

Semantics

1. Definition of semantics

Semantics is the branch of linguistics that studies the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences in language. It examines how language represents ideas, objects, actions, and relationships—essentially, how we use words and structures to communicate meaning.

Key points:

Semantics looks at both the meanings of individual words (lexical semantics) and how those meanings combine in sentences (compositional semantics).

It addresses questions like: What does a word mean? How do words relate to each other? How is meaning affected by context?

2. Sense vs. Reference

These two concepts are fundamental in semantics and help us understand how language connects with the world and with itself.

2.1 Sense

Definition:

The "sense" of a word or phrase is its meaning as understood through its relationships with other words in the language. It's the mental concept or the system of associations that a word evokes in speakers' minds.

Example:

The sense of the word "cat" includes the ideas of "a small, furry, domesticated animal, usually kept as a pet, that meows and purrs."

Sense is about the internal meaning and associations of a word, not about what specific thing in the world it points to.

3. Reference

3.1 Definition:

The "reference" of a word or phrase is the actual object, person, or thing in the real world (or possible world) that the word identifies or points to.

Example:

The reference of "the cat on the sofa" is the specific animal currently sitting on the sofa in your house.

Reference is about the real-world entity (or entities) that a linguistic expression picks out.

4. Synonymy

Definition:

Synonymy is the relationship between words that have the same or very similar meanings.

Examples:

Big / large

Begin / start

Purchase / buy

Perfect synonyms (words that are identical in every context) are rare. Usually, synonyms differ in connotation, formality, or usage.

Example: "Big" and "large" are usually synonyms, but we say "big mistake" and "large amount," not vice versa.

5. Antonymy

Definition:

Antonymy is the relationship between words with opposite meanings.

Types:

Gradable antonyms: Words that are opposites on a scale (e.g., hot/cold, happy/sad).

Complementary antonyms: No middle ground; if one applies, the other cannot (e.g., alive/dead, married/single).

Relational antonyms: Pairs with an opposite relationship (e.g., parent/child, teacher/student).

Examples:

Old / young

Full / empty

Win / lose

6. Hyponymy

Definition:

Hyponymy is a hierarchical relationship where the meaning of one word (the hyponym) is included in the meaning of another (the hypernym).

Examples:

"Dog" is a hyponym of "animal." ("Animal" is the hypernym.)

"Rose" is a hyponym of "flower."

In sentences:

A rose is a type of flower.

A sparrow is a type of bird.

7. Meronymy

Definition:

Meronymy is the part-whole relationship between words.

Examples:

"Wheel" is a meronym of "car."

"Leaf" is a meronym of "tree."

In sentences:

A wheel is part of a car.

A branch is part of a tree.

8. Polysemy

Definition:

Polysemy occurs when a single word has multiple related meanings.

Examples:

"Head" (part of the body, leader of a group, top of something)

"Book" (a physical object, to reserve something: "book a ticket")

Note:

The meanings are related, not random.

9. Homonymy

Definition:

Homonymy refers to words that share the same form (spelling or pronunciation) but have unrelated meanings.

Types:

Homographs: Same spelling, different meanings (e.g., "lead" (to guide) vs. "lead" (the metal))

Homophones: Same pronunciation, different meanings/spellings (e.g., "pair"/"pear"/"pare")

Examples:

"Bat" (flying mammal) and "bat" (sports equipment)

"Bank" (financial institution) and "bank" (side of a river)

10. Collocation

Definition:

Collocation refers to the tendency of certain words to occur together more frequently than by chance.

Examples:

"Make a decision" (not do a decision)

"Strong tea" (not powerful tea)

"Fast food," "take a risk," "heavy rain"

Importance:

Using correct collocations makes speech and writing sound natural. Incorrect collocations can sound awkward or wrong.

11. Lexical Ambiguity

11.1 Definition

Lexical ambiguity arises when a single word has two or more possible meanings. The context usually determines which meaning is intended.

11.2 Types of Lexical Ambiguity

Homonymy: Same form, unrelated meanings (e.g., "bank" as a financial institution vs. "bank" as the side of a river).

Polysemy: Same word, related meanings (e.g., "paper" as material, "paper" as a newspaper).

Examples

"Bat"

Animal (a flying mammal)

Sports equipment (used in baseball or cricket)

"Light"

Not heavy

Illumination

How to Spot Lexical Ambiguity

Ask: "Can this word mean more than one thing here?"

Context is key:

She saw a bat in the cave. (animal)

He hit the ball with a bat. (sports equipment)

11.3. Structural (Syntactic) Ambiguity

Definition

Structural (or syntactic) ambiguity occurs when a sentence or phrase can be parsed (analyzed) in more than one way due to its structure, leading to different meanings.

Examples

"I saw the man with the telescope."

Did you use the telescope to see the man?

Or did you see a man who had a telescope?

"Old men and women"

Are both men and women old?

Or just the men, with "women" being of any age?

How to Spot Structural Ambiguity

Look for sentences that can be grouped or divided in more than one way, altering the meaning.

Classic Examples

“Visiting relatives can be boring.”

(Is it boring to visit relatives, or are the relatives who visit boring?)

“The chicken is ready to eat.”

(Is the chicken going to eat, or is it ready to be eaten?)

11.4. Semantic Ambiguity

11.5 Definition

Semantic ambiguity arises when a sentence or phrase allows for multiple interpretations, even if the words and structure are clear. This often results from vague or context-dependent language.

Examples

“Everyone loves someone.”

Does everyone love the same person?

Or does each person love someone different?

“He promised to call her tomorrow.”

Will he call her tomorrow, or did he make the promise tomorrow?

How Semantic Ambiguity Occurs

Scope ambiguity: “All students read a book.” (Did they all read the same book, or did each read a different one?)

Unclear referents: “John told his friend he was late.” (Who was late—John or his friend?)

11.6. Entailment

11.6.1 Definition

Entailment is a logical relationship where if one sentence (A) is true, then another sentence (B) must also be true.

Examples

A: "John is a bachelor."

B: "John is unmarried."

(If A is true, B must be true.)

A: "She killed the spider."

B: "The spider is dead."

Key Points

Entailment is asymmetric: If A entails B, B does not necessarily entail A.

Test: Can you imagine A being true and B being false? If not, A entails B.

11.7. Presupposition

11.7.1 Definition

Presupposition is background information that is assumed to be true by both the speaker and listener for a sentence to make sense.

Examples

"Jane stopped smoking."

(Presupposes that Jane used to smoke.)

"Mary's brother is a doctor."

(Presupposes that Mary has a brother.)

Key Points

Presuppositions often survive negation:

"Jane didn't stop smoking" still presupposes that Jane used to smoke.

Common triggers: definite descriptions ("the car"), change-of-state verbs ("stop," "begin"), factive verbs ("know," "realize").

11.8. Contradiction

11.8.1 Definition

A contradiction is a relationship where if one sentence is true, the other must be false.

Examples

A: "The cat is alive."

B: "The cat is dead."

(Both cannot be true at the same time.)

A: "All students passed the exam."

B: "Some students failed the exam."

Key Points

Contradictory sentences cannot both logically be true at once.

Contradictions are important for reasoning, logic, and language testing.

11.9 Paraphrase

11.9.1 Definition

Paraphrase refers to two sentences that have the same meaning in all contexts; they are different ways of expressing the same proposition.

Examples

A: "The boy kicked the ball."

B: "The ball was kicked by the boy."

A: "She gave him a book."

B: "She handed a book to him."

Paraphrases can differ in structure, wording, or style, but the meaning remains unchanged.

Paraphrasing is an important skill in reading comprehension, summarizing, and translation