▸ **Semantics and Pragmatics**
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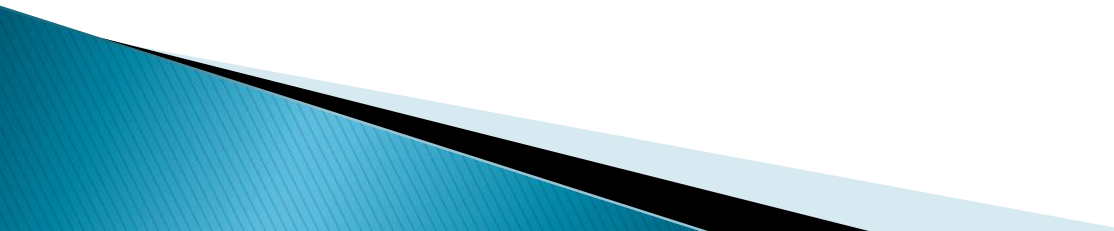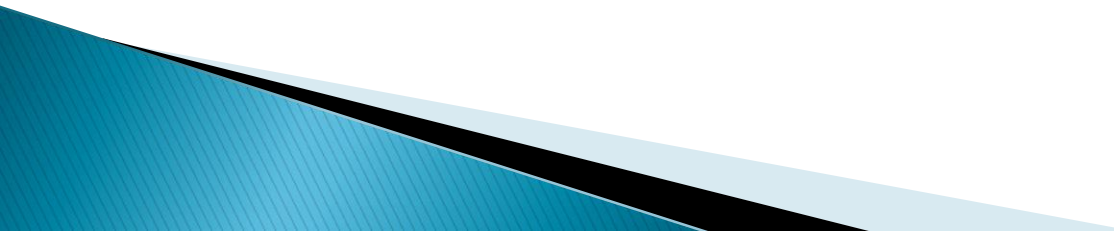**1435-1436**
2014-2015
Second Semester
▸ **Lecture Two**

The Scope of Semantics

- **Introductory Remark:**
- It was suggested that language might be thought of as a communication system with on the one hand the signifier, on the other the signified. But a basic problem is to establish the nature and relationship of these two.
- In this lecture we shall:
- 1. Examine two unsatisfactory views of semantics because they do not provide solutions to semantic problems
- 2. Set out some of the more important distinctions in the area of semantics

Naming
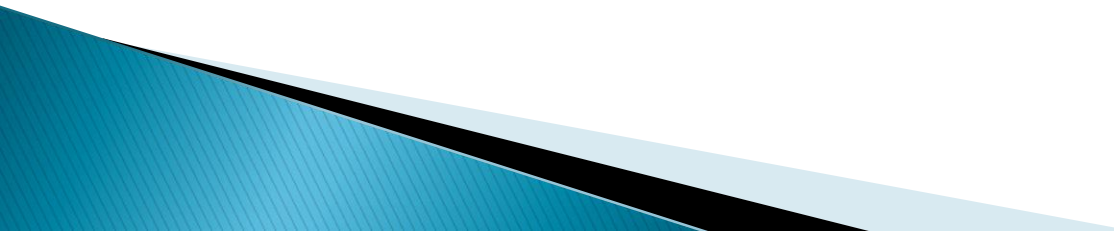
- Important terms:
- EXPRESSION: sequences of words, usually with grammatical identity, whole noun phrases for instance.
- DENOTATION: the class of persons, things, etc., generally represented by the expression
- REFERENCE: the actual persons, things, etc. being referred to by it in a particular context.

- One of the oldest views is that the signifier is a word in the language and the signified is the object in the world that it 'stands for', 'refers to' or 'denotes'. Words, that is to say, are 'names' or 'labels' for things.

- Points of Strength:

- 1. All languages have words like *John, Paris, and Wednesday,* the so called proper nouns, whose function is precisely that of naming or labeling.

- 2. The child learns many of his words by a process of naming.

