

Word meaning: Lexical Semantics

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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 **run** every morning.

b. We took the new car for a **run**.

c. There's been a **run** on the dollar.

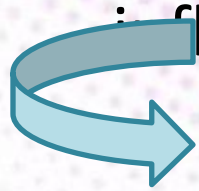
d. He hit a home **run**.

e. The bears come for

salmon **run**.

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~~ → ly modifies *men*


old [men and women] → d 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**:

cook (verb) *cooking* (noun)
cook (noun) *cookery* (noun)
cooker (noun)



The semantic relation is partly systematic, partly idiosyncratic.

Two classes of **paradigmatic relations**

inclusion & identity

opposition & exclusion

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