**SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS**

**Semantics** – the study of the linguistic meaning of morphemes, words, phrases and sentences. **Meaning** refers, very generally, to the content of an utterance.

(1) **Semantic relations** – determining the semantic relations that exist among words, phrases and sentences constitutes one of the basic analytic tools available for evaluating meaning.

**a. relations between words**
- **synonyms** – two words that have similar meanings, e.g. *filbert / hazelnut*
- **antonyms** – two words that have opposite meanings, e.g. *hot / cold*
- **polysems** (homonyms) – one word that has two or more related meanings, e.g. *bright* (shining or intelligent)
- **homophones** – two words with the same form (i.e. pronunciation) but two distinct meanings, e.g. *pen* (a writing instrument or an enclosure)

**b. relations between sentences**
- **paraphrases** – two sentences that have different forms but the same meaning, e.g. *The cat ate the mouse vs. The mouse was eaten by the cat*
- **entailment** – two sentences in which the truth of the first implies the truth of the second, but the truth of the second does not necessarily imply the truth of the first, e.g. *George killed the spider vs. The spider is dead*
- **contradiction** – two sentences such that if one is true, the second must be false, e.g. *Dodo is extinct vs. A hunter has just shot a dodo*

**Ex.1.** Identify the semantic relations for each of the following words or phrases

1. bug (insect)  
   bug (microphone)  
2. Sam is a widower  
   Sam’s wife is alive  
3. The shark bit a swimmer  
   The swimmer is injured  
4. George gave Sally the book  
   George gave a book to Sally  
5. hungry  
   famished

Q: What is the difference between polysems (homonyms) and homophones?

(2) **Ambiguity** - practice
Ex.2. Suggest two (or more) distinct paraphrases for the following structurally ambiguous sentences:
1. He watched them eating dinner.
2. After the cat caught the mouse, it died.
3. Everyone says that he can marry her.
4. He decided on the train.
5. The professor’s appointment was shocking.
6. Visiting professors can be interesting.
7. It’s a miracle that the old magician was able to work.
8. He’ll be staying here next month.
9. The road may be blocked.
10. I found her an entertaining partner.
11. I enjoy Indian summer holidays.
12. They called Susan a waitress.
13. How much do you want to cut the grass?

(3) **Thematic roles** – to interpret any sentence, we need to know who is doing the action, what is undergoing the action, the starting point of the action, etc. Thematic, or theta, roles capture the relation between a sentence and the event it describes. There are three important properties of thematic roles.

a. **common thematic roles** (only some)
   - **Agent** (actor) – the entity performing an action
   - **Theme** – the entity undergoing an action
   - **Source** – the starting point of a movement
   - **Goal** – the end point of a movement
   - **Location** – the place where an action occurs

b. **thematic role assignment** – thematic roles are assigned to noun phrases based on their position within the sentence. Typically, verbs and prepositions assign thematic roles
   - **Verbs** assign the agent role (if it has one) to its subject noun phrase
     assign the theme role (if it has one) to its complement noun phrase
   - **Prepositions** assign a thematic role (the specific one depends on the preposition) to its complement noun phrase

**Example**: John drove the car to Portland. – the verb drove assigns the agent role <ag> to the noun phrase John and the theme role <th> to the noun phrase the car, while the preposition to assigns the goal role <gl> to the noun phrase Portland.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{John} \\
\text{drove} \\
\text{the car} \\
to \\
\text{Portland}
\end{array}
\]

Knowledge of the thematic roles that verbs and prepositions assign is stored in our mental lexicon (similar to subcategorisation in syntax).

c. **thematic roles and deep structure** – thematic roles are assigned at deep structure. E.g. the wh question What did George lose? has the deep structure George lost what. So, the verb lost assigns the agent role to George and the theme role to what. What retains this role even after the Move operation changes its position in the structure.

