Mustansiriyah University

College of Arts

Department of English Language and Literature

3rd Year Linguistics

Textbook: Linguistics (Aichison, 2010)

Lecture Title: The Study of Meaning

- The aim of this lecture is to introduce the student the main concepts in semantics. It shows how the meanings of 'lexical items' (words) are linked together in intricate lexical structures. It also outlines how the meaning of sentences might be handled.
- Humans are able to distinguish meaningful sentences from contradictory or meaningless ones. They can also recognize sentences which have similar meanings, and can detect ambiguous sentences.
- Semantics can be defined as a branch of linguistics that deals with meaning; it seeks to understand why certain words and constructions can be combined together in a semantically acceptable way, while others cannot. Therefore, linguistic meaning involves two levels: lexical meaning and sentence meaning.
- There are three preliminary points that needs to be clarified when studying lexical meaning. The study of lexical meaning is mainly concerned with content words rather than function words. Second, the focus is often on descriptive meaning of words rather than their connotative meanings. Third, we must be aware that meaning is double-faced, as one element of the word meaning is part of a language system, but it is used to refer to things in the outside world.
- Linguists are interested primarily in the relationship of lexical items to one another, and only secondarily in their relationship to the world.
- Linguists believe that the best way to deal with lexical meaning in a language system is by identifying the semantic relationship between different lexical items (words). These relationships include: semantic fields, synonymy, opposites (antonym), and classification (inclusion).
- Semantic field is a group of lexical items seem to belong together in a lexical structure or a group. Each lexical item (word) in a group can be defined by its place in relation to the other members of the group.
- Semantic field can give a useful picture of the way in which a particular semantic area is divided up. It would be wrong, however, to assume that lexical items cover an entire field like a smooth mosaic. In fact, there are plenty of gaps and overlaps.
- To cope with overlap in semantic fields, linguists hoped that lexical meaning might be possible to be deconstructed into its basic elements in a similar fashion to phonemes in phonology. Therefore, they proposed a method known as 'componential analysis' to split up the components of lexical items to cope with the problem of overlap in semantic fields. However, it is somewhat inaccurate to speak

of the meaning of words as being 'composed' out of a heap of separate components.

- Synonymy is another lexical relation that clarifies how lexical items can be linked to gather. Lexical items can be regarded as synonymous if they can be interchanged without altering the meaning of an utterance. Perfect synonyms are very rare, because it is very unusual for two lexical items to have exactly the same meanings in all contexts. Lexical items are usually synonymous only in certain contexts.
- Opposites refer to different words that are in an incompatible binary relationship. Opposites can be of three kinds. First, absolute opposites in which the negative implies the other; Second, not absolute opposites where they are relative to some standards; and finally, converse opposites in which the choice of one opposite rather than another depends on the angle from which you view the situation being described.
- Classification (inclusion) is another lexical relationship to study lexical meaning; classification is a relationship between different lexical items in which these lexical items are arranged in a hierarchical structure.
- Fuzziness means that words often have fuzzy edges or no clear boundaries.
- A family resemblance means that a word, such as furniture, covers a whole range of things, which share characteristics with one another, as do members of a family. Yet it may be impossible to think up a set of characteristics which describes them all.
- Fuzziness and family relationships provide problems for understanding lexical meaning, because they make it hard to categorize lexical items in clear-cut lexical relationships. These problems indicate that it is impossible to set down fixed meanings for all words.
- Humans tend to understand and memorize meaning in terms of prototypes. Prototypes represent idealized images of concepts or items in the world; thinking of lexical meaning in terms of prototypes is what gives linguistics meaning its flexibility.
- Humans do not have fixed meanings in their minds; they mostly work from prototypes or typical examples and build themselves mental models which incorporate them in order to represent and talk about the world around them.
- The term 'representation' does not only covers subconscious or inherited representations, but also those consciously put across by, say, politicians, when they invent euphemisms such as pin-point strikes to lead people into believing that bombs can be precisely dropped on particular targets.
- Lexical meaning tells us quite a lot about the meaning of sentences, since sentences are individual words linked together by means of the syntax. The amalgamation of lexical meaning and syntax does not only enable us to reject anomalous utterances, it also allows us to make deductions about normal sentences. These deductions are called entailments.
- Entailment refers to the deduction of extra meaning that this not explicitly included in the lexical items (words) used in the sentence. The logical relationship of entailment can enable us to understand why some sentences are contradictory.
- Some semanticists hope that formal logical systems will on day handle semantic representations adequately, and also the meaning of sentences. Formal logical

systems can (in theory) provide formulae for the representation of the sentences of any language, in order to show the logical relationships which exist between sentences, and to show certain ambiguities quite clearly.