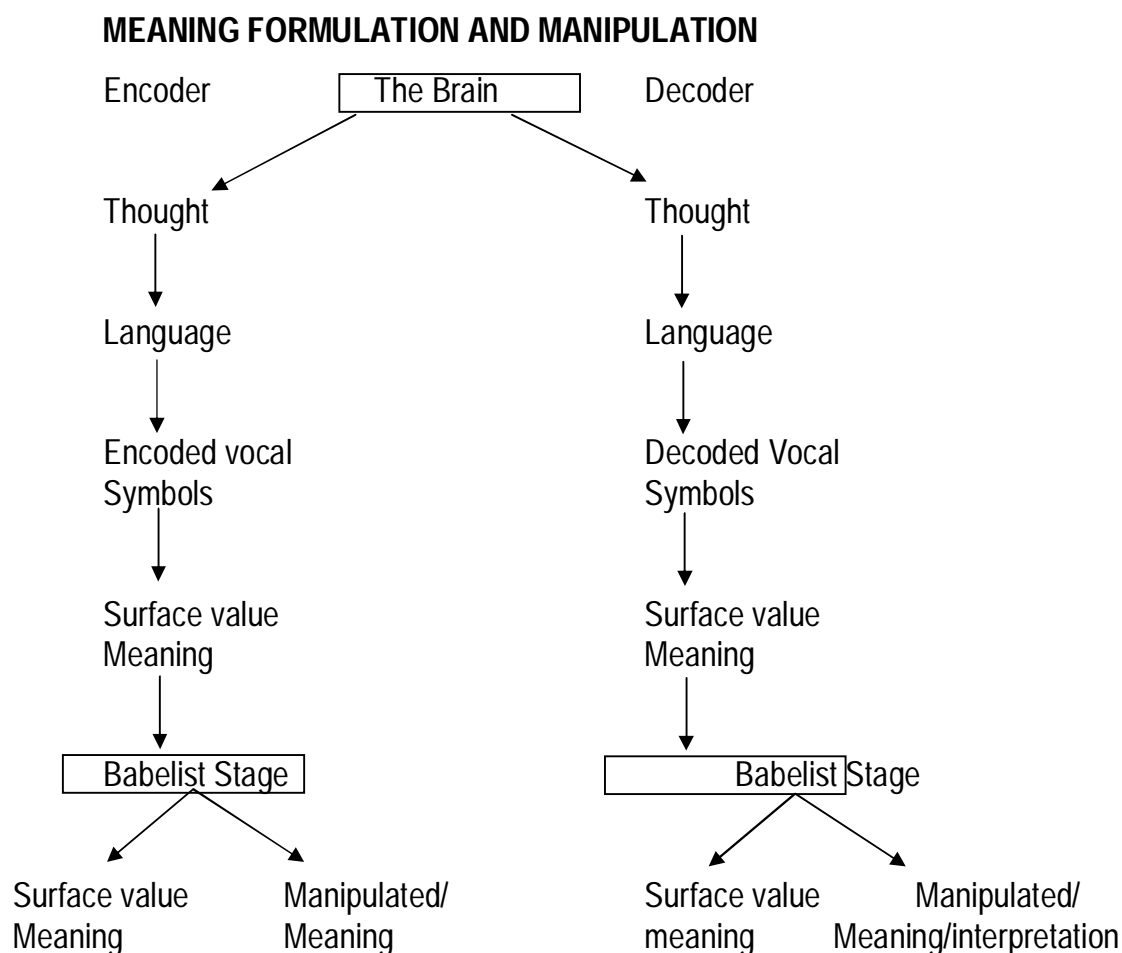
interfered/corrupted meaning. Some times what is termed interfered/corrupted meaning may be beyond the strict control of the hearer. This usually happens in cases of ambiguity, entailment, contradiction, presupposition, etc; at the sentence level or opposites, polysemys, synonyms, etc. at the word level. In Igbo

Mx na ya lxx qgx

I and him fought fight

(he fought with me) would require a second 'visit' to the brain to arrive at the required meaning because it is ambiguous. It could mean (a) He fought alongside me or (b) He fought me. Any of the interpretations at the babelist stage level could be either right or wrong.

