SEMANTICS

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Semantics

- Semantics is the study of meaning in language, including
  1. The meaning of individual words (lexical semantics)
  2. The meaning of larger units like sentences

- Semantics has long attracted the interest of philosophers and logicians, going back (at least) to Plato and Aristotle

- Today, semantics is studied by linguists, psychologists, philosophers, and others, under many different theories, e.g.
  - Cognitive linguistics: meaning rooted in the mind & body
  - Formal (logical) semantics: meaning as truth conditions
  - Semiotics: meaning as an abstract system of signs

- In this lecture we will explore just a handful of fundamental issues in the analysis of linguistic meaning
Two views on word meaning

1. **Meaning as reference**: words ⇒ things
   - In this view, words ‘name’ or ‘refer to’ things in the world
   - This seems true of proper nouns like *London* and *Bill Clinton*, and perhaps even nouns like *chair*
   - However, what ‘things’ do verbs and adjectives refer to? Or even nouns like *consistency* and *tradition*?

2. **Conceptualism**: words ⇒ **concepts** ⇒ things
   - In this view, the connection between words and things in the world is mediated by our minds
   - Words like *near*, *alive*, and *rabbit* refer to mental concepts of ‘nearness,’ ‘aliveness,’ and ‘rabbithood’
   - Some concepts may even be innate to the human mind
   - This view seems more reasonable, but still leaves us with the difficulty of identifying ‘concepts’
Meaning as reference leads to a paradox

- The ancient Greeks identified the stars Hesperus (the first star to appear in the evening) and Phosphorus (the last star to disappear in the morning)

- Later, Pythagoras discovered that Hesperus and Phosphorus are really the same star (in fact, they are the planet Venus):
  
  (1) *Hesperus is Phosphorus*

- But since both Hesperus and Phosphorus refer to the same thing, this is equivalent to saying
  
  (2) *Hesperus is Hesperus*

- Why then is (1) informative, while (2) is not?
Two kinds of meaning: *sense* and *reference*

- A solution to this identity paradox was proposed by German logician Gottlob Frege (1848-1925).

- Frege distinguished a word’s *reference*—what it refers to in the world—from its *sense*, or cognitive content.

  *Reference* relates words to entities in the world.
  *Sense* relates words to each other within the language.

- The *sense* of Hesperus is ‘the evening star’ and the *sense* of Phosphorus is ‘the morning star’, even though they happen to share the same reference (Venus).

- Sense is what you grasp when you understand a word.

  Sense of *chair* is ‘seat with four legs and a back’.
  Sense of *aunt* is ‘parent's sister’.
Senses of kinship terms

- Kinship terms like *aunt* and *cousin* have language-specific senses that do not correspond to categories in nature.

- For example, Pitjanjatjara carves up kinship differently than English: *ngunytju* ‘mother’s sister,’ *kamuru* ‘mother’s brother,’ *kurntili* ‘father’s sister,’ *mama* ‘father’s brother’
How do words acquire meaning?

According to Humpty Dumpty, the meaning of a word is purely *idiosyncratic* (up to the individual)

If Humpty were right, communication would be impossible!
Naturalism vs. conventionalism

- The earliest recorded linguistic discussion is Plato’s *Cratylus*, c. 400 BC, which recounts a debate between Cratylus and Hermogenes about how words acquire meaning.

- Hermogenes advocates the *conventionalist* position that language originated as a product of convention, so that the relationship of words and concepts is arbitrary.

  ‘Nothing has its name by nature; only by usage and custom’

- Cratylus advocates the *naturalist* position that there is a natural, intrinsic relationship between words and concepts.