Ex.3. Identify thematic roles in the following way to the sentences below.

e.g. Sally mailed her nephew a parcel
NP | Thematic role | Assigned by
---|---|---
Sally | agent | mailed
a parcel | theme | mailed
her nephew | goal | mailed

1. Sarah drove that bus from Indianapolis to Terre Haute.
2. The children are eating their ice cream in the kitchen.
3. Which shoes did you buy at the store?
4. The cat was chased around the garden by a large dog.
5. The boys walked to the park.

(4) Pragmatics – besides the structure of a sentence and the thematic roles assigned to the noun phrases within a sentence, there are many other factors involved in sentence interpretation.

**Pragmatics** is the study of the role other necessary information has in sentence interpretation.

- **Beliefs and attitudes**, e.g. in *The city council denied the demonstrators a permit because they advocated violence* the pronoun *they* refers to....:-)

- **Presupposition** – refers to assumption or belief implied by the use of a particular word. e.g. see the different implication that verbs *admitted / said* carry in: *John admitted / said that the soccer team had cheated*

- **Deictics (deixis)** – the form and interpretation of some words depend on the location of the speaker and listener within a particular setting, e.g. *here / there, this / that*

- **Discourse / topic** – many sentences can only be interpreted in reference to information contained in preceding sentences. **Discourse** describes the connected series of utterances that are produced during a conversation, lecture, story, or other type of speech act. **Topic** is what a sentence or discourse is all about.

**Example:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘The door is open’</td>
<td>You forgot to lock it again, idiot!</td>
<td>A bank manager to a clerk standing in front of the safe first thing in the morning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What a relief! Don’t have to sit out here, waiting for someone to come home.</td>
<td>Person arrives home without a key, no one there, the person tries the door and opens it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No wonder I’m bloody freezing!</td>
<td>A person sitting in a draughty room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shut the door.</td>
<td>Two people in an office. It’s very noisy next door and one person wants the door shut.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please come in.</td>
<td>Receptionist to someone who’s just knocked.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Come and see me anytime</td>
<td>A boss to an employee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Ex.4.** Fill in the **meaning** column.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘It’s raining’</td>
<td>Mum to young son dressed only in shorts and T-shirt who is going outside.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Farmer to harvesters.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Noah to his wife.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Man dying of thirst at sea in a small boat.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Driver with broken wipers to passenger on dark road.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ex.5. Fill in the context column.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘I feel tired’</td>
<td>I don’t want to make love</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It’s time you went home.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Carry me!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’m ready to die.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’ve done enough work today.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’d rather stay in tonight.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ex.6. Fill in both right hand columns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘He’s not answering’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ex.7. Garden path sentences

1. The prime number few.
2. Fat people eat accumulates.
3. The cotton clothing is usually made of grows in Mississippi.
4. Until the police arrest the drug dealers control the street.
5. The man who hunts ducks out on weekends.
6. When Fred eats food gets thrown.
7. Mary gave the child the dog bit a bandaid.
8. The girl told the story cried.
9. I convinced her children are noisy.
10. Helen is expecting tomorrow to be a bad day.
11. The horse raced past the barn fell.
12. I know the words to that song about the queen don’t rhyme.
13. She told me a little white lie will come back to haunt me.
14. The dog that I had really loved bones.
15. That Jill is never here hurts.
16. The man who whistles tunes pianos.
17. The old man the boat.
18. Have the students who failed the exam take the supplementary.
19. The raft floated down the river sank.
20. We painted the wall with cracks.
21. The tycoon sold the offshore oil tracts for a lot of money wanted to kill JR.

Ex.8. Headline interpretation

1. DRUNK GETS NINE MONTHS IN VIOLIN CASE
2. FARMER BILL DIES IN HOUSE
3. STUD TIRES OUT
4. SQUAD HELPS DOG BITE VICTIM
5. LACK OF BRAINS HIDERS RESEACH
6. MINERS REFUSE TO WORK AFTER DEATH
7. EYE DROPS OFF SHELF
8. JUVENILE COURT TO TRY SHOOTING DEFENDANT
9. QUEEN MARY HAVING BOTTOM SCRAPED
10. POLICE BEGIN CAMPAIGN TO RUN DOWN JAYWALKERS