- Points of Weakness:
- 1. It seems to apply only to nouns (or nominal expressions in general). It is difficult, if not impossible, to extend the theory of naming to include parts of speech other than nouns, e.g. (verbs: run–remember–like–see, prep: up–under, conj: when–because, pronouns: I–he, which raise more problems, since they denote different things at different times).
- 2. If we apply the theory to nouns only, some nouns, e.g. *unicorn, goblin, fairy,* relate to creatures that do not exist, that is they do not denote objects in the world.

- <u>One way out</u> is to distinguish two kinds of world, the real world and the world of fairy stories, but such words are still evidence that words are not simply names of the objects of our experience.

- 3. There are nouns that do not refer to physical objects at all, e.g. *love, hate, inspiration, nonsense*.

- 4. The meaning of the relevant word or expression is by no means the same as its denotation, e.g. *evening star and morning star*, in which each has a different meaning yet denote the same thing (planet Venus).
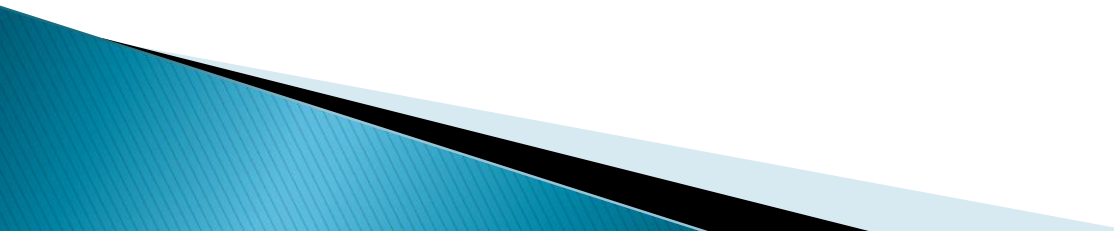
- 5. Even if we restrict our attention to words that are linked with visible objects in the world, they often seem to denote a whole set of rather different objects, e.g. chairs and stool, cup, mug, and bowel, in which the dividing line between them is vague and there may be overlap. Other examples, hill and mountain, river and stream. In the world of experience there are no clearly defined 'natural' classes of objects ready to be labeled with a single word. Part of the problem of semantics is to establish what classes there are.

- **6.** It might be argued that there are 'universal' classes common to all languages. But this is not so. The classification of objects in terms of the words used to denote them differs from language to language, e.g. English words *stool, chair, arm-chair, couch, sofa* do not have precise equivalents in other languages. French word *fauteuil* seems equivalent to *arm-chair*, the presence of arms is not necessary as in English *arm-chair*. Another example is the color systems of language that appear to differ too, in spite of the apparently 'natural' system of rainbow. The words of a language often reflect not so much the reality of the world, but the interests of the people who speak it. This is clear if we look at cultures different from our own.
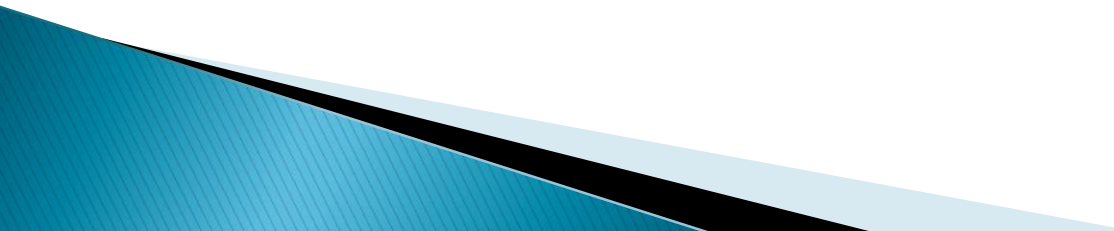
- Eskimo, for example, has four words for 'snow'–'snow on the ground', 'falling snow'. 'drifting snow' and 'snowdrift'. Hopi has only one word to denote a 'flier'–an aeroplane, an insect or a pilot.
- The same applies even to creatures that can not be labeled in two different ways. But these scientific classifications are not typical of everyday experience, e.g. whale and bat.

