

# Introduction to English Linguistics

## 2. Semantics and Pragmatics II 3 October 2019

1

## Study abroad

- **Study abroad information session** on options allowing students of English to spend some time in an English-speaking country (Swiss-European Mobility Programme (formerly known as Erasmus), other types of student exchanges, language assistantships).
  - Time: Wednesday 10 October, 18.30.
  - Place: Room B108.

2

## Lexical semantics

- Lexical semantics: The study of word meaning.
- Meaning relations:
  - Synonymy.
  - Opposition.
    - Non-gradable antonyms.
    - Gradable antonyms.
    - Relational opposites.
  - Hyponymy.
  - Homophony.
  - Polysemy.
- Semantic properties and features.

3

## Semantic properties and features

- Semantic decomposition:
  - (10) a. woman: [+human, +adult, +female]  
b. man: [+human, +adult, -female]
  - (11) a. ewe: [-hum, +adult, +fem, +sheep]  
b. ram: [-hum, +adult, -fem, +sheep]
  - (12) a. child: [+human, -adult]  
b. lamb: [-human, -adult, +sheep]

4

## Defining meaning relations in terms of semantic features

- *Synonymy*.  
(Nearly) identical features.
- *Opposition (antonyms, relational opposites)*.  
Feature opposition.
- *Hyponymy*.  
A subset of features is shared.
- *Homophony*.  
Different sets of features.
- *Polysemy*.  
Different (but related) sets of features.

5

## Features of nouns: [+/-count]

- [+/-count]: **count nouns** vs. **mass nouns**.
  - *Apple, idea, dog* vs. *water, rice*.
- (13) a. Rice is good for you. - \*Cup is clean.  
b. He bought \*a rice / a cup.  
c. He bought \*rices / cups.  
d. He bought **much** rice / \*cup. vs.  
e. He bought **many** \*rices / cups.  
f. He bought **a little** rice / \*cup. vs.  
g. He bought **a few** \*rices / cups.

6

## [+/- count]: Cross-linguistic variation

- (14) a. \*They gave us two informations.  
b. Ils nous ont donné deux informations.

Information:

English [-count], French [+count].

7

## Features of nouns: Gender

- English: Natural gender. But:
  - Human infants (*child, baby*) and animals: *he, she* or *it*.
  - With animals: *The bull turned his/its head. The cow was lying on her/its back.*
  - Ships: *The Titanic sank on her/its maiden voyage.*
- French: Grammatical gender (in addition to purely semantic gender features).

8

## Features of verbs: [+/-stative]

- [-stative]: Dynamic, i.e. involving a change.
    - *talk, work, dance.*
  - [+stative]: No change.
    - *suspect, resemble, doubt* + constructions with the verb *be*.
- (15) a. What happened? #They resembled each other.  
vs. They talked to him.  
b. #They are resembling each other. vs.  
They are talking to him.  
c. #What they did was resemble each other. vs.  
What they did was talk to him.

9

## Features of verbs: [+/-telic]

- [+telic]: A natural end point.
  - [-telic]: No natural end point.
- E.g. *win* vs. *walk*.
- (16) a. It took John an hour to *win*.  
[+telic]  
b. \*It took John an hour to *walk*.  
[-telic]  
c. It took John an hour to *walk two miles*.  
*walk* + object: [+telic]

10

## Features of verbs: [+/-causative]

- (17) a. The logger felled the tree.  
b. They strengthened their squad.  
c. Thefts never enrich.  
d. This machine sterilizes surgical instruments.  
e. They freed him.
- (18) a. She got the house painted.  
b. They made him feel guilty.
- (19) a. The navy sank the ship. [+causative]  
b. The ship sank. [-causative]  
c. Robin boiled the water. [+causative]  
d. The water boiled. [-causative]

11

## Some evidence for semantic features: Aphasia

- Aphasia: An acquired speech deficit due to brain damage (e.g. after a stroke or an accident).
- Main types of aphasia:
  - Broca's aphasia: Effortful speech production, telegraphic style, omission of grammatical items.
  - Wernicke's aphasia: Fluent speech, but generally incoherent; comprehension problems.
- A phenomenon found particularly with Wernicke's aphasia: Paraphasia. Difficulties with words.

12

## Paraphasia – object naming tasks

- Task: Name the object shown in the picture.  
Example:



- Subjects' incorrect responses:
  - fish* (frequent – superordinate term)
  - trout* (frequent – co-hyponym)
  - guitar* (rare – no meaning relation)

13

## Paraphasia – comprehension task

- Task: Choose the image corresponding to the word you hear. Example: CHAIR.
- Subjects' incorrect choices:



*rare*  
(despite phonetic similarity)



*frequent*  
(co-hyponym)



*rare*  
(no relation)

- Conclusion: Both tasks suggest that a speaker's lexicon is organized in terms of subcomponents of meaning, i.e. semantic features.

14

## Semantic features: Some problems

- Labels of features are given as words, but words are what we want to describe with features. Circularity?
- What are the basic features?
  - Cf. e.g. *ram*: [–hum, +adult, –fem, +sheep]

What are the features of *adult*? What are the features of *sheep*? Each feature seems to require its own definition in terms of another set of features. The selection of basic features would seem to be arbitrary.

15

## Semantic features: Some problems

- How can certain words be defined?
  - red: [+color, +??]
  - apple: [+fruit, +??]
  - love: [+emotion, +??]
  - ...
- An alternative approach is to equate word meaning with the notion of *concept* and then to apply models of concepts as developed in the field of cognitive psychology.

16