

SEMANTICS: Studying Meaning

Semantics is the branch of linguistics that studies the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences. It examines how meaning is constructed, interpreted, and understood within language, independently of *context*.

Conceptual vs. Associative Meaning

Semantics focuses on two main aspects of meaning:

- **Conceptual meaning:** This refers to the core, dictionary-like definition of a word. It's the literal understanding, like "dog" meaning a four-legged canine animal.
- **Associative meaning:** This encompasses the feelings, images, or ideas that a word evokes beyond its literal definition. For example, "dog" might also evoke feelings of loyalty, companionship, or playfulness.

Building Blocks of Meaning: Semantic Features

Semantic features are the abstract properties that contribute to a word's meaning, often represented in binary terms like [+/-]. For instance, the word "bachelor" can be analyzed as having the semantic features [+male], [+adult], and [-married]. These features combine to create the overall concept of an unmarried adult male.

Understanding Relationships: Semantic Roles

When we construct sentences, we describe events and situations with participants playing specific roles. Semantic roles define these relationships:

- **Agent:** The doer of an action (e.g., "**The boy** kicked the ball").
- **Theme:** The entity involved or affected by the action (e.g., "**The ball** was kicked by the boy").
- **Experiencer:** The entity that feels or perceives something (e.g., "**She** saw a beautiful sunset").
- **Instrument:** The object used to carry out an action (e.g., "He cut the bread *with* **a knife**").
- **Location:** The place where an event occurs (e.g., "They met *at* **the park**").

- **Source and goal:** The starting point and/or ending point of an action or movement (e.g., "She walked *from* home *to* school").

Practice: Analyze the following sentences and identify the semantic features and roles of the underlined words:

- The hungry wolf devoured the deer.
- Sarah felt a sense of joy when she received the good news.

5. Exploring Relationships Between Words: Lexical Relations

Words are not isolated entities; they exist in a network of relationships with other words. Here are some key types of lexical relations:

- **Synonymy:** Words with similar or identical meanings (e.g., "happy" and "joyful").
- **Antonymy:** Words with opposite meanings (e.g., "hot" and "cold").
- **Hyponymy:** A hierarchical relationship where one word is a specific type of another (e.g., "robin" is a hyponym of "bird").
- **Homophones:** Words that sound the same but have different spellings and meanings (e.g., "to," "too," and "two").
- **Homonyms:** Words with the same spelling and pronunciation but different meanings (e.g., "bat" as an animal and a sports tool).
- **Polysemy:** A single word with multiple related meanings (e.g., "run" can mean to move quickly on foot or to operate a machine).
- **Metonymy:** Using a word to refer to something closely associated with it (e.g., saying "the crown" to refer to the king or queen).
- **Collocation:** Words that frequently appear together (e.g., "heavy rain," "bright future").

References

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