

Introduction to English Linguistics

2. Semantics and Pragmatics III
10 October 2019

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Phrase and sentence meaning

- Phrase: A subunit within a sentence (cf. the discussion of syntax for more details).
- Main topics:
 - Compositionality.
 - Noun-centered meaning: The meaning of noun phrases.
 - Verb-centered meaning: Thematic roles.
 - Sentence meaning:
 - Truth-conditional semantics.
 - Meaning relations between sentences.

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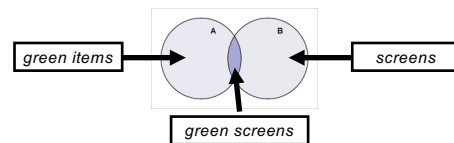
Compositionality

- *The Principle of Compositionality.*
The meaning of a phrase or sentence depends both on the meaning of its words and how those words are combined.
- Major exception: idioms.
 - *She pulled her brother's leg.*
 - *He hit the nail on the head.*

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Noun-centered meaning: Compositionality

- A simple case of compositionality:
 - *green screens*



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Noun-centered meaning: Interactions

- Sometimes more complex: Compositional meaning as the result of an interaction between the meanings of words plus context (i.e. pragmatics).

- (20)
- a. *a red hat*
 - b. *a red book*
 - c. *a pink grapefruit*
 - d. *a red traffic light*
 - e. *a red pencil*
 - f. *red eyes*
 - g. *blue eyes*

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Noun-centered meaning: Collocations

- Certain (often non-semantic) restrictions on the way meanings can be combined: Collocations.
 - E.g. intensifiers like *great*, *heavy*, *high*, *utter*, *extreme* and *severe*.

	<i>great</i>	<i>heavy</i>	<i>high</i>	<i>utter</i>	<i>extreme</i>	<i>deep</i>	<i>severe</i>
<i>frost</i>	–	+	–	–	?	–	+
<i>rain</i>	–	+	–	–	–	–	–
<i>wind</i>	?	+	+	–	–	–	–
<i>temperature</i>	?	–	+	–	+	–	–
<i>speed</i>	+	–	+	–	?	–	–
<i>surprise</i>	+	–	–	+	+	–	–
<i>distress</i>	+	–	–	–	+	+	+

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Noun-centered meaning: Sense vs. reference

- (21) a. **The Prime Minister** flew to Paris last night.
b. **The leader of the Tories** flew to Paris last night.
- (22) They met **the present Prime Minister** yesterday.
- (23) Meaning of a noun phrase =
sense (intension) + reference (extension)
(Reference assignment: Pragmatics)

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Verb-centred meaning

- (24) a. I will meet my friend at the castle.
b. My friend will meet me at the castle.
c. #I will meet the castle at the station.
d. #The castle will meet me at the station
- [+animate] *meet* [+animate]
 - Property 1 of verbs: Verbs can impose semantic restrictions on other elements occurring in the same sentence.

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Verb-centred meaning: Thematic roles

- (25) a. John invited Mary.
b. *John invited.
c. John was dining.
d. *John was dining a pizza.
- Property 2 of verbs: Verbs influence the number of elements that occur in a sentence.
 - A way to describe these relations between verbs and other elements: Thematic roles.
 - **Thematic roles**: The part played by a particular entity in the situation described by the verb. Verbs assign *thematic roles* to other parts of a sentence.
 - (25): **Agent** and **theme**.

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Thematic roles

- (26) a. John likes football. (Experiencer-Theme)
b. The teacher gave Sue the book. (Agent-Goal-Theme)
c. Sue was given the book by the teacher. (Goal-Theme-Agent)
- (27) a. John opened the door.
b. The door opened.
- (27a): [+causative]: two thematic roles
 - (27b): [-causative]: one thematic role
- (28) a. He is reading a book.
b. He is reading.
- A thematic role can sometimes be left implicit.

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Sentence meaning – Truth conditions

- Analysis of sentence meaning in terms of truth-conditional semantics.
- (29) a. The cat is on the mat.
b. *True if*:
There is some relevant feline occupying a specific position relative to an item of floor covering.

