CHAPTER 5

Introduction to lexical semantics

**5.1 The nature of word meaning**

**5.2 The major problems of lexical semantics**

**5-3 Approaches to lexical semantics**

**5.1.1 What is a word?**

What is a prototypical word like?

A word is described as 'a minimal permutable element'. This attributes two features to a prototypical word:

(i) It can be moved about in the sentence.

(ii) It cannot be interrupted or its parts reordered.Hence, we areobliged to treat words as structurally inviolable wholes.

(iii) They also have an internal structure, in that they prototypically have no more than one **lexical root.** (This notion will become clearer below, but, for instance, the lexical roots of the following words are shown in capitals:

GOVERNment reORDERing STRONGly deNATIONalization

Some words, such as HEDGE-HOG, BUTTER-FLY, and BLACK-BOARD seem to have more than one lexical root. These, however, are atypical, and for many of them form a fused root. Other words have no lexical

roots at all: these are the so-called **grammatical words** like *the, and,* and *of.*

At this point it is necessary to be somewhat more precise about what we mean by a word. In one sense, *obey, obeys, obeying,* and *obeyed* are different forms of the same word (and one would not, generally speaking, expect them to have separate entries in a dictionary). It will be necessary to establish the difference between **word forms** and **lexemes.** Lexemes can be regarded as groupings of one or more word forms, which are individuated by their roots and/or derivational affixes. So, *run, runs, running,* and *ran* are word forms belonging to the same lexeme ***run,*** while *walk, walks, walking,* and *walked* belong to a different lexeme, ***walk,*** distinguished from the former by its root; likewise, *obey, obeys, obeying,* and *obeyed* belong to a single lexeme and *disobey, disobeys, disobeying,* and *disobeyed,* despite having the same root as the first set, belong to a different lexeme, distinguished this time by the possession of the derivational affix *dis-.* Word forms that differ only in respect of inflectional affixes belong to the same lexeme. It is the word-as-lexeme which is the significant unit for lexical semantics.

**5.1.2 Lexical and grammatical meaning**

We can divide units into **closed-set items** and **open-set items**. Central examples of closed-set items have the following characteristics:

(i) They belong to small substitution sets.

(ii) Their principal function is to articulate the grammatical structure of sentences.

(iii) They change at a relatively slow rate through time.

These may be contrasted with open-set items, which have the following characteristics:

(i) They belong to relatively large substitution sets.

(ii) There is a relatively rapid turnover in membership of substitution classes, and a single speaker is likely to encounter many losses and gains in a single lifetime. (Think of the proliferation of words relating to

space travel, or computing, in recent years.)

(iii) Their principal function is to carry the meaning of a sentence.

Both closed- and open-set items carry meaning, but their different functions mean that there are differences in the characteristics of the meanings that they typically carry.

A closed-set item, in order to be able to function properly as a grammatical element, has to be able to combine without anomaly with a wide range of roots, and for this to be possible, it must have a meaning which is flexible, or broad enough. Hence, meanings such as "past", "present", and "future", which can co-occur with virtually any verbal notion, and "one" and "many", which can co-occur with vast numbers of nominal notions, are prototypical grammatical meanings. In contrast, there is no limit to the richness of the meaning an open-set element may carry. Hence, open-set items typically carry the burden of the semantic content of utterances. These are called **content words** (basically nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs) prototypically have one morpheme (usually called the **root** morpheme) and may also have one or more closed-set items in the form of affixes. Lexical semantics is by and large the study of the meanings of content words. On the other hand, grammatical semantics concentrates on the meanings of closed-set items. However, a strict separation between grammatical and lexical semantics is not possible because the meanings of the two kinds of element interact in complex ways.

**5.2 The major problems of lexical semantics**

**5.2.1 Description of content**

Describing content is the most obvious task: how do we say what a word means? Unfortunately, even at this level of generality it is impossible to reach an agreement**.**

**5.2.2 Contextual variation**

When one characterizes the notion of the meaning of a word, one is forced to confront the fact that the semantic import of a single word form can vary greatly from one context to another.

**5.2.3 Sense relations and structures in the lexicon**

Regular patterns appear not only in the nature and distribution of the meanings of a single word in different contexts, but also between different words in the same context. This results in structured groupings of words on the basis of recurrent meaning relations.

**5.2.4 Word meaning and syntactic properties**

An important question is whether and to what extent the syntactic properties of words are independent of, or are controlled by, their meanings. There are still many different views on this topic.

