

# Introduction to Linguistics – LANE 321

CHAPTER 10 – SEMANTICS

---

## Semantics

---

### What is Semantics?

Semantics is the study of the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences.

## Meaning

---

- When we define words, we deal with the **conceptual** meaning rather than the **associative** meaning.
- What is the difference?

## Meaning

---

### Conceptual meaning:

- **Needle** = thin, sharp, steel, instrument
- **Low-calorie** = producing a small amount of heat or energy

### Associative meaning:

- **Needle** = pain, illness, blood, drugs, thread, knitting, hard to find.
- **Low calorie** = healthy
- Associative connotations related to a word.
- These associations differ from a person to another.

## Meaning



## Semantic Features

- The hamburger ate the boy
- The table listens to the radio
- The horse is reading the newspaper 🤖
- The oddness of these sentences does not derive from their syntactic structure.
- According to the basic syntactic rules for forming English sentences, we have well-formed structures.

|  |     |           |     |  |         |
|--|-----|-----------|-----|--|---------|
|  | NP  |           | V   |  | NP      |
|  | The | hamburger | ate |  | the boy |

## Semantic Features

- This sentence is syntactically good, but semantically odd.
- Since the sentence *The boy ate the hamburger* is perfectly acceptable, we may be able to identify the source of the problem.
- The components of the conceptual meaning of the noun *hamburger* must be significantly different from those of the noun *boy*.
- The kind of noun that can be the subject of the verb *ate* must denote an entity that is capable of 'eating'.
- The noun *hamburger* does not have this property and the noun *boy* does .

## Semantic Features

- We can make this observation applicable by trying to determine the important features of meaning that any noun must have in order to be used as the subject of the verb *ate*.
- Feature = animate being
 

|                              |                                 |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>boy</i> . + animate       | [+ = has the feature]           |
| <i>hamburger</i> . – animate | [ – = doesn't have the feature] |

## Semantic Features

|         | table | horse | boy | man | girl | woman |
|---------|-------|-------|-----|-----|------|-------|
| animate | -     | +     | +   | +   | +    | +     |
| human   | -     | -     | +   | +   | +    | +     |
| female  | -     | -     | -   | -   | +    | +     |
| adult   | -     | +     | -   | +   | -    | +     |

- The word *girl* involves the elements [+ human, + female, - adult]
- Syntactic analysis + semantic features:

The \_\_\_\_\_ is reading the newspaper  
N [+human]

## Semantic Roles

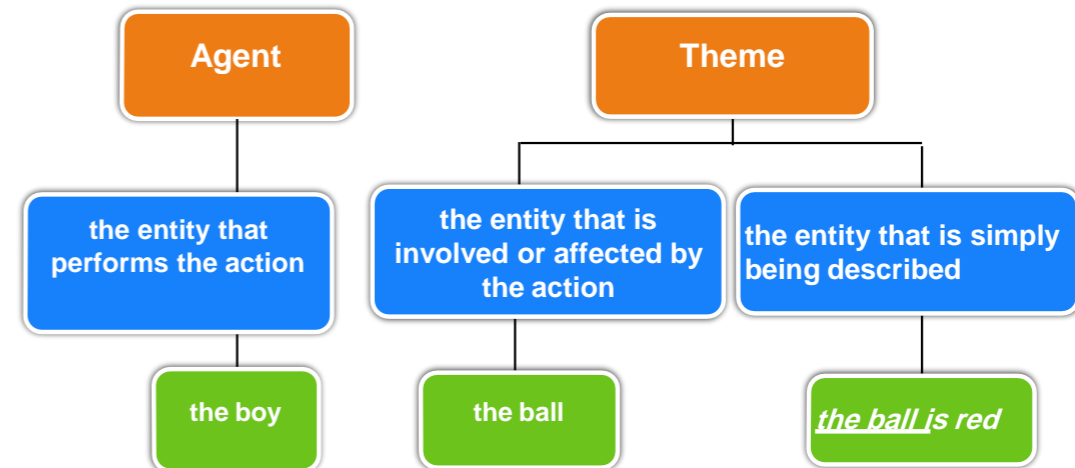
- Instead of thinking of words as 'containers' of meaning, we can look at the 'roles' they play.
- *The boy kicked the ball*
- The verb describes an action (kick)
- The noun phrases describe the roles of entities, such as people & things, involved in the action.
- We can identify a small number of **semantic roles** (thematic roles) for these noun phrases.

