Lecture 1

What is Semantics?

Semantics is the technical term used to refer to the study of meaning.

This term is a recent addition to the English language. One of the earliest uses of the term was in 1894, in a paper entitled: "Reflected meanings: a point in semantics." In this case, the term was used to refer not to meaning only but to its development which is what we call now "historical semantics".

In 1900, a book called "Semantics: studies in the science of meaning" was published. The term Semantics was treated in this book the way we use it today, to refer to the "science" of meaning not the changes of meaning from a historical point of view.

• The use of the word "semantics" in popular language:

In popular language, especially in newspapers, the word "semantics" is used to refer to the manipulation of language, mostly to mislead by choosing the right word. For example, the following headline in *The Guardian* in 1971: "Semantic manoeuvres at the Pentagon".

In this article the term "*mobile manoeuvre"* was being used to mean "retreat".

What is "meaning"?

"Meaning" covers a variety of aspects of language, and there is no general agreement about the nature of meaning.

Looking at the word itself, the dictionary will suggest a number of different meanings of the noun "meaning" and the verb "mean".

The word mean can be applied to people who use language, i.e. to speakers, in the sense of "intend". And it can be applied to words and sentences in the sense of "be equivalent to". To understand what meaning is, one has to keep in mind whether we are talking about what speakers mean or what words (or sentences)mean.

• Utterance Meaning (Speaker Meaning) is what a speaker means (i.e. intends to convey)when he uses a piece of language. It includes the secondary aspects of meaning, especially those related to context.

• Sentence Meaning (or Word Meaning) is what a sentence (or word) means, i.e. what it counts as the equivalent of in the language concerned.

Example:

"Nice day."

This sentence is equivalent to something like "This is a lovely day."

However, depending on the situation and the speaker's facial expressions, tone of voice, or the relationship that exists between the speaker and hearer, it can mean the exact opposite, i.e. "This is not a nice day."

From what we discussed above, it becomes clear that there is a distinction between what would seem to be the usual meaning of a word or a sentence, and the meaning it has in certain specific circumstances or contexts. It is this distinction that allows us to say one thing and mean another.

This is a difference between Semantics and Pragmatics.

What is Pragmatics?

Pragmatics is the study of meaning that a sentence has in a particular context in which it is uttered.

As we mentioned earlier, the difference between Semantics and Pragmatics is that the study of Semantics is independent of context.

e.g. There's a car coming.

This sentence out of context simply gives information that a car is coming, but in a specific context it can be understood as a warning.

---------- ✿

Lecture 2

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.

---------- ✿

Lecture 3

Paradigmatic VS. Syntagmatic Relations

Paradigmatic relations are those into which a linguistic unit enters through being contrasted or substitutable, in a particular environment, with other similar units. (vertical relation)

Syntagmatic relations are those into which a linguistic unit enters by its co-occurrence with other units. (horizontal relation)

e.g. "a red door"

"a green door"

In this example, "red" and "green" are in a paradigmatic relation to each other.

"Red" and "green" are also in a syntagmatic relation with "door".

Semantic Fields

Words in a language can be grouped and classified into different semantic fields.

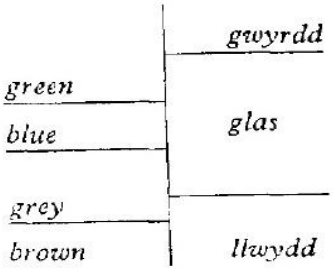
A semantic field contains a group of words which are related in their meaning.

For example, the words "Saturday", "Sunday", "Monday".. etc. belong to one semantic field which we can call "days of the week".

When we look at semantic fields we are concerned with paradigmatic relations between words.

• A word can be part of more than one semantic field. For example, the word "whale" can be a member of the following semantic fields: "living creatures", "animals" and "sea animals".

• Semantic fields can be useful to compare a single language at two different time periods, or to compare two languages to see the way in which they divide up a particular field.



This is a comparison of a single dimension of the color system between English and literary Welsh. We notice that English has more color terms to divide up this particular semantic field.

There are many other similar examples. For instance, if we look at the words for noise in a Mexican language, we find that there are six 'noise' words: referring to children yelling, people talking loudly, people arguing, people talking angrily, increasing noise and funeral noise.

Similarly, in Arabic we have a lot of words like "*klas*" and "*shishi*" that divide up the semantic field of "dates".

In all these examples we have a list of words referring to items of a particular class dividing up a semantic field.