  ‘There is a correctness of name existing by nature for everything: a name is not simply that which a number of people jointly agree to call a thing’
Word meaning is arbitrary and conventional

- Today it seems obvious that Cratylus was wrong and Hermogenes was right—the relation between words and concepts is **arbitrary** (not natural) and **conventional** (based on usage and custom)

- There is nothing about the word *dog* (or *perro*, *chien*, *inu*, *cão*, or *Hund*) that bears any natural relationship to ‘dogness’

- There are two exceptions to this arbitrariness:
  1. Onomatopoeia like *meow* and *splash*
  2. Interjections like *ouch!*

  But notice that these also vary greatly across languages
Deixis

• Words which can be interpreted only with reference to the speaker’s position in space or time are called *deictic* forms

• There are three types of deixis
  1. Personal deixis: *I, you, he*, etc.
  2. Spatial deixis: *this/that, here/there, bring/take, come/go*
  3. Temporal deixis: *now, yesterday, then*, etc.

• Every language has a deictic system (though details can vary)

• Spatial deixis is speaker-centered in English and Spanish
  *este* ‘near me’, *ese* ‘away from me’, *aquel* ‘far from me’

• Japanese and Fijian take the hearer into account too
  *ongo* ‘near me’, *ongori* ‘near you’, *oya* ‘away from us’
Collocations and idioms

- A *collocation* is a group of two or more words that habitually co-occur: *blond* and *hair*, *flock* and *sheep*, *salt* and *pepper*, *weapons of mass destruction*

- The term was coined in the 1930s by British linguist J.R. Firth: ‘You shall know a word by the company it keeps’

- Collocations differ across languages: in English we ‘face’ problems and ‘interpret’ dreams, while in Hebrew we ‘stand in front of’ problems and ‘solve’ dreams

- A collocation with a fixed, single meaning is called an *idiom*

- Examples of English idioms: *kick the bucket*, *blow one’s top*, *spill the beans*, *rain cats and dogs*, *let one’s hair down*
Six aspects of utterance meaning

1. **Grammatical** meaning: semantic roles like agent, patient, goal, etc., determine who did what to whom in a sentence.

2. **Prosodic** meaning is conveyed by stress and intonation patterns in utterances like *Oh, that’s just great!*

3. **Affective** meaning is the emotional connotation attached to utterances like *hurray!* and words like *vagrant* vs. *homeless*.

4. **Pragmatic** meaning refers to how an utterance functions in context: *Can you pass the salt? It's freezing in here!*

5. **Social** meaning can be conveyed by register and dialect, as in *Good morning, sir* vs. *wuzzup!*

6. **Propositional** meaning is expressed by logical *propositions* (statements that are true or false) like *It’s raining in Ottawa*
Truth-conditional semantics

• Truth-conditional semantics is an approach that emphasizes the role of truth within and between sentences

• Motto: to understand a sentence is to know the conditions under which it would be true

• Some propositions are empirically true or false—you decide by checking the real world

  It’s raining in Ottowa
  Arnold Schwarzenegger is governor of California

• Other propositions are analytically true or false: their truth depends on the semantics of the language, not the real world

  Either it is raining in Ottowa or it isn’t
  If John killed the bear then it’s dead
Entailment and presupposition

• *Entailment* and *presupposition* are examples of truth relations between sentences

• *A entails B* when the truth of *A* guarantees the truth of *B* and the falsity of *B* guarantees the falsity of *A*

  *John and Mary are sick* entails *John is sick*
  *The car is red* entails *The car has a color*
  *Oswald assassinated Kennedy* entails *Kennedy is dead*

• *A presupposes B* when the truth of *B* is required to make *A* a felicitous utterance

  *The present king of France is bald* presupposes *there is a present king of France*
  *It wasn’t Bill who lied* presupposes *someone lied*
Semantics: important concepts

• The mapping of sounds to concepts is fundamentally *arbitrary* and *conventional*, not natural

• Two types of word meaning must be distinguished
  1. *Reference* relates words to entities in the world
  2. *Sense* relates words to each other within the language

• *Deictic* forms like *you*, *there*, and *today* are interpreted relative to the speaker’s position in space or time

• Co-occurring word patterns include *collocations* and *idioms*

• Aspects of utterance meaning: grammatical, prosodic, affective, pragmatic, social, propositional

• *Entailment* and *presupposition* are examples of truth relations that hold between sentences