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|  | **Faculty of Arts and Languages** |  |
| **Module: Linguistics** | **Dept. of Arts and Foreign Languages** | **Level: First Year LMD** |
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| **Lecture № 03(a): Semantics** |

**A. Definition of Semantics**

**Semantics** is a branch of linguistics dealing with the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. According Geoffrey Leech, semantics concerns itself with “giving a systematic account of the nature of meaning.”

**B. Meaning**

**1. Definition of Meaning**

In their book *The Meaning of Meaning*, L. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards give a list of definitions of meaning. Meaning can be any of the following:

1. An intrinsic property of something
2. Other words related to that word in a dictionary
3. The connotations of a word
4. The thing to which the speaker of that word refers
5. The think to which the speaker of that word should refer.
6. The thing to which the speaker of that word believes himself to be referring
7. The thing to which the hearer of that word believes is being referred to

**2. Types of Meaning**

**a) The Logical or Denotative Meaning**

This is the literal meaning of a word indicating the idea or concept to which it refers. Concept is a minimal unit of meaning which could be called a ‘sememe’ in the same way as the unit of sound is called a ‘phoneme’. Just as the phoneme /b/ may be defined as a bilabial + voiced + plosive, the word ‘man’ may be defined as a concept consisting of a structure of meaning ‘human + male + adult’. All the three qualities are logical attributes of which the concept ‘man’ is made. They are the minimal qualities that the concept must possess in order to be a distinguishable concept, e.g. if any of these changes, the concept too changes. Hence, ‘human + female + adult’ would not be the concept referred to by the word ‘man’, since it is a different concept.

**b) The Connotative Meaning**

The connotative meaning consists of the attributes associated with a concept. For example, the logical or denotative meaning of the word ‘woman’ is the concept, ‘human + female + adult’. To it may be added the concept of ‘weaker sex’ or ‘frailty’. Another good example is the disease called cancer. The denotation of "cancer" is the mere disease that can be described by growing tumors, malfunctioning organs, etc. The connotation of cancer is all the emotional additions, as "cruel", "frightening", "hard to heal", etc.

Connotative meaning consists of the attributes associated with a concept. As we know, these associations come into use over a period of time in a particular culture and can change with change in time. While denotative meaning remains stable since it defines the essential attributes of a concept, connotative meaning changes as it is based on associations made to the concept; these associations may change.

**b) The Social Meaning**

This is the meaning that a word or a phrase conveys about the circumstances of its use. That is, the meaning of a word is understood according to the different style and situation in which the word is used, e.g. though the words ‘domicile’, ‘residence’, ‘abode’, ‘home’ all refer to the same thing (i.e. their denotative meaning is the same), each word belongs to a particular situation of use—’domicile’ is used in an official context, ‘residence’ in a formal context, ‘abode’ is a poetic use and ‘home’ is an ordinary use. Where one is used, the other is not seen as appropriate. Social meaning derives from the awareness of the style in which something is written and spoken and of the relationship between speaker and hearer—whether that relationship is formal, official, casual, polite, or friendly.

**d) The Social Meaning**

This is the meaning which is communicated by the way in which a speaker or writer organises the message in terms of ordering, focus and emphasis. It is often felt, for example, that an active sentence has a different meaning from its passive equivalent although its conceptual meaning seems to be the same. In the sentences:

***Mrs. Smith donated the first prize***

***The first prize was donated by Mrs. Smith***

The thematic meaning of both the sentences is different. In the first sentence it appears that we know who Mrs. Smith is, so the new information on which the emphasis is laid is ‘the first prize’. In the second sentence, however, the emphasis is laid on ‘Mrs. Smith’.

**C. Semantic Relations**

**1. Synonymy**

This refers to similarity or ‘sameness of meaning’. This is a handy concept for the dictionary makers, who need words for one word which have greater degree of similarity. We should keep in mind that the idea of “sameness” of meaning used in discussing synonymy is not necessarily “total sameness.” Except for highly technical and scientific items, words used in everyday language have strongly emotional or associative significance. For example, Liberty-freedom, Jude-conceal, attempt-effort, cut-slash, round-circular, have different evocative or emotive values; in a particular context where freedom is used liberty definitely cannot be used: it is always freedom struggle and not liberty struggle; or freedom movement not liberty movement. Clear in this instance freedom acts as modifier while liberty does not.

