

6 SEMANTICS

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Introduction and background

A good starting point when beginning to understand a new concept is with a question. For this chapter our question is this: *If I have a thought in my mind, how can I transfer that same thought to your mind?* One answer to this question that springs easily to mind is that I tell you what my thought is. This is where semantics comes into play. **Semantics** is the study of meaning in language on the word and phrasal levels. One of the primary goals of a language is to communicate meaning from one person to others, but how is meaning determined? How do we know that a word means what we think it means? Actually, people who study language, called linguists, have described two main ways that users of a language determine meaning. These two ways are semantics and pragmatics. Pragmatics focuses on how meaning is defined in terms of the context in which the language is used. For example, the identity of the speakers, their location and their knowledge of the world are important factors when determining meaning with pragmatics. Pragmatics will be explained in more detail in chapter 7. Semantics, on the other hand, concentrates on the words themselves.

It may be tempting to say that what a word means can be derived from the thing it labels, or what is called **direct reference**. So we know the word *dog* means “dog” because someone pointed at a dog and said “that’s a dog”. This is a tempting solution to the understanding of words but it quickly runs into problems. What happens if we need a word for something that we can’t point to, such as *dragons* or *immortality*? Surely the brain is capable of thought beyond the confines of language. So let’s look back at our question of how people communicate meaning to each other. It can’t be as simple as saying what’s on our mind. Take a look at the example in figure 6.1. The thought of “dog” is clearly being communicated, but the exact meaning is different for each person, which has resulted in slightly different thoughts for them. Accordingly, we can’t truly say that the thought was transferred from one mind to the other. This is because *meaning* has different values. So it appears our first question has brought us to a new question: *what is meaning?* If we look up the



Figure 6.1

word “mean” in the dictionary we can find several very different usages of the word. Take the following examples into consideration:

- I didn't mean for the window to break.
- He means a lot to me.
- What does your name mean?
- She is a mean teacher.
- The mean age of the students is 21 years.

Dictionary.com lists over 20 definitions for the word “mean” across verb, noun, and adjective word classes. We could talk at length about the different definitions of the word, but this wouldn't get us much closer to answering our question. In fact, some philosophers, such as Wittgenstein (1953), have concluded that there is no such thing as meaning. He argued that giving something a name, like “dog”, does not define that thing; which is more or less represented in figure 6.1 where a name (or label) is being used but the two understandings of that label are different. Wittgenstein argued that meaning might only be derived from how the word was used, and was not related to anything in a dictionary or in the real world. Other philosophers, like Plato, suggest that meaning is derived from what he called Form, or the idea of a thing (like the idea of a dog, for example), as it exists separately from reality. This is what's called **idealism**, which was later incorporated into semantics by

John Locke (1690). In Locke's way, humans who have experienced or have been taught about "dog" have developed in their minds the idea (or impression) of a dog, something like a domesticated 4-legged mammal. In this sense, if we are trying to communicate the meaning of "dog" we are actually referring to a manifestation of our impression of "dog".

Word meaning

So what is the meaning of "dog"? One way of answering this question can be represented in a diagram (see figure 6.2). There is a direct connection between the thought and the symbol (between the word *dog* and our impression of "dog"). The symbol will conjure the impression we have of "dog" in our minds. There is also a direct link between the referent and our impression, as our impression is shaped by our experience with the referent throughout our lives. When we see a dog (or think about a dragon) we conjure the impression of it, and perhaps even modify our impression if the referent differs from previous experiences. However, there is no direct link between the referent and the symbol. There is only the indirect relation from the use of the symbol by someone to stand for the referent. In this way we can see that meaning is derived both from our impression of "dog", and our use of the word *dog*. Depending on the symbol, this relationship may change. For example, if we use a