Figure IV



It is because the implicating of words and sentences are beyond supposed or actual and manipulated meanings, that human beings and analysts isolate what is commonly referred to as metaphors (extended meanings). If the meaning of words and sentences were to be amenable to scientific analysis, there would have been no need of having so many languages because all peoples of the world would understand themselves and every object or concept would be uniformly called. Nature or call it God did not mean it to be so, hence what a 'dog', for instance, is called in Igbo is not what it is called in say Ibibio or Yoruba.

3.4. THE THEORY OF BABELISM – WHICH WAY TO MEANING?

The world would be so stereotypical and boring if words and sentences have static or permanent meanings. The concept of meaning is therefore identical to the biblical account of the Tower of Babel. Language is natural; it is acquired; nature gave man all he needs to acquire this all important but intricate skill. Meaning which is the basis for language is as complicated as nature. With the limited degree of man's intelligence, he now turns round and tries to uncover fully all the intricacies of nature including language. When man is fully able to understand nature he will understand the meaning of meaning. Man's inability to study meaning scientifically in the way he studies other aspects of language, can be equated with his inability to read the minds of others. Once we are able to read one another's mind, the mystery of meaning will be unraveled and there would be no need for us to have lawyers, teachers, philosophers, theologians, soothsayers, etc.

Our inability to read what is in other people's minds is the origin of the popular saying "if words have meaning, how can't we mean what we say?" This is the basis of flexibility of meaning. Meaning is as flexible as the mind that tries to construct and interpret it. The ability for man to proffer the exact meaning of linguistic items can only occur at some limited levels of linguistic analysis especially the phonological. Phonemes have specific interpretations. They are part of the study of meaning. For example the phoneme /p/ can only be interpreted as + cons + plosive + bilabial + voiceless. The

above sound, once described cannot take on an opposite or diverse description. Certain lexemes can mean one and only one thing, e.g 'is' can be describe as verb (to be) present time, unless again used in an extra ordinary context like keep your 'is'.

The morpheme rV_1 in an Igbo structure as seen in

$E \cong \delta \varepsilon \cong \beta \varepsilon \exists \underline{p \varepsilon} \exists \alpha \cong \kappa \omega \alpha \cong$

Ede crypast cry (Ede cried)

The -rV cannot express any other meaning except past time. Hence it has meaning. However at the more complex levels of description, meaning becomes flexible and babelistic.

Robins (1997:242) emphasizes the problem of meaning when he says:

Apart from some restricted technical vocabulary – for example, that of chemistry – anything like a full analysis of what is meant by a word or by a sentence form to a native speaker must involve a vast and indeterminate amount of extralinguistic knowledge and the recognition of many private perceptions, feelings, thoughts, emotions, hopes and fears etc which necessarily have to remain private, directly accessible to oneself and only inferable in others by what they may say about them or by their general behavior.

Robin is of the opinion that the above explains Bloomfield's pessimistic observation in *Language* in which the author (Bloomfield, 1935:140) says "The statement of meaning is the weak point in language study.

Like Robin, we may say that Bloomfield's observation is pessimistic but, it is the undeniable situation we find ourselves in the study of meaning. It may be hard to swallow this bitter pill. But come to think of it. Which other level of linguistic study has brought with it this degree of complexity, complication, uncertainty, repetition of already filed or inconclusive theories and ideologies as the study of meaning? I don't even see the end of this confusion and controversy in the near future because, meaning is above

human comprehension. It is for all purpose and intent babelistic. It is the linguistic Towel of Babel.

