Chapter 7

Semantics

WE HAVE ALREADY COME ACROSS the word 'semantic' in Chapter 5 when we examined the different connotations of 'word'. Semantics refers to meaning and meaning is so intangible that one group of linguists, the structuralists, preferred not to deal with it or rely on it at all. To illustrate what we mean by the intangible quality of 'meaning', think of such words as 'beauty', 'goodness', 'love'; it would be hard to find two people who agree absolutely on what each of these words implies. A person may seem good to one onlooker and a hypocrite to another. Similarly, we all think we know what we mean by 'boy' and 'man', but at what age does a boy cease to be a boy? at thirteen? fifteen? eighteen? twenty-one? Meaning is a variable and not to be taken for granted.

Under the subject of semantics we shall deal with the following areas of interest:

(1) the fact that a word can have more than one meaning, for example *ball* can be both a dance and a round object for bouncing
(2) the fact that different words appear to have the same meaning, for example 'regal' and 'royal' or 'big' and 'large'
(3) the fact that some words can be analysed into components such as adult, female, for example *mare* implies both adult and female as well as horse
(4) the fact that some words seem to have opposites, for example 'long' and 'short', 'good' and 'bad' but not 'desk' or 'table'
(5) the fact that the meanings of some words are included in the meaning of others, for example the meaning of 'vegetable' is included in that of 'potato' and the meaning of 'tree' is included in that of 'elm'
(6) the fact that certain combinations of words have meanings which are very different from the combination of their separate meanings, for example the meanings of 'pass' plus the meanings of 'on' do not add up to the meaning of 'die' although that is what 'pass on' can mean.

Polysemy

The same morphological word may have a range of different meanings as a glance at any dictionary will reveal. Polysemy, meaning 'many meanings', is the name given to the study of this particular

phenomenon. In a dictionary entry for any given word the meanings are listed in a particular order with the central meaning given first, followed by the most closely related meanings and with metaphorical extensions coming last. If we look up the word 'star', for example, in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, we find the meanings:

(1) celestial body
(2) thing suggesting star by its shape, especially a figure or object with radiating points
(3) (in card game) additional life bought by player whose lives are lost
(4) principal actor or actress in a company

In theory, the idea of words having several meanings is straightforward; in practice there are problems, especially in relation to drawing boundary lines between words. It is not always easy to decide when a meaning has become so different from its original meaning that it deserves to be treated like a new word. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, for example, lists 'pupil' as having two meanings:

(1) one who is taught by another, scholar
(2) circular opening in centre of iris of eye regulating passage of light to the retina

Many speakers of English, however, regard these as two different words. Stated simply, the essential problem is that it is not always easy or even possible to be certain whether we are dealing with polysemy, that is, one word with several meanings, or homonymy, that is, several words with the same form.

Normally dictionaries decide between polysemy and homonymy by referring to etymology (the origins and history of a word) when this is known, but even this rule is not foolproof because, on occasions, etymologically related words may have different spellings as in the case of 'flower' and 'flour'. The simplest solution is to seek a core of meaning and any homonymous items sharing the core of meaning should be classified as polysemous.

The phenomenon of polysemy is not restricted to full words in English. Multiplicity of meaning is a very general characteristic of language and is found in prefixes as well as full words. Let us take 'un' for example. When it prefixes a verb, it usually means 'reverse the action of the verb': undo, unpack, untie, unzip. When 'un' precedes a noun to form a verb, it can mean 'deprive of this noun': 'unhorse', 'unman' (that is, deprive of manly qualities). This usage is rare in English now but previously words like 'unbishop', 'unduke', 'unking', 'unlord' occurred. When 'un' precedes an adjective, it can mean 'the opposite of': 'unfair', 'ungracious', 'unkind', 'untrue'.

