

Universidad de Los Andes
Facultad de Humanidades y Educación
Escuela de Idiomas Modernos

Unit 1: Semantic Relationships

Semantic relationships are the associations that there exist between the meanings of words (semantic relationships at word level), between the meanings of phrases, or between the meanings of sentences (semantic relationships at phrase or sentence level). Following is a description of such relationships.

Semantic Relationships at Word Level

At word level, we will study semantic relationships like the following: synonymy, antonymy, homonymy, polysemy and metonymy.

Synonymy

Synonymy is the semantic relationship that exists between two (or more) words that have the same (or nearly the same) meaning and belong to the same part of speech, but are spelled differently. In other words, we can say that synonymy is the semantic equivalence between lexical items. The (pairs of) words that have this kind of semantic relationship are called **synonyms**, or are said to be **synonymous**. E.g.,

big = large	hide = conceal	small = little
couch = sofa	to begin = to start	kind = courteous
beginning = start	to cease = to stop	fast = quickly = rapidly

Pairs of words that are synonymous are believed to share all (or almost all) their semantic features or properties. However, no two words have exactly the same meaning in all the contexts in which they can occur. For example, the verbs *employ* and *use* are synonymous in the expression *We used/employed effective strategies to solve the problem*; however, only *use* can be used in the following sentence: *We used a jimmy bar to open the door*. If we used *employ*, the sentence would sound awkward **We employed a jimmy bar to open the door*. In short, we can say that there are no **absolute synonyms**, i.e., pairs of words that have the same meaning (or share the same semantic features) in all the situational and syntactic contexts in which they can appear.

Antonymy

Antonymy is the semantic relationship that exists between two (or more) words that have opposite meanings. The pairs of words which have opposite meanings are called **antonyms**. **Antonymous** pairs of words usually belong to the same grammatical category (i.e., both elements are nouns, or both are adjectives, or both are verbs, and so on). They are said to share almost all their semantic features except one. The semantic feature that they

do not share is present in one member of the pair and absent in the other (cf. Fromkin & Rodman, 1998). E.g.,

<i>girl</i>	$\left(\begin{array}{l} + \text{animate} \\ + \text{human} \\ + \text{female} \\ + \text{young} \\ - \text{adult} \end{array} \right)$	<i>woman</i>	$\left(\begin{array}{l} + \text{animate} \\ + \text{human} \\ + \text{female} \\ - \text{young} \\ + \text{adult} \end{array} \right)$
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There are three major **types of antonyms**:

a. **Complementary or contradictory antonyms.** They are pairs of words in which one member has a certain semantic property that the other member does not have (cf. Lyons, 1977). Therefore, in the context(s) in which one member is true, the other member cannot be true. E.g., *male/female*, *married/unmarried*, *complete/incomplete*, *alive/dead*, *present/absent*, *awake/asleep*. It is said that these pairs of antonyms exhibit an *either/or* kind of contrast in which there is **no middle ground**.

b. **Relational antonyms.** They are pairs of words in which the presence of a certain semantic property in one member implies the presence of another semantic property in the other member. In other words, the existence of one of the terms implies the existence of the other term. For example, *over/under*, *buy/sell*, *doctor/patient*, *teacher/pupil*, *stop/go*, *employer/employee*, *taller/shorter*, *cheaper/more expensive*.

c. **Gradable or scalar antonyms.** They are pairs of words that are contrasted with respect to their degree of possession of a certain semantic property. Each term represents or stands for an **end-point** (or extreme) on a scale (e.g., of temperature, size, height, beauty, etc.); between those end-points there are other intermediate points (i.e., there is some middle ground) (cf. Godby et al., 1982; Lyons, 1977). E.g., *hot/cold*, *big/small*, *tall/short*, *good/bad*, *strong/weak*, *beautiful/ugly*, *happy/sad*, *fast/slow*.

Antonyms may be (a) **morphologically unrelated** (i.e., one of the elements of the pair does not derive from the other), e.g., *good/bad*, *high/low*; or (b) **morphologically related** (i.e., one of the members of a pair of antonyms is derived from the other member by the addition of a negative word or an affix), e.g., *good/not good*, *friendly/unfriendly*, *likely/unlikely*.