**5.3 Approaches to lexical semantics**

**5.3.1 One-level vs. two-level approaches**

A major dividing line which separates semanticists is the question of whether a distinction can be made between semantics and encyclopedic knowledge. In a similar way, the variety of 'raw' meanings (pertaining to encyclopedic knowledge) is virtually infinite, but only a limited number of these are truly linguistic and interact systematically with other aspects of the linguistic system. The vast detailed knowledge of the world, which speakers undoubtedly possess, is, according to the dual-level view, a property, not of language elements, but of concepts, which are strictly extralinguistic. Truly linguistic meaning elements are of a much 'leaner' sort, and are (typically) thought of as (more) amenable to formalization. One criterion suggested for recognizing 'linguistic' meaning is its involvement with syntax.

On the other hand, most cognitive linguists would take the view that all meaning is conceptual (one-level approach).

**5.3.2 Monosemic vs. polysemic approaches**

The point at issue in relation to the distinction between the monosemic and the polysemic approach is how many meanings ought to be attributed to a word. There is no dispute about clear-cut cases of homonymy, like that of *bank,* where there is no conceivable way of deriving one meaning from the other. The dispute centres on clusters of related senses characteristic of polysemy. (For greater detail, see Chapter 6.) The monosemic view is that as few senses as possible should be given separate recognition in the (ideal) lexicon of a language, and as many as possible derived from these. The argument usually goes like this: if one reading of a word is in any way a

motivated extension of another one, then only one should be recorded, and the other should be left to the operation of **lexical rules.**

The polysemic approach rejects the assumption that a motivated extension of a word sense does not need to be recorded in the lexicon. The basic reason for this is that lexical rules only specify ***potential*** extensions of meaning, only some of which become conventionalized and incorporated in the lexicon. Take the case

of *drink.* In many contexts, it is clear what is being drunk, but obviously one would not wish to create a different lexical entry for *drink* corresponding to every possible drinkable liquid. To this extent, the monosemists and the

polysemists would agree. However, it is possible for some particular drinkable items to be incorporated into a specific reading for *drink.* In English, only "alcoholic beverages" can be encoded thus: *I'm afraid John*

*has started drinking again.* Now in principle, this could have happened with fruit juice instead of alcohol, but it is a fact about the English lexicon that *drink* has one of these possibilities, but not the other.

**5.3.3 The componential approach**

One of the earliest and still most persistent and widespread ways of approaching word meaning is to think of the meaning of a word as being constructed out of smaller, more elementary units of meaning, somewhat on the analogy of the atomic structure of matter. These 'semantic atoms' are variously known as **semes, semantic features, semantic components, semantic markers, semantic primes.**

**5.3.4 'Holist' approaches**

It is a belief of all componentialists that the meaning of a word can, in some useful sense, be finitely specified, in isolation from the meanings of other words in the language. Among philosophers of language, this is known as the **localist** view. The contrary position is the **holistic** view, according to which the meaning of a word cannot be known without taking into account the meanings of all the other words in a language. There are various

versions of holism: two will be outlined here**.**

**5.3.4.I Haas**

Haas was influenced by:

1. Wittgenstein's work: "Don't look for the meaning—look for the use."
2. J. R. Firth's dictum: "Words shall be known by the company they keep."

This interprets 'use' as the contexts, actual and potential, in which the expression occurs normally (i.e.

without anomaly). Haas went further than this. He said that the meaning of a word was a **semantic field** which had two dimensions: a *syntagmatic* dimension, in which all possible (grammatically well-formed) contexts of the word were arranged in order of normality; and a *paradigmatic* dimension, in which for each context, the possible paradigmatic substitutes for the word were arranged in order of normality. In principle, 'context' includes extralinguistic context. The word's semantic field, as understood by Haas, constitutes its meaning.

**5.3.4.2 Lyons**

Lyons states that the sense of a lexical item consists of the set of sense relations which the item contracts with other items which participate in the same field. So, for instance, the meaning of *horse* should be portrayed

along the lines shown in Fig. 5.I.

In this system, the links are of specific sorts, such as "is a kind of" (e.g. *horse: animal),* "is not a kind of" (e.g. *horse: cow),* "is a part of" (e.g. *mane-:horse),* "is characteristic noise produced by" (e.g. *neigh: horse),* "is a dwelling place for" (e.g. *stable: horse),* and so on. Since the words illustrated also enter into relations with other words than *horse,* the full meaning of *horse* is a complex network of relations potentially encompassing the whole lexicon.

**5.3.5 Conceptual approaches**

Conceptual approaches are single-level approaches and identify the meaning of a word (or at least a major part of it)with the concept or concepts it gives access to in the cognitive system. Among cognitive linguists, the prototype model of concept structure is an important contribution. ****