That one speaks a particular language is not an indication that once a linguistic text is rendered in that language, one would detect the full meaning of all linguistic texts. This is not because the words used in such texts are strange but that certain meanings attached to such texts may be completely hidden from the interpretation of the ordinary hearer. We shall take one example from a text recorded during a divination session in an Igbo speaking area of South-East Nigeria. It goes as follows:

Afa m gbara n'xzq mmiri
B[awa - o mgbe na-akpq
Afa m gbara n'ala mmiri
B[awa - o mgbe na-akpq
Qga oz[b[a za m oku
Na chi ehoola.
A kapuo ala a hx mmxq
Ahxhx na-ar[q≡j[≡, ar[q≡j[≡
Okpokpo e ji awa mbara
O mepxrx onye q b[ara
Onye utukuru afq.
Okirikiri ka a na agba ose,
A nagh[ar[ya elu.
Eze mburu mburu
Ji ekete kuru mmiri
W[[n'abq
Okwe m agbaala anq,
Gbaa asato.
Mbx, Mbq, Ntio, Nnq
Eze kelee ude - o
Ude ekele.

Translation (surface)

The divination I divined on the pathway to the river

Come now that I am calling.

The divination I divined under the river

Come now that I am calling

Messenger come and answer me.

The day has broken

If the ground is burrowed,

Spirits will be seen.

The insect that climbs both

The iroko and the kolanut trees.

The spade that is used in building the road.

The philanthropist, the pot-bellied man

One can only go round the pepper plant but cannot climb it.

The king that carries everything in sight.

The one who fetches water

in a basket and empties

it in a basket.

My (divination) seeds have separated into four

And into eight sets

One, two, three, four

Let the King, greet Ude – o

Ude I greet you!

Any speaker of the Igbo language can never guess right what the theme of the above divination chant is all about. Why? If meaning can be defined in the sense that all other aspects of linguistic analysis is, why must any Igbo speaking person fail to understand the verse above. After all, the individual words can be interpreted. Even the “meaning” of individual sentences can be interpreted literally as has been done above. However the overall meaning is confusing; it

is babelistic, if not unattainable by, the hearer. Hence he waits for the diviner to tell him (the hearer) the meaning of the divination.

The reader may be surprised to know that the quoted divination chant came up in the context of deciding who among the sons of a deceased polygamist should inherit one contentions piece of land. The diviner was called in and after rendering the above verse repeatedly for about eight times (even though with some variations intermittently) declared that it was the son of the third of the five wives (who was the reincarnation of the dead man's father) that was to inherit the land even at the disagreement of the older members of the family.

Language underspecifies meaning. It is very clear that meaning is older, richer illusive and more complicated than language itself, when talking about communication process. Speakers are said to compress their thoughts, hence the saying, "he is a man of few words". When we speak we usually imply rather than state explicitly what we mean. It is therefore left to the hearer to fill out his own version of intended meaning from the utterances presented to him. Hence Saeed (2007:44) opines:

The idea that language underspecifies meaning and has to be enriched by hearers would seem to fit naturally into the idea that speakers are putting their thought into language rather than voicing their thought directly.

From the above excerpt, we can state that attaching definite meaning to linguistic items is problematic and confusing as long as language is built around such complicated and intricate phenomenon as thought. As long as the human mind is changeable and flexible so long also will be the product of thought – language. Because it is so, man can only guess what is in the mind of another. He may guess right (if both share the same experience/background knowledge). If not, it is almost impossible to know the minds of others or to interpret and

give accurate meaning to people's utterances. This is the situation in language as far as meaning is concerned. Meaning therefore, is of the mind. If this is not so, there would be no need of misinterpretation and interpreters.

To maintain and reinforce this situation, nature has made it impossible for all humans to speak the same language; hence the babelist theory of meaning is hinged to the situation. Since linguistic meaning has to do with man and man is a unique animal, having both private and shared experiences, it will be unthinking for meaning to be so common and easily accessible that one would only have to slot all linguistic items into a machine to realize the implications or deduce the meanings. For man to be unique it could have been unbearable if he could not harbour some reserved thoughts, ideas, plans and feelings in his mind. Other attributes of man such as smile, laughter and shedding of tears, like language can have several types of meaning or interpretation; e.g

tears of sorrow
tears of joy
innocent simile
deceitful smile
genuine laughter
treacherous laughter.