Synonymy

Most people think of 'synonymy' as implying 'having the same meaning' but it is easy to show that synonymy is always partial, never complete. 'Tall' and 'high' are usually given as synonyms but whilst we can have both:

a tall building

and:

a high building

we cannot have both:

a tall boy

and:

*a high boy

We can best define synonymy by saying that it is the relationship in which two or more words are in free variation in all or most contexts. The closest we come to absolute synonymy is when the synonyms belong to different dialects as with:

British usage	*US usage*
autumn	fall
estate agent	realtor
pavement	sidewalk

but even here the choice of one term rather than another indicates a regional preference. As well as regionally marked synonyms, we find synonyms which differ stylistically, in that one term may be more formal than another:

die	pass on/over	kick the bucket	decease
steal	relieve one of	pinch/half inch	purloin
smell	odour	stink/pong	effluvium

And, as the above items also illustrate, items which are cognitively synonymous may arouse very different emotional responses, the A list below implying less approval than the B list:

A	*B*
conceal	hide
politician	statesman
stubborn	resolute

Total synonymy, that is, the coincidence of cognitive, emotive and stylistic identity, is more of an ideal than a reality. In addition, the choice of one word rather than its synonym can have an effect on the words and phrases than can co-occur with it. Let us illustrate this briefly by listing dictionary synonyms for 'put up with' and 'noise':

put up with	*noise*
bear	clamour
brook	din
endure	disturbance
stand	sound level
tolerate	

All the verbs can collocate with 'such noise' although 'brook' is more likely to occur with words like 'impertinence', 'offhandedness' or 'rudeness'. As soon as we try to substitute 'clamour' for 'noise' we meet our first problem. We can say:

I can't put up with such noise.

but for most native speakers:

I can't put up with such clamour.

is unacceptable. In addition, if we substitute 'din' we need to include an indefinite article 'such a din', and the same applies to 'racket'. What is being stressed here is the fact that items collocate and interact. We must take levels of formality into account in selecting synonyms.

Antonymy

This is the general term applied to the sense relation involving oppositeness of meaning. For our purposes, it will be convenient to distinguish three types of 'oppositeness', namely (1) implicitly graded antonyms, (2) complementarity and (3) converseness.

(1) **Implicitly graded antonyms** refer to pairs of items such as 'big' and 'small', 'good' and 'bad', 'young' and 'old'. In other words, 'big', 'good' and 'young' can only be interpreted in terms of being 'bigger', 'better' or 'younger' than something which is established as the norm for the comparison. Thus, when we say that one fly is bigger than another, we imply that 'big' is to be understood in the context of flies. This accounts for the apparent paradox of a 'big fly' being smaller than a 'small dog' because 'small' in the latter context means 'small when compared with other dogs'.

In English, the larger item of the pair is the unmarked or neutral

member. Thus we can ask:

How big is it?

How old is he?

How wide is the river?

without implying that the subject is either 'big', 'old' or 'wide'. Such questions are unbiased or open with regard to the expectations of the enquirer. On the other hand, to ask:

How small is it?

does prejudge the matter, claiming that it is indeed small. There is nothing universal about the larger member of the pair being the neutral member although in many societies this seems to be the case. In Japanese, for example, one would ask the equivalent of:

How thin is it?

when an English speaker would have to ask:

How thick is it?

(2) **Complementarity** refers to the existence of such pairs as 'male' and 'female'. It is characteristic of such pairs that the denial of one implies the assertion of the other. Thus if one is not male, then one is certainly female. Notice the difference between graded antonyms of the 'good'/'bad' type and complementary pairs. To say:

John is not single.

implies:

John is married.

but to say:

John is not bad.

does not imply:

John is good.

In certain contexts, the following can be complementary pairs:

food	drink
land	sea
transitive	intransitive
warmblooded	coldblooded

Related to complementary sets are sets of terms like colours or numbers where the assertion of one member implies the negation of all

the others. Thus, if we have a set such as: green, yellow, brown, red, blue, to say:

This is green.

implies that it is not yellow, brown, red or blue. In a two-term set such as (male, female), the assertion of male implies the denial of the only other term in the set. Such terms, as well as being described as 'complementary', are often referred to as 'incompatible'.

(3) **Converseness** is the relationship that holds between such related pairs of sentences as:

John sold it to me.

and:

I bought it from John.

where SELL and BUY are in a converse relationship. English has a number of conversely related verbs and so sentence converseness is a common phenomenon:

John lent the money to Peter.

Peter borrowed the money from John.

Other frequently occurring converse verbs include:

buy and sell
push and pull
command and serve
give and take
hire out and hire
lease and rent
teach and learn

Occasionally, the same verb can be used in the conversely related pair of sentences as in:

John rented the house to Peter.

Peter rented the house from John.

and also:

John married Mary.

and:

Mary married John.