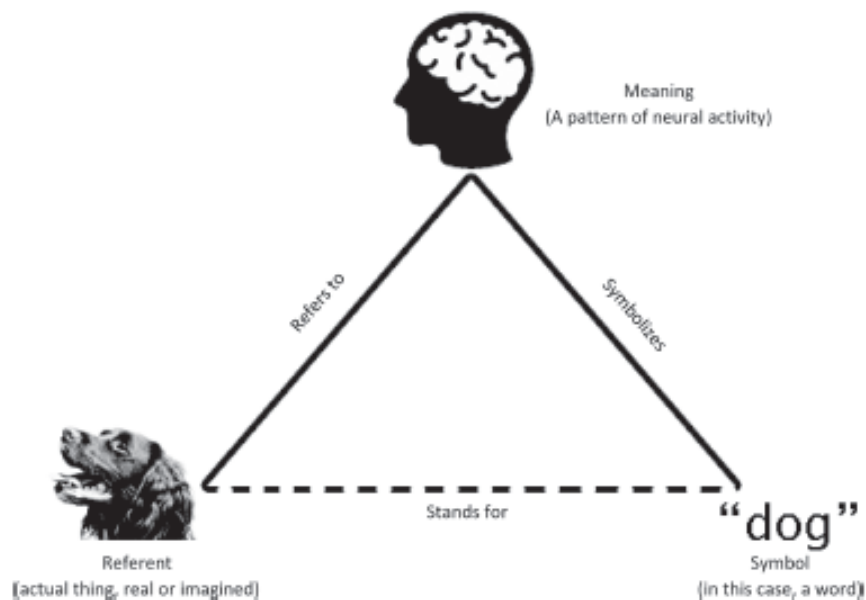


Figure 6.2 (Inspired by Ogden & Richards, 1923)

painting of a dog as a symbol instead of the word dog, then there is a direct connection between the symbol and the referent. Similarly, some logographic languages, like Chinese, may have written characters which visually represent the thing for which they stand. For example the Chinese character for mountain is written as 山, which vaguely looks like a mountain. However, for the majority of the world's languages, and for the majority of Chinese as well, the words we use only have meaning in so far as they are used by people.

To further understand word meaning, linguists have divided it into three distinct categories: subjective, associative, and conceptual. The first two classifications, subjective and associative meaning, are more to do with pragmatics. **Subjective meaning** is a form of meaning that is different for each person, as each person connects words with their personal experiences and knowledge. For example, someone's impression of "dog" may be similar to the golden retriever they had as a child. **Associative meaning** is concerned with how words develop qualities that we ascribe to them even if those qualities are not part of the concept of that word. For instance, you may associate the word dog with "cute" or "loveable" or "smelly" even though those are not part of the definition of a dog. Semantics is primarily concerned with the third classification, conceptual meaning. **Conceptual meaning** derives from the record of ideas (or concepts) that people have about things in the world. This is the type of meaning that is described in dictionaries. It's different from subjective and associative meaning because it looks for a common understanding between all users of a language.

In the rest of this chapter we will explore conceptual semantics. We will look closely at the semantic relationships between words, semantics at the phrasal (multi-word) level, and lastly at semantic barriers, or breakdowns in meaning. In doing so we will hopefully answer the questions we discovered above, namely what does a word mean? And how is that meaning shared among others?

How semantics makes a difference

You might be thinking that this is hardly important. After all, you've never had a problem communicating about a dog with anyone before. However, semantics plays a significant role in today's world, especially in the political and legal arenas. Let's look at some examples of semantics at work in the real world.

In 2003 America moved some of its military into the country of Iraq with the express objective of overthrowing its ruler, Saddam Hussein. Depending on the perspective, this event can be called a *liberation* or an *invasion*. Those terms share a similar meaning, essentially the action of moving one's military into a country for the purpose of removing its leadership. However, they differ widely in their interpretation. A *liberation* is welcome and an *invasion* is not. For those that supported the war, *liberation* was the word of choice, whereas Mr. Hussein was more inclined to call it an *invasion*. Who was right? One answer is that they were both right, and that two words with different meanings could describe the same event. If this is the case then how should we refer to the actions that took place? Will our use of one word over the other betray our feelings about the war? Is there a neutral way to refer to it?

In recent decades, wealth inequality has become a serious problem in some countries. The wealthy have used their riches to gain influence in politics and legal processes where they have molded laws in their favor in order to become richer still. This has reached such extremes in places that a backlash has occurred and a demand to redistribute wealth has been made. Wealth redistribution sounds like a fair and just thing until you realize that it means the same thing as confiscation. Depending on the term you choose to use, you can manipulate the sympathy towards your position. If the world's poor demanded the confiscation of wealth from the world's rich, few people would take them seriously, or people might perhaps actively resist them.