In almost all of these cases, moreover, the words are incompatible. We cannot say for example, "This is a red hat" and of the same object "This is a green hat." Also, a creature cannot be described both as a "lion" and as an "elephant" at the same time.

The incompatibility of terms within a semantic field is often clearly indicated in language.

e.g. It was on Saturday that she went there.

This sentence implies that she did not go there on Monday or any other day of the week (but not that she did not go there in August). The words "Saturday" and "Monday" are incompatible because they divide up the semantic field of "days of the week" in English.

We can, however, recognize terms that seem to be mixtures.

For example, a hat can be orange-red. But by introducing such terms we merely increase the words within the field, and divide the field up more finely. So instead of just having color terms like "red", "green", "blue" and "orange", the semantic field of the color system will include color terms like " red-green", "orange-red".. etc.

In some cases the distinction between the terms in a semantic field is clear, and reflected by clear distinctions in experience; this is the case, with few exceptions, with animal names. So, the distinction between "rabbit" and "tiger" is very clear.

In other cases, e.g. the Mexican 'noise' words we discussed earlier, the distinctions are far more blurred.

Generally, too, the items in a semantic field are 'unordered'. In other words, there is no natural way, as far as their meaning is concerned, of arranging them in any kind of order. If we wanted to list them we should probably do so in alphabetical order.

But there are some groups of words that seem to have some 'order'. For example, the days of the week and the months of the year form sets of ordered incompatible items.

We cannot say for instance:

"This month is November and it is also March."

This group of words, however, have sequential relations such that Sunday comes immediately before Monday, and Monday before Tuesday.. etc.

Another example of semantic fields that have members that can have "natural order" is the case of measurement units such as inch, foot and yard which can be put in order, starting from the smallest one.

The numerals one, two, three, etc., are another obvious example.

---------- ✿

Lecture 4

Collocation

In our previous lecture, we mentioned that semantic field theory is essentially concerned with paradigmatic relations. Another important type of relations we need to recognize is the syntagmatic relations between words like "bite" and "teeth", "bark" and "dog", "blond" and "hair".. etc.

We notice from these examples that certain words tend to appear together or "keep company". This keeping company is what is called in semantics "collocation".

• Collocation can be seen as part of the meaning of a word. By looking at the linguistic context of words, we can often distinguish between different meanings. Notice the use of "chair" in these examples.

1. sat in a chair

2. the baby's high chair

3. the chair of philosophy

4. has accepted a University chair

5. the chairman of the meeting

6. will chair the meeting

7. the electric chair

8. condemned to the chair

These examples are clearly in pairs, giving four different meanings of the word. The above examples help to illustrate Firth's (1951) argument: "You shall know a word by the company it keeps."

Types of Collocational Restrictions

Here we will discuss the three types of restriction that result in collocation of words in a language.

• Types of Collocational Restrictions:

A. Some collocational restrictions are based wholly on the meaning of the item.

For example, meaning explains the collocation of "bite" and "teeth". Meaning also explains why it is unlikely to see the collocation "green cow".

Words may have more specific meanings in particular collocations. In particular collocations, a word may change. Thus, we can speak of "abnormal weather" or "exceptional weather" if we have a heat wave in winter, but "an exceptional child" is not "an abnormal child". In the second example, "exceptional" is being used for greater than usual ability and "abnormal" to refer to some kind of defect.

B. Some restrictions are based on range - a word may be used with a number of other words that have some semantic features in common. Also, we find that individual words or sequences of words will NOT collocate with certain groups of words.

Looking at the range we know roughly the kind of nouns (in terms of their meaning) with which a verb or adjective may be used.

For example, we may say "The rhododendron died," but not "The rhododendron passed away." This is in spite of the fact that "pass away" seems to mean "die". We should not use "pass away" with the names of any shrubs. It is not very plausible to say that "pass away" indicates a special kind of dying that is not characteristic of shrubs. It is rather that there is a restriction on its use with a group of words that are semantically related.

Range accounts for the unlikeliness of collocations like "The rhododendron passed away."

In cases like this, we do not reject specific collocations simply because we have never heard them before - we rely on our knowledge of the range.

C. Some restrictions are collocational in the strictest sense, involving neither meaning nor range.

Although collocation is very largely determined by meaning, it sometimes cannot easily be predicted in terms of the meaning of the associated words.

An example of this is the use of "blond" with "hair". We do not normally say "a blond door" or "a blond dress" even if the color was exactly that of blond hair.