Sometimes, in English, we can find converse nouns corresponding to converse verbs:

command	serve	master	servant
teach	learn	teacher	pupil
treat	consult	doctor	patient

Hyponymy

Hyponymy is related to complementarity and incompatibility. Whereas the relationship of implicit denial is called incompatibility, the relationship of implicit inclusion is called hyponymy. This relationship is easy to demonstrate. The colour 'red', for example, includes or comprehends the colours 'scarlet' and 'vermilion' just as the term 'flower' includes 'daisy', 'forget-me-not' and 'rose'. The including term in our latter example 'flower' is known as the 'superordinate term' and the included items are known as 'co-hyponyms'. The assertion of a hyponym:

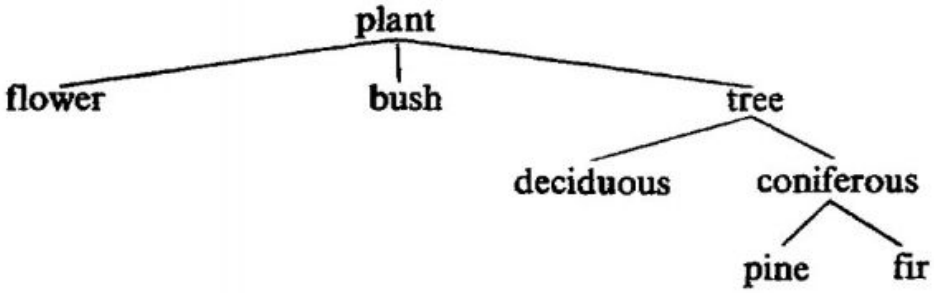
This is a rose.

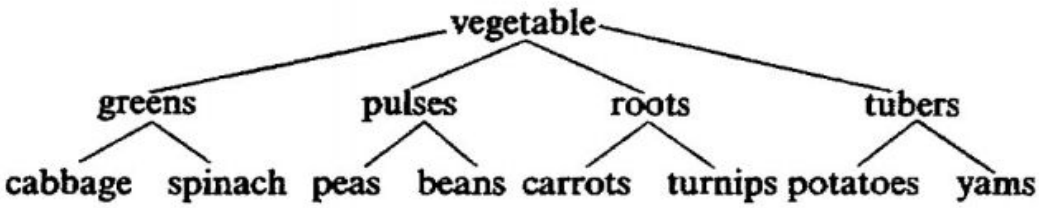
implies the assertion of the superordinate:

This is a flower.

but the assertion of the superordinate does not automatically imply one specific hyponym. We can thus say that the implicational nature of hyponymy is unilateral or works one way only.

One of the most useful features of the principle of hyponymy is that it allows us to be as general or as specific as a particular linguistic occasion warrants, as can be seen from the following hierarchies:





Often these hierarchical diagrams are called 'taxonomies'. With each downward step we encounter terms of more specific meaning.

Hyponymy is a recently invented method of indicating the relationships that can exist between words. Occasionally, items have to be put into a context to see whether their relationships can best be illustrated by means of one classification rather than another. 'Black' and 'white' are co-hyponyms when considered as colours but they can be complementary in discussions about race, draughts and piano keys.

Idioms

An idiom is a group of words whose meaning cannot be explained in terms of the habitual meanings of the words that make up the piece of language. Thus 'fly off the handle' which means 'lose one's temper' cannot be understood in terms of the meanings of 'fly', 'off' or 'handle'. Idioms involve the non-literal use of language and they can be categorised as follows:

(1) *alliterative comparisons*:

dead as a dodo

fit as a fiddle

good as gold

(2) *noun phrases*:

a blind alley (route that leads nowhere, a false trail)

a close shave (a narrow escape)

a red letter day (a day that will never be forgotten)

(3) *preposition phrases*:

at sixes and sevens (unable/unwilling to agree)

by hook or by crook (by whatever methods prove necessary)

in for a penny, in for a pound ('I'm involved irrespective of cost')

(4) *verb + noun phrase*:

kick the bucket (die)

pop your clogs (die)

spill the beans (reveal a secret)

(5) *verb + preposition phrase*:

be in clover (be exceptionally comfortable)

be in the doghouse (be in disgrace)

be between a rock and a hard place (have no room for manoeuvre)

(6) *verb + adverb*:

give in (yield)
put down (kill)
take to (like)

