Lexical Semantics: Lexical and grammatical meanings, Lexical Ambiguity

The term 'word is ambiguous, both in everyday usage and also as it is employed technically by linguists. Words may be considered purely as **forms,** whether spoken or written, or, alternatively, as composite **expressions,** which combine form and meaning.   i

Words as expressions: i.e., as composite units that have both form and meaning (more precisely, as we shall see, as units which have, typically, a set of forms and a set of meanings).

It is word-expressions, not word-forms, that are listed and defined in a conventional dictionary. And they are listed according to an alphabetic ordering of their **citation-forms:** i.e., what are commonly referred to as the **headwords** of dictionary entries

Grammaticality and semanticality are not necessarily correlative. Some illgrammatical structures make perfect sense semantically speaking. Besides, what is grammatically incorrect in one language is not necessarily incorrect in another language, for instance, while it is incorrect in English to omit the copula from such a structure as (he is a teacher), it is the norm in Arabic to have a verbless structure.

Some grammatical element do not have semantical counterpart, a feature that is called **Zero Mapping**. The verb and pronoun it in (it is raining) can be regarded as a 'dummy element' in syntax.

The opposite situation arises with null arguments, and with arguments which contain no features other than the feature of definiteness. Both these types of argument have zero expression. However, the conditions under which there can be zero expression are also dictated by syntactic considerations. In an active sentence with a transitive verb like enjoy, neither of the arguments of a two-place predication can be unexpressed, even though the semantic conditions for zero expression may be present :

  (1)The man in the street enjoys television plays .
 * (2)The man in the street enjoys .
 * (3)Enjoys television plays .
  (4) *Enjoys.

There has been a great deal of discussion of the nature of the word as a **grammatical unit**. The notion has notoriously resisted precise definition. Probably the best approach is a **prototypic one**: what is a prototypical word like? Well, for our purposes, the classical characterization as 'a minimal permutable element' will serve. This attributes two features to a prototypical word:

(i) It can be moved about in the sentence, or at least its position relative to other constituents can be altered by inserting new material.

(ii) It cannot be interrupted or its parts reordered. In other words, in making changes to a sentence, we are by and large obliged to treat its words as structurally inviolable wholes.

Word forms and **lexemes**

Word forms are individuated by their form, whether phonological or graphic; lexemes can be regarded as groupings of one or more word forms, which are individuated by their roots and/or derivational affixes. So, *run, runs, running,* and *ran* are word forms belonging to the same lexeme ***run,*** while *walk, walks, walking,* and *walked* belong to a different lexeme, ***walk,*** distinguished from the former by its root; likewise, *obey, obeys, obeying,* and *obeyed* belong to a single lexeme and *disobey, disobeys, disobeying,* and *disobeyed,* despite having the same root as the first set, belong to a different lexeme, distinguished this time by the possession of the derivational affix *dis-*. On the other hand, any verb which will fit grammatically into the frame *John is — me* must bear the affix *-ing,* showing that it is not a **derivational,** but an **inflectional** affix.

Lexical and Grammatical Meaning

A distinction is often made between lexical and grammatical meaning (sometimes only the latter is allowed as being properly linguistic). There are dangers in all dichotomies; this one is harmless provided it is borne in mind that in reality there is a continuously varying scale, of what might be termed lexicality and grammaticality. A convenient way of presenting the distinction is in terms of the sorts of element which carry the meaning in question. We can divide grammatical units into **closed-set items** and **open-set items**. Central examples of closed-set items have the following characteristics:

(i) They belong to small substitution sets (perhaps as small as one).

(ii) Their principal function is to articulate the grammatical structure of sentences.

(iii) They change at a relatively slow rate through time, so that a single speaker is unlikely to see loss or gain of items in their lifetime. (No new tense markers or determiners have appeared in English for a long time.) In other words, the inventory of items in a particular closed-set grammatical category is effectively fixed (i.e. 'closed', hence the name). These may be contrasted with **open-set** items, which have the following characteristics:

(i) They belong to relatively large substitution sets (especially if semantic plausibility is ignored).

(ii) There is a relatively rapid turnover in membership of substitution classes, and a single speaker is likely to encounter many losses and gains in a single lifetime. (Think of the proliferation of words relating to space travel, or computing, in recent years.)

