INTRODUCTION TO LINGUISTICS II

ANNA PIATA

apiata@enl.uoa.gr
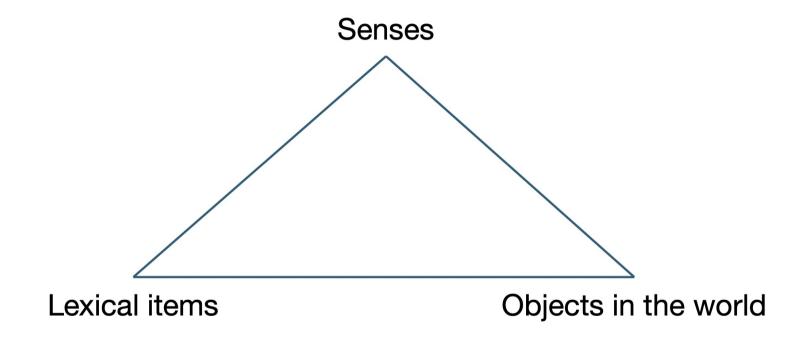
FACULTY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE
SPRING 2025
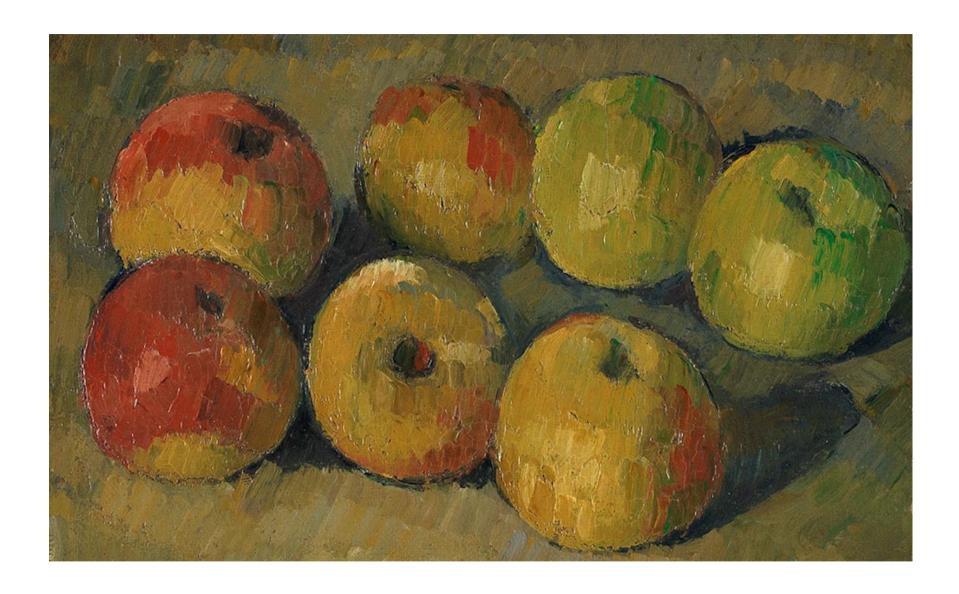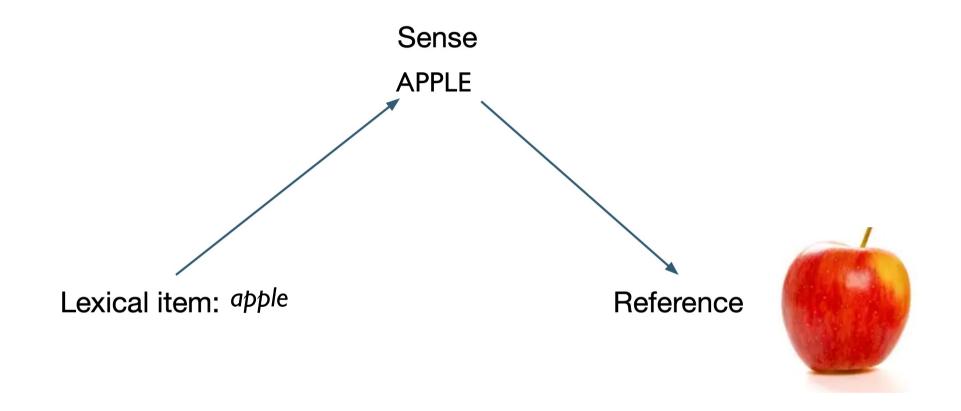
Α-ΚΑΡ, Π-Ω

LEXICAL MEANING: MAIN QUESTIONS

- What is word meaning? In other words, how can we define word meaning?