Morphologically related antonyms can be formed in the following ways:

b.1. By using the word *not*; e.g., *alive/not alive*, *happy/not happy*, *beautiful/not beautiful*.

b.2. By adding negative prefixes such as *un-*, *im-*, *in-*, *il-*, *ir-*, *non-*, *mis-*, *dis-*, *a-*. E.g., *happy/unhappy*, *do/undo*, *lock/unlock*, *entity/nonentity*, *conformist/nonconformist*, *tolerant/intolerant*, *decent/indecent*, *please/displease*, *like/dislike*, *behave/mishave*, *hear/mishear*, *moral/amoral*, *political/apolitical*, *legal/illegal*, *logical/illogical*, *probable/improbable*, *relevant/irrelevant*.

b.3. By adding negative suffixes such as *-less*. E.g., *careful/careless*, *joyful/joyless*.

Homonymy

Homonymy is the relationship that exists between two (or more) words which belong to the same grammatical category, have the same spelling, may or may not have the same pronunciation, but have different meanings and origins (i.e., they are etymologically and semantically unrelated). E.g., *to lie* (= to rest, be, remain, be situated in a certain position) and *to lie* (= not to tell the truth); *to bear* (= to give birth to) and *to bear* (= to tolerate); *bank* (= the ground near a river) and *bank* (= financial institution); *lead* [li:d] (= the first place or position, an example behavior for others to copy) and *lead* [led] (= heavy metal); *bass* [beɪs] (= musical instrument) and *bass* [bæs] (= edible fish). The pairs of words that exhibit this kind of relationship are called **homonyms**. Homonyms usually have different entries in dictionaries, often indicated by superscripted little numbers; e.g., *lie*¹, *lie*².

In isolated *spoken sentences*, homophonic homonyms can also give rise to lexical ambiguity. For example, in the following sentences it is almost impossible to know the intended meanings of *bank* and *bear*. Notice the following sentences.

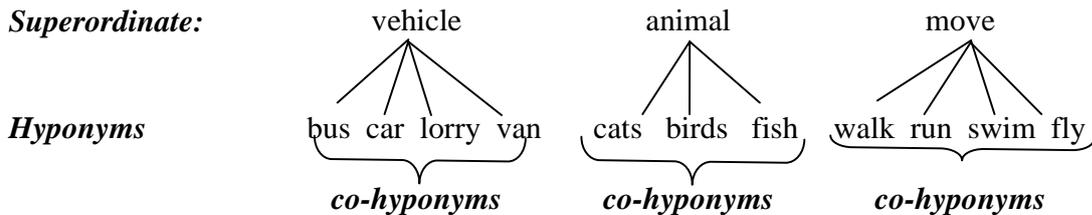
John went to the [bæŋk] (the financial institution or the ground by the river?)

Mary can't [beə] (have or tolerate?) children.

Hyponymy

Hyponymy ([hɑ:p'hɒnəmi] or [hɪp'hɒnəmi]) or **inclusion** is the semantic relationship that exists between two (or more) words in such a way that the meaning of one word includes (or contains) the meaning of other word(s). We say that the term whose meaning is included in the meaning of the other term(s) is the **general term**; linguists usually refer to it as a **superordinate** or **hypernym**. The term whose meaning includes the meaning of the other term is the **specific term**; linguists usually refer to it as a **hyponym**. If the meaning of a superordinate term is included in the meaning of several other more specific words, the set of specific terms which are hyponyms of the same superordinate term and are called **co-hyponyms** (cf. Crystal, 1991). Examples:

Superordinate:



Polysemy

Polysemy ([pə'li:səmi]) is the semantic relationship that exists between a word and its multiple conceptually and historically related meanings (cf. Crystal, 1991; Fromkin & Rodman, 1998; Richards et al., 1992). E.g.,

foot = 1. part of body; 2. lower part of something

plain = 1. clear; 2. unadorned; 3. obvious.

nice = 1. pleasant; 2. kind; 3. friendly; etc.

The different meanings of a word are not interchangeable; in fact, they are context-specific.

Metonymy

Metonymy is the semantic relationship that exists between two words (or a word and an expression) in which one of the words is metaphorically used in place of the other word (or expression) in particular contexts to convey the same meaning (cf. Fromkin & Rodman, 1998). E.g.,

brass = military officers
cops = policemen
crown = monarchy

jock = athlete
Moscow = Russian Government
Miraflores = Venezuelan Government

Semantic Relationships at Phrase or Sentence Level

At phrase or sentence level, we will study only paraphrase. Other relationships, such as entailment and contradiction, will not be dealt with in this course.