- <u>One possible way out</u> of all these difficulties is to say that only SOME words actually denote objects–that children learn SOME of them as labels. The others have a meaning that is derived from the more basic use. Thus, there are two kinds of word, 'object word' and 'dictionary word'. Object words are learnt ostensibly, i.e. by pointing at objects, while dictionary words have to be defined in terms of the object words. The object words thus have **OSTENSIVE DEFINITIONS**.

7. In order to understand an ostensive definition we have to understand precisely what is being pointed at, which involves the identification of the object, the specification of the qualities that make it a chair or a table. It requires a sophisticated understanding, perhaps even the understanding of the entire categorization of the language concerned. Thus, you must already be a master of the language to understand an ostensive definition.

Concepts

- A more sophisticated and plausible view is one that relates words and things through the meditation of concepts of the mind.
- Two of the best-known versions are the 'sign' theory of de Saussure and the 'semiotic triangle' of Ogden & Richards.

- 1. According to de Saussure, the linguistic sign consists of a signifier and a signified (a sound image and a concept), both linked by a psychological 'associative' bond. Both the noises we make and the objects of the world are mirrored in some way by conceptual entities.
- 2. Ogden & Richards (1923) saw the relationship as a triangle. The symbol is the linguistic element–the word, sentence, etc., and the referent the object, etc., in the world of experience, while 'thought or reference' is concept. According to the theory there is no direct link between symbol and referent (between language and the world)–the link is via thought or reference, the concepts of our minds.
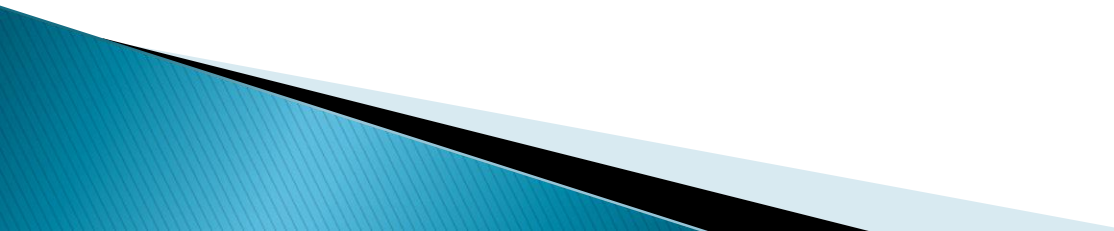
- **Points of Strength:**
- This theory avoids many of the problems of naming–the classification, for instance, need not be natural or universal, but merely conceptual.
- **Points of Weakness:**
- 1. It raises the question of what precisely is the associative bond of de Saussure or the link between Ogden & Richards' symbol and concept? It is not clear what exactly is meant by 'thinking of' a concept.
- Some scholars have suggested that we have some kind of image of a chair when we talk about chairs. But this is certainly false.

- I can visualize a chair in 'my mind's eye', but I do not do so every time I utter the word *chair*. If this were a necessary part of talking, it would be impossible to give a lecture on linguistics. For precisely what would I visualize? Moreover, if I have images when I think about linguistics, they will almost certainly be different from those of other people.
- 2. Even if there were concepts in the mind they are in principle inaccessible to anyone but the individual, and we are left therefore with totally subjective views, since I can never know what your 'meanings' are.