## Semantic Roles

- . Agent
- . Theme
- . Instrument
- . Experiencer
- . Location
- . Source
- . Goal

## Agent and Theme

*The boy kicked the ball*



## Agent and Theme

- Although **agents** are typically **human**, they can also be **non-human** entities that cause actions.
- as in noun phrases denoting:
  - A natural force            (the wind blew the ball away)
  - A machine                    (A car ran over the ball)
  - A creature                    (The dog caught the ball)

## Agent and Theme

- The theme is typically **non-human**, but can be **human**
  - The dog chased the boy.
- The same physical entity can appear in 2 different semantic roles in a sentence
  - The boy cut himself

the boy = agent  
himself = theme

## Instrument

- If an agent uses another entity in order to perform an action, that other entity fills the role of **instrument**.
  - The boy cut the rope with an old razor.
  - He drew the picture with a pencil.
- The NP *an old razor* & *a pencil* are being used in the semantic role of **instrument**.

## Experiencer

- When a NP is used to represent an entity as the person who has a feeling, perception or state, it fills the role of **experiencer**.
- If we *see*, *know* or *enjoy* something, we are not really performing an action (so, we are not agents)
- We are in the role of **experiencer**.
  - The boy feels sad
  - Did you hear that noise?
  - The boy = experiencer
  - You = experiencer
  - that noise = theme



## Agent Vs Experiencer

According to Ramchand, G.C. (2011),

- **Agent:** A participant which the meaning of the verb specifies as doing or causing something, possibly intentionally.
  - e.g. subjects of kill, eat, hit, smash, kick and watch.
- **Experiencer:** A participant who is characterised as aware of something.
  - e.g. subjects of love, like, enjoy, smell, hear

## Location

- A number of other semantic roles represent where an entity is
  - on the table
  - in the room
- Where an entity is fills the role of **location**.

## Source and Goal

- Where an entity moves from is: the **source**
- Where an entity moves to is: the **goal**.
- *We drove from Jeddah to Riyadh.*

source                  goal

- *I transferred the money from saving to checking.*

source                  goal

## Semantic Roles

- All these semantic roles are illustrated in the following scenario.

- *Mary saw a fly on the wall.*

EXPERIENCER                  THEME                  LOCATION

- *She borrowed a magazine from George*

AGENT                                  THEME                  SOURCE

- *she hit the bug with the magazine.*

AGENT                                  THEME                  INSTRUMENT

- *She handed the magazine back to George*

AGENT                                  THEME                  GOAL

- *"Gee thanks," said George*

AGENT

## Semantic Roles

- Extra examples:

*I took the pen from her and gave it to him*  
 AGENT                      THEME      SOURCE                      THEME      GOAL

*The door is big*  
 THEME

## Lexical Relations

- Synonymy
- Antonymy
- Hyponymy
- Prototypes
- Homophones
- Homonyms
- Polysemy
- Metonymy
- Collocations

## Lexical Relations

- What is the meaning of the word *conceal*?
- What is the meaning of *shallow*?
- What is the meaning of *Rose*?
- By answering these questions, we are characterizing the meaning of each word, not in terms of its component **features**, but in terms of its **relationship** to other words.

## Lexical Relations

- Words can have relationships with each other.
  - *Big*  
The same as *large* (*Synonymy*)
  - *Big*  
The opposite of *small* (*Antonymy*)
  - *Dog*  
A kind of *animal* (*Hyponymy*)
- **Lexical relations**

## Synonymy

- **Synonyms** are two or more words with very closely related meanings.

