

: STRUCTURE :**8.0 Objectives****8.1 Introduction****8.2 Lexical Relations : how meanings relate to each other****8.3 Hyponymy and Hypernymy****8.4 Synonymy****8.5 Antonymy****8.6 Homonym****8.7 Extension of Meaning****8.8 Demonstrating semantic knowledge****8.9 Let Us Sum Up****8.10 Check Your Progress****8.11 Books Suggested****Answers****8.0 OBJECTIVES**

This unit discusses the definition and explanation of “Lexical Semantics”, and :

- (a) how meaning is important for the understanding or sense of a word and a sentence,
- (b) why it is useful for anyone to use it for creating a new meaning,
- (c) what the different types of meanings are,
- (d) how to use and utilize them for our purpose of better communication and expression.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

Semantics is an allied field of linguistics. It is the study of meaning. The study of meaning can be at the level of words, phrases or sentences. “Lexical semantics” (also known as “Lexico–semantics”) is a subfield of linguistic semantics. The units of analysis in lexical semantics are lexical units which include not only words but also sub–words or sub–units such as affixes and even compound words and phrases. Lexical units make up the catalogue of words in a language, the lexicon. “Lexical semantics” looks at how the meaning of the lexical units correlates with the structure of the language and syntax. This is referred to as syntax–semantic

The study of lexical semantics looks at :

- (a) the classification and decomposition of lexical items

- (b) the differences and similarities in lexical semantic structure cross-linguistically
- (c) the relationship of lexical meaning to sentence meaning and syntax
- (d) Lexical units, also referred to as syntactic atoms, can stand alone such as in the case of root words or parts of compound words or they necessarily attach to other units such as prefixes and suffixes do. The former is called free morphemes and the latter bound morphemes. They fall into a narrow range of meanings (semantic fields) and can combine with each other to generate new meanings.

“Lexical semantics” is the study of the meanings of words. As well as the simple meaning of a lexical unit, lexical semantics studies how a word represents the meaning it conveys. In this sense, it studies the word's existence as a whole. While grammar is picked up as a child, an individual can expand his or her lexicography throughout his or her life. A lexical unit is a single word or run of words that creates the most basic level of a language's lexicon or vocabulary. The study of these units is called lexicology. Examination of lexical units moves beyond the meanings, as seen in lexical semantics, and moves on to structures and sub-structures of words. The study of the origin of lexical units and vocabulary in general is called etymology. These studies are distinct from lexical semantics, which concentrates on meanings alone.

Base lexical units do not take into account more complex word compounds. Two lexical units, sometimes more, can combine to form a compound with a new meaning. Sometimes this meaning is linked to both words, but other times it is metaphor. Each compound is considered one unit in lexical semantics because it provides a different meaning.

A run of lexical units that combines to provide an overall meaning is called a lexical chain. Lexical chains ignore the grammar functions of a sentence and, in fact, remove them to leave only the words that provide meaning. By removing the function words, or vocabulary, the information words can be strung together in a chain.

Classification is the process by which words are separated from one another. These classifications are usually by meaning or function. Once classified into broad categories, words are then sub-divided within the category. Of course, there are many words with multiple meanings, known as polysemy, which may fall into more than one category.

Words may also decompose. Word decomposition is the phenomenon where words lose their original meaning over time. This is a separate element of lexical semantics compared to classification, because the old word meanings have now become relics or fossils. Rather than morphing into a new meaning, true word decomposition occurs when the word has lost its recognizable meaning, such as in the case of Old English words such as “ascylfan,” meaning “to destroy”. Others are half-decomposed like an atomic half-life so people understand the meaning of “disheveled” and “ruthless,” but do not know the meaning of “sheveled” and “ruth.”

The study of lexical semantics also broadens out from the study of a single language. It is also an element of comparative and contrastive linguistics. In this sense, lexical semantics compares and contrasts the meanings of identical words between languages. There are multiple instances of words crossing languages, but having the meanings altered, and there are also instances of words forming from different origins that look on the surface to be the same, but have totally different meanings

8.2 LEXICAL RELATIONS : HOW MEANINGS RELATE TO EACH OTHER

Lexical items contain information about category (lexical and syntactic), form and meaning. The semantics related to these categories then relate to each lexical item in the lexicon. Lexical items can also be semantically classified based on whether their meanings are derived from single lexical units or from their surrounding environment. Lexical items participate in regular patterns of association with each other. Some relations between lexical items include hyponymy, hypernymy, synonymy, and antonymy, as well as homonymy.

8.3 HYPONYMY AND HYPERNYMY

Hyponymy and hypernymy refers to a relationship between a general term and the more specific terms that fall under the category of the general term. For example, the colors **red**, **green**, **blue** and **yellow** are **hyponyms**. They fall under the general term which is the hypernym.