Another example is words for animal sounds such as: "dog/bark", "cat/mew", "sheep/bleat", "horse/neigh", etc.

This characteristic of language is also found in an extreme form in the collective words such as: "flock of sheep", "herd of cows", "school of whales" and "pride of lions".

However, there is no clear distinguishing line between those collocations that are predictable from the meanings of the words that co-occur, and those that are not predictable from the meaning. That is because it might be possible to provide a semantic explanation for even the more restricted collocations, by assigning very particular meanings to the individual words. For example, we can account for collocations like "dogs bark", "cats mew" in terms of the kind of noise made.

This should not, however, lead us to conclude that all of these restricted collocations can be accounted for semantically. For instance, it is difficult to see any semantic explanation for the use of collective terms. The only difference between "herd" and "flock" is that one is used with cows and the other with sheep.

---------- ✿

Lecture 5

Sense Relations
Part 1

In lecture 2, we talked about the notion of "sense". We mentioned that the sense of an expression is the whole set of sense relations it has with other expressions in the language.

In this lecture we will talk about two of these sense relations: synonymy and antonymy.

Synonymy

Synonymy is the relationship between two lexical units (words) that have the same sense. Words that have the same sense are called synonyms.

The following pairs are examples of synonymy:

buy/ purchase

hide/ conceal

wide/ broad

deep/ profound

There are, however, no real synonyms. No two words have exactly the same meaning. Perfect synonymy is hard to find because it is unlikely that two words with exactly the same meaning would both survive in a language.

If we look at possible synonyms there are at least five ways in which they can be seen to differ. These ways are as follows:

First, some sets of synonyms belong to different dialects of the language. For instance, the term "fall" is used in the United States and in some western counties of Britain where others would use "autumn".

Second, words that are used in different styles. For example words such as "gentleman", "man" and "chap" have the same meaning but are used in different styles ranging from formal to colloquial.

Third, some words may be said to differ only in their emotive or evaluative meanings. The remainder of their meaning remains the same. Notice the emotive difference between "politician" and "statesman", "hide" and "conceal", "liberty" and "freedom", each implying approval or disapproval. The function of such words in language is to influence attitudes. They are chosen simply for the effect they are likely to have.

Fourth, some words are collocationally restricted. In other words, they occur only in conjunction with other words. Thus, "rancid" occurs with "bacon" or "butter" and "addled" with "eggs" or "brain". It could, perhaps, be argued that these are true synonyms differing only in that they occur in different environments.

Fifth, many words are close in meaning, or that their meanings overlap. There is a loose sense of synonymy between them. For the adjective "mature", for example, possible synonyms are "adult", "ripe" or "perfect". For the verb "govern", we may suggest "direct", "control" or "determine". This is the kind of synonymy that is used by the dictionary-maker.

Antonymy

Antonymy is the relationship between two lexical units (words) that have the opposite sense. Words that are opposite are called antonyms.

There are three different types of antonymy:

1. binary antonymy (complementarity)

2. converses (relational opposites)

3. gradable antonyms

Types of Antonymy

1) Binary antonymy (complementarity):

Binary antonyms are lexical units which come in pairs and between them exhaust all the relevant possibilities. If one of the antonyms is applicable, then the other cannot be applicable, and vice versa.

E.g. dead/ alive

married/ unmarried

2) Converses (relational opposites):

In the case of converses, a word describes a relationship between two things (or people). At the same time, another word describes the same relationship when the two things (or people) are mentioned in the opposite order. In this case, we say then the two lexical units are converses of each other.

E.g. "parent" and "child" are converses. If we say, "Ahmed is the parent of Ali" (one order); this describes the same relationship as "Ali is the child of Ahmed" (opposite order).

The notion of converseness can be applied to examples in which three referents are mentioned as in the case of "buy" and "sell".

John bought a car from Fred. Fred sold a car to John.

3) Gradable antonyms:

Gradable antonyms are two words at opposite ends of a continuous scale of values.

E.g. "Hot" and "cold" are gradable antonyms. Between "hot" and "cold" we have "warm", "cool" or "tepid". A good test for gradability is to see whether a word can combine with: very, very much, how or how much.

For example, it is possible with the gradable antonyms "far" and "near" to say: "very near" or "How far is it?"

On the other hand, in the case of other types of antonyms like "married/unmarried" we wouldn't normally say "very married" or "very unmarried". And with the antonyms "dead/alive", we normally wouldn't say: "How alive is he?"

---------- ✿