

Semantics

Meaning in linguistics:

Semantics:

Discipline of meaning on a lexical level

- mostly concerned with word meaning
- mostly concerned with meaning as independent from language use → e.g. meaning as recorded in dictionaries
==> dictionary gives stable meaning (independent, lexical etc.)
==> independent of specific speaker → e.g. “Chair” ; everyone has a diff. image (colour, size, style etc. ...) but general meaning stays the same

Pragmatics:

Discipline of meaning in a bigger context → sentence level

- mostly concerned with meaning at the utterance of/ sentence level (and above)
- mostly concerned with meaning in language use → context-dependent meaning:
==> meaning in language use socially situated situation: speaker-hearer-context / cultural-context / temporal-context etc.
e.g. saying stuff in uni vs. at the dinner table

Semiotics: The study of signs:

- study of language as a sign system
- very original of thinking of language as a system or structure

Saussure’s model of the linguistic sign:

- language as a sign system ==> the linguistic sign

Ferdinand Saussure (1857-1913) → Swiss linguist and philosopher, working in semiotics

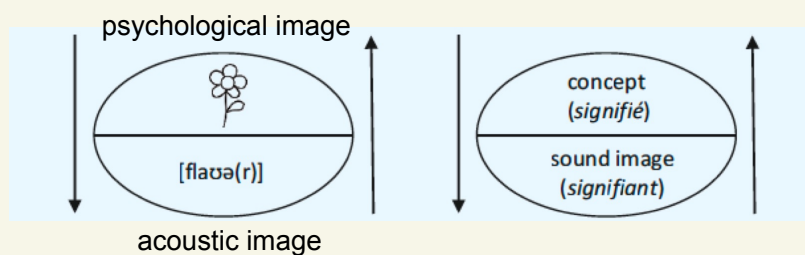
- semiotics: how form and meaning come together

Argued linguistic signs consist of two components (always consists of these two components):

- **signifier (signifiant)**: sound pattern, image, or written word that evokes a concept ==> e.g. hearing ‘flower’ or seeing it written
- **signified (signifié)**: concept that → that which is evoked by the sound pattern ==> e.g. the idea of the flower that is evoked by hearing flower / seeing flower written

The link between signifier and signified is arbitrary but conventional → doesn’t matter what it is called

Sign theory:



Pierce’s typology of signs:

- typology → plays on notion of arbitrariness

Charles Sanders Pierce (1839-1914), American mathematician and philosopher

Distinguishes three types of signs (typology):

- **Icon**: iconic signs share a visual or auditory similarity with the signified ==> e.g. idiograms, drawing, cartoons ...
- **Index (pl.: indices)**: indexical signs stand in a cause-effect relationship with the signified ==> smoke = fire → see smoke signifier so there must be fire
- **Symbol**: symbolic signs are completely arbitrary, based on convention → no reason why it evokes certain meaning

Linguistic signs are symbols!

- form of words are a matter of convention
- bear an arbitrary relation to signified

There are a few **exceptions**:

- Iconic: onomatopoeic (auditory relation between sound and word) words ==> splash, click, hiccup, cuckoo
- Indexical: exclamations ==> ha and oh, hesitators ==> uh and uhm
→ directly caused by our effective reaction → linguistic signs of effect of brain processing

Philosophical approaches to meaning: Sense and reference:

The referential view:

Meaning of a word or expression: the entity that the expression identifies in the world (the **referent**)

- an expression (signifier) refers to a real life entity

e.g.

“**The president**, who is 79, drew fire two weeks ago after he told a Bloomberg reporter to be "quiet, piggy" when she tried to ask a follow-up question about disgraced financier and sex offender Jeffrey Epstein's emails.”

- ‘**The president**’ —> referent to Donald Trump

BUT:

“The **President** is responsible for implementing and enforcing the laws written by Congress and, to that end, appoints the heads of the Federal agencies, including the Cabinet.”