- What do we know when we know the meaning of a word?

- What (kind of) information must a speaker associate to the words of a language in order to be a competent user of its lexicon?

Senses

Lexical items   Objects in the world

Sense

APPLE

Lexical item: *apple*

Reference

WORD MEANING

- The study of word meaning is **crucial** to the inquiry into the fundamental properties of human language.

- But the notions of *word* and *word meaning* are **problematic** to pin down, and this is reflected in the difficulties one encounters in defining the basic terminology of lexical semantics.

PROBLEMS WITH DICTIONARY DEFINITIONS

- Circularity.

- Individual differences.

- The role of context in modifying word meaning.

- ➤ Therefore, our semantic theory needs to be **more complex** than simple definitions.

- Is there a suitable way to define word meaning **independent of language**?

A SOLUTION

- A way to meet these problems is by characterising word meaning using **a semantic metalanguage**.

  - That is, a way of "translating", so to speak, meaning into a form that **is language-neutral**.

- In this way, we can account in a principled way for a word's **denotation** (= its literal, descriptive meaning, known as conceptual meaning).

  - As opposed to its **connotation** (= the idiosyncratic, emotive or other associations the word evokes).

- A word's denotation is shared by all speakers and is stored in their **mental lexicon**.

  - The lexicon corresponds to a speaker's **'mental dictionary'**, organized into lexical entries, which contain information about word types, known as lexemes.

- We can therefore assume that speakers have a stock of **concepts** in their mental lexicon.

  - That is, the meaning of *apple* is the concept APPLE.

TODAY'S TOPICS

- Semantic features.

- Semantic/Thematic roles.

➢ Reading: Yule's Chapter 9, p. 112-116.

SEMANTICS

SEMANTIC FEATURES

SEMANTIC FEATURES: DEFINITION

- The meaning of a word can be thought of as the sum of its semantic properties, which can be expressed in terms of semantic features:

  - The feature that the noun *dog* has is "+animate" (= denotes an animate being) and the feature that the noun *apple* has is "−animate" (= does not denote an animate being).

- We can then use this idea to describe part of the meaning of words as either having (+) *or* not having (−) that particular feature.

  - Features such as "+animate, −animate," "+human, −human," "+female, −female," for example, can be treated as the basic elements involved in differentiating the meaning of each word in a language from every other word.

- This yields a procedure for analyzing meaning into its crucial elements or features.

  - This helps us to *differentiate* the meaning of one word from another.

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF *GIRL?*

- From a feature analysis like this, we can say that at least part of the meaning of the word *girl* in English involves the elements [+human, +female, −adult].

- *woman*

  [+animate], [+human], [+female], [+adult]

- *boy*

  [+animate], [+human], [-female], [-adult]

- *horse*

  [+animate], [-human], [-female], [+adult], [+equine]

SEMANTIC FEATURE ANALYSIS

	table	horse	boy	man	girl	woman
animate	−	+	+	+	+	+
human	−	−	+	+	+	+
female	−	−	−	−	+	+
adult	−	+	−	+	−	+

SEMANTIC FEATURES: MERITS

- In this way, we can also characterize the feature that is crucially required in a noun in order for it to appear as the subject of a particular verb, supplementing the syntactic analysis with semantic features.

- *The _____ is reading the newspaper.*

   N [+human]

- This approach would give us the ability to predict which nouns make this sentence semantically odd. Some examples would be *table*, *horse* and *hamburger*, because none of them have the required feature [+human].

SEMANTIC FEATURES: MERITS

- Semantic feature (or componential) analysis allows us to:

a) describe meaning objectively and rigorously;

b) distinguish the meanings of words which are very close (e.g., *woman*, *girl*);

c) define semantic classes, i.e. groups of words that share one or more features;

d) identify semantic oddities and account for acceptable and non-acceptable combinations:

> e.g. , *The hamburger ate the man
>
> *The bachelor is pregnant
>
> *My dog writes poetry

SEMANTIC FEATURES: PROBLEMS

- However, there are many words in a language that cannot be defined in terms of semantic features:

  a) functional morphemes (e.g., *the*, *and*, etc.)

  b) abstract concepts (e.g., *love*, *peace*, etc.)

  c) common (very frequent) support verbs (e.g., *keep*, *take*, *put*, etc.).

