# Chapter 3
# Word Meaning

# Contents

▶ Introduction

▶ Words and Grammatical Categories

▶ Words and Lexical Items

▶ Problems with Pinning Down Word Meaning

▶ Lexical Relations: Homonymy, Polysemy, Opposites (antonymy), Hyponymy, Meronymy and Member–collection

▶ Derivational Relations: Causative verbs and Agentive nouns

▶ Lexical Typology: Color terms, Core vocabulary and Universal lexemes

- In this chapter we turn to the study of word meaning, or lexical semantics The traditional descriptive aims of lexical semantics have been:

- (a) to represent the meaning of each word in the language.

- (b) to show how the meanings of words in a language are interrelated.

- **Example**: "I saw my mother just now". You know, without any further information, that the speaker saw a woman. Or we can say the word mother contains a semantic element WOMAN as part of its meaning.

- Another example comes from looking at the different kinds of conclusions that speakers may draw from an utterance.

a. My bank manager has just been murdered.

b. My bank manager is dead.

c. My bank will be getting a new manager.

the relationship is such that if we believe the a sentence, then we are automatically committed to the b sentence.

- ▶ **Words and Grammatical Categories**

- ▶ It is clear that grammatical categories like nouns, prepositions, and so on, do reflect Word Meaning and semantic differences: different categories of words must be given different semantic descriptions.

 a. **names** e.g. Fred Flintstone

b. **common** nouns e.g. dog, banana, tarantula

c. **pronouns** e.g. I, you, we, them

d. **logical words** e.g. not, and, or, all, any

Looking at these types of words, we can say that they operate in different ways: some types may be used to refer (e.g. **names**), others may not (e.g. **logical words**); some can only be interpreted in particular contexts (e.g. **pronouns**), others are very consistent in meaning across a whole range of contexts (e.g. **logical words**); and so on

**Note:** This is only a selection of categories: we will have to account for

others like verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, and so on.

- **Words and Lexical Items**

- Words can be identified at the level of writing, where we are familiar with them being separated by white space, where we can call them orthographic words.

- below are three different grammatical words:

a. He walks like a duck.

b. He's walking like a duck.

c. He walked like a duck.

these are instances of the same lexeme, the verb walk.

defining the word as the symbolic, linguistic counterpart of a single concept is impossible.

attempting to find a universal definition is pointless because, in many languages, words do seem to have some psychological reality for speakers.

- a. He scored with his left **foot**.
- b. They made camp at the **foot** of the mountain.
- c. I ate a **foot-long** hot dog
- foot1: part of the leg below the ankle;
- foot2: base or bottom of something;
- foot3: unit of length, one third of a yard.

This is called lexical entry.

- **What do we mean by lexemes?**

 Is a unit of lexical meaning that underlies a set of words that are related through inflection or we can call it the **root** of the word.

Each inflected form of a lexeme is called a word-form. E.g. 'sing, sang, sung, singing, sings' are each a word-form and each one belongs to the lexeme **SING.**

- **Problems with Pinning Down Word Meaning**

- the meaning of a particular word, word meaning is slippery. Different native speakers might feel they know the meaning of a word, but then come up with somewhat different definitions.

- Firth (1957), Halliday (1966) and Lyons (1963). argue that it is easier to define a word if given the phrase or sentence in which it occurs. These contextual effects seem to pull word meanings in two opposite directions. The first, restricting influence is the tendency for words to occur together repeatedly, called **collocation**.

- Halliday (1966), for example, compares the collocation patterns of two adjectives **strong** and **powerful**, which might seem to have similar meanings. Though we can use both for some items, for instance, strong arguments and powerful arguments, elsewhere there are collocation effects. For example, we talk of strong tea rather than powerful tea; but a powerful car rather than a strong car. Similarly blond collocates with hair and addle with eggs.

- These collocations can undergo a fossilization process until they become fixed expressions. **Hot and cold** running water rather than cold and hot running water.

  **Husband and wife**, rather than wife and husband.

fixed expressions are common with food: **salt and vinegar, fish and chips, curry and rice**

Some writers have described this distinction in terms of ambiguity and vagueness.

- **Idioms**:  expressions where the individual words have ceased to have independent meanings. In expressions like kith and kin or spick and span, not many English speakers would be able to assign a meaning here to kith or span. Contextual effects can also pull word meanings in the other direction, toward creativity and semantic shift.