Paraphrase

Paraphrase is the expression of the meaning of a word, phrase or sentence using other words, phrases or sentences which have (almost) the same meaning (cf. Richards et al., 1992). Paraphrase involves a relation of semantic equivalence between syntactically different phrases or sentences (cf. Quirk et al., 1985). E.g.,

John wrote a letter to Mary.

A dog bit John.

John wrote Mary a letter.

John was bitten by a dog.

Like synonymy, paraphrase is never perfect; there are always differences in emphasis or focus. There are two **kinds of paraphrase**:

1. **Lexical paraphrase**. It is the use of a semantically equivalent term in place of another in a given context. This is also known as synonymy. E.g.,

John is happy. = John is cheerful.

to rejuvenate = to make someone or something appear or feel younger.

2. **Structural paraphrase**. It is the use of a phrase or sentence in place of another phrase or sentence semantically equivalent to it, although they have different syntactic structure. E.g.,

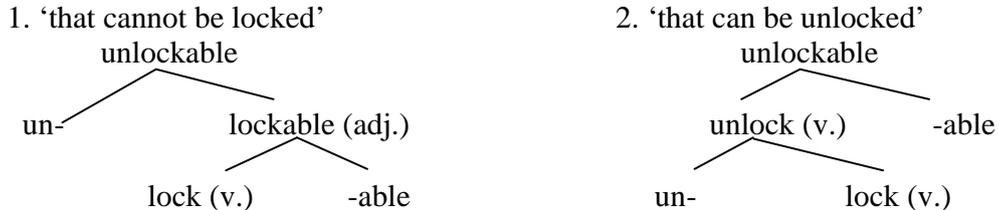
John showed the pictures to me.

John showed me the pictures.

Ambiguity

Ambiguity is the property of having two or more distinct meanings or interpretations (cf. Cipollone et al., 1998). A word or sentence is **ambiguous** if it can be interpreted in more than one way. Ambiguity can be caused by factors such as homonymy, polysemy, lack of sufficient context, etc. In this class, we will consider four **types of ambiguity**, namely:

1. **Morphological ambiguity.** It is the ambiguity that some words exhibit when their internal structure can be analyzed and interpreted in more than one way. E.g., the word *unlockable* is morphologically ambiguous. Notice its possible constituent structure (and meanings).



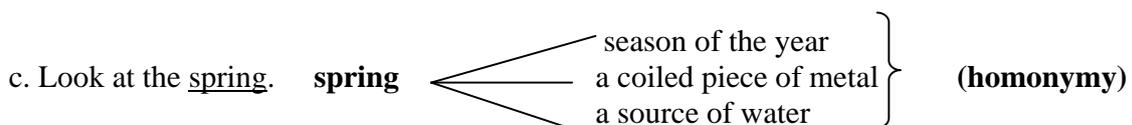
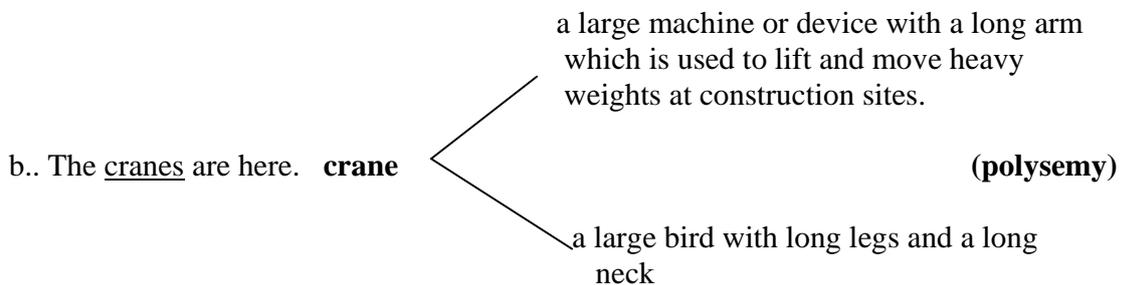
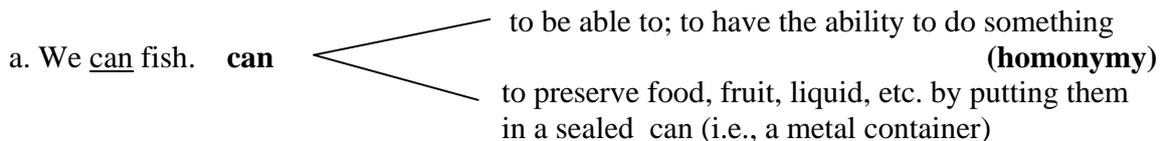
2. **Structural (or grammatical) ambiguity.** It is the ambiguity that some phrases and sentences exhibit when their (constituent) syntactic structure can be interpreted in more than one way. E.g., the sentence *We need more intelligent leaders* is **structurally ambiguous**. Notice its possible constituent structures (and meanings):

