

Semantics: Word-meaning

Lecture 3

Semantics

is the study of meanings dealing with the relationship between symbols (words, signs, etc.) and what they refer to (called 'referents') and of behavior in reaction to non-verbal symbols and verbal symbols (words).

Types of semantic complexity of word

- every word combines lexical, lexico-grammatical and grammatical meanings
- many words not only refer to some object but have associations expressing the attitude of the speaker
- the denotational meaning is segmented into semantic components or **semes**
- a word may be **polysemantic**, that is it may have several meanings, all interconnected and forming its semantic structure

§ 1. What's lexical word-meaning?

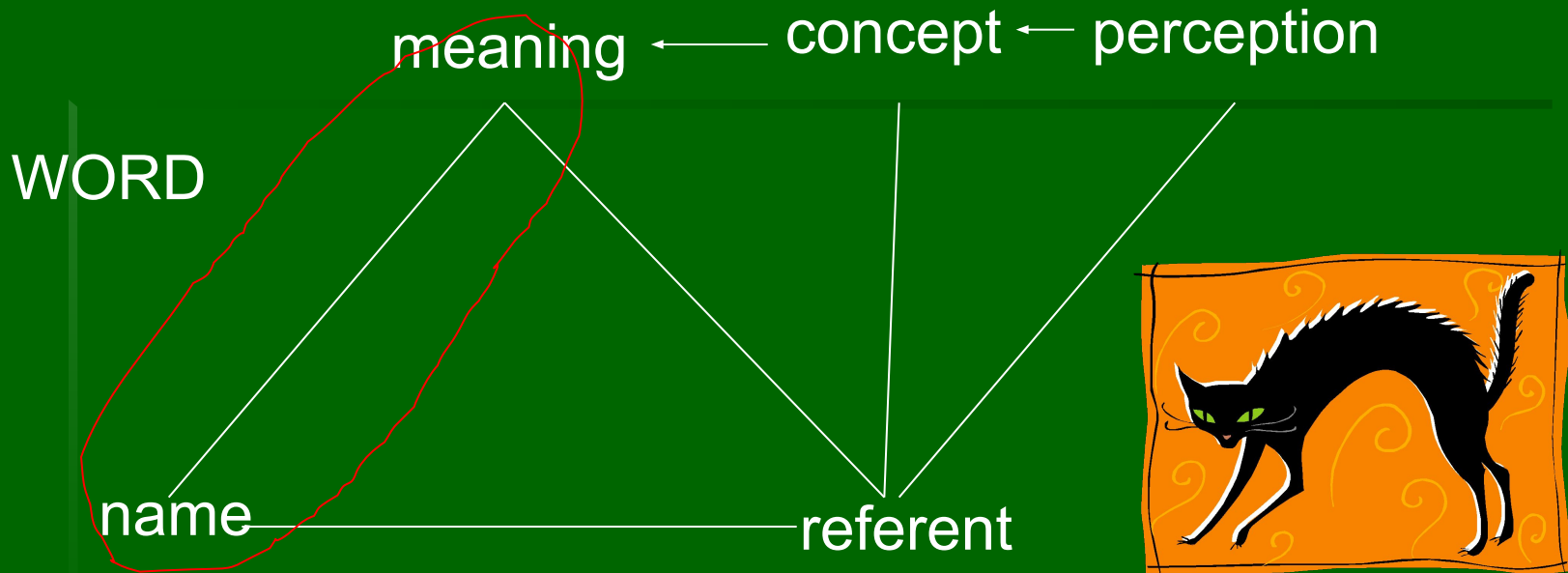
Two approaches

- 1) **F. de Saussure** considers meaning to be the relation between the object or notion named, and the name itself

The denotational trend of semantic studies considers a word as a unit possessing its own meaning. The main problem is the relation between the word, its meaning and the thing in reality which it denotes. The basis of the denotational theory is the double nature (ideal and material) of the word.

- **2) Bloomfield** defines the meaning as the situation in which the word is uttered.
- **The relative/functional approach** is based on treating the language as a semiotic system - the theory of relations. Each sign achieves a meaning only in comparison with other signs, its neighbours, i.e. meaning can be studied only through context.

1.1. Referential approach: the semantic triangle



- 1) in the scheme the word is represented only by the left-hand side of the diagram
- 2) does not show the actual process of reflection in our mind
- 3) describes only one meaning of a word and one form

What is the relation of words to the world of things, events and relations outside of language which they refer to?

Words by their form convey some meaning, which reflects a concept (with certain linguistic constraints conditioned by paradigmatic influence within the vocabulary) which in its turn is a generalized perception of a referent.

The lexical meaning of a word is the realization of a notion by means of a definite language system.

Meaning vs. concept

1. Can have a particular individual referent

2. reveal the speaker's state of mind and his attitude

3. belonging to some specific stylistic level reflect personality of the speaker, his background and his relations with his audience

4. Grouped on linguistic basis

5. nationally determined and limited

1. Refers to a class of referents

2. emotionally neutral as they are a category of thought

3. Does not

4. Grouped on logical basis

5. international

1.2. Functional approach: context

is based on the assumption that difference in meaning of linguistic units is always indicated by a difference in environment.

E. Nida: "it is from linguistic contexts that the meanings of a high proportion of lexical units in active or passive vocabularies are learned".

Context is a minimal stretch of speech and the conditions necessary and sufficient to reveal in which of its individual meanings the word in question is used.