### Examples:

*almost/nearly, big/large, broad/wide, buy/purchase, cab/taxi, car/automobile, couch/sofa, freedom/liberty.*

## Synonymy

- They can often, though not always, be substituted for each other in sentences.
  - *What was his **answer**?* ✓
  - *What was his **reply**?* ✓
- The idea of “sameness” of meaning is not necessarily ‘total sameness’.
- In many occasions, **one word is appropriate** in a sentence, but **its synonym is odd**.
  - *Sandy had only one correct **answer** on the test.* ✓
  - *Sandy had only one correct **reply** on the test.* ✗

### Formal Vs. informal uses

- *My **father** purchased a **large** automobile.*
- *My **dad** bought a **big** car.*

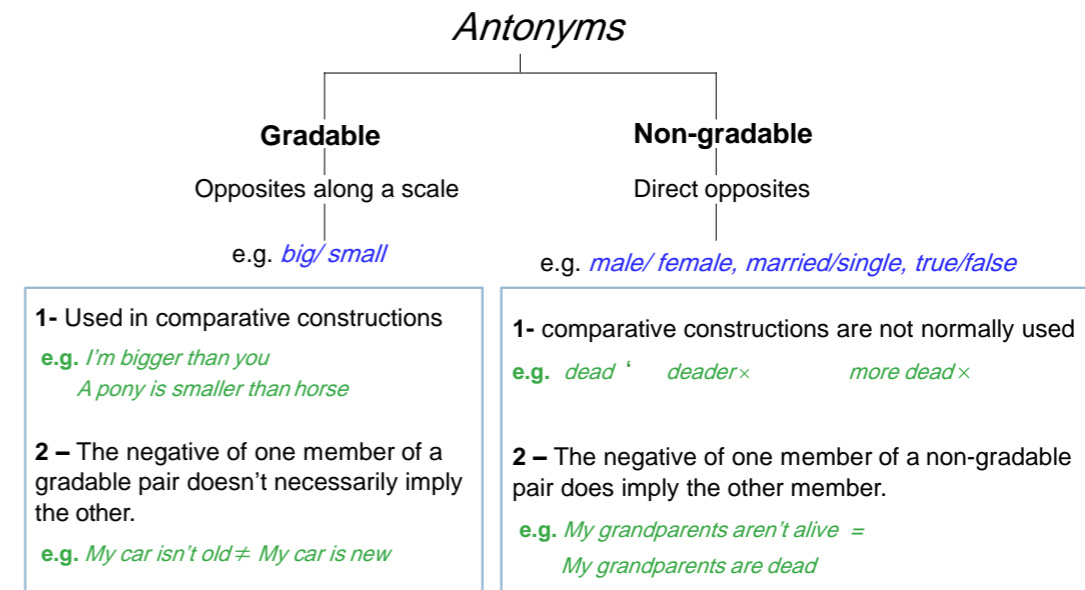
# Antonymy

- **Antonyms** are two forms with opposite meanings.

## Examples:

*alive/ dead, big/small, fast/slow, happy/sad, hot/cold, long/short, male/female, married/single, old/new, rich/poor, true/false.*

# Antonymy



# Hyponymy

- **Hyponymy** = when the meaning of one form is included in the meaning of another.

## Examples:

*animal/dog, dog/poodle, vegetable/carrot, flower/rose.*



- The concept of 'inclusion' involved in this relationship is the idea that if an object is a *rose*, then it is necessarily a *flower*

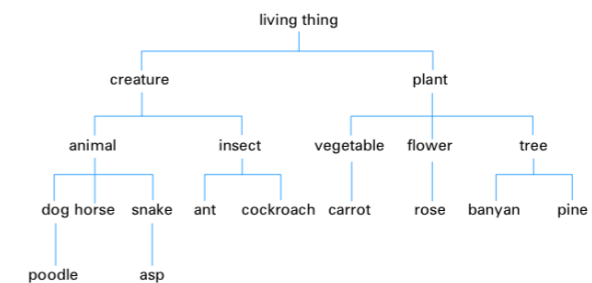
- *rose* is a hyponym of *flower*.



