

WEEK 3

# THEORIES OF MEANING

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## 1. THEORIES OF MEANING

- 1) Traditional semantics
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## UNIT OBJECTIVES

- Discuss the main principles of the theories
- Describe the strengths of some of the theories
- Examine weaknesses of some of the theories
- Carry out semantic analysis using these approaches

# THEORIES OF SEMANTICS

We shall use the terms theories/approaches

Different approaches to the study of semantics have emerged over the ages.

In this lesson, we shall focus on some approaches to the study of semantics.

The study of semantics has developed from the earliest times to the modern period, giving it a historical focus:

Traditional, structural and generative Perspectives

In addition, we shall look at theories such as componential analysis, prototype theory and the cognitive approach to meaning.

# TRADITIONAL SEMANTICS

- Like traditional grammar, it tends to be prescriptive.
  - Embodies in our attitudes towards dictionaries.
  - The first preconception is that the meaning of a phrase or a sentence consists of a sum of the meaning of its parts;
  - If we don't know what a sequence of words means, we assume that we simply have to look for the meaning in the dictionary.
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# TRADITIONAL SEMANTICS

It embraces the view about language that there is only one correct and accepted meaning for each word.

People then rely on the dictionary to provide this 'correct' meaning.

However, this assumption that there is only one 'true' meaning for a word is mistaken.

Note:

Even if such meanings existed, dictionary makers would have no direct access to them;

They can only consult usage (by use of corpus or computerized collections of language).

They will then discover the meaning of a word, in the different contexts in which it is used.

Equally, word meanings are a matter of both social agreement and use, and are imprecise and fluid.

Native speakers do not always agree on the meaning of words, even common ones;

And dictionaries cannot be expected to record individual word meanings.

Consider these:

‘Brother-in-law’ may refer to:

- your sister’s husband

- your husband’s brother

- your wife’s brother

- any combinations of these meanings.

Meanings may change more rapidly than can be recorded in dictionaries.

This view also ignores many aspects of meaning apart from the meanings of words.

The function of meaningful features (i.e. stress and intonation), grammatical structure and the communicative context are ignored.

Traditional semantics also assumes that the correspondence between a word and a thing is simple and direct as expressed by Brinton and Brinton (2010).

In fact, relation between a word and the world maybe quite complex.

See examples from Brinton and Brinton (2010):

Brinton, L.J. and Brinton, D. M. (2010). *The linguistic Structure of modern English: Amsterdam*. John Benjamins.

- ✓ *disappointment* names an emotional state, but to understand the word we must know that this is the state which results from one's hopes or expectations of something pleasant not being satisfied.
- ✓ Under normal circumstances, you wouldn't be 'disappointed' that you didn't get hurt in an accident, but you might be disappointed that you did not get the raise you expected.

- ✓ The word —*widow* denotes a type of woman, but again we must know something about the history of that woman, that she was married and that her husband has died.
- ✓ To understand meanings of the word —*stingy* or *lazy*, as well as their negative associations, we must know something about the cultural values of the English-speaking linguistic community.

Another assumption of traditional semantics is that words name things or objects in the real world; that meaning is always in reference to phenomena outside language.

In fact, many words do not name things at all, such as words denoting abstractions or nonentities, or function words.

Linguists believe that a clear distinction must be made between:

- the **extension** of a word, the set of entities that a word denotes in the world (its referents) – if it denotes any entity at all
- the intension of a word, the set of properties shared by all the referents of a word, their defining characteristics

A final assumption of traditional semantics is that it is possible to treat the meanings of individual words separately.

However, words refer to things in the real world not directly, but by means of concepts existing in the mind, or meanings internal to language (linguistic meaning) – what is known as the sense of a word – and words enter into various sense relationships with other words in the language.

# STRUCTURAL SEMANTICS

Structuralism as a linguistic theory considers the structures and systems in language.

Emphasis is on the process of segmenting and classifying the features of utterances.

Under structuralism, emphasis is on the analysis of sense relations that connect words and meanings.

Sense is a system of semantic relations a given word keeps with other expressions in a given language.

The relationship is usually paradigmatic in terms of similarity and dissimilarity.

The relationship of similarity occurs as synonyms, while that of dissimilarity occurs as antonymy.

Structural processes are useful in lexical relations in the study of words.

# COMPONENTIAL ANALYSIS

- Componential analysis is an attempt to give a semantic analysis of words in terms of semantic features or components.
- It consists in determining the basic components constituting the semantic content, or sense, of a word.
- These components, sometimes called semantic primitives, are assumed to be the most basic notions expressed by linguistic meaning,
- the “givens” of the semantic system which cannot be broken down further by semantic analysis.