In conclusion, Wherever we have a word there will be a concept–and the concept will be the 'meaning of that word'. This is, obviously, a completely circular definition of meaning that says nothing at all.
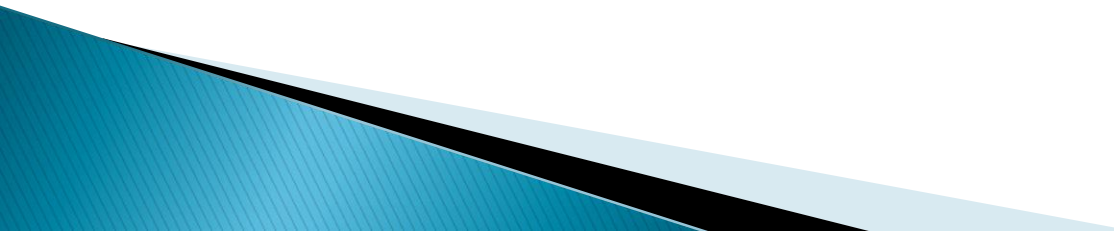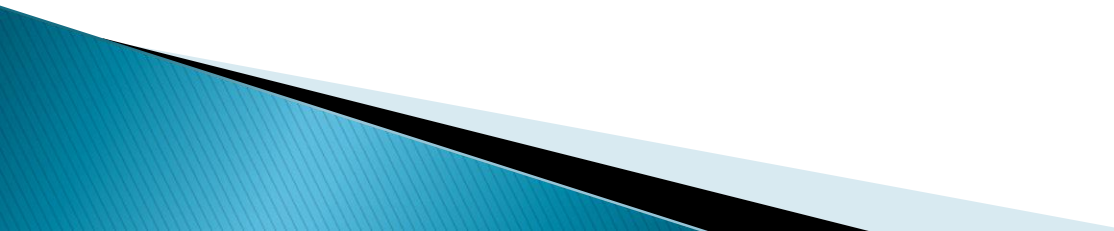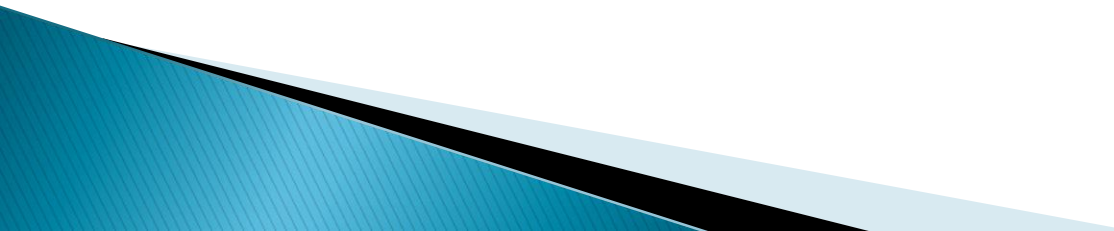
Sense and Reference

- REFERNCE is used to a useful and wide sense to contrast with SENSE and to distinguish between two very different, though related, aspects of meaning.

- REFERENCE deals with the relationship between the linguistic elements, words, sentences, etc., and the non-linguistic world of experience.

- SENSE relates to the complex system of relationships that hold between the linguistic elements themselves (mostly the words); it is concerned only with intralinguistic relations.
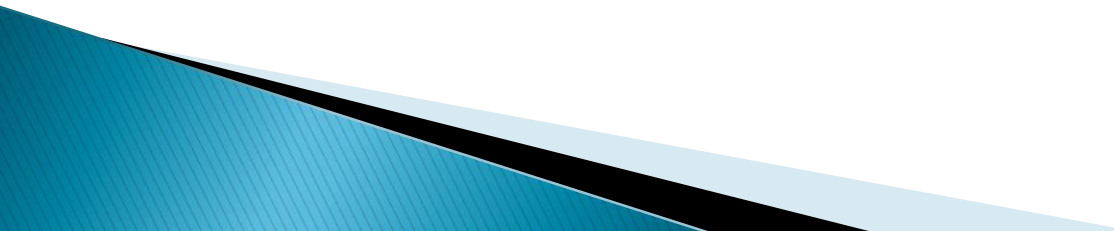
- Sense relationships have formed an important part of the study of language, *ram* and *ewe*. These on the one hand refer to particular kinds of animals and derive their meaning in this way. But they also belong to a pattern in English that includes *cow/bull, sow/boar, mare/stallion,* etc. Since this is part of gender, older grammars of English treated it as part of grammar.
- But there are other kinds of related words, e.g. *duck/duckling, pig/piglet* (involving adult and young), or *father/son, uncle/nephew* (involving family relationships0, and these are not usually thought to be grammatical. They are rather a part of the 'semantic structure' of English.