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Meaning relation 1: Paraphrase

- Two sentences are paraphrases if they have the same truth conditions.
- (30) a. He *must* go. – He *is obliged* to go.
b. It is easy to please John. – John is easy to please.
c. I gave the summons to Chris.
I gave Chris the summons.
d. The police chased the burglar.
The burglar was chased by the police.
e. Emily sold the dress to Jane.
Jane bought the dress from Emily.

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Meaning relation 2: Entailment

- A sentence A entails a sentence B if the truth of A guarantees the truth of B. [N.B. Paraphrases: mutual entailment.]
- (31) a. The park wardens killed the tiger.
entails The tiger is dead.
 b. The brick is red. *entails* The brick is not white.
 c. All dogs are purple. *entails* My dog is purple.
 d. John is eating salmon. *entails* John is eating fish.
- Entailments are lost under negation:
- (32) John is **not** eating salmon.
Does not entail: John is eating fish.
Nor does it entail: John is **not** eating fish.

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Meaning relation 3: Presupposition

- A background assumption that must hold for a sentence to be appropriate.
- (33) a. He continued drawing.
presupposes He was drawing before.
 b. It is annoying that it is raining.
presupposes It is raining.
 c. My neighbour is on holiday.
presupposes I have a neighbour.
- Speaker and listener may not always share a given presupposition.
- (34) *Reporter*: Mr Gandhi, what do you think of Western Civilization?
Gandhi: I think that it would be a very good idea.

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Entailment vs. presupposition

- A presupposition is maintained with negation (35) and questions (36), entailment is not.
- (35) He **didn't** continue drawing.
presupposes He was drawing before. (vs. 32)
- (36) a. Did he continue drawing?
presupposes: He was drawing before.
 b. Did the park wardens kill the tiger?
does not entail: The tiger is dead. (cf. 31a)

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Meaning relation 4: Contradiction

- A negative entailment: If one sentence is true, the other one must be false.
- (37) He is an orphan.
contradicts His parents are alive.
- (38) I spit out the water I had swallowed.

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Meaning relation 5: Ambiguity

- One sentence with two (or more) sets of truth conditions.
 - Ambiguity at the sentential level can be due to **lexical** ambiguity or **structural** ambiguity.
- (39) a. I saw him near the bank.
 b. The little girl hit the child with the toy.

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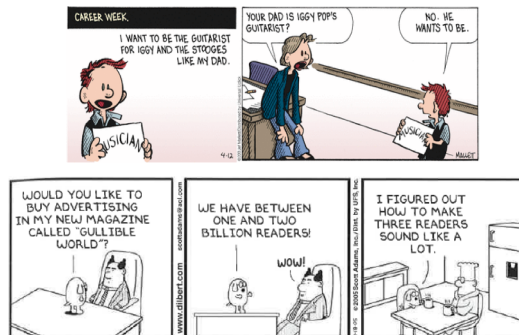
Lexical vs. structural ambiguity

(40)



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Structural ambiguity



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Structural ambiguity

- (41) a. **Bert:** Speaking of names, I know a man with a wooden leg named Smith.
Uncle Albert: What's the name of his other leg?
 (Mary Poppins; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9TrMNpUZM8>)
- b. Killer Sentenced to Die for Second Time in 10 Years.
- c. Two cars were reported stolen by the Groveton police yesterday.
- d. **Teacher:** How can you prevent diseases caused by biting insects?
Student: Don't bite any.
- e. Gov. Bill Walker has issued a disaster declaration in Alaska in response to Friday's earthquake, which was approved by President Donald Trump.

(<http://language.cog.kit.usc.edu/>) from: <https://www.accuweather.com/en/weather-news/monster-earthquake-in-anchorage-ak-shakes-city-sparks-tsunami-warnings/70006773>)

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Structural ambiguity

- (41) e. Officers tried to calm the confrontation and arrested a man found in possession of a knife and a woman.
- f. - Shoe, darling... I wish you'd give up smoking for me!
 - Who ever said I was smoking for you?
- g. - Is the fish served here previously frozen or fresh?
 - Previously fresh.



Figure 3.1 Vegetarian Chickens <<http://blondie.com/comics/november-5-2002>>
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