

# 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

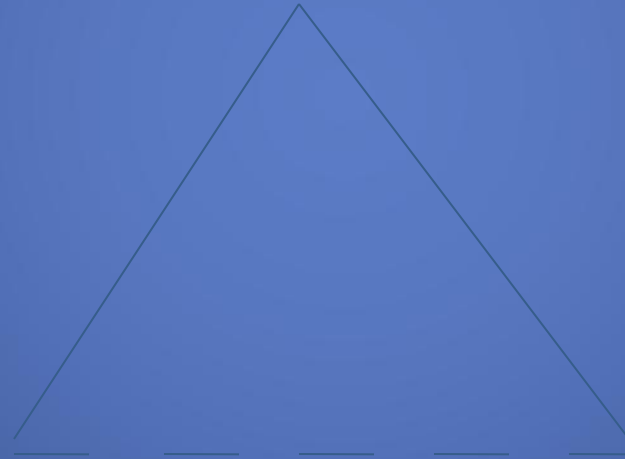
- *палец* 'подвижная конечная часть кисти руки, стопы ноги или лапы животного'



**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**:

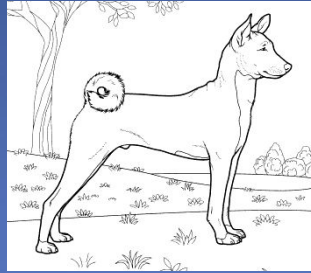
Thought = concept



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:

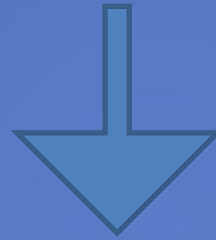
- **radiation** (the primary meaning stands in the center and the secondary meanings proceed out of it like rays. Each secondary meaning can be traced to the primary meaning)
- **concatenation** (secondary meanings of a word develop like a chain. It is difficult to trace some meanings to the primary 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 16<sup>th</sup> 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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