

Introduction to English Linguistics (Part 1)

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Lexical Semantics

Session 10, Semantics

What is meaning?

It's fairly difficult to describe what meaning is.

Even the verb *mean* itself has different meanings in different contexts:

- *Glücklich* means 'happy' in German
- *Serendipity* means "good luck in making unexpected and fortunate discoveries"
- I really meant to study, but I kept falling asleep on the couch
- This tornado means we'll be unable to fly to Los Angeles

Semantics is the branch of linguistics that is interested in meaning, specifically **conventional meaning**.

Okay, so what's *conventional* meaning?

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William Shakespeare was a playwright

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The conventional meaning of an utterance can often be evaluated with expressions that can be labeled as **true or false**.

Truth and conventional meaning

*William Shakespeare was a playwright.
Polar bears live in the Arctic.*

*She was standing over there.
Interpol is the best band on the planet.
A: "Should we go outside?"
B: "Well, it's raining."*

While the first two sentences can be described in terms of their conventional meaning, the second group of sentences poses certain analytical challenges.

Truth and conventional meaning

*William Shakespeare was a playwright.
Polar bears live in the Arctic.*

We can test these statements about William Shakespeare and polar bears and determine whether or not our description is accurate.

Truth and conventional meaning

She was standing over there.

(**ambiguous**, depends on the context)

Interpol is the best band on the planet.

(**affective**, depends on my taste)

A: *"Should we go outside?"*

B: *"Well, it's raining."*

(**implicated**, B probably means "no", but does not literally say so)

Truth and conventional meaning

(1) *An apple is a kind of fruit.*

(2) *A toaster is a kind of fruit.*

(3) *The earth is flat.*

(4) *I had a double espresso this morning.*

(5) *The childless woman has two daughters.*

(6) *My hair throws a party while I'm asleep.*

Truth and conventional meaning

- (1) *An apple is a kind of fruit.* (**TRUE**)
- (2) *A toaster is a kind of fruit.* (**FALSE**)
- (3) *The earth is flat.* (**FALSE** - at least according to most people)
- (4) *I had a double espresso this morning.* (**TRUE or FALSE**)
- (5) *The childless woman has two daughters.* (**CONTRADICTION**)
- (6) *My hair throws a party while I'm asleep.*
(**SEMANTIC ANOMALY**)

Referential meaning

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referential

John J. Smith

Mike's cat

my rusty old screwdriver

Referential meaning

Referential meaning can be found in those utterances which specifically refer to a distinct and real person, object, abstract notion, event or state.

referential

John J. Smith

Mike's cat

my rusty old screwdriver

non-referential

the North American woodchuck

most Canadians

some guy

Santa Claus

Words that "go together"

- (1) *lion, cougar, tiger, panther, leopard*
- (2) *dog, log, idea, lasagna, radioactivity*

Words that "go together"

- (1) *lion, cougar, tiger, panther, leopard*
- (2) *dog, log, idea, lasagna, radioactivity*

The lexemes in (1) "go together" because all of its members belong to the zoological category of big cats.

By contrast, the lexemes in (2) mean completely different things and are unrelated semantically.

Synonymy (sameness)

(3) *buy, purchase*

(4) *couch, sofa*

(5) *funny, amusing, comical, humorous*

The terms in (3-5) are semantically close to one another (they are **synonymous**), but one could argue that they incorporate different shades of meaning, especially in (5).

Synonymy is scalar, not binary, meaning that two terms are more or less close, but rarely completely synonymous.

Hyponymy (top-bottom relation)

color
|
blue red green yellow purple white black

cook
|
toast boil fry grill roast bake microwave

In these examples, the terms *color* and *cook* are **superordinates**, while the words listed below them are their **hyponyms**.

Antonymy (opposition)

- (1) *hot - cold*
- (2) *slow - fast*
- (3) *happy - sad*

- (4) *dead - alive*
- (5) *male - female*
- (6) *married - single*

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All examples given are opposites (**antonyms**). While (1-3) are **gradable** antonyms (one can be *happier* or *faster*), (4-6) are **non-gradable**.

Homophones (words that sound identical)

The sea is rough today
I can see you from here

The man made a joke
The maid cleaned the apartment

She doesn't eat meat
Let's meet at 1pm

Homophones are terms that sound the same in speech but are distinct lexemes. They usually spelled in different ways.

Homonyms (words that sound and look identical)

term	sense
-------------	--------------

- | | |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------|
| a) <i>match</i> | thing that you light a cigarette with |
| b) <i>match</i> | thing that a soccer team loses |

- | | |
|----------------|-------------------------------------|
| a) <i>date</i> | a sweet kind of fruit (ger: Dattel) |
| b) <i>date</i> | an appointment |

Homonyms look and sound the same, but are etymologically distinct words with different senses.

Polysemy (multiple senses)

Ouch, I hurt my head.

John Smith is the head of XYZ Corporation

Mike is a funny guy.

A: Are you okay?

B: Actually, I'm feeling a little funny.

Polysemy is the ability of words to take on multiple meanings. Polysemes are different from homonyms in that we are dealing with a single term that has multiple senses, not with several separate terms.

Metaphorical extension

- (1) *His phone call will buy us some time*
- (2) *The dollar has risen sharply*
- (3) *The students breezed through the exam*

A metaphor is linguistically defined as an expansion of a term beyond its primary sense. This is usually possible because similarities between the referent of the source term and the referent of the target term.

- (1) time = money
- (2) dollar = tide/sea level
- (3) effortless, rapid movement = breeze

Lexical ambiguity

- (1) *Mary had a little lamb*
- (2) *I smell*
- (3) *Your apartment smells*

Lexical ambiguity

- (1) *Mary had a little lamb*
- (2) *I smell (smoke)*
- (3) *Your apartment smells (of cat)*

In (1) *have* has two separate meanings (owning vs. eating a lamb)

In (2) *smell* is something that I actively do, whereas in (3) it describes what the apartment emits.