A third example I will take is from Stephen Pinker (2007). On September 11th, 2001 in New York City, a terrorist attack took place which caused the destruction of the World Trade Center and the tragic loss of thousands of lives. The question of how many events took place on 9/11 in New York has since become a question of extreme consequence. Was it one event, or two? It could be argued that the terrorist attack was a single event, planned by one person and carried out on one day. You could just as easily call it two events. There were two buildings involved, which were hit separately by two planes, at two different times. Whether it was one event or two is an important distinction to make, as the insurance payout on the World Trade Center lease stipulates a reimbursement of 3.5 billion dollars for each destructive "event." Now the meaning of the word "event" takes center stage. How do we go about understanding what "event" means? That is a question worth quite a lot of money.

The features of a word

Imagine a world without dictionaries. How might you go about understanding a new word? Probably you might ask people what the new word meant. If the word was a noun, they might actually point to something in the real world, if an adjective they might show you an example, a verb, they may demonstrate it. This could even work for things that only exist in the mind, like abstract nouns such as justice and beauty, or imaginary things like dragons and unicorns; but these ideas would have to be explained using other words instead of demonstrations. Of course not everybody would have the same explanation, because different people have different experiences of the world, but eventually, with enough examples you would find some common characteristics among the many definitions you collected to come up with an accurate conceptual meaning of a new word. One such way of accomplishing this is through the use of semantic features.

By analyzing the **semantic features** of a word, we can come to an understanding of its meaning. For example, the word “hamburger” can be analyzed as having the features of +EDIBLE +SANDWICH +COOKED. In doing so, we not only see what features a hamburger has, but also how it relates to other words. For example, the word “pizza” would have the features of +EDIBLE and +COOKED, but not the feature of SANDWICH. And if you put peanut butter and jelly in between bread, you have the features +EDIBLE and +SANDWICH, but not COOKED.

By using a chart to compare similar words we can better understand their meaning and how they relate to each other, such as in the table below. It should be noted though, that this method is an example of using words to define words which can only be done if we have a thorough knowledge of words to begin with.

Table 6.1

	Fire	Woman	Dog	Tree	Hamburger
Animate	—	+	+	+	—
Intelligent	—	+	+	—	—
Grows	+	+	+	+	—
Reproduces	+	+	+	+	—
Human	—	+	—	—	—

In looking at this chart, it's easy to see which words are more similar to each other and which are completely different. Of course women and dogs are very different, but they are much more similar to each other than women and hamburgers. Additionally, by analyzing the semantic features of a word we can better understand how it is used syntactically, and we will talk more about that when we discuss phrasal semantics.

When all of the semantic features of a word are collected (imagine a chart like the one above, but much longer), then we can say we have the **sense** of the word. Looking at our chart we can say that part of the sense of the word "dog" involves [+ANIMATE +INTELLIGENT +GROWS +REPRODUCES—HUMAN]. It's these features that will inform the dictionary definition of a word. The definition will not refer to any particular dog, but to anything that matches the features described. For example, Dictionary.com's definition of "dog" is "a domesticated canid, *Canis familiaris*, bred in many varieties". This is the sense of the word "dog" according to this dictionary.

The counterpart to word sense, is **reference**, which is what a word points to in the real world. Word reference is all about context, an example of the word as it exists in our life. In the sentence "the boy heard a dog barking on his birthday" each of the noun phrases in that sentence (*the boy, a dog, & his birthday*) refer to specific phenomena like things, times, places, events, or ideas. The sense of these noun phrases are clear for anyone who uses English, however their referent is only known to those involved in the speech act (i.e. the speaker and hearer). It's possible that a word may have more than one referent, such as "Cairo" which is both a city in Illinois and in Egypt. Similarly, two different words can have the same referent, such as "tennis shoes" and "sneakers" which both refer to the same type of shoe.

In terms of our quest to understand meaning, word reference must be understood first. In the words of Pinker (2007):

"...words are owned by a community rather than an individual. If a word isn't known to everyone around you, you might as well not use it, because no one will know what you're talking about. Nonetheless, every word in a language must have been minted at some point by a single speaker. With some coinages, the rest of the community gradually agrees to use the word to point to the same thing, tipping the first domino in the chain that makes the word available to subsequent generations."