# Componential analysis

- They are thought to be universal, not language specific, part of the cognitive and perceptual system of the human mind.
- Every word in the language consists of a unique bundle of semantic features.
- Semantic features combine in different ways in different languages; they are lexicalized differently, resulting in the varied vocabularies of different languages

# Componential analysis

Semantic features are usually presented as a matter of opposition, paired positive and negative features;

denoting the presence or absence of the particular feature in the meaning of the word.

The determination of semantic features is a kind of “factoring out” of semantic components.

We can use the livestock paradigm to carry out a feature analysis:

# Componential analysis

<i>man</i>	<i>boar</i>	<i>bull</i>	<i>cock</i>	<i>dog</i>	<i>stallion</i>	<i>ram</i>	[+MALE] [+ADULT]
<i>woman</i>	<i>sow</i>	<i>cow</i>	<i>hen</i>	<i>bitch</i>	<i>mare</i>	<i>ewe</i>	[-MALE] [+ADULT]
<i>child</i>	<i>piglet</i>	<i>calf</i>	<i>chick</i>	<i>puppy</i>	<i>foal</i>	<i>lamb</i>	[±MALE] [-ADULT]
<i>boy</i>	<i>shoat</i>	<i>bullock</i>	<i>chick</i>	<i>dog puppy</i>	<i>colt</i>	<i>ram lamb</i>	[+MALE] [-ADULT]
<i>girl</i>	<i>gilt</i>	<i>heifer</i>	<i>chick</i>	<i>bitch puppy</i>	<i>filly</i>	<i>ewe lamb</i>	[-MALE] [-ADULT]
<i>crowd</i>	<i>drove</i>	<i>herd</i>	<i>flock</i>	<i>pack</i>	<i>herd</i>	<i>flock</i>	[+COLLECTIVE]
[+HUMAN]	[+SWINE]	[+BOVINE]	[+CHICKEN]	[+CANINE]	[+EQUINE]	[+SHEEP]	
	[-HUMAN]	[-HUMAN]	[-HUMAN]	[-HUMAN]	[-HUMAN]	[-HUMAN]	

Source:

Brinton, L.J. and Brinton, D. M. (2010). *The linguistic*

*Structure of modern English: Amsterdam.* John Benjamins.

# Componential analysis

These are the weaknesses that have been identified:

- It has been criticized on many grounds
  1. It adopts an intensional view where properties of an item can also be properties of another item.
  2. Component features used to characterize meaning are more technical than the terms they describe-

It appears that the simple is being described in terms of the complex

# Componential analysis

It is used to describe words belonging to relatively closed lexical sets such as terminologies for kinship, plants and animals.

It does not capture connotations.

# PROTOTYPE THEORY

An alternative to feature analysis, which is intended to have psychological validity is called prototype theory (proposed by psychologist Eleanor Rosch, 1973).

- We understand the meaning of a word because we have a prototypical concept of the category to which the thing belongs.
- A prototype is a good, clear exemplar of a category.
- All members of the category are judged in relation to this prototype.
- The classification is done in terms of core and peripheral categories as seen on the table that follows:

Rosch, Eleanor H. (1973). *Natural categories*. *Cognitive Psychology*, 4, 328–350.

# Prototype theory

Type	Core Members	Peripheral Members		
Land	<i>car</i>	<i>truck</i>	<i>bicycle</i>	<i>tricycle</i>
	<i>motorcycle</i>	<i>scooter</i>	<i>skateboard</i>	<i>wagon</i>
	<i>limousine</i>	<i>van</i>	<i>baby carriage</i>	<i>shopping cart</i>
	<i>bus</i>	<i>ambulance</i>	<i>wheel barrow</i>	<i>sled</i>
	<i>hearse</i>	<i>taxi</i>	<i>toboggan</i>	<i>rickshaw</i>
	<i>tractor</i>	<i>go-cart</i>	<i>wheelchair</i>	<i>cart</i>
	<i>combine</i>	<i>train</i>	<i>buggy</i>	<i>carriage</i>
	Air	<i>airplane</i>	<i>helicopter</i>	<i>hot air balloon</i>
<i>spaceship</i>		<i>satellite</i>	<i>jet</i>	<i>parachute</i>
Water		<i>ferry</i>	<i>yacht</i>	<i>canoe</i>
	<i>tanker</i>	<i>motorboat</i>	<i>sailboat</i>	<i>(life)raft</i>
	<i>ship</i>	<i>tugboat</i>	<i>rowboat</i>	<i>catamaran</i>
	<i>hovercraft</i>	<i>steamboat</i>	<i>dinghy</i>	
	<i>hydrofoil</i>	<i>tugboat</i>	<i>barge</i>	

Source: Brinton, L.J. and Brinton, D. M. (2010). *The linguistic Structure of modern English*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

# Cognitive approaches to meaning

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that not only is language metaphorical, but the cognitive processes underlying language are themselves metaphorical.

