

Lecture 3

Semantic Structure of the Word and Its Changes

Plan:

1. Semantics / semasiology. Different approaches to word-meaning.
2. Types of word-meaning.
3. Polysemy. Semantic structure of words. Meaning and context.
4. Change of word-meaning: the causes, nature and results.

List of Terms:

- semantics
- referent
- referential meaning
- grammatical meaning
- lexical meaning
- denotational meaning
- connotational meaning
- polysemantic word
- polysemy
- lexical-semantic variants
- basic meaning
- peripheral meaning
- primary meaning
- secondary meaning
- radiation
- concatenation
- lexical context
- grammatical context
- thematic context
- ellipsis
- differentiation of synonyms
- linguistic analogy
- metaphor
- metonymy
- restriction of meaning
- extension of meaning
- ameliorative development of meaning
- pejorative development of meaning

It is meaning that makes
language useful.

George A. Miller,

The science of word, 1991

**1. Semantics / semasiology.
Different approaches to
word-meaning**

The function of the word as a unit of communication is possible by its possessing a meaning.



Among the word's various characteristics meaning is the most important.

- *"The Meaning of Meaning"* (1923) by C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards
– about 20 definitions of meaning

Meaning of a linguistic unit, or linguistic meaning, is studied by *semantics*

(from Greek – *semantikos* 'significant')

This linguistic study was
pointed out in 1897 by
M. Breal

Semasiology is a synonym
for 'semantics'

(from Gk. *semasia* 'meaning' +
logos 'learning')

Different Approaches to Word Meaning:

- ideational (or conceptual)
- referential
- functional

The ideational theory can be considered the earliest theory of meaning.

It states that meaning originates in the mind in the form of ideas, and words are just symbols of them.

A difficulty:

- not clear why communication and understanding are possible if linguistic expressions stand for individual personal ideas.

Meaning:

- a concept with specific structure.

- Do people speaking different languages have different conceptual systems?
- If people speaking different languages have the same conceptual systems why are identical concepts expressed by correlative words having different lexical meanings?

- *finger* 'one of 10 movable parts of joints at the end of each human hand, or one of 8 such parts as opposed to the thumbs'

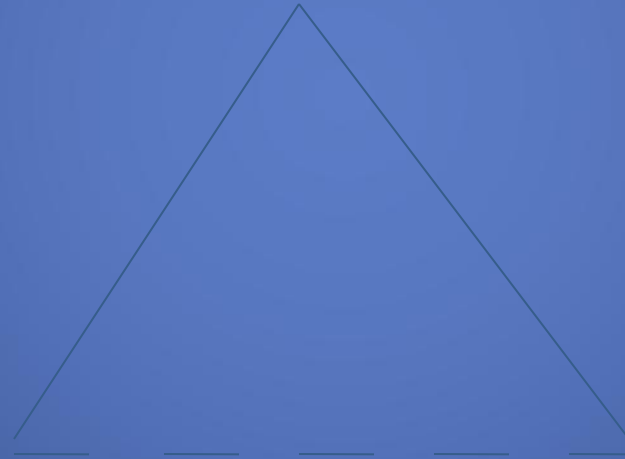
and

- *палец* 'подвижная конечная часть кисти руки, стопы ноги или лапы животного'

Referential theory is based on interdependence of things, their concepts and names.

The complex relationships between referent (object denoted by the word), concept and word are traditionally represented by the following **triangle**:

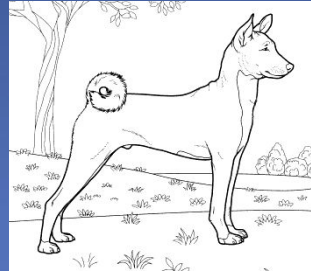
Thought = concept



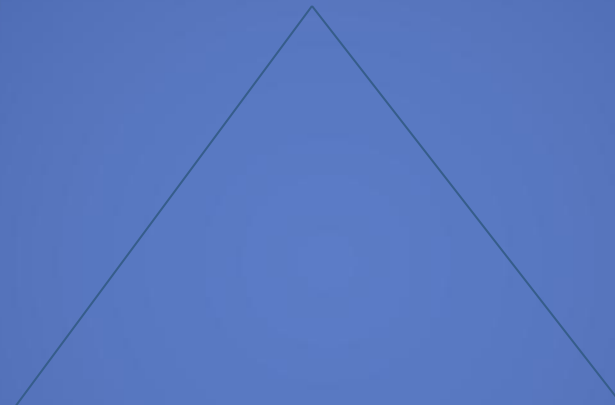
Symbol = word

Referent = object

an animal, with 4
legs and a tail, can
bark and bite



dog



Meaning \neq concept

- different words having different meanings may be used to express the same concept

Concept of dying

- *die*
- *pass away*
- *kick the bucket*
- *join the majority, etc*

Meaning \neq symbol

In different languages:

- a word with the same meaning have different sound forms (*dog, собака*)
- words with the same sound forms have different meaning (*лук, look*)

Meaning \neq referent

- to denote one and the same object we can give it different names

A horse

in various contexts:

- *horse,*
- *animal,*
- *creature,*
- *it, etc.*

Word meaning:

the interrelation of all three components of the semantic triangle: *symbol*, *concept* and *referent*, though meaning is not equivalent to any of them.