We can see then, that the act of reference comes first. If you and I point at a towering plant and call it a “tree” it is because in the distant past a human pointed at one and called it a “tree” and the word stuck in peoples’ minds. The sense of a word is only established later, after the word has become popular in a community. However, it’s the sense of a word that defines its relationship with other words (syntax) and informs us how we may or may not use it. These relationships help us to characterize words and to build a meaningful language with them.

Lexical relations

Many times, when we’re asked what a word means, we don’t recite the dictionary definition. If someone were to ask you what *edifice* means, you might say “it’s the same as *building*”; you might give the meaning of *shallow* as the opposite of *deep*; or you might say that a *parakeet* is “a type of bird.” In all of these examples you are expressing the meaning of a word through its relationship with other words. The next few paragraphs will go into detail about the different types of lexical relations that are important in semantics.

A **synonym** is two or more words that have a very similar meaning. For example *big* and *large* carry practically the same meaning. In most instances these words are interchangeable such as in the sentences *we ate a big watermelon / we ate a large watermelon*. However, and this is the case with most synonyms, they are not interchangeable all of the time. For instance, when you are asked at a cafe what size coffee you want, you reply with “large”; it would seem odd to say “big” in this situation. This is because not all synonyms are created equal.

One variation of synonyms are called **dialectal synonyms**, which are those words which carry the same meaning, but occur with more frequency in specific dialects of a language. British English and American English have many dialectal synonyms, such as *lift/elevator*, *torch/flashlight*, and *petrol/gasoline*. Another type of synonymy are **stylistic synonyms**. These are words that carry the same meaning, but differ in the degree of formality or style. *Dad/father*, *start/commence*, and *poop/faeces* are examples of stylistic synonyms where the latter mentioned word is more formal than its counterpart. A third type of synonymy is **para-synonyms**, which are words that differ only slightly in what they mean. *Error* and *mistake*, for example, both mean “to be wrong about”, however an error denotes a goof in competence, whereas a mistake is a goof in performance. Because of the slight differences, it is not always easy

to substitute synonymous pairs in sentences without changing the tone, degree of formality, or even the meaning of the sentence.

Antonym is a term used to describe words that have opposite meanings. Similarly to synonyms, antonyms come in different varieties. **Gradable antonyms**, for example, are words that oppose each other on a measurable spectrum. *Hot/cold* are gradable antonyms that demonstrate opposing temperatures. Gradable antonyms usually have a host of related terms for different degrees of extremity; so along the spectrum of *hot/cold*, we also have *warm/cool* and *freezing/scalding*. Another type of antonymy are **complementary antonyms**. These are antonyms which have no degree between them and therefore must be one or the other. For instance, *dead/alive* are complementary antonyms as there is no middle ground between those two states. Thirdly, **relational antonyms** describe words that reveal opposing relationships. Some examples of relational antonyms are *husband/wife*, *above/below*, and *buy/sell*. These pairs of words are dependent on each other, such that if A is X of B, then B is Y of A. As in if John is the husband of Mary, then Mary is the wife of John. A final type of antonym is called a **directional antonym**, which describes words that have opposite meanings in describing directions. *In/out*, *lengthen/shorten*, and *forwards/backwards* are examples of directional antonyms.

Hyponymy is another type of lexical relation. **Hyponyms** are words that can be classified under a more general semantic feature (remember our chart in figure 6.1). *Poodle*, *pug*, *collie*, and *corgi* can all be classified under the semantic feature of *dog*. The term *dog* in this situation is referred to as the **superordinate** and the different breeds listed are its hyponyms (hyponyms of the same superordinate are called **co-hyponyms**). Superordinates can become hyponyms themselves in an expanding hierarchical diagram, so that *dog*, *cat*, and *sheep* are co-hyponyms of the superordinate *animal*. See figure 6.3 below for a visual example. This style of classification has its limitations though. If you were to label *elephant*, *dog*, *horse* and *rabbit* as *mammal* there wouldn't be a problem, but what about *platypus*? Certain things in the world do not fit comfortably into superordinate classifications. Is a *penguin* a *bird*? Is a *tomato* a *fruit*? Because of this uncertainty, some researchers have defined certain things as the best examples of their respective superordinate. These prime examples are called **prototypes**. For instance a *carrot* is a prototype of *vegetable*. These classifications are not exact, and individuals may disagree as to how things should be labeled, but the concept of prototypes can provide us with further information about word meaning.