Types of contexts

Lexical context

determines the meaning of a word by lexical meanings of surrounding words

Black denotes colour when used with the words naming some material or thing: *black velvet, black gloves.*

When used with words denoting feeling or thought, it means 'sad', 'dismal': *black thoughts, black despair*

With nouns denoting time, the meaning is 'unhappy', 'full of hardships': *black days, black period.*

Syntactic context

has the indicative power in the syntactic pattern

To make means 'to cause' when followed by a complex object:

I couldn't make him understand a word I said.

Mixed context

Late, when used predicatively, means 'after the right, expected fixed time':

be late for school.

When used attributively with words denoting periods of time, it means 'towards the end of the period',

in late summer.

Used attributively with proper personal nouns and preceded with a definite article, means 'recently dead'

late Mr. Brown

Speech situation as context (text-situation and life-situation)

the necessary indication comes not from within the sentence but from some part of the text outside it.

Types of motivation

Motivation is the relationship between the phonemic or morphemic composition and structural pattern of the word and its meaning

1) Phonetical - similarity between the sounds that make up the word and those referred to by the sense

bang, buzz, cuckoo, giggle, gurgle, hiss, purr

2) Morphological - reflects the type of nomination process chosen by the creator of the new word.

re-think, detainee, manoeuvrable, prefabricated, self-propelling

3) Semantic - co-existence of direct and figurative meanings of the same word within the same synchronous system.

the mouth of a river, of a cave

4) Non-motivated - no perceptible reason for the word having this particular phonemic and morphemic composition

§ 2. Parts of lexical meaning

The denotative meaning

is essentially cognitive: it conceptualizes and classifies our experience and names objects spoken about

It is the central factor in the functioning of language

Includes the bare minimum of characteristic features as used by every speaker in everyday life

Significative

(the referent is a concept
Ex. A cat)

The connotative meaning

is the pragmatic communicative value that the word receives by virtue of where, when, how, by whom, for what purpose and in what contexts it is or may be used

Optional, additional to the denotative

Demonstrative

(the referent is an individual object ex. My cat Fluffy)

Connotation and its types

Connotation is the speaker's attitude to the social circumstances and the appropriate functional style, about his approval or disapproval of the object spoken, or the degree of intensity, fixed in the lexical meaning in addition to denotation.

Ex. a hovel denotes «a small house» and besides implies that it is a miserable dwelling place, dirty, in bad repair, and, in general, unpleasant to live in.

Ex. childlike vs. childish

Denotation: characteristic of a child

Connotation: *Childlike* suggests “good” qualities: innocence and trustworthiness

Childish connotes “bad” characteristics: foolishness or immaturity

- **stylistic connotation**

Is an association with the situation in which the word is uttered, the social circumstances (formal, familiar, etc.), the social relationships between the interlocutors (polite, rough), the type and purpose of communication (learned, poetic, official, etc.)

Ex. *horse – steed, to discharge/dismiss – to fire – to give a sack*

- **emotive connotation**

is acquired by the word as a result of its frequent use in contexts corresponding to emotional situations or because the referent named in the denotative meaning is associated with emotions. For example, the verb means

Ex. *dog – doggie; beseech: 'to ask eagerly and also anxiously'*

- **evaluative connotation**

expresses approval or disapproval.

Ex. *famous/well-known* - *notorious*

Magic=witchcraft=sorcery - art and power of controlling events by occult supernatural means

magic has glamorous attractive connotations
witchcraft and *sorcery* have rather sinister associations

- **expressive or intensifying connotation**

exaggerates real qualities of a referent

Ex. *splendid, superb, fantastic, beastly*, etc. are used colloquially as terms of exaggeration

- **bias words** involving ideological viewpoints

Ex. the red, the black

- **Associative** (implicational) meaning

is the implied information associated with the word by virtue of what it refers to and what the speakers know about the referent.

Ex. A wolf is known to be greedy and cruel but the denotative meaning of this word does not necessarily include these features.

Words can combine two or three types of connotations at once

Ex. *beastly* (*beastly weather* or *It's beastly cold*) is emotional, colloquial, expresses disapproval and intensity.

Practical task # 3

1. Which type of motivation (morphological, phonetical, semantic) do the words below possess?
 - a) *neigh* (the long high-pitched sound that a horse makes)
 - b) *resettlement*
 - c) *eyewash* ('something said or done to deceive a person so that he thinks that what he sees is good, though in fact it is not')

2. Define the types of connotation (emotional, expressive, evaluative, stylistic) characteristic to the highlighted words as compared with their neutral counterparts:

- a) **terrific** *pleasure* vs. very pleasant
- b) **a buddy** vs. a friend
- c) **stubborn** vs. determined
- d) **huge** vs. big
- e) **plump** vs. overweight

3. Which approach (referential, functional) is realized in each type of presenting the word-meaning of the word “to lay off”?

a) COLLINS COBUILD

1. If workers are laid off by their employers, they are told to leave their jobs, usually because there is no more work for them to do
2. If you tell smb to lay off, you are telling them to leave you alone.

b) ENCARTA

1. to stop employing somebody when there is insufficient work to be done
2. to stop bothering somebody (*informal*)

4. Identify the meanings of the word “cool” having no connotational components:

1. somewhat cold, usually pleasantly so
2. staying calm or not showing emotions, especially nervousness or fear
3. fashionable and sophisticated (*informal*)
4. unfriendly or unenthusiastic (ex. cool reception)
5. used to emphasize how large a sum of money is (*slang*)

5. What type of context (lexical, syntactic, mixed) is used as an indicator of meaning for the highlighted words in the following utterances?

- a) Her success at the exam **earned** her a place at university
- b) We **feed** our dogs on fresh meet
- c) We **fed** the spy some false information
- d) Where do the two streams **join**?
- e) I'll **have** you pay for your lies!