- There are many other kinds of sense relations, too, e.g. those exemplified by *narrow/wide, dead/alive, buy/sell.*
- The dictionary is usually concerned with sense relations, with relating words to words. The ultimate aim of the dictionary is to supply its user with referential meaning, and that it does so by relating, via sense relations, a word whose meaning is unknown to a word or words whose reference is already understood.

- We have then two kinds of semantics:
- 1. one that deals with semantic structure, i.e. intra-linguistic.
- 2. another one that deals with meaning in terms of our experience out side language, i.e. relates to non-linguistic entities.

- We are not concerned, however, only with words but also with sentences. Indeed, most scholars who have dealt with sense have been primarily concerned with sentence meaning and its relation to word meaning.
- Bierwisch (1970) argues that a semantic theory must explain such sentences as:

1. *His typewriter has bad intentions.*
2. *My unmarried sister is married to a bachelor.*
3. *John was looking for the glasses.*
4. (a) *The needle is too short.*
   (b) *The needle is not long enough.*
5. (a) *Many of the students were unable to answer your question.*
   (b) *Only a few students grasped your question.*
6. (a) *How long did Archibald remain in Monte Carlo?*
   (b) *Archibald remained in Monte Carlo for some time.*

- (I) is an example of an anomalous sentence, (2) of a contradictory one and (3) of an ambiguous one; (4) illustrates paraphrase or synonymous sentences; in (5) one sentence follows from the other, while in (6) the first implies or presupposes the second.
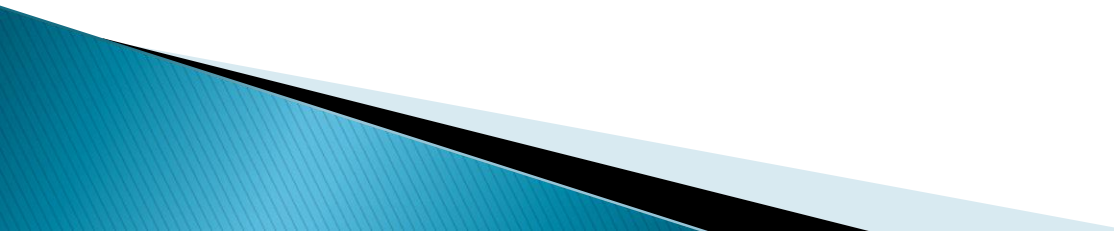
- It is not always possible to distinguish clearly between sense and reference for the simple reason that the categories of our language correspond, to some degree at least, to real-world distinctions. Whether language determines the shape of the world or vice versa is probably a 'chicken and egg' problem. The fact that we have *ram/ewe, bull/cow* is part of the semantic structure of English, but it also relates to the fact that there are male and female sheep and cattle. But we have to remember two points.

- **(1)** Not all languages will make the same distinctions.
- **(2)** There is considerable indeterminacy in the categorization of the real world, e.g. *bat.*
- (3) Although we have *ram/ewe, stallion/mare,* we have no similar pairs for *giraffe* or *elephant*.
- It is because of this that we can distinguish sense and reference, yet must allow that there is no absolute line between them, between what is in the world and what is in language.

The word

- Dictionaries appear to be concerned with stating the meanings of words and it is, therefore, reasonable to assume that the word is one of the basic units of semantics. Yet there are difficulties.