(iii) Their principal function is to carry the meaning of a sentence.

Lexical ambiguity

When homonyms can occur in the same position in utterances, the result is **lexical ambiguity,** as in, for example, "I was on my way to the bank." Of course, the ambiguity is not likely to be sustained in a longer discourse. A following utterance, for example, is likely to carry information about depositing or withdrawing money, on the one hand, or, on the other hand, fishing or boating. Quite often homonyms belong to different lexical categories and therefore do not give rise to ambiguity. For instance, *seen* is a form of the verb *see* while *scene* is an unrelated noun; *feet* is a plural noun with concrete reference, *feat* is a singular noun, rather abstract in nature; and so on. Ambiguity occurs also because a longer linguistic form has a literal sense and a figurative sense:

-There's a skeleton in our closet.

Skeleton in the closet can mean 'an unfortunate event that is kept a family secret.' With this meaning *skeleton in the closet* is a single lexeme; with its 'literal' meaning it is a phrase composed of several lexemes.

Approaches to lexical semantics

 One-level vs. two-level approaches

A major dividing line which separates semanticists is the question of whether a distinction can be made between semantics and encyclopaedic knowledge. Those who believe such a division can be made often draw an analogy with phonetics and phonology. Human beings can make and learn to recognize an almost infinite variety of speech sounds, but in any particular language, only a handful of these function distinctively to convey meanings, or enter into systematic relations of any complexity. These are the true linguistic elements on the 'sound' side of language (Saussure's *expression plane).* In a similar way, the variety of 'raw' meanings is virtually infinite, but only a limited number of these are truly linguistic and interact systematically with other aspects of the linguistic system. The vast detailed knowledge of the world, which speakers undoubtedly possess, is, according to the dual-level view, a property, not of language elements, but of concepts, which are strictly extralinguistic. Truly linguistic meaning elements are of a much 'leaner' sort, and are (typically) thought of as (more) amenable to formalization. One criterion suggested for recognizing 'linguistic' meaning is involvement with syntax, whether by virtue of being the meaning carried by some grammatical element, or because it correlates with such factors as agreement patterns or sub-categorization of major syntactic categories.

Partisans of the single-level view claim that no non-arbitrary basis for assigning aspects of meaning (or knowledge) to the 'semantic' or 'encyclopaedic' side of a purported dichotomy has been put forward which survives even a cursory scrutiny. Most cognitive linguists would take the view that all meaning is conceptual, and that the 'extra' level of structure proposed by the two-level camp does not actually do any theoretical work. The distinction between grammatical and lexical/encyclopaedic meaning is not necessarily denied, but it is likely to be seen as a continuum, rather than a dichotomy, and entirely conceptual in nature.

Monosemic vs. polysemic approaches

The point at issue in relation to the distinction between the monosemic and the polysemic approach is how many meanings ought to be attributed to a word. There is no dispute about clear-cut cases of homonymy, like that of *bank,* where there is no conceivable way of deriving one meaning from the other. The dispute centres on clusters of

related senses characteristic of polysemy. The monosemic view is that as few senses as possible should be given separate recognition in the (ideal) lexicon of a language, and as many as possible derived from these. The argument usually goes like this: if one reading of a word is in any way a motivated extension of another one, then only one should be recorded, and the other should be left to the operation of **lexical rules,** which in general apply to more than one instance and hence represent systematicity in the lexicon.

The polysemic approach rejects the assumption that a motivated extension of a word sense does not need to be recorded in the lexicon. The basic reason for this is that lexical rules only specify *potential* extensions of meaning, only some of which become conventionalized and incorporated in the lexicon: others are possible, and may appear as nonce forms, but there is none the less a clear distinction between these and those which are established (in principle, anyway: actually there is a continuous scale of establishment). Take the case of *drink.* In many contexts, it is clear what is being drunk, but obviously one would not wish to create a different lexical entry for *drink* corresponding to every possible drinkable liquid. To this extent, the monosemists and the polysemists would agree. However, it is possible for some particular drinkable items to be incorporated into a specific reading for *drink.* In principle, any class of beverage could be incorporated in this way, but in fact, in English, only "alcoholic beverages" can be encoded thus: *I'm afraid John has started drinking again.* Now in principle, this could have happened with fruit juice instead of alcohol, but it is a fact about the English lexicon that *drink* has one of these possibilities, but not the other.