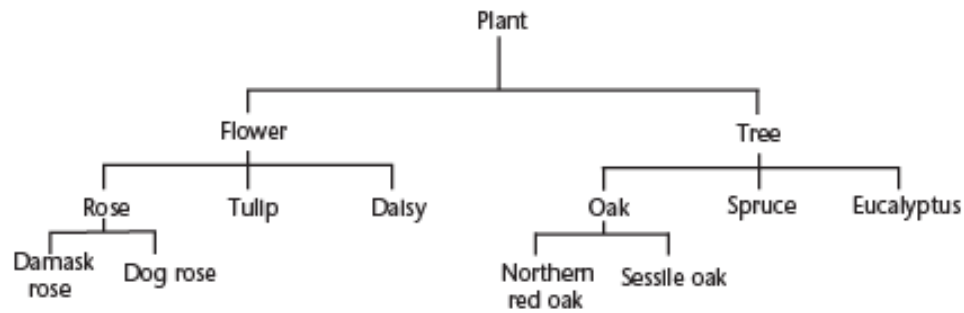


Figure 6.3

A word that has more than one meaning is said to be a polysemic word. **Polysemy** occurs very often in the English language. An example of a polysemic word is *spring*, which can mean many things such as to jump, a coiled piece of metal, or the season that comes after winter – even though the word itself maintains the same spelling and pronunciation. Typically speaking, a word that has many different definitions is almost always a very old word, because words tend to change and adapt as they are used in different situations. For example, the word *head* probably started off referring to the top of our body, but now can mean a person at the top of a company, the top part of a bone, the source of a river, or to go somewhere, as in *I'm going to head to work*.

Homonymy describes the relationship between words that have the same spelling and/or the same pronunciation. Each of these instances go by a different name. **Homophones** are two or more words which have the same pronunciation. Some examples of homophones are *flower/flour*, *bear/bare*, and *night/knight*. Conversely, **homographs** are words which are identical in spelling, even though they may have different pronunciations and meanings. A common example is *tear* (a verb that rhymes with fair) and *tear* (a noun that rhymes with fear); others include *lead* n./*lead* v., *project* n./*project* v., and *contract* n./*contract* v. There are some homonyms that are both homophones and homographs, these are referred to as **complete homonyms**. For instance *light* a./*light* n. and *watch* n./*watch* v. are complete homonyms as they are both spelled and pronounced exactly the same. You may be wondering how you can tell the difference between a complete homonym such as *light* and a polysemic word such as *face*. As we mentioned in the previous paragraph, a polysemic word is one that has evolved to take on different meanings by being exposed to different conditions. It's easy to see how *face* can mean both the front of our heads and the front of a building, or even to turn your face towards something.

Complete homonyms, on the other hand, are words that have evolved completely separately from each other and coincidentally have the same pronunciation and spelling. If you're unsure, you can always check in a dictionary. If there are two entries for a word, then it is a complete homonym; if there is only one entry but with multiple definitions, it is polysemic.

So far we have listed the most common lexical relations, however linguists continue to find new ways that words can relate to each other. Here are a couple more examples. **Meronymy** is a lexical relation that describes words which denote parts of a whole. For example, *finger* is a meronym of *hand*, and *arm* is a meronym of *body*. Another lexical relation is a **metonym**, which is a word that is used to represent a thing or concept that it is closely associated with. When Mark Antony, in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, said "friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears", he wasn't expecting people to literally give him their ears, but to listen to him. Similarly, we use *suits* to mean businessmen, *boots* to refer to soldiers, and *dish* to refer to a whole plate of food.

Lexical relations, such as those we discussed here, can show us the many ways that words are connected to each other, and from that understanding we can begin to formulate meaningful phrases. Going forward in our quest to understand meaning, we will begin with short phrases of just two to three words.