8.4 SYNONYMY

Synonymy refers to words that are pronounced and spelled differently but contain the same meaning, for example, **Happy**, **joyful**, **glad**

8.5 ANTONYMY

Antonymy refers to words that are related by having the opposite meanings to each other. There are three types of antonyms : graded antonyms, complementary antonym, and relational antonyms, for example, **dead**, **alive**, **long**, **short**

8.6 HOMONYM

Homonymy refers to the relationship between words that are spelled or pronounced the same way but hold different meanings, for example, **bank (of river)** **bank (financial institution)**

8.7 EXTENSION OF MEANING

We are all necessarily interested in meaning. We wonder about the meaning of a new word. Sometimes we are not sure about the message we should get from something we read or hear, and we are concerned about getting our own messages across to others. We find pleasure in jokes, which

often depend for their humor on double meanings of words or ambiguities in sentences.

Commercial organizations spend a lot of effort and money on naming products, devising slogans, and creating messages that will be meaningful to the buying public. Legal scholars argue about the interpretation—that is, the meaning—of a law or a judicial decision. Literary scholars quarrel similarly over the meaning of some poem or story.

Three disciplines are concerned with the systematic study of ‘meaning’ in itself : psychology, philosophy and linguistics. Their particular interests and approaches are different, yet each borrows from and contributes to the others. Psychologists are interested in how individual humans learn, how they retain, recall, or lose information; how they classify, make judgements and solve problems—in other words, how the human mind seeks meanings and works with them.

Philosophers of language are concerned with how we know, how any particular fact that we know or accept as true is related to other possible facts—what must be antecedent to that fact and what is a likely consequence, or entailment of it; what statements are mutually contradictory, which sentences express the same meaning in different words, and which are unrelated.

Linguists want to understand how language works. Just what common knowledge do two people possess when they share a language— English, Swahili, Korean or whatever—that makes it possible for them to give and get information, to express their feelings and their intentions to one another, and to be understood with a fair degree of success ? Linguistics is concerned with identifying the meaningful elements of specific languages, for example, English words like “paint” and “happy” and affixes like the “-er” of “painter” and the “un-” of “unhappy”. It is concerned with describing how such elements go together to express more complex meanings—in phrases like “the unhappy painter” and sentences like “The painter is unhappy”—and telling how these are related to each other.

Linguistics also deals with the meanings expressed by modulations of a speaker's voice and the processes by which hearers and readers relate new information to the information they already have. Semantics is the systematic study of meaning, and linguistic semantics is the study of how languages organize and express meanings. Linguistic semantics is the topic, but we need to limit ourselves to the expression of meanings in a single language, English. Here, we make comparisons with other languages, but these are meant to be illustrative of language differences, not full accounts of what differences exist.

8.8 DEMONSTRATING SEMANTIC KNOWLEDGE

How can we explain the speaker's knowledge of meanings ? Certainly, we cannot expect that speakers can clearly define all the words they know. If that were our criterion, we should also expect speakers to be able to explain the meaning of every utterance they will ever produce or comprehend, which is, for all practical purposes, an infinite number. But the obvious thing

is that speakers can make their thoughts and feelings and intentions known to other speakers of the language and can understand what others say. This ability requires possession of a vocabulary and for speakers to know how to pronounce every item in this vocabulary and how to recognize its pronunciation by other speakers. They know how to use the production vocabulary in meaningful sentences and to understand the sentences produced by others. And, of course, they know meanings—how to choose the items that express what they want to express and how to find the meanings in what other people say. If it is hard to say what meaning is, it is fairly easy to show what knowledge speakers have about meanings in their language and therefore what things must be included in an account of semantics. The next ten paragraphs demonstrate ten aspects of any speaker's semantic knowledge.

1. Speakers know, in a general way, whether something is or is not meaningful in their language. For example, speakers of English can tell which of the following are meaningful in English.
 - 1a. Henry drew a picture.
 - 1b. Haresh laughed.
 - 1c. The picture laughed.
 - 1d. Picture a Haresh drew.

It is certainly not too much to assume that 1a and 1b are meaningful to speakers of English, while 1c and 1d are anomalous (examples of anomaly). Sentence 1c has the appearance of being meaningful and it might attain meaning in some children's story or the like, while 1d is merely a sequence of words.

2. Speakers of a language generally agree as to when two sentences have essentially the same meaning and when they do not.
 - 2a. Riya got home before Ramesh.
 - 2b. Ramesh got home before Riya.
 - 2c. Ramesh arrived at home after Riya.
 - 2d. Riya got home later than Ramesh.

Sentences that make equivalent statements about the same entities, like 2a and 2c, or 2b and 2d, are paraphrases (of each other).

