

Semantics: The Study of Meaning

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In order to understand the meaning of any language, it is vital to have the knowledge of the meanings in that language. Semantics is the study of linguistic meaning of morphemes, words, phrases, and sentences. For example, understanding the meaning of the prefix “un” can help you use the correct meaning and form in your own language.

- My friend, Tony, does not achieve what he wants or does. He is absolutely *unsuccessful* in everything.

You may observe yourself when you are asked “What do you mean?” or “What does it mean?” This implies that the listener may not understand the meanings of what you are saying. Thus, the knowledge of meanings permits you to use them to express your thoughts and to understand them when heard (Fromkin, 2003). In order to become a competent speaker and listener, it is interesting and important to learn types of meaning. This will be explained in the next section.

Types of Meaning

When we hear a conversation exchanged by two persons or when you are speaking with your friend, mother, father, or teacher, it is

worth defining the meanings whether which category they fall on: referential, affective, or social meanings.

Referential Meaning

1. ***“What’s that in your suitcase? Thailand remains a hub for trade and transit of protected wildlife.”***

Bangkok Post, July 17, 2011

2. ***Morocco – Much more than just an adventure***

Bangkok Post, July 17, 2011

Readers who know meanings of the words shown in statement # 1 will understand the meanings of the whole statement. For example, if we understand the meaning of “**suitcase**” that it looks like a bag and we also know the meaning of “**Thailand**”, one of the countries located in South East Asia, we tend to understand the whole meaning. However, if we know more meanings of more words such as **remain, hub, trade, transit, protect, and wildlife**, we will be able to understand this headline news more easily. The meanings shown in this statement are used to identify the real-world objects (Thailand, suitcase, wildlife, hub), action (remain, trade, transit, protect). This type of meaning is a **referential** meaning.

Similarly, statement # 2 shows the real world meanings of “**Morocco**” (the name of the country in Saharan dunes), and “**adventure**” (an exciting experience).

Likewise, when we were born, we were named in order to identify who we were. For example, Thai names can be Supon, Suporn, Nida, Prawat, etc., and English names can be John, Mary, Victoria, Ben, Barak, etc. Even though names are sometimes similar, the context of utterance may identify who we refer to. Not only human beings but animals or our pets have referential meanings.



*Look at Tong, he is a happy and affectionate dog.
He is one of the best friends at home.*

Affective Meaning

- 1. The new city project seeks to safeguard Bangkok from flooding caused by rising sea levels.*
- 2. He battles injury for Chinese gold.*
- 3. Just about everywhere in the Middle East there has been movement –stirring, uneven. It has been a year of terrible waste. (Obama, 2011)*

The above statements show both positive and negative meanings. The word “**safeguard**” carries a positive attitude towards the new city project since it can help prevent the rising sea levels. The word “**battle**” in statement 2 is also positive since it shows how patient and hard-working he is in order to become a winner in a competition. However, words such as “**movement**”, “**stirring**”, “**terrible**”, “**waste**” in statement 3 convey negative attitudes reflected by the speaker.

When a word, phrase, sentence, or an expression is spoken or written, it may imply or convey speakers’ or writers’ attitudes, feelings, emotions, or opinions towards that context. Therefore, affective attitudes, feelings, emotions, and opinions will lead to a selection of word choices, pronunciation (pronounced in an offensive, insulting, or affectionate ways), and genre (particular styles).

Read the lyrics of the song “I will always love you” by Whitney

Houston

If I should stay,
I would only be in your way.
So I'll go, but I know
I'll think of you every step of the way.

And I will always love you.
I will always love you.
You, my darling you. Hmm.

Bittersweet memories
that is all I'm taking with me.
So, goodbye. Please, don't cry.
We both know I'm not what you, you need.

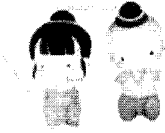
And I will always love you.
I will always love you.

I hope life treats you kind
And I hope you have all you've dreamed of.
And I wish to you, joy and happiness.
But above all this, I wish you love.

And I will always love you.
I will always love you.
I will always love you.
I will always love you.
I will always love you.
I, I will always love you.

You, darling, I love you.

Ooh, I'll always, I'll always love you.



The song is so affective, isn't it?

Social Meaning

If affective meanings convey attitudes, emotions, opinions, and feelings, social meanings carry words or sentences that vary in different social classes, ages, genders, ethnicities, geographical origins, and levels of formality.

1. At the hospital

Doctor Shahab, could you please explain my symptoms?

2. At the party

Hey, what's up, man?

3. Female language

.....and that is the sort of sexual harassment, not a physical touch, isn't it?

4. Male language

I am certain that I don't swear.

5. Speech delivered by King Jigme of Bhutan (October 2010)

In a world that has seen unprecedented material growth: the poorest 40 percent of the world's population accounts for only 5 percent of global income.

