Meaning, Reference and Structuralism

Lexical relations - recap
• Lexicographers face the problem of differentiating between different senses of words when compiling dictionaries
• The problem of ambiguity of meaning is known as homonymy and polysemy

Polysemy vs. Homonymy

- **Polysemy**
  - two or more words with the same form and related meanings
  - One single lexeme with several distinguishable meanings
- **Homonymy**
  - is the relation between two or more expressions which have the same form but different meanings

Polysemy

- Lexicography: polysemic word entered as one entry in a dictionary (with its several meanings)
  - but unrelated homonyms are entered separately
  - Bachelor – 1) unmarried man; 2) person who holds a first university degree;
  - the two words are related historically – both come from a Medieval Latin word Baccalaureatus

Polysemy - examples

- Foot:
  - of a person
  - of a bed
  - of a mountain
- Run:
  - person does
  - water does
  - colours do

Head:
- object on top of your body
- top of a glass of beer
- person at the top of a company/department

Homonymy

- traditionally defined as different words with same form
  - separate words with same pronunciation, lexemes have entirely distinct meanings
  - the term “homonym” is applied when one form has two or more unrelated meanings
Homonymy

**Homophony**
(same pronunciation but different meaning)
E.g. knot & not; ad & add; allowed & aloud; be & bee; berry & bury

**Homography**
(same spelling but different meaning)
E.g. bank converse invalid present tear

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**Homonymy**

- may appear due to change in pronunciation E.g.: see and sea were pronounced differently before the Great Vowel Shift
- Other reasons for homonyms:
  - Ellipsis: He hates boring students → impossible to avoid ambiguity unless sentence is extended
  - Euphemisms: bull → for an animal and euphemistic shortening for bullshit
  - can also arise across different dialects
  - often grammatically distinct: bull as an animal is a countable noun: one bull – three bulls, but as euphemism it is uncountable: a load of bullshit

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Homonymy - examples

- **Bank**:
  - the edge of river
  - the financial institution
- **Ball**:
  - the party dance
  - the round object

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Meronymy

**Meronymy**

- part – whole relationship

  - The noun bank in the bank of a river is a meronym of river;
  - co-meronyms: mouth, source, bed.

  - The word bank in the bank manager does not have the same co-meronyms → different words

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Meronymy - examples

- Hand – finger
- Teapot – spout
- Car – engine
- Telescope – lens
- Tree – branch
  - Hand – finger: finger is a meronym (or partonym), hand is the holonym

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Conversives

- Another type of opposites
- Converseness may be regarded as two-place predicates:
  - the sentence John is the husband of Mary expresses the proposition the lexical converse of which is Mary is the wife of John
- Converse relations are especially common in areas of the vocabulary having to do with reciprocal social roles, temporal and spatial relations
Conversives - examples

- Husband – wife
- Doctor – patient
- Master – mistress
- Before - after
- Above – below, etc.

Reversives

- Another term: directional opposites
- E.g.:
  - Up - down
  - Come - go
  - Arrive – depart

- Common feature: implication of motion in one of the two opposite directions with respect to a given place

Taxonomic sisters

- Taxonomies = classification systems
- Taxonomic sisters: words which are at the same level in a taxonomy (sometimes described as antonymy)
- E.g.:
  - Colour adjectives
  - Days of the week
- Sister members of the same taxonomy are incompatible (if the car is red it cannot be blue)

Practical application of sense relations

- Conventional dictionaries: lists of lexical entries, each entry starts with a head-word. Head-words are organized alphabetically. Entries contain three types of information: morphological, syntactic and semantic.
- Several difficulties: e.g. homonymy vs. polysemy.
- Other difficulties:
  - Derivatives e.g. ride, rides, riding but rode & ridden (not *rided)
  - Compound lexems e.g. the Hong Kong plane – going to HK or coming from HK; cf. Hong Kong taxis – taxis which operate in Hong Kong

Practical application of sense relations

- A separate entry in the lexicon is required when a lexical item is phonologically, morphologically, semantically and syntactically idiosyncratic

- Thesaurus: a list of related lexical items (synonyms, antonyms) to help with writing English: to avoid repetitions, to find different expressive ways of writing, etc.
Sense and reference

- Referent (names and noun phrases)
- Denotation vs. Connotation
- Some Linguists (e.g. Lyons) distinguish between 'refer' and 'denote'
- Denotation is used to express the relationship between the words/expression and the entity in the real world
- Reference is used for the action of a speaker (I pick out a word to speak about a certain entity in the real world)

The difference:

- Denotation is the relation within the language, and it is stable
- Reference is the relationship that I, as a speaker, establish between the expression and the world

Types of reference

- Referring and non-referring expressions
- Constant and variable reference
- Referent and extension

Reference as a theory of meaning

- Referential approach (denotational)
  - words, phrases & sentences have meaning by picking out objects in the real world
- Representational approach
  - The word denotes something because it is associated with something in the speaker’s/ hearer’s mind
  - the problems of referents not-existing in the real word is solved

Structuralism

- Ferdinand de Saussure, ‘founding father’ of structuralism
- Every language has unique pattern and consists of units
- Those units can be identified only in terms of their relationship with other units in the same language
  - words do not exist in isolation

Structuralist semantics

- Lack of interest in diachronic semantics and generally in historical linguistics
  - Strict distinction between diachrony and synchrony
  - Focus on synchronic stability rather than on flexibility and change
Structuralist semantics

- Autonomous approach
  - Language as an independent sign system
- Psychological structure is disregarded
- Introduction of “ordinary structural criteria into semantics” (Ullmann, 1964: 237)
- Other structuralists: Trier, Lipka, Weisgerber

Structuralist perspectives on meaning

- Lexical meaning must be seen in relation to expressions in the same language
- Relationship between linguistic form and extra linguistic reality denied
- Analogy from phonology: semantic components are parallel to phonetic components

Structuralist perspectives on meaning

- Meaning is defined as result from necessary and sufficient features
- Individual word meaning is determined only relative to some contrast set
  - Componential analysis
  - Semantic/lexical fields
  - student's presentation

Limits of semantic field theory

- Fuzzy boundaries
- Words cannot always be separated from each other
- No overlaps but adjacent fields
- No lexical gaps

Lexical gaps

- Language is not systematically classified
- Evidence in lexical structure of a concept that might/should be lexicalised
- e.g.: parts of the human finger
  - Three joints
  - Common language term for only one: knuckle
  - Lexical gaps for other two potential meronyms (periphrastic expressions instead)

Lexical gaps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Conducted heat (oven)</th>
<th>Radiated heat (fire)</th>
<th>Contact heat (pan)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>with water, without oil</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vapourized</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not vapourized</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with oil, without water</td>
<td>(oven-fry)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>fry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>without oil, without water</td>
<td>bake</td>
<td>broil</td>
<td>roast</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

English cooking terms (after Lehrer 1974):
Limits of componential analysis

- Analysis only suitable for certain areas of the lexicon (abstract concepts = unsuitable)
- Reaches a point where description is repetition of actual object language
- Cannot deal with metaphors
- Limiting process of atomisation appropriately