3. Speakers generally agree when two words have essentially the same meaning—in a given context. In each sentence below one word is underlined. Following the sentence is a group of words, one of which can replace the underlined word without changing the meaning of the sentence.
 - 3a. Where did you purchase these tools ? (use, buy, release, modify, take)
 - 3b. At the end of the street we saw two enormous statues, (pink, smooth, nice, huge, original)

Words that have the same sense in a given context are synonyms— they are instances of synonymy and are synonymous with each other.

4. Speakers recognize when the meaning of one sentence contradicts another sentence. The sentences below are all about the same person,

but two of them are related in such a way that if one is true the other must be false.

- 4a. Suresh is married.
- 4b. Suresh is fairly rich.
- 4c. Suresh is no longer young.
- 4d. Suresh is a bachelor.

Sentences that make opposite statements about the same subject are contradictory.

- 5. Speakers generally agree when two words have opposite meanings in a given context. For example, speakers are able to choose from the group of words following 5a and 5b the word which is contrary to the underlined word in each sentence.

- 5a. Bindu cut a thick slice of cake (bright new soft thin wet).
- 5b. The train departs at 12 : 25. (arrives leaves waits swerves).

Two words that make opposite statements about the same subject are antonyms; they are antonymous, instances of antonymy.

- 6. Synonyms and antonyms have to have some common element of meaning in order to be, respectively, the same or different. Words can have some element of meaning without being synonymous or antonymous. For example, we should all agree that in each of the following groups of words, 6a and 6b, all but one of the words have something in common. Which is the word that doesn't belong ?

- 6a. street lane road path house avenue
- 6b. buy take use steal acquire inherit

The common element of meaning, shared by all but one word in 6a and by all but one item in 6b, is a semantic feature.

- 7. Some sentences have double meanings; they can be interpreted in two ways. Speakers are aware of this fact because they appreciate jokes which depend on two-way interpretation, like the following.

- 7a. Meera doesn't care for her parakeet. (doesn't like it; doesn't take care of it)
- 7b. Meera took the sick parakeet to a small animal hospital. (small hospital for animals; hospital for small animals)

A sentence that has two meanings is ambiguous—an example of ambiguity.

- 8. Speakers know how language is used when people interact. If one person asks a question or makes a remark, there are various possible answers to the question or replies one might make to the remark. Thus, for the question in 8a some answers are suggested, of which all but one might be appropriate. Similarly, the statement in 8b is followed by several possible rejoinders, all but one of which could be appropriate.

- 8a. When did you last see my brother ? (Ten minutes ago. Last Tuesday. Very nice. Around noon. I think it was on the first of June.)

- 8b. There's a great new comedy at the Oldtown Playhouse. (So I've heard. What's it called ? When did it open ? So, do I. Are you sure it's a comedy ?)

When a question and an answer, or any two utterances, can go together in a conversation and the second is obviously related to the first, they constitute an adjacency pair. The ability to deal with adjacency pairs is part of any speaker's implicit knowledge.

9. Speakers are aware that two statements may be related in such a way that if one is true, the other must also be true.
- 9a. There are tulips in the garden.
- 9b. There are flowers in the garden.
- 9c. The ladder is too short to reach the roof.
- 9d. The ladder isn't long enough to reach the roof.

These pairs of sentences are examples of entailment. Assuming that 9a and 9b are about the same garden, the truth of 9a entails the truth of 9b, that is, if 9a is true, 9b must also be true. Likewise, assuming the same ladder and roof, the truth of 9c entails the truth of 9d.

10. Speakers know that the message conveyed in one sentence may presuppose other pieces of knowledge. For instance, if 10a is accepted as true, 10b–10e must also be accepted as true.
- 10a. Mahesh usually drives his Maruti car to work.
- 10b. There is a person named Mahesh.
- 10c. Mahesh works.
- 10d. There is a Maruti car that belongs to Mahesh.
- 10e. Mahesh knows how to drive a car.

The meaning of sentence 10a presupposes what is expressed in 10b, c, d and e. The latter are presuppositions of 10a. Note that a presupposition does not establish the truth of anything. Sentence 10a is meaningful as it is, but it is true only if there is a person named Mahesh, who works and owns a Maruti car, etc. The sentence is presented AS IF there is a person named Mahesh. (There probably is not since we created the sentence for demonstration, just as the writer of a child's arithmetic textbook turns out problems that begin “Kamal Singh has four apples...”)

These ten terms have been introduced to show the latent knowledge that people have about their language. We are not suggesting that the points illustrated make up a test that anyone can deal with successfully. People differ considerably, and circumstances differ considerably, so that the way individuals behave in a given situation is not necessarily an indication of what their deeper competence is. Personality factors, such as willingness to cooperate, memory, attention, recent experience, can greatly affect performance. We only want to indicate the general implicit knowledge that speakers have about meaning in their language.