While the shedding of tears naturally denotes a feeling of sorrow or pain one can shed tears because of joy or pitty. On Sunday the 9th of July 2011, *the Sun Newspaper* quoted Ambassador Dr. Chijoke Wilcox Nwige (Nigerian Ambassador to Kenya as saying, while making a statement on the rift between him and his estranged wife, to a Nairobi Newspaper on June 5th 2011 as follows:

Mrs Nwigwe has proven beyond doubt my long held
belief that ... truth is a lie repeated three times. P. 39.

How can lie ever become truth if repeated three times or even a million times? This goes to show that it is what the hearer of a linguistic item wants to believe to be the meaning of such a linguistic item that he upholds as the truth and

therefore the meaning. It is this condition that brings about the babelist situation which sets confusion at the stage of interpretation. In fixing what we perceive as processes in our theory of Babelism we recognize five stages that give rise to the interpretation of linguistic items, namely:

- i. Conception stage
- ii. Symbolic stage
- iii. Surface value interpretations stage
- iv. Babelist stage
- v. Flexible stage

Conception stage – This begins with what the speaker conceives in his mind as what he wants to say to his hearer. It starts from the word level. Here it is only the speaker that knows what meaning he wants the hearer to decode. For example, if he is to utter the form ‘i≡γωεΞ’ (a high + low tone word) as an isolated word, it is him and only him that can assign meaning to the form since he has more than one option. ‘i≡γωεΞ’ for him could mean a bicycle or iron. A hearer can only guess what the speaker actually means when the latter utters the form ‘i≡γωεΞ’ in isolation. The speaker has the unique privilege of knowing what he himself means by i≡γωεΞ at this level. Every other person can only guess except when both speaker and hearer share the same experience that would warrant the speaker to use the form ‘i≡γωεΞ’ to mean any of the above.

This situation can be extended to the level of phrase and sentence in which a speaker may conceive whatever he ‘means’ without of course being in doubt about what he means. A good example would be a sentence like. ‘I want to use that table’. A hearer that does not have some shared experience with the speaker could go wrong in decoding the sentence because, the speaker could, by the lexeme ‘table’ mean ‘a piece of furniture’ or ‘a graphic work on paper’. What might help the hearer could be the context in which the word ‘table’ is

used, e.g, if there is a piece of furniture and perhaps the speaker has a pen or paper in hand and is looking around to find a place to place the paper to write. Another meaning could be arrived at, if the speaker is doing some calculation and wants to make use of some graphic work on paper. If the two situations are absent, it is only the speaker that knows what he means by 'table' in the above sentence. It is usually ambiguous sentences that present this kind of problem. Some of the often given examples include:

- i. Visiting relatives can be exciting
- ii. Flying planes can be dangerous.
- iii. Biting dogs can constitute some health hazard.
- iv. Visiting professors can be boring.

Symbolic Stage – The term symbolic in this study is used in the sense Moravcsik (2006:141) used it. This author maintains that syntactic structure is merely the scaffolding to be fleshed out with meaning and that syntax is part of the larger goal of accounting for the relationship between meaning and sound forms.

This, in essence, goes to show that each level of linguistic description hinges on some semantic content. Syntactic structures convey meanings and are realized first and foremost by sound forms. However, we know that syntactic analysis of sentences is possible even when they do not convey meanings. The sum of word meanings does not always equal the meaning of the entire sentence. In the same vein, the sum of the word forms does not always equal the phonological form of the entire sentence.

Our contention is that at the stage of conceiving an idea, there comes the attachment of symbols – sounds, words, sentences to what the speaker wants to encode. It is this relationship between meaning and the linguistic forms that carry them, that we see as symbolic stage. While meaning and symbols cannot

be said to be the same thing, they can be said to correspond in the sense that each evokes the other - the sound sequence.

‘M≡μῑῑῑ ṽαῑ-e≡ζoῑ’ (it is raining) brings up a particular meaning in the mind of an Igbo speaker. In turn the conceived message calls for this particular sequence of sounds in the order they appeared.