The componential approach

One of the earliest and still most persistent and widespread ways of approaching
word meaning is to think of the meaning of a word as being constructed out of smaller, more elementary, invariant units of meaning, somewhat on the analogy of the atomic structure of matter (although the immediate inspiration for the first proposals on these lines was not physics, but phonology). These 'semantic atoms' are variously known as **semes, semantic features, semantic components, semantic markers, semantic primes.**

'Holist' approaches

It is a belief of all componentialists that the meaning of a word can, in some useful sense, be finitely specified, in isolation from the meanings of other words in the language. Among philosophers of language, this is known as the **localist** view. For a localist, contextual variation can be accounted for by rules of interaction with contexts. The contrary position is the **holistic** view, according to which the meaning of a word cannot be known without taking into account the meanings of all the other words in a language. There are various versions of holism: two will be outlined here.

Haas

W. Haas (I962, I964), has a highly idiosyncratic view of meaning derives from an aspect of Wittgenstein's work, namely, his 'use' theory of meaning, which is encapsulated in the dictum: "Don't look for the meaning—look for the use." In other words, the meaning of an expression is the use to which it is put. As it stands, this is not very helpful, merely suggestive. Haas gave it a personal twist, inspired by J. R. Firth's dictum:

"Words shall be known by the company they keep." This interprets 'use' as the

contexts, actual and potential, in which the expression occurs normally (i.e. without anomaly). Haas went further than this. He said that the meaning of a word was a **semantic field** (not the usual semantic field) which had two dimensions:

a syntagmatic dimension, in which all possible (grammatically wellformed) contexts of the word were arranged in order of normality; and a paradigmatic dimension, in which for each context, the possible paradigmatic substitutes for the word were arranged in order of normality. Relative normality was for Haas a primitive. In principle, 'context' includes extralinguistic context; but Haas argued that since every relevant aspect of extralinguistic context can be coded linguistically, nothing is lost by restricting attention to linguistic contexts.

Lyons

A second variety of holism is represented by Lyons (I977). The essence of this approach is the quintessentially Saussurean belief that meanings are not substantive, but relational, and are constituted by contrasts

within the same system. Lyons states that the sense of a lexical item consists of the set of sense relations which the item contracts with other items which participate in the same field. Sense relations, he insists, are not relations between independently established senses; one should rather say that senses are constituted out of sense relations. In this system, the links are of specific sorts, such as "is a kind of" (c.g. *horse:animal),* "is not a kind of" (e.g. *horse:cow),* "is a part of" (e.g. *mane- :horsc),* "is characteristic noise produced by" (e.g. *neigh:horse),* "is a dwelling place for" (e.g. *stable:horse),* and so on. Since the words illustrated also enter into relations with other words than *horse,* the full meaning of *horse* is a complex network of relations potentially encompassing the whole lexicon.

Conceptual approaches

Conceptual approaches are single-level approaches and identify the meaning of a wordwith the concept or concepts it gives access to in the cognitive system. Among cognitive linguists, the prototype model of concept structure holds sway. The origins of the prototype approach can be traced to Wittgenstein (I972) (who initiated more than one line of thinking that was to influence linguistics). He is usually credited with being the first to challenge the classical Aristotelian notion of natural categories as being definable in terms of necessary and sufficient criteria. He put forward the well-known example of GAME, challenging his readers to come up with the necessary and sufficient criteria for something being a game. None of the obvious suggestions is criterial:

involves physical activity

has winners and losers

is played for amusement

has rules, etc.

None of these is either exclusive to games or necessary for something to be a game. Wittgenstein proposed the notion of family resemblance: the members of a large family typically resemble one another in a variety of ways, but there are no features which they all have, and there may be members who share no features, but these will none the less be linked to the others by a chain of resemblance.

Formal approaches

Formal approaches to semantics attempt to express the facts of meaning through a strict formalism. The hoped-for pay-off from adopting this sort of approach includes greater explicitness, testability of hypotheses, easier link-up with syntax, and machine implementability. Those who are less sympathetic to this kind of approach point to the existence of significant aspects of semantics which are continuously variable, and to the somewhat meagre descriptive results so far achieved.

References

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