Collocation

Our first step into examining the meaning of more than one word at a time will be with collocation. Thanks to the work of corpus linguistics, we can identify which words tend to occur with other words. The term **collocation** literally refers to words that occur in the same place (*co-* meaning "together", and *location* meaning "place"). Linguists have examined huge collections of language, called corpora, to analyze the frequency of two words occurring together. For example, this type of analysis has shown us that we use certain words to describe food that has gone bad, depending on which type of food it is. When fruit goes bad, we say that it is *rotten*; when meat goes bad it is *rancid*; and if milk goes bad, we say it is *sour*. An English speaker would find it very strange if you referred to your moldy strawberries as being rancid. Another popular example is how we describe tea as being *strong*. If you tried to use a synonym for strong in substitution, such as *powerful*, it would sound strange. People might look at you oddly if you said your tea was *powerful*.

Furthermore, a *powerful* computer is far preferable to a *strong* computer. Other examples include phrases like *make the bed* and *do the dishes*, which are perfectly acceptable to an experienced English user, whereas the phrases *do the bed* or *make the dishes* are not.

Collocation is a phenomenon through which we can further our understanding of words and meaning. The fact that we say “an orange is rotten” or that “milk is sour” gives us information about the meaning of the terms involved in those utterances. Although both of those expressions serve the purpose of identifying the subjects (an orange, milk) as having gone bad, they also illuminate a certain quality of them. For instance, we can know that *an orange* will “rot” (to decompose) and that *milk* will “sour” (to acidify), which adds meaning to those words.

Research into collocations also shows us the context in which a word or phrase is used which gives us even more insight into the meaning of words. For example, the words *pretty* and *handsome* collocate with the sexes female and male, respectively. This can tell us about how the word is used, its associative meaning, and can provide us with information if context is unavailable (such as the sex of someone if they are being referred to as *pretty*). Additionally, we can gain further meaning if these terms are used contrary to their normal collocation. So that if a boy is referred to as *pretty*, it could mean that he has feminine features. For a different example, after analyzing the expression *true feelings* in a corpus and looking for the lexical context in which it is used, it was discovered that “English speakers use the phrase... when they want to give the meaning of reluctance to express deeply felt emotions” (Sinclair, 2003: p148, as cited in Yule, 2010, p122). Thus the term *true feelings* is most commonly used to actually hide the true feelings of the speaker; as in utterances like “we try to communicate our *true feelings* to those around us”, instead of actually saying what the “true feelings” are.

Phrasal semantics

As individual words have meaning, so do multi-word phrases. With words, we can determine meaning through analysis of sense and reference, and through their lexical relations. Phrases, however, must be decoded differently. The meaning of a phrase is not only determined by the meaning of the words it contains. For example, if we take the words in the phrase *Mary likes Tom* and jumble them up we may get *Tom*

likes Mary. This is still grammatically correct, but the meaning of the sentence has completely changed. We could just as easily get something such as *likes Mary Tom* which is not grammatical and has no meaning. Therefore, we can say that the meaning of a sentence is more than just the meaning of the words it contains. We can begin to understand phrase semantics if we examine the sense relations between phrases. Below are some different relationships phrases can have, along with examples and their truth conditions.

1. Phrasal synonymy (**a** is a synonym of **b**) **Truth conditions**

a. Mary walked to school.	}	If a is true, then b is true. If a is false, then b is false.
b. Mary went to school by foot.		
a. The woman butchered the pig.		
b. The pig was butchered by the woman.		

2. Phrasal inconsistency (**a** is inconsistent with **b**)

a. Coco eats noodles every day.	}	If a is true, then b is false. If a is false, then b is true.
b. Coco never eats noodles.		
a. He is married.		
b. He is a bachelor.		

3. Phrasal entailment (**a** is an entailment of **b**)

a. Mary has been to Beijing.	}	If a is true, b is necessarily true. If a is false, b may be true or false.
b. Mary has been to China.		
a. He has eaten steak.		
b. He has eaten meat.		

4. Phrasal presupposition (**a** presupposes **b**)

a. She cooked a delicious meal.	}	If a is true, b must be true. If a is false, b is still true.
b. She knows how to cook.		
a. Coco's bike needs to be repaired.		
b. Coco has a bike.		

5. Phrasal contradiction (**a** contradicts itself)
 - a. Mary is a vegetarian who eats meat.
 - a. Coco is married to a bachelor.
 } **a** is invariably false.

6. Semantically anomalous phrases (**a** is absurd)
 - a. Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.
 - a. The rain shouted in silence.
 } **a** presupposes a contradiction.