Idioms range from the semi-transparent where either the meaning can be interpreted in terms of metaphor:

clip someone's wings (reduce someone's mobility)

or because one part of the idiomatic phrase is used literally:

run up a bill

to the totally opaque:

go bananas (lose one's temper)

They tend to be relatively fixed with regard to number:

spill the beans *and not* *spill the bean

the use of determiners:

a dead duck *and not* *the/that dead duck

the use of comparatives and superlatives:

good as gold *and not* *better than gold
red tape *and not* *reddest tape

word order:

hale and hearty *and not* *hearty and hale

the use of passives:

They buried the hatchet *and not* *The hatchet was buried
He spilt the beans *and not* *The beans were spilt

There is a tendency for the more transparent idioms to allow some change:

run up a bill *and* run up an enormous bill

but:

kick the bucket *and not* *kick the enormous bucket

and there is a marked tendency for a few colours – black, blue, green, red and white – to be used idiomatically:

blackmail a blue moon a red herring a white elephant

Idioms differ according to region and according to formality. They are more frequently found in speech than in writing and, because they are both hackneyed and imprecise, they are best avoided in formal contexts. Idioms are a marked example of non-literal use of language and, although they occur in all languages, they can rarely be translated from one language to another.

Summary

Meaning is not an easy concept to deal with partly because we are dealing with abstractions (one person's idea of 'goodness' may differ radically from another's), with mobility ('silly' used to mean 'holy' and 'regiment' used to mean 'government'), with difference of opinion (when, for example, does a hill become a mountain or a sea become an ocean?) and with distinctions essential in one language but not in another (the English only need one word for 'sand' but Arabs need many more). To meet some of these problems linguists have tried to deal with sense relations, that is, with the relationships that exist within a specific language, in terms of similarity (synonymy), differences (antonymy), related sets (complementarity and hyponymy) and the non-literal use of language (idiom). They examine the lexicon in terms of systems in which individual words depend for their meaning on being opposed to other items in a set. 'Good' can only be fully understood by being opposed to 'bad' or 'better' or 'worse'. In addition, qualitative adjectives can only be understood in terms of an implied norm. 'Good' for example can be used to modify:

behaviour

looks

mood

We can even talk about a 'good liar' because, in each case, 'good' is related to a standard relevant to behaviour, looks, moods and liars. Meaning is not 'given' and is never absolute.

Exercises

1. Offer synonyms for the underlined words in the following sentences:
   (1) We saw a tiny child.
   (2) He was praised for his kingly bearing.
   (3) He hid the news from his mother and father.
   (4) He was overcome by the nasty effluvium.
   (5) Indicate the route to my abode.
   (6) He could not tolerate the noise.

(7) He always referred to himself as a labourer.
(8) She lit it.
(9) He always nods off as soon as he sits by the fire.
(10) Please don't meddle with my possessions again.

2. Select the most appropriate antonyms for the underlined items in the following sentences:

(1) It was the smallest elephant I had ever seen.
(2) My coffee is cold.
(3) My feet are cold.
(4) My house is cold.
(5) He has dark hair.
(6) He gave me a dark look.
(7) The sky is becoming very dark.
(8) He disappeared.
(9) We arrived at noon.
(10) It was a very wide river.

3. Put the following lists into taxonomic hierarchies:

(1) rose, plant, tea-rose, dog-rose, flower, daisy
(2) tea, coffee, beverage, milk, black coffee, sugared coffee
(3) cold-blooded animals, warm-blooded animals, animals, crocodiles, birds, fish, whales

4. Examine the following sentences carefully and try to establish a hierarchy of the verbs used. (Put the most general verb at the top.)

(1) He rushed down the road.
(2) He went down the road.
(3) He walked down the road.
(4) He strolled down the road.
(5) He ran down the road.

Which of the above verbs are mutually exclusive? That is, if we assert one verb like 'run' do we automatically deny another verb?

5. Complete the following idioms:

(1) as right as . . . . .
(2) a . . . . . moon
(3) by the skin of his . . . . .
(4) burn the . . . . . at both ends
(5) bark up the wrong . . . . .
(6) cry for the . . . . .
(7) go on a wild . . . . . chase
(8) bite the . . . . .
(9) keep a . . . . . profile
(10) get to the . . . . . gritty