- ‘The **President**’ not referring to a specific president —> it is the role of ‘the President’

Problem —> Japan does not have a **president**

Problems of the referential view:

- words that don’t have a referent —> no one, unicorn, the President of Japan
- words whose referential meaning changes depending on context —> here, now, I, yesterday ==> deictic expressions
- words or expressions that refer to same entity
—> why would we need several words to refer to the same entity if the meaning of words have restricted to identifying referents?

Sense and reference:

Gottlob Frege (1848-1925), German mathematician and philosopher

Reference:

- entity (in real world) that the expression stands for / identifies / refers to
- also called **extensional meaning**

Sense:

- cognitive significance if an expression —> more like Saussure, cognitive abstraction
- also called **intensional meaning**

Example:

Venus, aka the morning star, aka the evening star

Reference:

the morning star = the evening star.
—> referring to the same spacial entity

Sense:

“the morning star ≠ “the evening star”
seen in morning seen in evening
—> concept is different

Structualist approaches: Componential analysis:

- more structuralist
- lexical entities segmented

Componential Analysis:

- comparing one word to others

Meaning of word or expression: set of all relationships a word has with other words —> look at it through looking at its components

Semantic analysis involves:

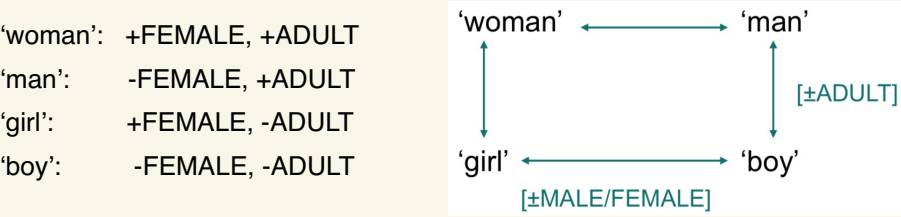
1. Systematically comparing and contrasting related words —> lexical field of terms semantically in the same area
2. Summarising similarities and contrasts in the most economical way —> we find bits of meaning that we can say are either present or absent in a word

—> **Componential analysis**

Lexical decomposition:

Word meanings are decomposed into distinct meaning components or features

Aim: finding smallest number of binary dimensions of contrast possible:



- annotate lexical items with meaning components (sememes)

Necessary and sufficient conditions:

Componential analysis: words defined in terms of individually necessary and jointly sufficient criteria

Example: criteria for X to be a BACHELOR

- X is human [+HUMAN]
- X is male [+MALE]
- X is adult [+ADULT]
- X is unmarried [-MARRIED]

The criteria are:

- individually **necessary**: if any one criteria not met, X is not a bachelor
- Jointly **sufficient**: if all criteria satisfied, X is a bachelor

Problems of componential analysis: Buzz groups:

FURNITURE:

- identification of features:
 - > features can be arbitrary
 - > whether or not a feature is relevant ca depend on context
 - > identification of “useful” features difficult
- restriction to binary features:
 - > aspects of gender: [+MALE] [+FEMALE] —> ?
- No universal inventory of semantic features
- Fixed category boundaries
 - > What about peripheral members?

Psychological approaches: Prototype theory:

Family resemblances:

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), Austrian-born British philosopher

Developed concept of family resemblances:

- set of criteria that are shared by many (not all) members of a category
 - each member of a category shares several (not all) criteria
 - no single criterion is necessary
- > fuzzy boundary of lexical concepts that share certain criteria but not all

e.g. ‘games’ —> ‘olympic-games’, ‘board-games’, ‘ball-games’, ‘card-games’, etc.

Fuzzy boundaries of categories:



- Experimental study by Labov (1973)
- Investigation of subjects’ naming of line drawings illustrating cups, mugs, vases, bowls etc.
 - > one image at a time
 - > different randomised orders
- only some items reliably assigned to one particular category
- responses could be influenced by contextual conditions
 - > imagining person holding object in hand and drinking from it —> contextual knowledge went into this

Prototype theory:

Eleanor Rosch, American Psychologist —> specialises in cognitive psychology

- experimental research
- speakers of different (especially non-Indo-European) languages
- Different types of tests:
 - > Production tests (category given and must name as many members of it as possible)
 - > Rating test (assess whether X is a typical member of category Y)
 - > Priming tests (measuring response times in recognition tasks depending on whether or not a category label was provided)
 - > ...

