Module: Linguistics

Level: L1- FILA

Time Allotted: 90 min

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Lecture 12: Semantics

1. **Definition**

Semantics is a branch of linguistics which is concerned with the study of meaning in all its formal aspects. If you open your dictionary to check a word meaning, you’ll find more than meaning for that word. Thus, the definition of words relies on conceptual meaning rather than the associative meaning. We mean by conceptual meaning of a word the literal meaning found in the dictionary. This term is often referred to as denotation. In contrast, associative meaning of a word goes beyond the dictionary definition and focuses on connotation and figurative meaning.

Poets, song-writers, novelists, literary critics, advertisers and lovers may all be interested in how words can evoke certain aspects of associative meaning, but in linguistic semantics we’re more concerned with trying to analyze conceptual meaning.

Conceptual meaning: Associative meaning:

• Needle = thin, sharp, steel, instrument • Needle = pain, illness, blood, drugs,

thread, knitting, hard to find.

**(Adopted from Yule: 2010)**

1. **Semantic Properties of Words**

To investigate conceptual meaning of words we rely on “oddness” when we read sentences like the following ones:

The hamburger ate the boy.

The table listens to the radio**. (Adopted from Yule, 2010: 113)**

The horse is reading the newspaper.

These sentences are syntactically well-formed structures but semantically odd.

NP V NP

The hamburger ate the boy

Although the sentence makes sense syntactically, the meaning is strange. We might be able to pinpoint the issue's origin because the statement "The boy ate the hamburger" is entirely fine. In order to prevent one noun from being used as the subject of the verb "ate," the conceptual meanings of the nouns hamburger and boy must differ greatly from one another. Any noun that can be the subject of the verb ate has to indicate something that has the ability to "eat". This is a property that the noun boy possesses; the noun hamburger does not.

To analyse the meaning of words, we can look at their semantic characteristics (features). These characteristics are the components of meaning that comprise the speaker's mental image of the word. For example: the words “man and boy” share two semantic properties of “maleness” and “humanness”. We generally use the symbols + and – to analyze these semantic properties.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Semantic properties** | **Man** | **Boy** |
| [adult] | + | – |
| [male] | + | + |
| [human] | + | + |

**(Adopted from** **Masaitiené: 2009)**

Masaitiené (2009: 145) defines Semantic property analysis *as “the process of analyzing and breaking down the semantic properties of a word”.*

Properties or features like "+animate, −animate," "+human, −human," and "+female, −female," for instance, might be regarded as the fundamental components that distinguish each word in a language from all others in terms of meaning. We could start with the following diagram (adopted from Yule,2010: 114) if we had to list the essential characteristics that differentiate the meanings of a group of English terms, like table, horse, boy, man, girl, and woman.

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

1. **Semantic Roles**

Rather of considering words as "containers" of meaning, we can consider the "roles" they play in the context of the sentence. The verb defines an action (kick) in a circumstance when the situation is simple, like in “the boy kicked the ball”. The sentence's noun phrases explain the functions of the various entities—people, things, and other entities—involved in the action. For these noun phrases, we are able to pinpoint a limited number of semantic roles, also referred to as "thematic roles."

**Agent and Theme**

-In “The boy kicked the ball”, one role is taken by the noun phrase “**The boy”** as “the entity that performs the action, known as the ***agent***. Another role is taken by the ball as “the entity that is involved in or affected by the action,” called the ***theme*** (or ***“patient”***).

- The ***theme*** can also be an entity (The ball) that is simply being described (i.e. not performing an action), as in “The ball was red”.

The bold-typed words are ***agents*** and ***themes***:

**The boy** kicked **the ball**.

**The wind** blew **the ball** away.

**A car** ran over **the ball**.

**The dog** caught **the ball**.

-In “The boy cut himself”. ***The boy*** is ***agent*** and ***himself*** is ***theme***.

**Instrument & Experiencer**

- In the sentences “The boy cut the rope with an old razor” and “He drew the picture with a crayon”**,** the noun phrases *an old razor* and *a crayon* are being used in the semantic role of ***instrument*** (Yule, 2010: 116).

When a noun phrase is used to designate an entity as the person who has a feeling, perception or state, it fills the semantic role of **experiencer.** If we *see, know or enjoy* something, we’re not really performing the role of experiencer. In the sentence “The boy feels sad**”**, *the boy* performs the role of the ***experience*** (Yule, ibid).

**Location, Source and Goal**

Where an entity is (*on the table, in the room*), fills the role of ***location***. Where the entity moves from is the ***source*** (*from Chicago*) and where it moves to is ***the goal*** (*to New Orleans*), as in “We drove from Chicago to New Orleans.”

Consider the semantic roles in the following sentences:

Mary saw a fly on the wall.

**EXPERIENCER THEME LOCATION**

She borrowed a magazine from George.

**AGENT THEME SOURCE**

She squashed the bug with the magazine.

**AGENT THEME INSTRUMENT (Yule: ibid)**

She handed the magazine back to George.

**AGENT THEME GOAL**

“Gee thanks,” said George.

**AGENT**

1. **Relations Between Words**

Synonym: a word that has the same or nearly the same meaning as another word. E.g. “complete” and “finish” are synonyms.

Antonym: a word that has the opposite meaning of another word. E.g. “short” and “long” are opposite words.

Hyponym: a word whose meaning is included in the meaning of another word. Hyponym is often known as subordinate word. E.g. eagle and pigeon are hyponyms of bird.

Hypernym: also known as super-ordinate word. It is a word whose meaning includes meaning of another word. E.g bird is hypernym of eagle and pigeon.

Homonym: it is a word that has a different meaning, but the same form as another word. E.g. well (adjective) vs. well (noun) – kind (adjective) vs. kind (noun)

Homophone: When two or more different (written) forms have the same pronunciation, they are described as homophones. Examples are: *bare/bear, meat/meet, flour/ flower, pail/pale, right/write, sew/so* and *to/too/two* (Yule, 2010: 120)*.*

Polysemy:  When two or more words have the same form but different meanings, this is referred to as polysemy. It can also mean one form (spoken or written) with several meanings that are all connected by extension (for instance, the word "head" can refer to many different things, such as the object on top of your body, the froth on top of a beer glass, the person at the top of a department or company, and many more things) (Foot of person, of bed, of mountain) (Yule, ibid)*.*.

Metonym: The term metonymy describes a link between words that is based only on a close connection in daily life. Examples of these relationships include those between a container and its contents (bottle/water, can/juice), a whole and portion (car/wheels, house/roof), or a representative and symbol (king/crown, the President/the White House) (Yule, ibid: 121)*.*

- Collocation: collocation, or words that commonly occur together, is one approach to simply organize our word knowledge (e.g. pass/the exam, long/short, hammer/nail, salt/pepper, table/chair, thread/needle) (Yule, ibid: 122).