

Sense and Reference

Sense and Reference :

Sense and reference are two very distinct ways of talking about the meaning of words and other expressions.

Sense deals with the relationships inside the language.

Reference deals with the relationship between the language and the world.

Sense

- The sense of an expression is its place in a system of semantic relationships with other expressions in the language.

E.g. The relationship between "big" and "small" is oppositeness of meaning (antonymy).

The relationship between "rich" and "wealthy" is sameness of meaning (synonymy).

- We will talk more about sense relations in a coming lecture.

- Notes:

- 1- In some cases, the same word-form can have more than one sense.

E.g. Look at the word-form "bank" in the following sentences:

"I have an account at the bank."

"We took the boat to the other bank of the river."

In these examples, "bank" has a different sense in each sentence.

- 2- We can talk about the sense, not only of words, but also of longer expressions such as phrases and sentences.

e.g. "Rupert took off his jacket."

"Rupert took his jacket off."

We say that both of these sentence have the same sense.

- 3- One sentence can have different senses.

e.g. "The chicken is ready to eat."

This sentence has two different senses. The first sense is that the chicken is ready to be eaten. The second sense is that the chicken is ready to eat something.

Reference

- Reference is a relationship between parts of a language (words and phrases) and things outside the language (in the world).
By reference a speaker indicates which things and persons in the world are being talked about.
e.g. My son is in the house.
"My son" here refers to a person in the world and "the house" refers to a thing in the world.
- To make the term reference clearer to you, hold a book in your hand and describe it in a sentence. For example: "This book is about Semantics."
The English expression "this book" is part of the language. This expression can refer to any book. In the example, we used it to refer to part of the world which is the book you are holding in your hand. "Reference" is the relationship between the language expression and the real world object.
- After looking at the previous example, we can give the following two definitions:
 - A referring expression is any expression used in an utterance to refer to something or someone.
 - A referent is the person or thing in the world speakers refer to by using a referring expression.
 The relation between a referring expression and a referent is what we call reference.

Notes:

- 1- The same referring expression can, in some cases, be used to refer to different referents.
e.g. The referring expression "this book" can be used to refer to different books.
- 2- Two different referring expressions can have the same referent.
e.g. The two expressions "Riyadh" and "the capital of Saudi Arabia" both refer to the same place.

Comparing Sense and Reference

- 1- The referent of an expression is often a thing or person in the world; whereas the sense of an expression is not a thing at all.
- The sense of an expression is an abstraction in the mind of a language user. When a person understands fully what is said to him, it is reasonable to say that he grasps the sense of the expression he hears.
- 2- Every meaningful expression has sense, but not every meaningful expression has reference.
e.g. The words "almost", "if" and "probable" have sense, but they do not refer to a thing in the world.