Introduction to Linguistics (CL1.102)

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Types of Meaning

1. Conceptual meaning: This is the logical/denotative/cognitive meaning of a word; it indicates how we describe the outer world in a linguistic system. It is integral to the functions of language in a way that other types of meaning are not.

   It has a complex and sophisticated organisation, akin to those of phonology and syntax. Two structural principles followed by this organisation are

   (i) contrastiveness: analogous to the distinctive features system in phonology. Just like the binary contrast of ±feature, meanings can be analysed as being constituted of collections of features. For example,

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   woman: +human -male +adult
   man:   +human +male +adult
   boy:   +human +male -adult
   girl:  +human -male -adult
   cow:   -human -male +adult
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   The problem with this analysis is that it does not take context into account, and that there is no limit to the number of features that can be contrasted.

   (ii) structure: the principle of building up larger linguistic units out of smaller units. There is a hierarchical structure (similar to that in syntax) in semantics. For example, the class of animate beings can be divided into plants and animals; within animals, we have humans and non-humans; and so on.

   These two principles represent the paradigmatic (selectional; expressions sharing a category) and syntagmatic (combinatory; expressions in a sentence) relations.

   The aim of conceptual semantics is to symbolically represent the interpretation of a sentence.

2. Connotative meaning: This meaning associates real-world experiences with an expression. Additional attributes (which are not essential/non-critical properties) are included in this meaning. For example, in the case of the word "woman", there are

   (i) Psychological/social properties: gregarious, caring, maternal

   (ii) Typical (not invariable) features: cook, homemaker

   (iii) Putative (dependent on individual/social/cultural perception) prop-

erties: frail, emotional, irrational

Unlike a conceptual meaning, connotations are variable across time and space; they are peripheral/unstable.