- A rather strict, narrow view of words as **containers of meaning**.

SEMANTIC FEATURES: DISCUSSION

- Consider the cliché phrase: "*Boys will be boys*". What does this expression mean? What does this imply for an analysis of word meaning in terms of semantic features?

- "*The Pope is a bachelor*": Why such an expression is odd and not acceptable?

SEMANTIC FEATURES

➢ <u>Exercises 1-4</u>

SEMANTICS

SEMANTIC/THEMATIC ROLES

SYNTAX-SEMANTICS INTERFACE

- Consider the following sentences:

  ?The apple ate the hay.

  ?The dog read the newspaper.

  ?Definiteness melted in the sun.

- Syntactically well formed, but semantically odd. Why?

- Meaning allows us to account for the oddity of sentences as the ones above.

SEMANTIC FEATURES VS SEMANTIC ROLES

- Semantic features approach:

  - Words are thought of as 'containers' of meaning.

- Semantic/Thematic roles approach:

  - Words can be thought of in terms of the 'roles' they fulfill in the situation described in a sentence.

AN EXAMPLE

The cat chased the mouse.

- One way to analyze the semantic structure of sentences is to **start with the verb** as the central element and define the semantic roles required by that verb.

  - This is sometimes called "*theta assignment*".

- There is an entity that carries out the action (the agent)

- There is an entity that is affected by the action (the theme, or patient)

SEMANTIC/THEMATIC ROLES

- There is a small set of semantic/thematic roles:

    - agent and theme

    - instrument and experiencer

    - location, source and goal/recipient

- Semantic roles are assigned mostly by *verbs* and *prepositions*.

AGENT AND THEME

- Agent: the entity that performs an action (prototypically human, but not necessarily so)

  The boy ate his lunch.

  The cat meowed pathetically.

  A passing car injured the boy.

  The wind blew the paper off the table.

- Theme: the entity that is affected by the action, involved in the action, or is described by in the sentence (in copula constructions with the verb "to be")

  The boy ate his lunch.

  A passing car injured the boy.

  The wind blew the paper off the table.

  The book is easy to read.

  The man killed himself.

ACTIVE VS PASSIVE VOICE

- Compare the following sentences:

  The dog bit the man.
  The man was bitten by the dog.

- The referential equivalence of active and passive can be explained through the semantic roles assigned by the corresponding verb and the passive construction:

  *The dog (<**agent**) bit the man (<**theme**).*
  *The man (<**theme**) was bitten by the dog (<**agent**).*

EXPERIENCER AND INSTRUMENT

- **Experiencer**: the entity that has a perception, or feeling, or maintains a state

  I feel happy.

  Did you hear that noise?

  These students study linguistics.

  Mary enjoyed the party.

- **Instrument**: the entity used by an agent in order to do something

  He ate his soup with a spoon.

  He went to London by bus.

LOCATION, SOURCE, AND GOAL

- **Location**: where an entity is

  There's a book <u>on the coffee table</u>.

  The students work out <u>at the gym</u>.

- **Source**: where an entity moves from (includes metaphorical origin)

  John travelled <u>from Paris</u> to Athens.

  I borrowed this book <u>from Peter</u>.

- **Goal/Recipient**: where an entity moves to (includes metaphorical destination/recipient)

  John travelled from Paris <u>to Athens</u>.

  John gave the book <u>to Mary</u>.

Mary   saw   a fly   on the wall.

EXPERIENCER   THEME   LOCATION

She   borrowed   a magazine   from George.

AGENT   THEME   SOURCE

She   squashed   the bug   with the magazine.

AGENT   THEME   INSTRUMENT

She   handed   the magazine   back to George.

AGENT   THEME   GOAL

"Gee thanks," said George.

                                    AGENT

- *[The window]$_{pat}$ broke*
- *[A rock]$_{inst}$ broke [the window]$_{pat}$*
- *[John]$_{ag}$ broke [the window]$_{pat}$ [with a rock]$_{inst}$*

- *[Peter]$_{ag}$ gave [Mary]$_{rec}$ [the book]$_{pat}$*
- *[Mary]$_{rec}$ received [the book]$_{pat}$ [from Peter]$_{ag}$*

SEMANTIC ROLES

➢ Exercises 5-9

SUMMARY

- We can think of the conceptual meaning of words in terms of:

  - the crucial features that differentiate the meaning of words from that of other words.

  - the roles that words fulfil in the situation described by a sentence.