

Seminar 4 Word Meaning

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2020

Semantics

- Semantics is a subfield of linguistics that is traditionally defined as the study of **meaning** of (parts of) words, phrases, sentences, and texts.
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Semantic change

- One and the same word may have **several meanings**. A word that has more than one meaning is called polysemantic. The total number of meanings for the first thousand of the most frequent English words is almost 25,000; i.e. the average number of meanings for each of these words is 25.

E.g. *to run* = to go by moving the legs quickly (I began to run.).

Other meanings:

- 1) The bus *runs* between A. and B.
 - 2) This shop is *run* by the co-op.
 - 3) The car *runs* on petrol.
 - 4) The bank of the river *runs* up steeply.
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Specialisation of the meaning

□ Specialisation of the meaning

case = circumstances in which a person or a thing is
(general meaning)

Specialised meanings:

case in law terminology = question decided in a court

case in medicine = a patient, an illness

case in grammar (There are six cases in the Slovak language.)

Generalisation of the meaning

□ Generalisation of the meaning

ready = prepared mentally or physically for some experience or action

(The original meaning was 'to be prepared for a ride'.)

fly = to move in or through the air or space; to move, pass or act swiftly

(The original meaning was just 'to move in or through the air by means of wings'.)

Metaphor

- Metaphor - transfer of the name of one object to another (and different one) based on association of similarity.
 - 1) Similarity of behaviour: *a fox* (= a cunning person), *a Don Juan*.
 - 2) Similarity of shape: *a head* of a cabbage.
 - 3) Similarity of function: *the key* to the mystery.
 - 4) Similarity of position: *foot* of a mountain.
 - 5) Transfer from the concrete to abstract: *to catch* an idea.
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Metonymy

- Metonymy - the association of contiguity.
 - 1) Symbol for thing symbolised: *the crown* (monarchy)
 - 2) Material for article: *glass, iron, copper*
 - 3) A part for the whole (pars pro toto): I want to have *a word* with you.
 - 4) The whole for the part (totum pro parte): *Kazakhstan* won the match.
 - 5) Common names from proper names: *volt, wellingtons*
 - 6) The place of establishment for its policy: *the Kremlin*
 - 7) Goods from the geographical names: *bikini, tweed*
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Other types of semantic change

- 1) Hyperbole - an exaggerated expression: *A thousand thanks!*
 - 2) Litotes - expressing the affirmative by the negation of its contrary: *not very clever* (= stupid)
 - 3) Euphemism - the substitution of words of mild or vague meaning for expressions rough, unpleasant or for some other reasons unmentionable: *pass away* (= die), *queer* (= mad)
Euphemism is a base for (politically correct) English Euphemism is a base for PC
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Synonymy

- The common definition of synonyms as words of the same language having the same meaning is very simple, but unfortunately misleading. Words of the same meaning are useless for communication. Occasionally they can be found in special terminology, e.g. *noun* = *substantive*. These are called total synonyms.
 - Every word has its own history, motivation and context, thus we can define **synonyms** as **words** not absolutely identical but just **similar in meaning, belonging to the same part of speech** and interchangeable in some context.
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Hope – expectation – anticipation.

- E.g. The word *hope* is in this group the synonymic dominant. It is the most general, native and neutral word. Expectation and anticipation are (as the words of Romance origin usually are) formal and literary. The difference is not just in the level of stylistics.
 - Although all three of them mean “having something in mind which is likely to happen”, they differ in collocation. *Hope* can be used in idiomatic expressions (*to lose hope*, not: *to lose expectation* or *to lose anticipation!*), means belief and desire. *Expectation* is collocated with both – good, and evil; *anticipation* – something good, pleasurable.
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Synonyms 2

□ Synonyms may differ:

- 1) **in emotional colouring:** *alone* – *lonely* (sad, longing for company)
- 2) **in valency:** *win* (a victory, a war) – *gain* (a victory, not a war!)
- 3) **in style:** *begin* (neutral) – *commence* (literary)

□ There are **words that are similar in meaning only under some specific conditions – contextual synonyms**.

E.g. *buy* and *get* in a sentence: “I’ll go to the shop and *get/buy* some bread.”

Distinction between synonyms

- The distinctions between words similar in meaning are often very fine, even for a native speaker. Sometimes to show the difference it is good to point out antonyms: *high* – low; *tall* – short.
 - English is quite rich in synonyms. Words of native origin are usually simple and less formal than their synonyms borrowed from other languages.
 - Other sources of synonymy are local dialects, regional varieties of English (American, Scottish, etc.), formation of new words, semantic change. Rich sources of synonymy are phrasal verbs.
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Antonyms

- **Antonyms** are two (rarely more) words of the same language belonging to **the same part** of speech with **contradictory meaning** (*alive – dead, love – hate, useful – useless*).
 - Unlike synonyms, antonyms do not differ in style, emotional colouring or distribution.
 - The same word may have different antonyms when used with different words: *single* ticket – *return* ticket, she is *single* – she *is married*.
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Root antonyms

1. **Root (*absolute*) antonyms.**

- a. Antonyms proper. Proper (absolute) antonyms may be characterised as contrary. They are polar members of a gradual opposition which may have intermediary elements.
E.g. *beautiful* – pretty – good-looking – plain – *ugly*.
 - b. Complementary antonyms. Complementarity is a binary opposition; it may have only two members. The denial of one member means the assertion of the other. E.g. not *male* means *female*, not *true* means *false*.
 - c. Relational antonyms (converses). Converses denote one and the same subject as viewed from different points of view (e.g. subject and object, family and social relations, space and time relations, etc.).
E.g. *borrow* – *lend*, *husband* – *wife*, *before* – *after*.
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Derivational antonyms

2. Derivational antonyms.

E.g. *happy – unhappy, known – unknown.*

- The affixes in derivational antonyms deny the quality stated in the stem. There are typical affixes that form these derivational antonyms (see above *Derivation*). The regular type of derivational antonyms contains negative prefixes: *dis-*, *il-* /*im-*/*in-*/*ir* and *un*. Derivational antonyms may be characterised as contradictory. A pair of derivational antonyms forms a binary opposition (see above *complementary root antonyms*). E.g. *logical – illogical, appear – disappear.*
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Contronyms

- **Contronyms** are the words which are their own antonyms.
E.g.: *dust* - to remove fine articles (dust the cabinets) or to add fine articles (dust the bread with flour);
fast - rapid or unmoving (fast asleep, fast stuck);
handicap - advantage (in golf) - disadvantage.
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Homonymy

- Two or more words **identical in sound and spelling but different in meaning**, distribution and origin are called homonyms.
 - It is necessary to differentiate between polysemy (e.g. *head* of a cabbage, *head* of department) and homonymy (e.g. *liver* = 1 living person, 2 the organ that produces bile)
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Classification of homonyms

- 1) **Homonyms proper** are identical in pronunciation and spelling.
E. g. *ball* = 1 a round body or mass, 2 a large formal gathering for social dancing
seal = 1 a marine flesh-eating mammal, 2 an emblem or word impressed or stamped on a document as a mark of authenticity
 - 2) **Homophones** are identical in pronunciation but different in spelling.
E.g. *buy* – *bye*, *rain* – *reign*, *steel* – *steal*.
 - 3) **Homographs** are identical in spelling but different in pronunciation.
E.g. *bow* [bau] (bending of the head, body or knee)
– *bow* [bou] (a tool used to shoot an arrow)
lead [li:d] (to direct or guide) – *lead* [led] (a heavy soft metallic element)
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