The truth conditions of the above examples may seem simple and obvious, but this is a huge step forward in our understanding of meaning. Whereas before we were analyzing the meaning of individual words, we can now look at entire sentences and derive meaning from them. The fact that we can take a sentence like “Coco’s bike needs to be repaired” and know that this means that Coco has a bike is actually an impressive semantic undertaking. We are deriving meaning from the sentence beyond that which the sentence is explicitly stating. In order to do this we must understand the semantic features of each of the words contained in the sentence, along with their lexical relations. Furthermore, we have to have an understanding of grammatical meaning as well.

Grammatical meaning refers to how well-formed a sentence is according to the grammatical conventions of the language. The sentence *She the book gave me* is not grammatically correct, however, we may still get some meaning from it. Compare that to the sentence *Gave book me the she*, which contains practically no meaning at all. So there are degrees of grammatical accuracy which will supply degrees of meaning. On the other hand, all of the sentences in examples 1-6 above are grammatically perfect, however they do not all have semantic meaning. The famous example from the linguist Noam Chomsky, which I used above, *colorless green ideas sleep furiously*, is one such sentence. Grammatically speaking, there is no problem with this sentence, yet semantically it makes no sense. This is because the words contained in the sentence cannot go together. Just to name a few of the semantic problems, ideas do not have colors; something cannot be green and colorless at the same time; ideas do not sleep, and so on. This tells us that a sentence must obey semantic

restrictions as well as have grammatical meaning. The **semantic restrictions** dictate which words are allowed to go together.

Phrasal semantics can get quite complex. As phrases become longer, the grammatical meaning and the sense relations can carry more information. To go deeper into analyzing meaning at the phrasal level would require the addition of syntax and grammar, which is beyond the scope of a chapter on semantics.

Semantic barriers

By now you've probably come to recognize that word meaning is not always clear or easily understood. There are a number of obstacles that can get in the way when one person wants to communicate a thought to another person. We encountered one such barrier early in this chapter when there was a slight miscommunication when conveying the idea of "dog" (figure 6.1). It's worth taking a moment to examine these types of **semantic barriers**, or misunderstandings that occur from the confusion of word meaning, because they can help us to better grasp what word meaning is all about.

Let's first look at the semantic barrier that occurred in figure 6.1 at the beginning of the chapter. The word *dog* by itself is an ambiguous label. **Ambiguous labels** are words that have the same conceptual meaning, but may have different subjective meanings. The conceptual meaning of *dog*, basically a domesticated canine, can be used to refer to any type of dog in the world. However, individual people have different experiences of "dog" and therefore may have slightly different understandings as to the meaning of the word as it pertains to their experiences. Generally, ambiguous labels do not result in very serious misunderstandings, and can easily be clarified by being more specific.

Another semantic barrier is **ambiguous intention**, which results from using homonyms and polysemic words. Without adequate context it can be very easy to misinterpret a word that has several different meanings. For example, some Americans are very fond of their right to "bear arms", which is sanctioned in the U.S. constitution. However, out of context this can be interpreted differently than "to possess weapons" due to the multiple meanings of *bear* and *arms* (see figure 6.4). This can occur at the phrasal level as well, such as in the example given in figure 6.5, which shows four different interpretations of the sentence "I saw bats."