- 1. Not all words have the same kind of meaning as others, e.g. *Boys like to play.* We need to distinguish between 'full' words and 'form' words. Examples of full words are *tree, sing, blue, gently* and form words *it, the, of, and.* It is only the full words that seem to have the kind of meaning that we would expect to find in a dictionary. The form words belong rather to the grammar and have only 'grammatical' meaning. Such meaning cannot be stated in isolation, but only in relation to other words and even sometimes to the whole sentence.

- 2. The word is not a clearly defined linguistic unit. It is to some degree purely conventional, defined in terms of the spaces of the written text. Of course, this spacing is not wholly arbitrary, e.g. stress (one word seems to allow only one main stress), thus *bláckbird* is one word, but *bláck bírd* are two words. However, there are *the whíte House, shóeblack, shóe-horn* and *shóe polish,* all with a single stress.

- Bloomfield (1933) offered two solutions:

- 1. He suggested that the word is the 'minimum free form', the smallest form that may occur in isolation. However, there will be a problem with words such as *a, the, is*, as they do not occur in isolation.

- 2. He suggested that we should look for an element smaller than the word, a unit of meaning–the MORPHEME: examples are *-berry* in *blackberry* or *-y* in *Johnny*.
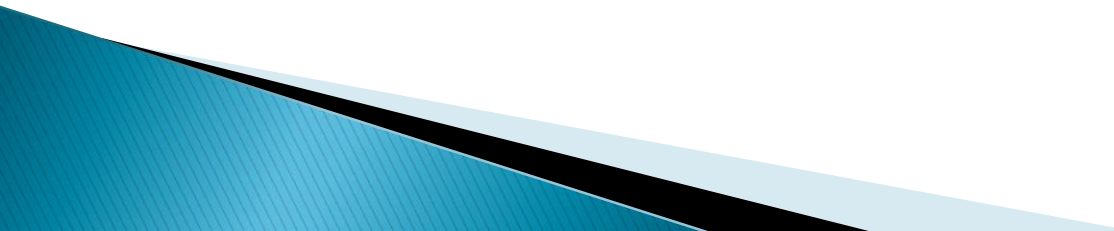
Later linguists were more interested in the status of such words as *loved* where they could identify the morphemes *love–* and *–d.* But problems soon arose with words such as *took.*

The best way to handle this was not in terms of morphemes, but by redefining the term *word* . We have been using this term in the sense that *love* and *loved* are different words. But we could say that they are forms of the same word. A technical term for the word in this second sense is LEXEME. It is lexemes that usually provide dictionary headings. There are not two entries for *love* and *loved,* but one only (and this may even include the noun *love* as well as the verb).

- There are still other problems:

- 1. Stating the meaning of the elements, e.g. the grammatical elements and elements such as *cran-* in *cranberry,* which seem to have no independent meaning and does not occur in any other words. Similarly, *straw-* and *-goose* in *strawberry* and *gooseberry* have nothing to do with straw or geese, unlike *black-* in *blackberry, blackboard, blackbird,* in which the meaning of black is related.

- 2. There are many words in English that are called PHONAESTHETIC, in which one part, often the initial cluster of consonants, gives an indication of meaning of a rather special kind, e.g. many words beginning with *sl-* are 'slippery' in some way *–slide, slip, sludge, etc.,* while the *–sk* words refer to surfaces or superficiality *–skate, skimp, skim, skid,* etc. However, not every word with these phonological characteristics will have the meaning suggested. Further, we cannot separate this part and state the meaning of the remainder.

- **Transparent and opaque words:**

- The previous point is related to the distinction between TRANSPARENT and OPAQUE words. Transparent words are those whose meaning can be determined from the meaning of their parts, opaque words those for which this is not possible. Further, there are degrees of transparency and opacity.

