Mustansiriyah University

College of Arts

Department of English Language and Literature

4th Year Linguistics

Main Textbook: The Study of Language, 6th Edition (George Yule, 2017)

Lecture Title: The study of Grammar

Aim: the series of lectures aims to introduce the student the main concepts in semantics. It shows how linguistic meaning can be approached differently.

Semantics:

- **Semantics** is the study of the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. Semantics deals with what the words conventionally mean, rather than on what an individual speaker might want them to mean on a particular occasion. Semantic analysis is concerned with objective or general meaning and avoids trying to account for subjective or local meaning.

- While semantics is the study of linguistic meaning, there is more interest in certain aspects of meaning than in others. Semantic analysis is interested more in conceptual meaning, rather than associative meaning. **Conceptual meaning** (referential or denotative meaning) covers those basic, essential components of meaning that are conveyed by the literal use of a word. Thus a word like needle in English might include "a thin, sharp, steel instrument". It is the type of meaning that dictionaries are designed to describe. **Associative meaning** (emotive or connotative meaning) is the type of meaning that people might connect with the use of words (e.g. needle = "painful") that is not part of conceptual meaning.

- One way in which the study of basic conceptual meaning might be helpful would be as a means of accounting for the "oddness" we experience when we read sentences such as the following, even though they are syntactically well-formed:

  i.   The hamburger ate the boy.
  ii. The table listens to the radio.

- There are three different ways to analyze linguistic meaning. Each of these ways has a different analytical focus; these are: semantic features of words, semantic roles filled by words, and lexical relations among words.

Semantic Feature:

- In this approach of semantic analysis, words are thought of as containers of meaning. Therefore, semanticists using this approach attempt to analyze the conceptual meaning of words by deconstructing the semantic features of words into its basic elements in a similar fashion to phonemes in phonology. Features such as "+animate, −animate," "+human, −human," "+female, −female," for example, can be treated as the basic elements involved in differentiating the meaning of each word in a language from every other word. This approach can give us the ability to predict which words make the sentence semantically odd even when the sentence is syntactically well-formed.

- The approach is not without problems. For many words in a language it may not be as easy to come up with neat components of meaning. If we try to think of the components or features we would use to differentiate the nouns advice, threat and warning, for example, we may not be very successful. Part of the problem seems to be that the approach involves a view of words in a language as some sort of "containers" that carry meaning components. This approach seems to be too restrictive and very limited in terms of practical use. There is more to the meaning of words than these basic types of features.

Semantic Roles:

- Instead of thinking of words as "containers" of meaning, we can look at the "roles" they fulfill within the situation described by a sentence. We can identify a small number of semantic roles (also called "thematic roles") for these noun phrases. These roles include:

  i. **Agent**: It is the role is taken by the noun phrase to represent "the entity that performs the action".

  ii. **Theme (Patient)**: The noun phrase that represents the entity simply being affected by the action, or being described (i.e. not performing an action).

  iii. **Instrument**: The noun phrase that represents the entity used by the agent to perform the action.

  iv. **Experiencer**: The noun phrase used to designate an entity as the person who has a feeling, perception or state.

  v. **Location**: It is the role that indicates where an entity is (on the table, in the room).

vi. **Source**: It is the role that indicates where the entity moves from (From New York).

vii. **Goal**: It is the role that indicates where the entity moves to (to New Orleans).

Lexical Relations:

- In this approach to analyze linguistic meaning, words are thought of as having "relationships" with each other. In fact, in everyday talk we explain the meanings of words in terms of their relationships to each other. These lexical relations include:

i. **Synonymy**: Lexical items can be regarded as synonymous if they can be used interchangeably without altering the meaning of the sentence. Perfect synonyms are very rare, because it is very unusual for two lexical items to have exactly the same meanings in all contexts. Lexical items are usually synonymous only in certain contexts.

ii. **Antonymy**: Different words that are in an incompatible binary relationship are called antonyms. Antonyms are usually divided into two main types, "gradable" (opposites along a scale) and "non-gradable" (direct opposites). **Gradable antonyms**, such as the pair big/ small, can be used in comparative constructions. Also, the negative of one member of a gradable pair does not necessarily imply the other. With **non-gradable** antonyms (also called "complementary pairs"), comparative constructions are not normally used. Also, the negative of one member of a non-gradable pair actually implies the other member. Although we can use the "negative test" to identify non-gradable antonyms in a language, we usually avoid describing one member of an antonymous pair as the negative of the other. These types of pairs are called **reversives**, in which the choice of one opposite rather than another depends on the angle from which you view the situation being described.

iii. **Hyponymy**: is a relationship between different lexical items in which these lexical items are arranged in a hierarchical structure. One can say that "horse is a hyponym of animal" or "cockroach is a hyponym of insect." In these two examples, animal and insect are called the **superordinate** (= higher-level) terms. We can also say that two or more words that share the same superordinate term are **co-hyponyms**. So, dog and horse are co-hyponyms and the superordinate term is animal.

iv. **Prototypes**: Humans tend to understand and memorize meaning in terms of prototypes. Prototypes represent idealized images of concepts or items in the world; thinking of lexical meaning in terms of prototypes is what

gives linguistics meaning its flexibility. Humans do not have fixed meanings in their minds; they mostly work from prototypes or typical examples and build themselves mental models which incorporate them in order to represent and talk about the world around them.

v. **Homophones**: When two or more different (written) forms have the same pronunciation, they are described as homophones. Common examples are bare/bear, meat/meet, flour/ flower, pail/pale, right/write, sew/so and to/too/two.

vi. **Homonyms**: when one form (written or spoken) has two or more unrelated meanings, as in these examples. For instance the word "bank" has two senses; these are the side of a river and the financial institution. Homonyms are words that have separate histories and meanings, but have accidentally come to have exactly the same form. Homonyms have different entries in the dictionary.

vii. **Polysemy**: It is a lexical relation between two words that have the same form and related meanings. Polysemy can be defined as one form (written or spoken) having multiple meanings that are all related by extension. The relatedness of meaning found in polysemy is essentially based on similarity. Examples are the word "head", used to refer to the object on top of your body, froth on top of a glass of beer, person at the top of a company or department, and many other things. Polysemous words have a single entry in the dictionary.

viii. **Metonymy**: Is a lexical relation between two words that have close connection in everyday experience. The connection of meaning found in metonymy is essentially based on contiguity. That close connection, i.e. contiguity, can be based on a container–contents relation (bottle/water, can/juice), a whole–part relation (car/wheels, house/roof) or a representative–symbol relationship (king/crown, the President/the White House). Many examples of metonymy are highly conventionalized and easy to interpret. However, other examples depend on an ability to infer what the speaker has in mind. Making sense of such expressions often depends on context, background knowledge and inference.

ix. **Collocation**: It is the relationship between the words that frequently occur with each other. In recent years, the study of collocations and their frequency of co-occurrence have received a lot more attention in corpus linguistics, which analyzes large collections of texts, spoken or written, typically stored as a database in a computer. Those doing corpus linguistics can then use the database to find out how often specific words or phrases occur and what types of collocations are most common. Investigating collocational relations can explain how human beings categorize their lexical knowledge, and can provide more evidence to the fact that our

understanding of what words and phrases mean is tied to the contexts in which they are typically used.