**kith and kin means friends and relatives.**

**Spick and span means neat and clean.**

**Break a leg means good luck.**

**Ambiguity and vagueness.**

The basic idea is that in examples of vagueness, the context can add information that is not specified in the sense, but in examples of ambiguity the context will cause one of the senses to be selected. The problem, of course, is to decide, for any given example, whether one is dealing with ambiguity or vagueness. Several tests have been proposed, but they are difficult to apply. The main reason for this is once again **context.** The difference between ambiguity and vagueness is that ambiguity is when what's written is clear but could have several meanings while vagueness is when it's unclear what the author or writer means.

- **One test** proposed by Zwicky and Sadock (1975) and Kempson (1977) relies on the use of abbreviatory forms like do so, do so too, and so do. These are short forms used to avoid repeating a verb phrase:

- example:3.17

a. Charlie hates mayonnaise and so does Mary.

b. He took a form and Sean did too

Such expressions are understandable because there is a convention of identity between them and the preceding verb phrase.

a. Duffy discovered a mole.

b. Duffy discovered a small burrowing mammal.

c. Duffy discovered a long-dormant spy.

This relies of course on the two meanings of mole and is therefore a case of **lexical ambiguity**

d. Duffy discovered a mole, and so did Clark.

 whichever sense is selected in the first clause has to be repeated in the second, that is, it is not possible for the first clause to have the mammal interpretation and the second the spy interpretation, or vice versa.

- A second type of test for ambiguity relies on one sense being in a network of relations with certain other lexemes and another sense being in a different network. So, for example, the run of 3.16a above might be in relation of near synonymy to another noun like jog, while run in 3.16c might be in a similar relation to nouns like pen, enclosure, and so on. Thus while the b sentences below are fine, the c versions are bizarre:

a. I go for a run every morning.

b. I go for a jog every morning.

c. ?I go for an enclosure every morning.


a. He built a new run for his chickens.

b. He built a new enclosure for his chickens.

c. ?He built a new jog for his chickens.

This sense relations test suggests that run is ambiguous between the 3.16a and 3.16c readings.

- A third test employs **zeugma**, which is a feeling of oddness or anomaly when two distinct senses of a word are activated at the same item, that is in the same sentence, and usually by conjunction, for example.

- Jane drew a picture and the curtains,

- which activates two distinct senses of draw. Zeugma is often used for comic effect, as in Joan lost her umbrella and her temper. If zeugma is produced, it is suggested, we can identify ambiguity, thus predicting the ambiguity of run as below:

- He planned a run for charity and one for his chickens.

- This test is somewhat hampered by the difficulty of creating the appropriate structures and because the effect is rather subjective and context-dependent. There are a number of other tests for ambiguity, many of which are difficult to apply and few of which are uncontroversially successful;

▶ **Lexical Relations**

There are a number of different types of lexical relations, as we shall see. A particular lexeme may be simultaneously in a number of these relations, so it may be more accurate to think of the lexicon as a network, rather than a listing of words as in a published dictionary. An important organizational principle in the lexicon is the **lexical field**. This is a group of lexemes that belong to a particular activity or area of specialist knowledge, such as the terms in cooking or sailing; or the vocabulary used by doctors, coal miners, or mountain climbers.

**blanket1** verb. to cover as with a blanket.

**blanket2** verb. Sailing. to block another vessel's wind by sailing close to it on the windward side.

### ▶ **Homonymy**

Homonyms are unrelated senses of the same phonological word. Some authors distinguish between homographs, senses of the same written word, and homophones, senses of the same spoken word. Here we will generally just use the term homonym. We can distinguish different types depending on their syntactic behavior, and spelling, for example:

1. lexemes of the same syntactic category, and with the same spelling: e.g. lap "circuit of a course" and lap "part of the body when sitting down";

2. of the same category, but with a different spelling: e.g. the verbs ring and wring;

3. of different categories, but with the same spelling: e.g. the verb bear and the Noun bear;

4. of different categories, and with a different spelling: e.g. not, knot

- **Polysemy**

There is a traditional distinction made in lexicology between homonymy and polysemy. Both deal with multiple senses of the same phonological word, but polysemy is invoked if the senses are judged to be related. This is an important distinction for lexicographers in the design of their dictionaries because polysemous senses are listed under the same lexical entry, while homonymous senses are given separate entries. Lexicographers tend to use criteria of "relatedness" to identify polysemy.

**Hook** 1. A piece of material, usually metal, curved or bent, and used to suspend, catch, hold, or pull something.

2. short for fish-hook.

3. a trap or snare.

4. Boxing. a short swinging blow delivered from the side with the elbow bent.

the main difference between homonyms and polysemes is that homonymy is an accidental similarity between words while polysemous words are connected in meaning through a shared word history (etymology).

# Thank you for listening

# Any questions?