- The relationship of hyponymy = the concept of 'is kind of'
  - e.g. "an *asp* is a kind of *snake*"

# Hyponymy

- Looking at the diagram, we can say that "*horse* is a hyponym of *animal*" or "*ant* is a hyponym of *insect*"
  - *animal* = *superordinate* (= higher level)
  - *insect* = *superordinate*
- The 2 or more words that share the same superordinate term are *co-hyponyms*.
  - *Dog* & *horse* are co-hyponyms and the superordinate term is *animal*.



## Hyponymy

---

- Not only words of 'things' but also words of 'actions'
  - e.g. *punch*, *shoot*, *stab* are co-hyponyms of the superordinate term *injure*.

## Prototypes

---

- What is the clearest example of the word *bird*?
- What is the clearest example of the word *fruit*?
- What is the clearest example of the word *furniture*?

•



## Prototypes

- “The characteristic instance” of a category is known as the *prototype*.
- Explain the meaning of certain words in terms of resemblance to the clearest example.
  - Bird
    - Pigeon & sparrow are closer to the prototype than ostrich & penguin.
  - Clothing--- *shirts* are closer than *shoes*.
  - Furniture --- *chair* is closer than *stool*



## Homophones

- **Homophones:** Two or more words with different forms and the same pronunciation
- **Examples:**  
*Bare/bear, meat/meet, flour/flower, pail/pale, right/write, hole/whole, to/too/two.*

## Homonyms

- **Homonyms:** Two or more words with the same form and pronunciation that are unrelated in meaning

- Examples:

*bank* (of a river)

*bank* (financial institution)

*mole* (on skin)

*mole* (small animal)

*pupil* (at school)

*pupil* (in the eye)

*race* (contest of speed)

*race* (ethnic group)

- Homonyms are words that have separate histories and meanings, but have accidentally come to have exactly the same form and pronunciation .



## Polysemy

- **Polysemy:** Two words or more with the same form and pronunciation, and with related meanings.

- Examples:

- *Head* = the object on top of your body
- *Head* = the person at the top of a company or department.
- *Foot* = of person/ of bed/ of mountain
- *Run* = person does/ water does/ colors does.

## Polysemy

- It is possible for two terms to be distinguished via homonymy and via polysemy.

- **Date** = a thing we eat
  - **Date** = a point in time
- } **homonyms**

- **Date** = a point in time is polysemous in terms of:

- a particular day and month (=on a letter)
  - *The date on the letter was 30th August 1962.*
  - *What's today's date?*
- An arranged meeting (= an appointment)
  - *Let's make a date to come over and visit.*
- A romantic meeting (=with someone we like)
  - *I've got a date with Andrea tomorrow night.*
- A person (that person we like)
  - *Can I bring my date to the party*

**polysemy**

## Metonymy

- A container-contents relation
  - *Bottle/water*      *e.g. He drank the whole bottle.*
  - *Can/juice*
- A whole-part relation
  - *Car/wheels*
  - *House/roof*
- Representative-symbol relation
  - *King/crown*
  - *The President/ the White House*    *The White House has announced..*
- Using one of these words to refer to the other is an example of metonymy.

## Metonymy

### Other examples:

- *10 Downing Street protested..*
- *answering the door*
- *boiling a kettle*
- Making sense of such expressions often depends on context, background knowledge and inference.

## Collocation

- Which words tend to occur with other words.
  - *hammer/ nail*
  - *table/ chair*
  - *butter/ bread*
  - *needle/ thread*
  - *salt/ pepper*
  - *Break/ rule, break/promise, break/ heart*

## References

---

Yule, George. *The study of language*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Alroqi, Haifa. LANE 321 Introduction to linguistics lecture notes. King Abdulaziz University, 2015.

Thank you