Symbolic stage of representation signifies those linguistic elements which a speaker puts together for the hearer to decode. They may be phonological, morphological or syntactic. If a speaker articulates the sound /v/ a labiodental voiced fricative, it is perceived as such. If he chooses to combine this sound with other sounds, he produces a larger linguistic unit which may be a morpheme. For example, if he decides to combine the above sound with /a/ a front, open, low and - retracted vowel and /n/ an alveolar nasal voiced sound in that order, he produces the morpheme ‘van’ which a hearer can decode, if he (the hearer) speaks and understands the English language.

At the phrasal level, a speaker can combine the lexical item ‘van’ with the definite article ‘the’ to produce the phrase ‘the van’ which the hearer can decode. Still moving up he can decide to produce a sentence by combining the phrase ‘the van’ with the finite verb ‘arrived’ ‘The van arrived’. Here again the hearer can decode the sentential structure and fix the meaning as appropriate.

At the symbolic stage, sounds, words and sentences are interpreted as they symbolically appear without an interference from other factors or reference to their deep structures. In other words, linguistic structures are interpreted by applying the principle of one-to-one correspondence to the participating phonological and lexical items involved.

Surface Value Interpretation Stage

We may wonder why the differentiation between conception stage and surface interpretation stage of linguistic elements. Surface value interpretation is inherent and cannot change. It is sometimes referred to as the truth value of

words and sentences. The conceived meanings at the surface value interpretation stage remain untouched by any extra mental or linguistic factor. Surface value interpretation, has no colouring. It is 'objective', maintaining that meaning should be finite and true, based on the linguistic, mental and intellectual factors, that come to bear on utterances.

Surface value interpretation brings us to the basic factor, that there is what we have here called Universal Meaning (UM) borrowing from Chomsky's Universal Grammar (UG). However, unlike UG, UM can be tampered with. When not tampered with, what manifests is surface value interpretation, but after this stage of interpretation confusion and semantic instability may set in like we saw in the biblical story of the Tower of Babel. If the stages of linguistic interpretation had stopped at the surface value stage, then meaning could have been stable, like UG, to subject itself to empirical studies. It would have been easy to decipher what the other person says. Surface value meaning is usually associated with imperatives or one word sentences such as 'come, go, laugh, sing, etc' and exclamations e.g what! Dead! as well as greetings. e.g. hello, Kedu, (how?) etc.

Even at that, the speaker may not always mean to tell his hearer to come when he utters the word 'come'. The babelist theory therefore emphasizes the issue of allotting meaning to words and sentences haphazardly and concludes that a linguistic item must fulfill certain conditions/rules before its meaning can be verified. The rule applies as follows:

A linguistic element P has meaning iff and only iff the conceived meaning W and the interpreted meaning Y correspond with the surface value meaning Z, thus:

P has meaning

Iff and only iff

$W \& Y = Z$

Where P = linguistic element

W = conceived meaning

Y = conceived/interpreted meaning and

Z = surface value meaning.

Outside the above rule, what applies in the interpretation of words and sentences of a language is a babelist situation where words and sentences are irregularly given meaning based on different and or sometimes manipulated criteria.

Babelist State

This is the stage of confusion where the speaker and hearer get into a confused or intricate stage of interpretation. Here both (speaker and hearer) enter into a stage of making some semantic choice in preparation for conceived/interpretation stage. This stage could also be referred to as the fluid stage of semantic interpretation. It is associated with psychological, intellectual and social factors, all of which may contribute to a babelist situation.

Flexible Stage

This has to do with the stage of multiple choices which the decoder makes in decoding message. It is usually evidenced in synonyms, polysemy, homonymy, at the level of words and ambiguity, entailments, presupposition, etc. at the sentence level.

When a speaker utters some linguistic items, in decoding such, the hearer is faced with making choices as dictated by his brain. The interpretation of such linguistic item may not be very obvious on being heard. Again the hearer has to make a choice between what the speaker wants his utterance to be interpreted as or what he (the decoder) thinks the speaker means. This is the idea behind such saying as “Read in-between the lines” and “it is not what he says but what he means”. If a speaker says, for example “Biting dogs can be dangerous”, the hearer could interpret it to mean that dogs that bite are dangerous, or that, to bite dogs can be dangerous.

