LESSON FOUR IN LINGUISTICS

Part Two

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(to group **1 . 2 . 3 . 4 . 5 & 6**)

Semantics

Introduction

Semantics is the study of the linguistic meaning of morphemes, words , phrases and sentences.
Part one of this lesson focused on the different types of lexical relationships (synonymy , antonymy ...etc) highlighting the fact that :
1- lexical semantics deals with the meanings of words
(what words conventionally mean) and the meaning relationships among words (synonymy , antonymy ...etc)
eg : The word dog is a symbol to a concept - The mental or psychic image - that the symbol dog strikes in our brain . This happens because symbols are conventionally shared words by the users of a common language to denote the meanings they make of them. Clearly the speakers of a language agree implicitly on their meanings . Meanings can shift depending on context . They can also take extra meanings ascribed to them in the course of time (conceptual and associative meaning) .

So meaning transcends the threefold relationship described by Ferdinand de Saussure between the linguistic sign , signifier & signified , also by C K ogden & I A Richards (1920) between the linguistic symbol , referent and reference (the linguistic item , the thing referred to and the individual's concept of the referent) .

Please feel the difference in the sentences below :

a - My dog does not have all its teeth yet .

b - She called him a dirty dog

in **"a"** the animal is too young it does not have all its teeth .

in **"b"** an insult for wrong doing .

Our understanding of the two sentences is sensitive to the meaning of the individual words and to the structure in which they occur. It is the result of both lexical and grammatical meaning.

We have also followed meaning relationships among words . Here are some examples :

Synonyms are words which relate to other words, their equivalents or their substitutes in meaning
 (a scoundrel **=** a rogue)

Antonyms are words which relate to other words , their opposites. They contrast with them in meaning . (cunning **#** guileless)

Hyponyms are words which relate to other words with which they are members of the same system **ex :** son , daughter , niece , nephew ..etc **=>** Co-hyponyms (kinship terms)

The meanings of many words in language are determined by their place in different words systems they are part of semantic fields **eg:**
 elm ,ash , willow , pine , bread fruit ..etc **=>** plant (tree)

Part Two deals with the meaning of syntactic units larger than a word , longer stretches of speech involving phrases and sentences. It is an attempt to describe explicitly how speakers of a language compose and understand sentences in a way that corresponds to their semantic knowledge. It is the concern of compositional semantics, also known as " phrasal & sentential semantics .

It relies in its description on a technique devised by American anthropologists in 1950 and introduced in linguistics years later: componential analysis (semantic features) . In addition to truth conditional semantics (truth value of sentences).

Modern linguists seek to understand and describe clearly the knowledge that native speakers rely on to compose , accept , reject sentences and understand infinite numbers of them . Briefly , to speak , learn and assign semantic interpretations to phrases and sentences in their native language .

2 - Compositional Semantics

Compositional semantics examines the building up of phrasal and sentential meaning from the meanings of smaller units by means of semantic rules.

It happens when the meaning of a sentence (or a phrase) does not follow from the meaning of its parts. The native speaker regards it anomalous , or incoherent and rejects it **eg:** Chomsky's invented sentence :

Colorless green ideas sleep furiously .

His example does not adhere to the semantic principle of compositionality which regards the meaning of a sentence as a result of the meanings of its parts plus how they are combined structurally .

Colorless green......furiously)) obeys the syntactic rules of English : **N P** (colorless green ideas) **+ V P** (sleep furiously)

N P **=** adjectives colorless & green **+** Noun ideas

V P **=** verb sleep **+** adverb furiously

It is semantically anomalous . The meaning of the sentence is not compositional .It cannot be obtained from the meanings of its smaller parts :

(colorless green) (green ideas) (ideas sleep) (sleep furiously)

Chomsky's invented sentence evidenced the interdependence of semantics and syntax .

Linguists consider our knowledge of language + our knowledge of the world the key that leads us to different interpretations of sentences . We may suppose in this case the above sentence to be either :

1- a riddle and perhaps it is . Please read F R . Palmer 1976 . P 134 : "Chomsky's sentence can be (and has been) given an interpretation , far fetched though it has to be" .

2- an example to evoke a long-standing problem of semantic study tied to the rectitude of words , a question raised in Plato's Cratylus with a lot of irony and humor .

3- Or dismiss the fact as it came in "Through the looking glass" of the mathematician Louis Carrol (1871) :

" when I use a word" Humpty Dumpty said , in a rather scornful tone " it means just what I choose it to mean " - neither more nor less . (J.Lyons 1981 p 176)

Conversely , Confucius believed that when words are misused nothing can be on a sound footing . For him morality and social order require precision of thought . Indeed ! (F.West 1975)

Linguists envisaged our knowledge of sentence meaning to include knowing fundamentally :

-The truth conditions of declarative sentences :

 Cats are domestic animals (truth value of sentences)

- When one sentence **entails** another sentence :

Cats are domestic animals entails cats are animals .

He lives in Paris entails he lives in France.

- When two sentences are paraphrases (synonymous) they are synonymous if they entail each other :

The lesson was written by the teacher entails the teacher wrote The lesson.

- When two sentences are contradictory (when one is true, the other is false) :

 Yasmeen is blond # yasmeen is swarthy .

- When a sentence is a tautology (a limited number of sentences which are always true no matter the circumstances . Their meanings are directly reflected by the meanings of their words ex :

Snow is white.

Doomsday is the day of judgment .

A square has four straight equal sides .

- A contradiction : opposite to tautology **eg :**

Circles are triangular (false)

A square is a round shape (false)

-When a sentence is ambiguous and more . **eg :**

His wife cannot bear children . Ambiguity arises here because **bear** has more than one meaning :

a- His wife cannot give birth to children.

b- His wife cannot (stand) tolerate children.