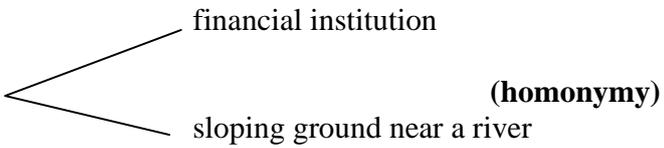
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| <p>1. 'We need leaders that are more intelligent.'</p> | <p>2. 'We need more leaders that are intelligent.'</p> |
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Other examples of structurally ambiguous sentences are:

- Visiting strangers can be dangerous.
- Moving sidewalks can be useful.

3. **Lexical ambiguity.** It is the ambiguity that some sentences exhibit when they contain words that can be interpreted in more than one way (those words are either homonymous or polysemous words). E.g.,



- d.. John met his wife near a bank.  (homonymy)

4. **Metaphorical ambiguity.** It is the ambiguity that some metaphorical or idiomatic sentences exhibit because they may be interpreted in their literal meaning or in their nonliteral meaning. E.g., the following sentences are **metaphorically ambiguous**:

a. *Dr. Jones is a butcher.*

- Jones is the name of a physician who also slaughters animals and/or sells meats.
- Dr. Jones is a harmful, possibly murderous doctor, who likes to operate on people unnecessarily.

b. *John is a snake in the grass.*

- John is the name of a snake that is in the grass.
- John is a deceitful person who pretends to be a friend.

c. *This car is a lemon.*

- This car is a miniature car carved out of or shaped like a lemon.
- This a newly purchased car that often breaks down and needs constant repairs.

It is interesting to note that, in each case above, the second interpretation is more common or likely than the first one.

Disambiguation

Disambiguation is the process by which the ambiguity of a word or sentence is eliminated. Generally, ambiguities are resolved by using the word or sentence in sufficient and appropriate contexts (whether linguistic and/or social), and by means of the use of emphatic pronunciation and intonation.

Collocations

Collocations are combinations of two or more words that often occur together in speech and writing. Among the possible combinations are *verbs + nouns*, *adjectives + nouns*, *adverbs + adjectives*, *prepositional phrases*, *noun phrases* (i.e., prepositions + noun phrases), *similes* (i.e., comparisons of some things to others) and so on. Some idiomatic expressions are considered collocations, too. The order of the constituent elements of collocations is somewhat fixed. Also, the constituent words cannot be replaced by other words. The following are some examples of English collocations.

Adj. + noun phrase	a resounding victory an itemized ac- count powerful car	a crying shame widespread use of drugs	common cold strong tea
Noun phrases	man and wife husband and wife bangers and mash a school of whales	salt and pepper salt and vinegar franks and beans a pack of dogs	fish and chips curry and rice a herd of cattle a book of matches
Adv. + adj.	amazingly calm entirely free awfully sorry	relatively small terribly sorry stark mad	perfectly reasonably stark mad alive and kicking
Verb + verb	rain or shine		
Verb + adv.	speak clearly	walk steadily	to be met with great acclaim
Prep. phrase	with a pro- nounced French accent	by hook or crook	for a start
Similes	as fit as a fiddle as light a feather as blind as a bat as strong as a horse	as poor as a church mouse as deep as the ocean as steady as time as tight as a drum	as heavy as lead as blind as a bat as blue as the sky as white as a lily

Reference:

Zapata B., A. A. (2000). A handbook of general and applied linguistics. Trabajo de As-
censo sin publicar. Mérida: Escuela de Idiomas Modernos, Universidad de Los Andes.