Functionalists study word meaning by analysis of the way the word is used in certain contexts.

The meaning of a word
is its *use in language*.

cloud and cloudy


- have different meanings because in speech they function differently and occupy different positions in relation to other words.

Meaning:

a component of the word
through which a concept is
communicated

2. Types of word-meaning

According to the conception of word meaning as a specific structure:

- **functional meaning:** part of speech meaning (nouns usually denote "thingness", adjectives – qualities and states)
- **grammatical:** found in identical sets of individual forms of different words (*she goes/works/reads*, etc.)
- **lexical:** the component of meaning proper to the word as a linguistic unit  highly individual and recurs in all the forms of a word (the meaning of the verb *to work* 'to engage in physical or mental activity' that is expressed in all its forms: ***works, work, worked, working, will work***)

Lexical Meaning:

- denotational
- connotational

- **Denotational** lexical meaning provides correct reference of a word to an individual object or a concept.
- It makes communication possible and is explicitly revealed in the dictionary definition (*chair 'a seat for one person typically having four legs and a back'*).

• *to glare – to look*

Connotational lexical meaning is an emotional colouring of the word. Unlike denotational meaning, connotations are optional.

Connotations:

1. **Emotive charge** may be inherent in word meaning (like in *attractive*, *repulsive*) or may be created by prefixes and suffixes (like in *piggy*, *useful*, *useless*).

It's always objective because it doesn't depend on a person's perception.

2. Stylistic reference refers the word to a certain style:

- **neutral words**
- **colloquial**
- **bookish, or literary words**

Eg. father – dad – parent .

3. Evaluative connotations express approval or disapproval (*charming, disgusting*).

4. Intensifying connotations are expressive and emphatic (*magnificent, gorgeous*)

Denotative component



- Lonely = alone, without company

- To glare = to look

Connotative component



- + melancholy, sad
(emotive con.)

- + 1) steadily, lastingly
(con. of duration)

- + 2) in anger, rage
(emotive con.)

3. Polysemy. Semantic structure of words. Meaning and context

- A **polysemantic word** is a word having more than one meaning.
- **Polysemy** is the ability of words to have more than one meaning.

Most English words are
polysemantic.

A well-developed
polysemy is a great
advantage in a language.

Monosemantic Words:

- terms (*synonym, bronchitis, molecule*),
- pronouns (*this, my, both*),
- numerals, etc.

The main causes of polysemy:

a large number of:

1) monosyllabic words;

2) words of long duration (that existed for centuries).

The sources of polysemy:

- 1) the process of meaning change
(meaning specialization: is used in more concrete spheres);
- 2) figurative language (metaphor and metonymy);
- 3) homonymy;
- 4) borrowing of meanings from other languages.

blanket

- a woolen covering used on beds,
- a covering for keeping a house warm,
- a covering of any kind (*a blanket of snow*),
- covering in most cases (used attributively), e.g. we can say: *a blanket insurance policy*.

Meanings of a
polysemantic word
are organized in a
semantic structure

Lexical-semantic variant

one of the meanings of a
polysemantic word used in
speech

A Word's Semantic Structure Is Studied:

Diachronically (in the process of its historical development): the historical development and change of meaning becomes central. Focus: the process of acquiring new meanings.

Synchronically (at a certain period of time): a co-existence of different meanings in the semantic structure of the word at a certain period of language development. Focus: value of each individual meaning and frequency of its occurrence.

- The meaning first registered in the language is called **primary**.
- Other meanings are secondary, or **derived**, and are placed after the primary one.

table

1. *a piece of furniture* (primary meaning)
2. *the persons seated at the table*
3. *the food put on the table, meals*
4. *a thin flat piece of stone, metal, wood*
5. *slabs of stone*
6. *words cut into them or written on them*
7. *an orderly arrangement of facts*
8. *part of a machine-tool on which the work is put to be operated on*
9. *a level area, a plateau*

- The meaning that first occurs to our mind, or is understood without a special context is called the **basic** or **main** meaning.
- Other meanings are called **peripheral** or **minor**.