- “a metaphor is essentially a device that involves conceptualizing one domain of experience in terms of another.

# Cognitive approaches to meaning

Consider the following sentences:

*I won the argument.*

*He retreated from his initial position.*

*She buttressed her position with several examples.*

*He shot down all my arguments.*

# Cognitive approaches to meaning

Here, we conceptualize arguing (the target domain) in terms of warfare (the source domain).

What is conceptualized in terms of what is not random. Source domains tend to relate to concrete and more immediate areas of human experience;

whereas target domains are more abstract.

# Cognitive approaches to meaning

Quite systematic mappings or correlations between conceptual domains underlie coherent sets of structural metaphors;

metaphors come together in “a coherent system of metaphorical concepts and a corresponding coherent system of metaphorical expressions of those concepts (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, p. 9).

Importantly, these coherent mappings permit us to interpret metaphors.

Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

# Cognitive approaches to meaning

For example, loss of consciousness is associated with being or going down (e.g. *fall into a coma, be under a spell, drop off to sleep*)

while gaining consciousness is associated with being or going up (e.g. *come out of a coma, wake up*).

That is, we conceptualize consciousness in terms of the spatial orientation.

More examples from Brinton and Brinton (2010),

Pg. 181-183

ideas are objects (to be sensed)

- ✓ building: *The argument is shaky.*
- ✓ food: *That notion is half-baked.*
- ✓ people: *He is the father of linguistics.*
- ✓ plants: *The seeds of the idea were planted.*

# Cognitive approaches to meaning

More examples:

- ✓ time is money
- ✓ *I've invested a lot of time.*
- ✓ *I haven't enough time.*
- ✓ *You're running out of time.*
- ✓ *You've wasted my time.*
- ✓ *He's living on borrowed time.*
- ✓ *Can you spare me a moment.*
- ✓ *Put aside some time this evening.*

# Cognitive approaches to meaning

More examples:

love is a physical force

*There isn't any electricity between us.*

*They gravitated towards each other.*

love is a patient

*Their relationship is {sick, healthy}.*

# Cognitive approaches to meaning

More examples:

love is war

*He made a conquest.*

*He made an advance.*

*She has to fend off suitors.*

*She rebuffed his advances.*

# Cognitive approaches to meaning

In conclusion:

the overarching view of cognitive linguistics is that the meanings of words are a reflection of general conceptual organization-

(mappings between and within conceptual domains)

and principles of linguistic categorization -(prototypicality, core and peripheral meanings).

Words act as a set of instructions to create meaning

(often multiple meanings) in particular contexts.

# GENERATIVE SEMANTICS

- ✓ According to the theory of transformational generative grammar, knowledge of language is generated in the mind. A language user has a finite set of rules from which he can generate an infinite number of sentences.
- ✓ This power of generations is facilitated by the power of transformational rules,  
Which convert deep structure sentence types into other various forms via transformations.

# GENERATIVE SEMANTICS

- ✓ The semantic component has been presented as being partially
- ✓ dependent on syntax and at the same time distinct.
- ✓ This produces a composite relationship between grammar and meaning. The deep structure is deemed to determine how sentence parts combine to make meaning for the whole.
- ✓ The syntactic component is the generative source of grammar.

# GENERATIVE SEMANTICS

- ✓ Thus, the output of syntax forms the input to the semantic component.
- ✓ The semantic component is perceived to operate on the structural description of sentences to provide a representation of the meaning of sentences.

Grammar as used here is the totality of the mechanism and rules of language organization including meaning.

# SUMMARY

This lesson has looked at the approaches to studying meaning. Specifically, it has considered the traditional, structural and generative approaches. It has also looked at componential analysis, prototype theory and the cognitive approaches to meaning.

Brinton, L.J. and Brinton, D. M. (2010). *The linguistic Structure of modern English*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Lakoff, G, & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rosch, Eleanor H. (1973). *Natural categories*. *Cognitive Psychology*, 4, 328–350.

LESSON 4: WE SHALL DISCUSS THE TYPES OF MEANING  
THANK YOU.