**2. Antonymy**

Apart from equality in meaning, as with synonyms, there is also the opposite. Opposition in meaning is known as antonymy. *Large*-*small*, *wide*-*narrow*, *white*-*black*, *fat-slim* are some examples for antonyms. All classes of words can have 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 like *I’m bigger than you* and *A pony is smaller than a horse*. Also, the negative of one member of a gradable pair does not necessarily imply the other. For example, the sentence *My car isn’t old*, doesn’t necessarily mean *My car is new*.

**3.** **Hyponymy**

When the meaning of one form is included in the meaning of another, the relationship is described as hyponymy. Examples are the pairs: *animal*/*dog*, *dog*/*poodle*, *vegetable*/*carrot*, *ﬂower*/*rose*, *tree*/*banyan*. The concept of “inclusion” involved in this relationship is the idea that if an object is a *rose*, then it is necessarily a *ﬂower*, so the meaning of *ﬂower* is included in the meaning of *rose*. Or, *rose* is a hyponym of *ﬂower*.

**4. Polysemy**

When a word is identified as possessing two or more meanings, it is; said to be polysemous. These different meanings are derived from one basic idea or concept. Dictionaries enter different meanings of a word. Head, for example, has the following different meanings : the upper or anterior division of the body, scat of intellect, mind, poise, the obverse of a coin, person, individual, the source of a stream, leader, director, crisis, culminating point of action, etc (Webster’s Dictionary). All these meanings derive from the same word. Other examples of polysemy are *foot* (of person, of bed, of mountain) or *run* (person does, water does, colours do).

**5. Homonymy**

Homophonous words may be spelled and written identically or in different ways. For the words that are spelled alike, the name ***homography*** is used. For the words that sound alike but may be spelled differently, the term homophony is used. Examples of the former are tear /tɪə/-tear /teə/; bow /bəw/-bow /bɑw/; lead /lɪ:d/-lead /led/; desert /dizə:t/-desert /dezət/. As for ***homophones***, one can mention the following instances: right-rite-write-wright; site-sight-cite; see-sea; die-dye; by-buy.

**6. Metonymy**

The relatedness of meaning found in polysemy is essentially based on similarity. The *head* of a company is similar to the *head* of a person on top of and controlling the body. There is another type of relationship between words, based simply on a close connection in everyday experience. That close connection 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*). Using one of these words to refer to the other is an example of ***metonymy***. It is our familiarity with metonymy that makes it possible for us to understand the sentences below:

a) He drank the whole bottle.

b) The White House announced that The USA will not negotiate with terrorists.

c) We have to find a roof to shelter us as soon as possible.

**7. Collocation**

An important concept in semantics is that of collocation, which recognises the association of a lexical item with other lexical items. If you ask a thousand people what they think of when you say *hammer*, more than half will say *nail*. If you say *table*, they’ll mostly say *chair*, and *butter* elicits *bread,* *needle* elicits *thread* and *salt* elicits *pepper*. One way we seem to organize our knowledge of words is simply on the basis of ***collocation***, or frequently occurring together.

**D. Semantic Features**

We can make this observation more generally applicable by trying to determine the crucial element or feature of meaning that any noun must have in order to be used as the subject of the verb *ate*. Such an element may be as general as “animate being.” We can then use this idea to describe part of the meaning of words as having either plus (+) or minus (–) that particular feature. So, the feature that the noun *boy* has is “+animate” (= denotes an animate being) and the feature that the noun *hamburger* has is “–animate” (= does not denote an animate being).

This simple example is an illustration of a procedure for analyzing meaning in terms of ***semantic features***. 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. If we had to provide the crucial distinguishing features of the meanings of a set of English words such as *table, horse, boy, man, girl, woman*, we could begin with the chart in the table below:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **table** | **horse** | **boy** | **man** | **girl** | **woman** |
| **animate** | - | + | + | + | + | + |
| **human** | - | - | + | + | + | + |
| **female** | - | + | - | - | + | + |
| **adult** | - | + | - | + | - | + |