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TOPIC- Definition by Equivalent words.

Introduction

We have seen that in order to know the meaning of a word we have to make explicit the rule that determines in what conditions a word or a phrase is to be used. When we try to define a word, we use other words to define it and those other words must be equivalent in meaning to the word that we are defining, so that the defining phrase can be substituted for the defined word without changing the meaning of the sentence in which it occurs. This is in fact, the most usual and the most “standard” sense of the word “definition” which is called “definition by equivalent words.”

Definition by Equivalent words

Suppose, I replace the word Mahatma Gandhi by the “Father of the Indian Nation” in the sentence. I find that I have replaced the word with the phrase and the sentence will not have changed the meaning because the word “Mahatma Gandhi” is equivalent in meaning to the phrase. ‘The father of the Indian Nation’. Similarly the words “one metre” is equivalent in meaning to the phrase ‘one hundred centimetres’.

Sometimes we find that a single word is sufficient to define a word, for e.g. 'courage' means 'valor', but there are very few exact synonyms in my language. Hence, this method cannot work. Many times it happens that there is no word or group of words that is equivalent in meaning to the word defined. For example such words which describe our sensation like black, happiness, pain, sweet etc. Such words cannot be defined in words unless we confront the person to whom we are describing the word with the experiences which the word experience. Such words can be defined only ostensively.

There are some abstract words like "time" 'being', 'relation', etc. which cannot be defined by equivalent words. Such words are so broad in their meaning that we cannot find broader word to replace them. So such words cannot be defined by equivalent words.

Defining Characteristics

In the words of Hospers, "A defining characteristic of a thing (not only a physical thing but a quality, an activity, a relation etc.) is a characteristic in the absence of which a word would not be applicable to the thing. For e.g. the defining characteristic of a triangle is that it is a "three sided figure". Thus, being three sided is the defining characteristic of a triangle because a thing cannot be called a triangle unless it has three sides.

Similarly, "a thing to write with ink" is the defining characteristic of 'pen' because in the absence of this characteristic a thing cannot be called a pen. But being of 'red colour' is not the defining characteristic of pen because a pen can be of black colour also and we can think of a pen even in the absence of red colour.

Thus, the test of whether a certain characteristic is defining is that would the same word still apply if the thing lacked the characteristic- if the answer is in the negative the characteristic is defining, if the answer is in the affirmative, it is merely accompanying. When we are talking of defining characteristic we must remember that this process can be applied when the word is used for an object, quality, relation or action.

Interjections like oh! Hurrah etc. and conjunctives like 'and', 'or', 'but', etc. cannot have any defining characteristic because they do not stand for any object or thing.

Defining Characteristics and Accompanying Characteristics

The defining characteristic of a thing are those characteristics in the absence of which the word would not be applicable to the things. But accompanying characteristics are those characteristics in the absence of which the word can be applied to the things. The characteristics of being closed, three sided and two dimensional is the defining characteristic of a triangle because in their absence a thing cannot be called a triangle. But the characteristic of the three sides being three inches long is the accompanying characteristic of a triangle because even if a side is not three inches long it can be a triangle,

Accompanying characteristics can be of two kinds – (1) Accidental (2) Universal. It is the characteristic of a thing is accidental, that is, it is sometimes present and sometimes not, it is called an accidental accompanying characteristic, e.g. laughing or to laugh is the accidental accompanying characteristic. But there are some characteristics which are universally accompanying characteristics e.g. the use of language is the universally accompanying characteristic.

When we are distinguishing defining from accompanying characteristics we should be particularly careful about the universally accompanying characteristic: When D always accompanies A, B and C, we may think that it belongs in the definition. But we should ask ourselves, “Even” though D always accompanies A, B, and C if sometimes D did not accompany A, B, and C, would the thing in question still be called an X?” If the answer is yes, the characteristic is still accompanying and not defining.