

# Semantics

## Introduction: What is Semantics?

**Definition:** Semantics is the study of meaning in language how words, phrases, and sentences convey meaning.

### Why is it important?

- Helps us understand how language communicates ideas.
- Explains why some sentences are meaningful and others are not.
- Crucial in translation, linguistics, AI, and philosophy.

Example:

✓ The dog chased the cat. (Meaningful)

✗ Chased the dog cat the. (Not meaningful)

Question:

What do you think is the difference between word meaning and sentence meaning?

## Types of Meaning

Semantics focuses on two main types of meaning:

### A. Conceptual Meaning (Literal Meaning)

The literal, dictionary definition of a word or phrase. It refers to the core, objective meaning that does not change across contexts. Example: Mother = Female parent.

### B. Associative Meaning (Emotional or Cultural Meaning)

The additional, often emotional or cultural, meanings that a word carries. These are subjective connotations that go beyond the literal definition. Example: Mother can imply love, care, or strictness. Home can mean comfort, warmth, or security.

### Example Discussion:

How does the word snake make you feel? (Danger, betrayal, etc.)

This shows how words carry more than just their dictionary meaning. The word ‘snake’ literally means a reptile (conceptual meaning), but many people associate it with danger or betrayal (associative meaning). This is why words can evoke emotions and cultural associations. For example, in some cultures, a snake represents wisdom or rebirth, while in others, it represents deception (like in religious stories). This proves that meaning is not just about definitions but also associations and context.”

### **Example Discussion 2:**

Compare: Thin vs. Skinny (Same meaning, different associations).

‘Thin’ and ‘skinny’ both refer to body size (synonyms in lexical meaning), but they have different associations (associative meaning). ‘Thin’ is neutral or even positive (‘She has a thin figure’), while ‘skinny’ often suggests being too thin in an unhealthy way (‘He looks skinny and weak’). This shows how words can carry positive, negative, or neutral connotations, even when their basic meaning is the same.

These examples show that meaning is not only about definitions but also about feelings, culture, and context.

### **Lexical Relations**

Definition: The relationships between words based on their meanings. This includes how words relate as synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, homonyms, and homophones.

**1. Synonyms:** Words that have similar or nearly identical meanings (Same or similar meaning).

Big – Large, Begin – Start

**2. Antonyms:** Words that have opposite meanings (Opposite meaning).

Hot ✗ Cold, Happy ✗ Sad

**Types:**

- **Gradable:** Hot ↔ Cold (Can have warmer or cooler in between).
- **Non-gradable:** Dead ↔ Alive (No in-between state).

**3. Hyponyms:** Words that denote a specific instance or member of a broader category (Specific vs. General).

Dog is a hyponym of Animal.

Rose is a hyponym of Flower.

#### **4. Homonyms & Homophones:**

**Homonyms:** Words that share the same spelling and pronunciation but have different meanings. (bat = animal or sports equipment).

**Homophones:** Words that sound the same when spoken but may differ in spelling and meaning. (see & sea).

Question:

Can you think of more examples of synonyms and antonyms?

#### **Semantic Roles (Who Does What in a Sentence?)**

**Definition:** The functions that entities (typically expressed by nouns) play within a sentence.

**1. Agent:** The doer of the action.

- John kicked the ball.

**2. Theme:** The entity affected by the action.

- John kicked the ball.

**3. Instrument:** The tool or means used to perform an action.

- She wrote with a pen.

**4. Experiencer:** The person feeling something.

- Sarah heard a noise.

**5. Location:** Where the action happens.

- She is in the library.

**6. Goal:** The endpoint of an action.

- He went to Paris.

**7. Source:** The starting point of an action.

- She moved from London.

### **Practice Exercise:**

Identify the agent, theme, and goal in:

“The child threw the ball into the basket.”

“The teacher gave the student a book.”

### **Ambiguity & Meaning Shifts**

Definition: The occurrence of a word, phrase, or sentence having more than one interpretation.

**A. Lexical Ambiguity** (When a word has multiple meanings.)

- She saw a bat. (Animal or sports equipment?)

**B. Structural Ambiguity** (When the sentence structure allows for different interpretations.)

- I saw the man with a telescope.

Meaning 1: I used a telescope to see the man.

Meaning 2: The man had a telescope.

### **Discussion:**

Can you think of an ambiguous sentence?

## **Prototypes & Categorization**

Since not all words fit perfectly into categories.

**Prototype Theory:** We recognize the “best example” of a category.

**Prototype:** Are the best or most typical examples of a category that help define what it means.

- Birds: A robin is a better example than a penguin.
- Furniture: A chair is a better example than a rug.