8.9 LET US SUM UP

The study of meaning can be undertaken in various ways. Linguistic semantics is an attempt to explicate the knowledge of any speaker of a language which allows that speaker to communicate facts, feelings, intentions and products of the imagination to other speakers and to understand what they communicate to him or her. Language differs from the communication systems of other animals in being stimulus-free and creative. Early in life every human acquires the essentials of a language—a vocabulary and the pronunciation, use and meaning of each item in it. The speaker's knowledge is largely implicit. The linguist attempts to construct a grammar, an explicit description of the language, the categories of the language and the rules by which they interact. Semantics is one part of the grammar; phonology, syntax and morphology are other parts. Speakers of a language have an implicit knowledge about what is meaningful in their language, and it is easy to show this. In our account of what that knowledge is, we introduced ten technical terms : anomaly; paraphrase; synonymy; semantic feature; antonymy; contradiction; ambiguity; adjacency pairs; entailment and presupposition.

8.10 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

BELOW ARE TEN PAIRS OF SENTENCES. IN EACH PAIR ASSUME THAT THE FIRST SENTENCE IS TRUE. THEN DECIDE WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT THE SECOND SENTENCE, WHICH HAS THE SAME TOPIC(S). IF THE FIRST IS TRUE, MUST THE SECOND ALSO BE TRUE (T) ? OR IF THE FIRST IS TRUE, MUST THE SECOND BE FALSE (F) ? OR DOES THE TRUTH OF THE FIRST TELL US NOTHING ABOUT THE TRUTH OF THE SECOND (X) ?

- 1a. Radha is married to Shyam.
- 1b. Radha is Shyam's wife.
- 2a. Dilavar is an unmarried adult male.
- 2b. Dilavar is a bachelor.
- 3a. This knife is too dull to cut the rope.
- 3b. This knife isn't sharp enough to cut the rope.
- 4a. Veena likes to sing.
- 4b. Veena doesn't sing.
- 5a. Hari has been here for an hour.
- 5b. Hari is tired of waiting.
- 6a. Mr. Bose has given up smoking.
- 6b. Mr. Bose used to smoke.
- 7a. Mr. Bose still smokes.
- 7b. Mr. Bose used to smoke.
- 8a. Oil paintings are more expensive than watercolors.
- 8b. Watercolors cost more than oil paintings.

- 9a. The Taj Hotel is more than a century old.
 9b. The Taj Hotel has operated for more than a century.
 10a. Ayesha invited some friends to lunch.
 10b. Ayesha has friends.

8.11 BOOKS SUGGESTED

General introductions to linguistic semantics are far from numerous. The following can be recommended for the beginning student who wants collateral or supplemental reading in the subject :

Allan, Keith (1986). *linguistic Meaning* (2 vols).

Dillon, George (1977). *Introduction to Contemporary Linguistic Semantics*.

Hofmann, Th. R. (1993). *Realms of Meaning : An Introduction to Semantics*.

Hurford, J.R. and Brendan Heasley (1983). *Semantics : A Coursebook*.

Leech, Geoffrey N. (1981). *Semantics*. 2nd edn.

Lyons, John (1995). *Linguistic Semantics : An Introduction*.

Nilsen, D.L.F. and Nilsen, A. (1975) *Semantic Theory : A Linguistic Perspective*.

Palmer, Frank R. (1981). *Semantics*. 2nd edn.

Saeed, John I. (1997). *Semantics*.

The more advanced student will want to be familiar with :

Chierchia, Gennaro and Sally McConnell–Ginet (1990). *Meaning and Grammar : An Introduction to Semantics*, as well as : Frawley, William (1992). *Linguistic Semantics*. Kempson, R.M. (1977). *Semantic Theory*. Lyons, John (1977). *Semantics* (2 vols).

The logical formulation of semantic statements is well explicated in : Cann, Ronnie (1993). *Formal Semantics : An Introduction*.

A very readable discussion of (non–human) animal communication and of the biological basis for humans’ language capacity is Wardhaugh (1993), chapters 2 and 3.

Full details of these and all other books cited in Suggested Reading lists can be found here.

Bassac, Christian ; Mery, Bruno & Retoré, Christian (2010). Towards a type–theoretical account of lexical semantics. *_Journal of Logic, Language and Information_* 19 (2) : 229–245.

Wright, Cory (2007). Review Essay : Hubert Cuyckens, René Dirven, & John Taylor's (2003) ‘Cognitive Approaches to Lexical Semantics’. *_Cognitive Linguistics_* 18 (4) : 570–579.

ANSWERS

1a and 1b : T

2a and 2b : T

3a is T, if 3b is T, 3a is partially T

4a is T, 4b can be T

5a is T. 5b can be T or F

6a is T, 6b is T

7a is T, 7b is T

8a is T, 8b is F

9a is T, 9b is T

10a is T, 10b is T

