

# **Word meaning: Lexical Semantics**

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**April 2015**

# Lexical Semantics

**Lexical semantics** is the study of **word meaning**.

## Aims:

- a. To represent the **meaning of each word in the language**.
- b. To show **how the meanings of words in a language are interrelated**.

Lexical relations are central to how speakers and hearers construct meaning.

There are **many types of relationship** that can hold **between words**.



# Lexical Semantics

Word meaning is slippery: different speakers know the meaning of a word, but come up with different definitions.

Some of this difficulty arises from the influence of context on word meaning, which can pull word meaning in 2 opposite directions:

■ **Collocations** (=words that occur together repeatedly)

can undergo fossilization becoming  
→ **idioms** (=words w/o independent meanings)

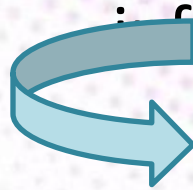
■ **Creativity & semantic shift**: f. ins. *run*:

- |   |                               |
|---|-------------------------------|
| a. I go for a <b>run</b> every morning.     | d. He hit a home <b>run</b> . |
| b. We took the new car for a <b>run</b> .   | e. The bears come for         |
| c. There's been a <b>run</b> on the dollar. | salmon <b>run</b> .           |



# Lexical Semantics: Ambiguity

Are these 5 senses of the word *run* or the same sense influenced by different contexts?

 Different senses, it is 5 ways **ambiguous**.

In examples of **ambiguity**, the context causes 1 of the senses to be selected by the participants.

Difference between **vagueness** & **ambiguity**:

□ A word is **vague** if some aspects of its meaning are **unspecified**, allowing some **specifications**:

*They hired a publicist*  **vague** for gender

□ Senses of an **ambiguous** word cannot be chosen: Same sentence with 2 meanings or a sense in a **network** of **semantic relations** with other words.



# Lexical Semantics: Ambiguity

**Lexical ambiguity:** resulting from the ambiguity of a word:

*Rose rose to put roses on her rows of roses.*

**Structural ambiguity:** an ambiguous sentence because its words relate to each other in different ways, even though none of the individual words are ambiguous:

*The chicken is ready to eat.*

Structural ambiguity is a question of ‘what goes with what’ in a sentence, f. ins. *old men and women*

*[old men] and women*       *old* modifies *men*

*old [men and women]*       *old* modifies *men & women*




# Lexical Relations

There are different types of lexical relation. A **lexeme** or semantic word may be in a number of these relations called **networks**.

A group of **lexemes** belonging to a particular area of knowledge (i.e. cooking or sailing) is the **lexical field**.

Lexical relations are more common between lexemes in the same field:

**peak**= part of the mountain  near synonym of *summit*

**peak**= part of the hat  near synonym of *visor*



# Lexical Relations

Lexical relations are on one of the 3 following axes:

□ **Paradigmatic relations** involve words belonging to the same syntactic category:

*We bought some knives/forks/spoons/cutlery, etc*

□ **Syntagmatic relations** hold between items occurring in the same sentence. The choice of possibilities is constrained by other elements in the sentence, resulting in **semantic incoherence** if chosen from outside a range.

*I'd like a glass of dry sherry.*

*\*I'd like a glass of striped sherry.*



# Lexical Relations

□ **Derivational relations** structure the vocabulary into **word families** (=words derived from a single root) & contribute to **cohesion**:

<i>cook</i> (verb)	<i>cooking</i> (noun)
<i>cook</i> (noun)	<i>cookery</i> (noun)
<i>cooker</i> (noun)	



The semantic relation is partly systematic, partly idiosyncratic.

Two classes of **paradigmatic relations**

**inclusion & identity**

**opposition & exclusion**



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