(listed down by V Fromkin page 176)

So what is the knowledge of the language and of the world that gives native language speakers sway over the linguistic operations presented above ?

The answer to this question centers about why do we have these intuition ?

a- Componential Analysis

It was first used to analyze kinship vocabulary in the field of anthropology. Its implementation in the study of semantics proved useful to some extent in analyzing word meaning in terms of a finite set of components : **Semantic features** , they are conceptual elements by which we understand the meaning of words and hence of phrases and sentences. They were believed to offer a universal framework from handling meaning . Words are identified in terms of : (+ human) (- human) (+animate) (- animate) (+ female) (- female) (+ male) (- male) (+ adult) (- adult) (+ concrete) (-concrete) (+ abstract) (- abstract) (+ count) (- count) (+ mass) (- mass)... etc

eg : girl = (+ human) (+ female) (- adult)

man = (+ human) (+ male) (+adult).

mosque ,car, plate, garden ,coat => **concrete** (-inanimate)

passion,charisma,idea,pity,greed=> **abstract** (-inanimate)

dog, potato,shoe,car => **count** (+ concrete)

oatmeal,honey,sugar,sand => **mass** (+ concrete)

Some components are treated as binary opposites **eg:**

 girl **=** (+ human) (+female) (+ adult)

boy **=** (+human) (+ male) (- adult)

=> boy and girl contrast in one feature male/female

Semantic features provide an explanation to our intuition towards oddness and anomaly eg :

He drank a cake. (semantically anomalous)

The components of the conceptual meaning of the word **cake** fail to agree with the components of the verb **drink** drink requires a unit denoting **liquid** such as water , juice , Coke... etc . But not a unit denoting **solid** such as cake , bread , Apple … etc

Another example : The rain slept (semantically anomalous) **sleep** requires **an animate subject** such as cat , mam , the girl...etc

The technique of analyzing meaning in terms of semantic features show that native speakers rely on selectional features / restriction rules to make their judgement of sentences and phrases .

b- Semantic Roles

Semantic properties are part of words meanings that reflect or display explicitly our knowledge about what words mean and hence their combination in phrases and sentences.

Words are not only constrainers of meaning. They fulfill roles within the situation described by a sentence .

  For example many roles are identified for noun phrases : agent, theme, instrument ,goal , source , experiencer and location . Here are some **examples** :

-The girl dropped **a coin** .

The girl **=>** agent (The entity that performs the action , the doer)

a coin **=>** theme (The entity that is affected by the action)

-The girl hit a little ball **with a racket** .

The girl **=** agent

a little ball **=** theme

with a racket **=** instrument (entity by means of which the action is accomplished)

-The girl threw a little ball **to her sister** .

to her sister **=** goal (to where an entity moves)

-The student borrowed the book **from the library**.

from the library **=** source (where the action began , originated or moved from) .

-The yelling girl frightened **the baby** .

the baby **=** the experiencer (entity receiving sensory input)

-The girl dropped a coin **in the pond** .

in the pond **=** location (where an entity is = on , in, down...etc)

c- Metaphors and Idioms

Like anomalous sentences , other types do not lend themselves to easy interpretation : meaning in metaphors and idioms is not compositional

1-metaphors : word(s) indicating something different from the literal meaning eg :

he is a demon (cruel)

a heart of Stone (unmoved)

The iron Lady (strong and determined)

a blue stocking (well educated woman who is more interested in ideas and studying than in traditionally feminine things)

2- idioms : a succession of words whose total meaning cannot be deduced from the meanings of the individual words **eg :**

- Someone is toast **=** finished & ruined no longer important or powerful .

- To separate the wheat from the offensive chaff = distinguish the valuable from the worthless .

- To be the toast of the town = be liked and admired.

OXFORD DICTIONARY 2005.

Metaphors and idioms must be learned as they are. They are culturally conceived .

3 - Pragmatics

It is the study of the relationship between **signs** and **behavior** and how context affects meaning .

Pragmatics is concerned with the behavior that translates the words concretely and effectively by actualizing the meaning potential corresponding to the definition of language as a system of communication

Briefly it means "doing what with words" in a practical sense

(JL Austin , speech Acts : reference , illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect . **Eg :** interpersonal communication :

  - Speaker : Give me a hand , please !
  - Hearer's response = helping act , the performed action has to be inferred from the context in which the words are uttered + shared social and cultural knowledge provide clues : it is not your hand that you give but your help.
  - In a context of traffic , drivers and pedestrians prudent behavior is inferred from traffic signs : lights color implying go or stop.
  - Needless to expatiate upon this part , you will study pragmatics as a separate module .

Conclusion

With the heightened research in lexicogrammar & the introduction of componential Analysis in the study of semantics, approaches to the description of meaning multiplied. They offered a clearer view of the immanent and converging elements in the native language speaker's Linguistic behaviour: speaking, understanding , assigning interpretations & making judgements .There is more to glean From future research . Semantics is still a field in its infancy.

This fifth part makes the end of the first year program. It is worth reminding you that all the lessons were conceived micro-linguistically (learning about language itself) . In the years ahead , you will be introduced to interdisciplinary studies involving language and other subjects . The macro-linguistic scope regarded the mutual interests and benefits of the study of language with other disciplines such as biology , psychology, sociology ...etc their overlapping lead to the emergence of new fields : Biolinguistics Psycholinguistics , Sociolinguistics... etc (DETAILED ACCOUNT IN DAVID CRYSTAL 1971 CHAPTER 5 PAGE 248 + J LYONS 1981 CH 9 , P 266) .

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