Fire



1. *flame* (main meaning)



2. an instance of destructive burning

e.g. a forest fire

3. burning material in a stone, fireplace

e.g. a camp fire

4. the shooting of guns

e.g. to open fire

5. strong feeling, passion

e.g. speech lacking fire

Processes of the Semantic Development of a Word:

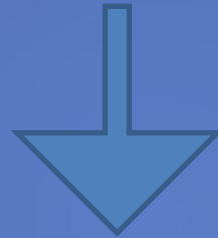
- **radiation** (the primary meaning stands in the center and the secondary meanings proceed out of it like rays. Each secondary meaning can be traced to the primary meaning)
- **concatenation** (secondary meanings of a word develop like a chain. It is difficult to trace some meanings to the primary one)

crust

- *hard outer part of bread*
- *hard part of anything (a pie, a cake)*
- *harder layer over soft snow*
- *a sullen gloomy person*
- *Impudence*



Polysemy exists not in speech but in the language.



It's easy to identify the main meaning of a separate word. Other meanings are revealed in context.

Context:

- **linguistic**

1. **lexical** – a number of lexical units around the word which enter into interaction with it (i.e. words combined with a polysemantic word are important).

2. **grammatical** – a number of lexical units around the word viewed on the level of parts of speech.

3. **thematic** – a very broad context, sometimes a text or even a book.

- **extralinguistic** – different cultural, social, historical factors

4. Change of word-meaning: the causes, nature and results

The meaning of a word
can change in a course of
time.

Causes of Change of Word-meaning:

1. Extralinguistic (various changes in the life of a speech community, in economic and social structure, in ideas, scientific concepts)

- *e.g. “car” meant ‘a four-wheeled wagon’; now – ‘a motor-car’, ‘a railway carriage’ (in the USA)*
- *“paper” is not connected anymore with “papyrus” – the plant from which it formerly was made.*

2. Linguistic (factors acting within the language system)

Linguistic Causes:

1. ellipsis – in a phrase made up of two words one of these is omitted and its meaning is transferred to its partner.

*e.g. “to starve” in O.E. = ‘to die’ + the word “hunger”.
In the 16th c. “to starve” = ‘to die of hunger’.*

e.g. daily = daily newspaper

Linguistic Causes:

2. differentiation (discrimination) of synonyms – when a new word is borrowed it may become a perfect synonym for the existing one. They have to be differentiated; otherwise one of them will die.

e.g. “land” in O.E. = both ‘solid part of earth’s surface’ and ‘the territory of the nation’. In the middle E. period the word “country” was borrowed as its synonym; ‘the territory of a nation’ came to be denoted mainly by “country”.

Linguistic Causes:

3. linguistic analogy – if one of the members of the synonymic set acquires a new meaning, other members of this set change their meaning too.

e.g. “to catch” acquired the meaning ‘to understand’; its synonyms “to grasp” and “to get” acquired this meaning too.

The nature of semantic changes is based on the secondary application of the word form to name *a different yet related* concept.

Conditions to any semantic change: some connection between the old meaning and the new.

Association between Old Meaning and New:

- similarity of meanings or **metaphor** – a semantic process of associating two referents one of which in some way resembles the other
- contiguity (closeness) of meanings or **metonymy** – a semantic process of associating two referents one of which makes part of the other or is closely connected with it

Types of Metaphor:

- a) similarity of shape, *e.g. head (of a cabbage), bottleneck, teeth (of a saw, a comb);*
- b) similarity of position, *e.g. foot (of a page, of a mountain), head (of a procession);*
- c) similarity of function, behavior, *e.g. a bookworm (a person who is fond of books);*
- d) similarity of color, *e.g. orange, hazel, chestnut.*

Types of Metonymy:

- 'material — object of it' (She is wearing a *fox*);
- 'container — containee' (I ate three *plates*);
- 'place — people' (The *city* is asleep);
- 'object — a unit of measure' (This horse came one *neck* ahead);
- 'producer — product' (We bought a *Picasso*);
- 'whole — part' (We have 10 *heads* here);
- 'count — mass' (We ate *rabbit*)

Results of Semantic Change:

- changes in the denotational component
- changes in the connotational meaning

Changes in the Denotational Component:

- **restriction** – a word denotes a restricted number of referents.

e.g. “fowl” in O.E. = ‘any bird’, but now ‘a domestic hen or chicken’

- **extension** – the application of the word to a wider variety of referents

e.g. “a cook” was not applied to women until the 16th century.

- **generalization** – the word with the extended meaning passes from the specialized vocabulary into common use and the meaning becomes more general.

e.g. “camp” = ‘the place where troops are lodged in tents’; now – ‘temporary quarters’.

- **specialization** – the word with the new meaning comes to be used in the specialized vocabulary of some limited group.

e.g. “to glide” = ‘to move gently and smoothly’ and now has acquired a special meaning – ‘to fly with no engine’.

Changes in the Connotational Meaning:

- **pejorative development (degradation)** – the acquisition by the word of some derogatory emotive charge.
e.g. “accident” ‘a happening causing loss or injury’ came from more neutral ‘something that happened’;
- **ameliorative development (elevation)** – the improvement of the connotational component of meaning.
e.g. “a minister” denoted a servant, now – ‘a civil servant of higher rank, a person administering a department of state’

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