Notion of universal:

- explores the links between language and thinking
- interested in universals
 - > do all humans distinguish same set of colours? —> a universal colour semantic
 - > do speakers of all languages distinguish same set of basic shapes? —> a universal shape semantic

Example: Birds

Some birds are better representatives of the class “bird” than others

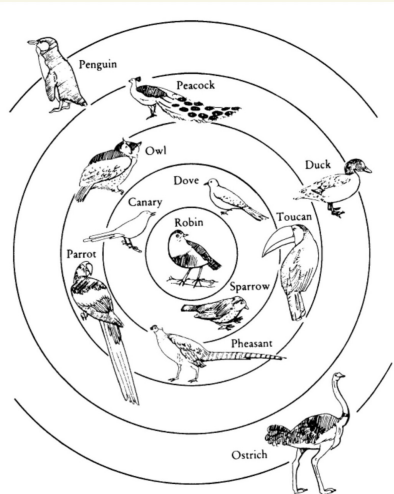
- more readily associated with term “bird”
- combine more features that are typical of birds (flying, singing voice etc.)

Category-members don’t all share same attributes:

- different positions in category
- neighbouring members share attributes

Marginal members share attributes with neighbouring categories:

- clear boundaries not always necessary



Prototypes: Further examples:

Prototypes are items of category that are:

- cognitively most easy to retrieve
- perceived to be most typical of category (the ‘birdiest’ bird)
- items that are visualised when thinking of category
- typically share many of the “family resemblance” categories
- culture-specific

rank	category				
	BIRD	FRUIT	VEHICLE	FURNITURE	WEAPON
top eight					
1	robin	orange	automobile	chair	gun
2	sparrow	apple	station wagon	sofa	pistol
3	bluejay	banana	truck	couch	revolver
4	bluebird	peach	car	table	machine gun
5	canary	pear	bus	easy chair	rifle
6	blackbird	apricot	taxi	dresser	switchblade
7	dove	tangerine	jeep	rocking chair	knife
8	lark	plum	ambulance	coffee table	dagger
.....
middle ranks					
26*	hawk	tangelo	subway	lamp	whip
27	raven	papaya	trailer	stool	ice pick
28	goldfinch	honeydew	cart	hassock	slingshot
29	parrot	fig	wheelchair	drawers	fists
30	sandpiper	mango	yacht	piano	axe
.....
last five					
51*	ostrich	nut	ski	picture	foot
52	titmouse	gourd	skateboard	closet	car
53	emu	olive	wheelbarrow	vase	glass
54	penguin	pickle	surfboard	fan	screwdriver
55	bat	squash	elevator	telephone	shoes

Componential analysis vs. Prototype theory:

Componential analysis:

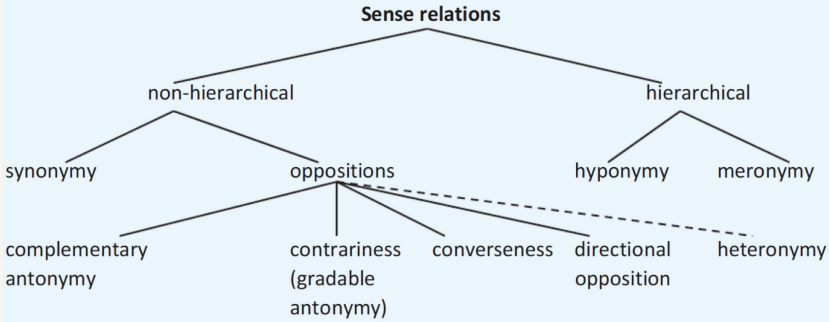
- originates in logic
- categories defined in terms of a set of necessary and sufficient features
- categories have clear boundaries
- features are binary, i.e. feature can either be present [+], or absent [-]
- all members of category have equal status, i.e. no degrees of membership in a category
- features are universal, abstract linguistic concepts
- innate to entities / objects