6. Language use in sports headline

Battle of the continents in the World Cup

It can be obviously seen that social meanings vary depending on language users' choices or the context of utterance.

Look at two more examples.

1. Use the Green Line **underground** to go to Big Ben.
2. What about using the North **subway** ?

The speaker of statement 1 carries the word choice of British English while the speaker of statement 2 indicates the word choice of American English.

What do you think of this song in terms of social meaning?

Gimme That (Chris Brown)

[Intro:]

[Spoken:]

Storch (oh)

S. Dot (Yea)

[Ad Lib:]

Ooh Ohh.

[Spoken:]

The dynamic duo.

[Spoken:]

Wow womp womp womp.....it's what your body sayin'.

Chris Brown is in the building.

[Verse 1:]

The young boy just turned 16

And I got 64's and hot bikes that I rock

Keep 3 or 4 sweeties on my clock,

But all that swinging in that bikini just make 'em dizzy.

Slow all the traffic down to a complete stop,

'cause you speaking that slang that I talk.

That sassy tempo with that walk,

Maybe the reason that all this teenies may never see me.

[Chorus (x2):]

Momma you may be 3 years older but you hot (gimme that)

You be talking like you like what I got (gimme that)

I know you like it how I lean in the 'lac,

You could be in the back saying (gimme, gimme, gimme)

[Verse 2:]

Ma, take a break, let me explain to you,

What ya body got a young boy ready to do.
If you take a chance to let me put them things on you,
I could show you why I make them straight A's in school.
I'm a HUSTLA! Trust my frame and age.
Got you thinking that I'm just too young to turn your page.
I can PICTURE! Us switching lanes in the coupe
With you on the phone screaming my name.

(CHRIS!)

[Chorus x2]

[Breakdown:]

Wo-womp, womp, Wo-womp, womp, Wo-womp, womp, Wo-
womp

Girl you serious and I been watching you.

Wo-womp, womp, Wo-womp, womp, Wo-womp, womp,
Wo-womp

This's what your body's saying

Wo-womp, womp, Wo-womp, womp, Wo-womp, womp,
Wo-womp (yeahhhhh)

Wo-womp, womp, Wo-womp, womp, Wo-womp, womp,
Wo-womp

This what your body's sayin (owwww)

[Chorus x2]

[Outro - Spoken:]

V.A.

Yeah ha,

Yeah ma don't be frontin' like you don't know what's goin' on

Aight, yeah

Semantic Relations among Words

The knowledge of meanings of words can expand a large number of vocabulary lists. For instance, when we know the meaning of “father”, we can relate the word with an opposite word; that is “mother” or we may think of many words that share the same semantic property of “father” such as “brother”, “uncle”, “man”, “masculine”, and “parent”. Similarly, when we know the meaning of “sense”, we are able to identify or increase more associated verbs such as “see”, “hear”, “feel”, “sound”, “touch”, “smell”, “experience”, and “taste”, etc. Finally, it should be noted that words are related to one another in a variety of ways (Fromkin, 2003). The morpheme *-nym* is a good example to describe this relationship.

Homonyms

When a word is spelled or sounds the same as another word but they have different meanings, they are homonyms.

Look at the following examples

- I will go to the **bank**.

The sentence sounds ambiguous since there may be two meanings of the word “bank”: the bank of a river or the bank to deposit money. In order to avoid this ambiguity, it is suggested that a writer or a speaker should add more contextual information; otherwise, the sentence will result in **lexical ambiguity**.

- He is looking for a **match**.

What do you think of the above sentence? It is also ambiguous. The word “**match**” has more than one meaning. For example,

1. a small stick that produces a flame when rubbed against a rough surface
2. a game or competition
3. a marriage or a partner
4. something that looks the same as something else

Synonyms

When words have the same meaning they are **synonyms**.

Think of your mother tongue language, a Thai speaker may prefer to use /phoom/ = **thin** instead of /lek/ = **small**; however, a listener will understand both words and interpret them as the same thing.

Similarly, the word “**die**” may be used with the same meaning as

“**pass away**” but they may be used in different contexts depending on different situations and affective and social connotations.

See examples:

1.1 I would like to **assist** the investigation. (formal context)

1.2 I want to **help** investigate the case. (informal context)

2.1 I **am afraid** to say that.

2.2 I **am frightened** to see that.

3.1 Look at that **fat** boy.

3.2 Look at that **chubby** boy.

3.3 Look at that **dumpy** boy.

The above examples have shown that there are no perfect synonyms. The word “chubby” in 3.2 sounds more positive than the word “dumpy” in 3.3 and “fat” in 3.1. However, all of them have similar meanings.

Antonyms

Think when you are at home, you have the **father** and the **mother**. When you go shopping, you see both **males** and **females**. At night, you **sleep** but you will **wake up** in the morning. You may be **happy** today but will be **sad** tomorrow. We are talking about **antonyms**:

words which are opposite in meanings. The property they do not share is present in one and absent in the other (Fromkin, 2003).

