

Semantics

Semantics is the study of the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. In semantic analysis, there is always an attempt to focus on what the words conventionally mean, rather than on what an individual speaker might want them to mean on a particular occasion. We can go further and make a broad distinction between conceptual meaning and associative meaning. Conceptual meaning covers those basic, essential components of meaning that are conveyed by the literal use of a word. It is the type of meaning that dictionaries are designed to describe. Some of the basic components of a word like needle in English might include “thin, sharp, steel instrument.” These components would be part of the conceptual meaning of needle. However, different people might have different associations or connotations attached to a word like needle. They might associate it with “pain,” or “illness,” or “blood,” or “drugs,” or “thread,” or “knitting,” or “hard to find” (especially in a haystack), and these associations may differ from one person to the next. These types of associations are not treated as part of the word’s conceptual meaning.

Semantic features

- The hamburger ate the boy.
- The table listens to the radio.

- The horse is reading the newspaper.

We should first note that the oddness of these sentences does not derive from their syntactic structure. According to the basic syntactic rules for forming English sentences we have well-formed structures.

NP V NP

(The hamburger ate the boy)

This sentence is syntactically good, but semantically odd. Since the sentence The boy ate the hamburger is perfectly acceptable, we may be able to identify the source of the problem. The kind of noun that can be the subject of the verb ate must denote an entity that is capable of “eating.” The noun hamburger does not have this property and the noun boy does.

We can then use this idea to describe part of the meaning of words as either having (+) or not having (–) 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 following diagram.

	table	horse	boy	man	girl	woman
animate	–	+	+	+	+	+
human	–	–	+	+	+	+
female	–	–	–	–	+	+
adult	–	+	–	+	–	+

Lexical relations

Not only can words be treated as “containers” of meaning, or as fulfilling “roles” in events, they can also have “relationships” with each other.

1. Synonymy

Two or more words with very closely related meanings are called synonyms. They can often, though not always, be substituted for each other in sentences. In the appropriate circumstances, we can say, What was his answer? or What was his reply? with much the same meaning. Other common examples of synonyms are the pairs: almost/nearly, big/large, broad/wide, buy/purchase, cab/taxi, car/automobile, couch/sofa, freedom/liberty. We should keep in mind that the idea of “sameness” of meaning used in discussing synonymy is not necessarily “total sameness.”

2. Antonymy

Two forms with opposite meanings are called antonyms. Some common examples are the pairs: alive/dead, big/small, fast/slow, happy/sad, hot/cold, long/short, male/female, married/single, old/new, rich/poor, true/false. Antonyms are

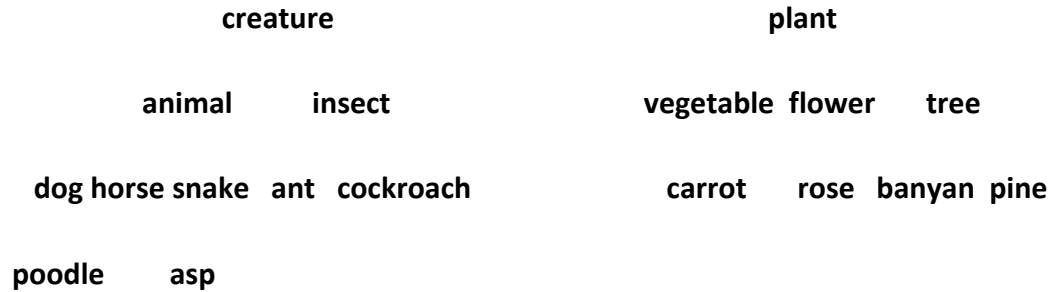
usually divided into two main types, “gradable” (opposites along a scale) and “non-gradable” (direct opposites). Gradable antonyms, such as the pair big/small, can be used in comparative constructions like (I’m bigger than you) and (A pony is smaller than a horse). Also, the negative of one member of 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. With non-gradable antonyms (also called “complementary pairs”), comparative constructions are not normally used. We don’t typically describe someone as deader or more dead than another. Also, the negative of one member of a non-gradable pair does imply the other member. That is, My grandparents aren’t alive does indeed mean My grandparents are dead. Other non-gradable antonyms in the earlier list are the pairs: male/female, married/single and true/false.

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.

When we consider hyponymous connections, we are essentially looking at the meaning of words in some type of hierarchical relationship. We can represent the relationships between a set of words such as animal, ant, asp, banyan, carrot,

living thing



The elements of this tree are in a hierarchical relation.

Looking at the diagram, we 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. The relation of hyponymy captures the concept of “is a kind of,” as when we give the meaning of a word by saying, “an asp is a kind of snake.”

4. Homophones and homonyms

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. We use the term homonyms when one form (written or spoken) has two or more unrelated meanings, as in these examples:

- bank (of a river) – bank (financial institution)
- bat (flying creature) – bat (used in sports)
- mole (on skin) – mole (small animal)
- pupil (at school) – pupil (in the eye)

- race (contest of speed) – race (ethnic group)

5. Polysemy

When we encounter two or more words with the same form and related meanings, we have what is technically known as polysemy. Polysemy can be defined as one form (written or spoken) having multiple meanings that are all related by extension. 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. Other examples of polysemy are foot (of person, of bed, of mountain) or run (person does, water does, colors do). Of course, it is possible for two forms to be distinguished via homonymy and for one of the forms also to have various uses via polysemy. The words date (= a thing we can eat) and date (= a point in time) are homonyms. However, the “point in time” kind of date is polysemous in terms of a particular day and month (= on a letter), an arranged meeting time (= an appointment), a social meeting (= with someone we like), and even a person (= that person we like). So the question How was your date? could have several different interpretations.

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 (He drank the whole bottle), although it sounds absurd literally (i.e. he drank the liquid, not the glass object). We also accept The White House has announced...or Downing Street protested ... without being puzzled that buildings appear to be talking. We use metonymy when we talk about filling up the car, answering the door, boiling a kettle, giving someone a hand, or needing some wheels.

7. Collocation

We know which words tend to occur with other words. 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.