In the above case, the decoder has to situate the utterance to the context on ground before assigning meaning to the structure he perceives, taking into consideration some possible socio/psychological factors that might be brought to bear on the different linguistic elements making up the structure heard. He has to do some mental calculation before fixing any meaning to the utterance. Even at that, the speaker may reject any of the decoder's interpretation, insisting on his own perception/meaning of what he (the speaker) had uttered.

Fixing meaning to an utterance is not an easy task (see factors discussed earlier). For a linguistic item P to be semantically situated appropriately the following process must be in place, thus: the decoded meaning Y must agree with the intended meaning W. Then both decoded and intended meaning Y & W must correspond to the surface value meaning Z. If the above does not apply, then the babelist situation would interfere with meaning and the result is unstable semantic realization. This is why the meaning of meaning is very hard if not impossible to arrive at.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

We are all agreed on one basic fact, that language has meaning. We are also convinced that meaning is not fixed. Trying to fix the definition of meaning or study the subject of meaning in the laboratory (as is done with such aspects of linguistics as phonology) is like searching for the origin of language itself. In fact, the later is more feasible and can be done. We can study most aspects of linguistics such as phonology and syntax empirically but not semantics/meaning.

We can only state the goals of the theories of meaning as is usually done in linguistic circles. We can also suggest what these theories should and are expected to fulfill. This does not solve the problem of fixing the definition of meaning which may help linguists study the subject scientifically. In fact writers like Harris (1990:32) observes as follows:

The emphasis in semantic description has shifted from reading meaning from the surface structures of words and phrases, to using contextual information.

How fixed and authentic, we may ask, are contextual information? We are again stuck. Akwanya (1996:19) states that there may be a difference between the meaning of a word taken in isolation and its uses in sentences. Yes, this is very true but it means that to arrive at the meaning of a word we have to set up as many interpretative devices as possible for such a word wherever and whenever it appears in different sentences and contexts. In this way, we might end up having tens and hundreds of the meanings of a particular word.

Language is all about meaning, yet at several occasions, definite meanings of words, phrases and sentences elude us. Meaning often plays very serious, albeit deceptive tricks on language. In fact all levels of linguistic description end up at ascribing or assigning one type of meaning or the other to elements. This goes to show that other levels of linguistic study are embedded

in the study of meaning, even though the latter has no definite definition. As the content cannot comprehend the container, so it is that other levels of linguistic description which end up in describing meaning cannot be used to subject semantics to the same system of analysis. The formation of myriads and sophisticated theories cannot solve this problem either.

Perhaps, instead of talking about meaning of words and sentences, it may be safer to talk about syntactic interpretation because the so-called true utterances are subject to many interpretations and even denials. The contextual theory of meaning came closer to the babelist theory but it failed to recognize the problem of individual idiosyncrasies and the working of the human mind, each of which cannot be captured in ascribing meaning to linguistic items.

Like the theory of the origin of language, which is based on speculation, the babelist theory postulates that the meaning of meaning remains at the speculative stage and may remain so as long as a speaker may not mean what he says and as long as the human mind that creates thought and language remains inaccessible and flexible and also, as long as a hearer is free to interpret any linguistic item according to his own disposition and conviction. Edward Finegan (2012:188) says of the study of meaning, thus:

Linguists ... attach different interpretation to the word meaning. Because the goal of linguistics is to explain precisely how languages are structured and used to represent situations in the world (among other things).

Worried about the above situation such expressions as social meaning, affective meaning, referential meaning, sense meaning have been used, to see whether the meaning of meaning could be captured. In spite of this, meaning remains illusive and confusing. The explanation is that meaning is a huge deceit.

The story of biblical tower of babel is therefore used in this study as a metaphor, illustrating how slippery meaning is, how untenable it could be for man to define in exact terms. The Babelist theory of meaning emphasizes how

illusive and trickish meaning could be to the extent that one may intentionally fail to mean what one says and by so doing deceive a hearer.

If the meaning of what we hear, what we think we hear, may not tally with what the speaker says, what he intends that we understand by his utterance or what he has in mind while speaking, what can be more Babelistic than such a situation; hence, the Babelist theory of meaning challenges us to this very intricate aspect of language.

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