- Examine the following words in terms of the above definitions:

- *Chopper, doorman, blackmail, screwdriver, spanner, hammer.*

- **IDIOMS:**
- We must notice that some whole groups of words must be taken together to establish meaning. These are idioms-sequences of words whose meaning cannot be predicted from the meanings of the words themselves, e.g. *kick the bucket, spill the beans.* Semantically, idioms are single units, but they are not single grammatical units like words, for there is no past tense *kick the bucketed.*

- **Semantic division versus word division:**
- Sometimes semantic division seems to override word division, e.g. *heavy smoker* and *good singer.* Semantically these are not *heavy+smoker* (a smoker who is heavy) and *good+singer* (a singer who is good). The meaning is rather one who smokes heavily or sings well. We can divide, but the first division would be between *heavy smoke-*and-*er*, *good sing-*and-*er.*

The sentence

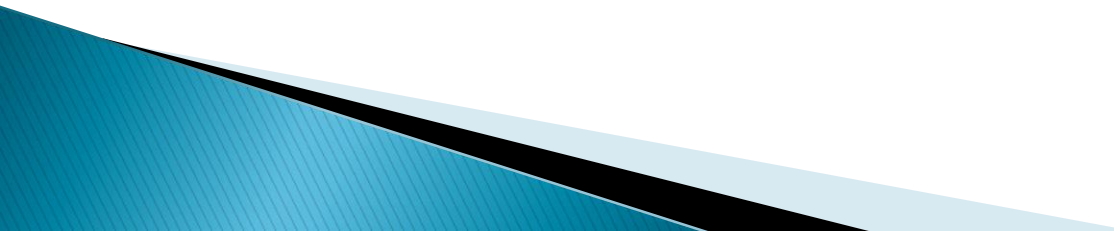- ## Introduction:

- A part from all the problems concerning the word itself, there is the question whether the basic unit of meaning is not the word after all, but the sentence. For it is with sentences that we communicate, and this is reflected in the traditional definition of the sentence as 'the expression of a complete thought'.

- The sentence is essentially a grammatical unit that consists minimally of a subject noun phrase and a verb phrase as its predicate or complement. Each of these may be a single word as in *Birds fly.* However, we do not always produce complete sentences, *Horses, Coming? Coming!*

- **<u>Kinds of Meanings in the Sentence:</u>**
- 1. The meaning of the sentence can be predicted from the meaning of the words it contains, or more strictly, from these words and the grammatical features with which they are associated.
- 2. But there has been some debate whether the meaning is to be related to the actual SURFACE STRUCTURE or some abstract DEEP STRUCTURE. So each sentence will have a meaning (a 'literal' meaning), or, if it is ambiguous like *I went to the bank,* two or more meanings.

- 3. A great deal of meaning in the language is carried by the PROSODIC and PARALINGUISTIC features of language-intonation, stress, rhythm, loudness, etc., as well as such features as facial expressions and gestures (which are often called 'paralinguistic' in a wide sense of the term).
- 4. There is a variety of what are today called 'speech acts'. We warn, threaten, promise, though often without giving any overt indication that we are doing so.
- 5. Meaning is also presupposed such as in the sentence, *the king of France is bald.*

- 6. Language is often deeply concerned with a variety of social relations. We can be rude or polite, and the decision depends on the social relationship with the person to whom we are speaking. Further, some parts of language are wholly social and carry no information.
- 7. Lyons (1977) drew the distinction between sentence meaning and utterance meaning. Sentence meaning is directly predictable from the grammatical and lexical features of the sentence. Utterance meaning includes all the various types of meaning that we have just been discussing.

- 8. For some scholars it is not the sentence but the PROPOSITION that is the basic unit of semantics. One reason for this is the belief that semantics must be TRUTH-CONDITIONAL, and that propositions, unlike sentences, can always be characterized as true or false, e.g. *I was there yesterday*. Logic, moreover, which is truth-conditional, is not concerned with the grammatical and lexical forms of the sentence, but essentially with its propositional meaning. Thus *Every boy loves some girl* is grammatically unambiguous, but for the logician it expresses two quite distinct propositions–either that every boy loves a different girl or that every boy loves the same girl. This is important because different logical inferences can be drawn from these distinct propositions.