Tiny – huge

Beautiful – ugly

Thin – fat

Happy – unhappy

Birth – death

True – false

Right – wrong

Right – left

Cold- hot

Fail – succeed

Boy – girl

Poor – rich

Antonyms can be formed by adding the prefixes such as **un**....., **non**....., **in**....., **mis**....., **dis**....., **anti**....., **ir**.....

Comfortable – uncomfortable

Human – non-human

Complete – incomplete

Manage – mismanage

Please – displease

Corruption – anti-corruption

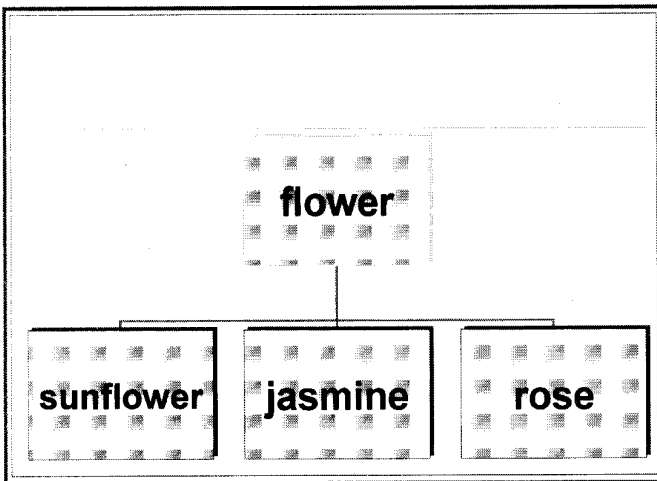
Regular – irregular

Metonyms

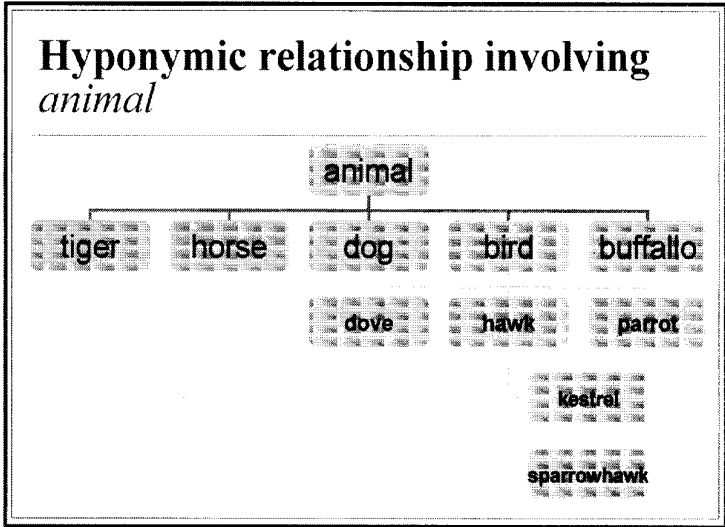
When we see an object, person, group of person, place, sport, we may have concepts associated with them. We use the word “palace” for the king but the White House for the President of the USA or the US government.

Hyponyms

- **Flower** is a general term which includes many and more specific instances, such as **rose**, **sunflower**, and **jasmine**.



- *Cook* is a general term which includes many and more specific instances, such as toast, boil, fry, and deep-fry.



Such above sets of words are called “**hyponyms**”.

Metaphor

We have learned that language changes through time and knowledge of a language enables us to combine words to form phrases, and phrases to form sentences. Knowing a language means being able to produce new sentences never spoken before and to understand sentences never heard before. It is said that metaphorical use of language is language creativity at its highest (Fromkin, 2003).

Metaphor conveys language concepts. In order to understand and interpret the real meaning of that metaphor, one needs a real-world experience and cultural knowledge of that language. Since its meaning is literal, we sometimes need imagination to help interpret the real meaning. Metaphor has been used in everyday language. It can be found in all contexts such as politics, love, beauty, life, work, time, marriage, sports, death, etc. See examples below.

- I do not love you except because I love you;
I go from loving to not loving you,
From waiting to not waiting for you
My heart **moves from cold to fire**
- Democrat Party seeks a little more **distance**.
- **Touchdown**: Obama
- Obama **landslide** in weekend primaries
- Every teardrop is like a **waterfall**.
- Life is a **seed**.
- Love is **an adventure**.
- Haha very **cheesy** thought!
- His hair is **bone white**.

Conclusion

Knowing a language means to know how to distribute words in a well-formed string. On the other hand, knowing a language also

means to understand words, phrases, and sentences with particular meanings. The meanings in a language can be referential, affective, and social. Language learners should be able to interpret a speaker's feeling, emotion, and identity.

Reference

Formkin, V., Rodman, R., and Hyams, N. (2011) *An introduction to language*. 9th ed. Boston: Cengage Education.

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