Figure 6.4

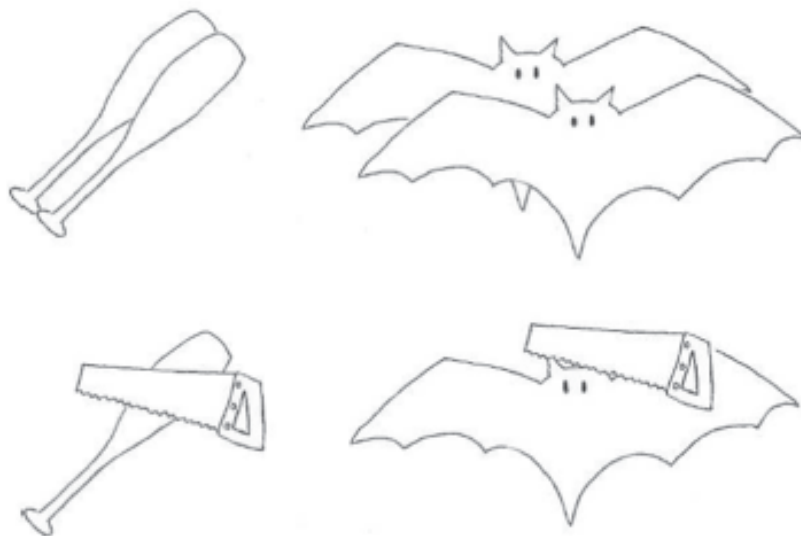


Figure 6.5

An additional form of the semantic barriers we encounter with words that have multiple meanings is called **reflected meaning**. In this case, the associative meaning of a word, sometimes called the connotation, interferes with (or reflects on) the intended meaning of the utterance.

For instance, the word *intercourse* has two different meanings, to communicate and to have sexual relations. Many people associate this word with sexuality, which interferes with the meaning of an utterance that uses it to mean communication, even if the context is obvious. Similarly, the word *gay*, which at one time had the single meaning of happy, nowadays more frequently means homosexual. The use of *gay* to mean happy now can easily interfere with the intended meaning due to its connotation.

The semantic barriers described above come from the word meaning itself. There are still other semantic barriers that cause misunderstanding. These include jargon, slang, or context-specific vocabulary that is unknown, or used in a way that is unfamiliar to the hearer/reader. Faulty translations are a form of semantic barrier, as can occur from one language to another or even from spoken language to written language. E-mails and text messages, for example, do not convey tone-of-voice or facial expressions, from which people derive a lot of meaning. It's important to keep semantic barriers in mind in order to communicate effectively.

Conclusion


We've come a long way and have learned a lot of new terms and ideas in this chapter. The meaning of words seems to be very obvious at first: after all, a dog is a dog, as has been said. However, I hope that you can see now that a dog (the referent) is only a *dog* (the word) in so far as our impression of it, and that actually, those domesticated canines that we commonly share our house with have nothing to do with the word *dog* beyond our use of it. Communication depends on effectively transmitting meaningful language between and among people. With so many factors that can contribute to meaning it's a wonder that people are able to communicate at all. Yet through semantics, with the careful analysis of words, the examination of their features, understanding how they relate to other words, and how they function in phrases, we can go a long way towards our goal of understanding meaning. But not all the way. In the next chapter you will be introduced to pragmatics which will take you the rest of the way down the path towards meaning.

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Review questions

- Which of the following is the conceptual meaning of the word *dog*?
 - A loveable pet
 - A domesticated canid, bred in many varieties
 - 
 - It depends on the person using the word
- Which of the following are semantic features for the word *coffee*?
 - +HOT +BEVERAGE +CAFFEINATED—SWEET
 - +HOT +BEVERAGE—CAFFEINATED +SWEET
 - +HOT—BEVERAGE +CAFFEINATED +SWEET
 - HOT +BEVERAGE +CAFFEINATED +SWEET
- Match the words on the right to their synonym on the left.

A. Die	___ Speculate
B. Depart	___ Bear
C. Carry	___ Fall
D. Autumn	___ Pass away
E. Wonder	___ Flee
F. Escape	___ Leave

4. Match the word pairs on the right to the correct lexical relation on the left
- | | |
|--------------------|------------------------|
| A. Mother/daughter | 1. Gradable antonym |
| B. Truck/lorry | 2. Relational antonym |
| C. Mango/apple | 3. Homophone |
| D. Young/old | 4. Stylistic synonym |
| E. Blew/blue | 5. Dialectical synonym |
| F. Kid/child | 6. Co-hyponym |
5. "He was in charge of overlooking the student's essay but he overlooked the spelling mistakes." What best describes the word *overlook*?
- A homophone
 - A meronym
 - A polysemic word
 - A synonym
6. Which of the following is entailed by the sentence "The queen of England is old"?
- The queen is going to die soon.
 - She has been queen for a very long time.
 - England has a queen.
 - The queen is royalty.

? DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The sentence *We saw her duck* can have three very different meanings. What are they? What kind of semantic barrier is this an example of?
2. Imagine you meet a woman who speaks a language you have never heard before. She points at a rabbit and says "frottage". What are some possible meanings of the word *frottage*? How might you go about communicating the meaning of rabbit to her?