Prototype theory:

- originates in psychology
- categories not structured in terms of a shared set of features, but by a crisscrossing network of similarities
- categories have fuzzy boundaries
- attributes not binary constructs but variables on a continuum, at a dimension of meaning
- not all members of a category have equal status; some birds are “better” birds than others
- attributes are not abstract entities or linguistics
- language users assign them to objects on the basis of their encyclopaedic knowledge

Meaning relations:

- relation between individual lexical entities



Synonymy and antonymy:

Synonymy:

semantic equivalence (same meaning)

Note: Total synonymy is very rare / inexistent, near-synonyms vary with respect to:

- range of contexts where they can be applied / collocates they can take (e.g. deep vs. profound, Big Brother vs. Large Brother)
- connotations, style, register (e.g. baby vs. neonate, begin vs. commence) —> depends on context
- regional and social dialects (e.g. truck vs. lorry)

Antonymy:

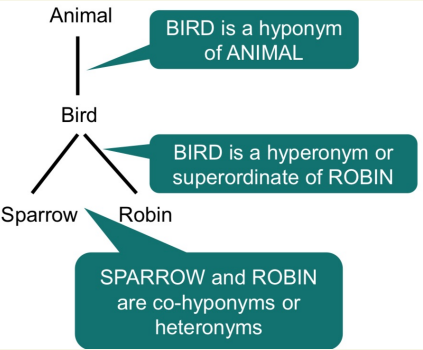
Opposite in meaning, incompatible

- **Complementary antonyms:** either/or relations —> asleep - awake, dead - alive, pass - fail
- **Gradable antonyms:** more or less on a continuum (in between there are more meanings) —> warm - cold, old - young
- **Relational antonyms:** same role-relationship from different perspectives (only exist in relation to each other) —> employer - employee, buy - sell
- **Directional antonyms:** opposite direction —> open - shut, rise - fall, come - go, above - below

Hierarchical relations:

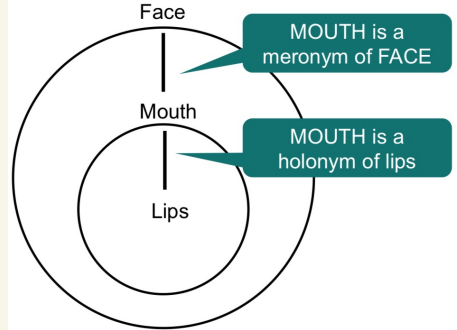
Hyperonymy / Hyponymy:

- one item is a kind of another item
- Taxonymy relationship: ‘is a kind of’



Meronymy:

- part-whole relationship: ‘is a part of’



Lexical ambiguity:

Homonymy:

Homonyms:

- identical forms with different meanings
- e.g. bark:
 - > sound dog makes
 - > part of tree

Note:

- no transparent link (metaphorical link) between the meanings
- homonyms have separate lexical entities in a dictionary

Homonyms are both homographs and homophones

Homographs:

- written the same but pronounced differently
- e.g. lead:
 - > /led/ ‘kind of metal’
 - > /li:d/ ‘piece of leather attached to dog collar’

Homophones:

- pronounced the same but spelt differently
- e.g.
 - > sea vs. see
 - > flower vs. flour

Polysemy:

Polysemy:

- word that has different, but related, meanings
- e.g.
 - > mouth: body, river, cave entry
 - > wing: bird, airplane, building
- much more frequent than homonymy
- practically every word is polysemous to some extent
- distinguishing polysemy and homonymy not always trivial and may require etymological knowledge

Note:

- link between the meanings (metaphorical meaning link) can be reconstructed
- no separate entries in dictionary (sub-meanings are listed)