

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,

woman: +human -male +adult
man: +human +male +adult
boy: +human +male -adult
girl: +human -male -adult
cow: -human -male +adult

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.