Descriptive, Social and Expressive Meaning

LING-053 Semantics 1
UCSC
Instructor: M. Ippolito

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Road map for today:

- Different types of meanings:

  1. **Descriptive meaning**, which we’ll see comes in two types. We are going to discuss the relevance of indexical expressions.

  2. **Social meaning**.

  3. **Expressive meaning**.

We’ll be especially concerned with descriptive meaning.
Descriptive meaning

Meanings are concepts: the meaning of a word

(1) The car is not starting today.

• Suppose Mary utters (1) and her utterance is true. I – the hearer – will know something I didn’t know before: that the car is not starting today. How?

• Mary used the phrase the car, the definite article the together with the common noun car.

• The word car tells us that the referent of the word is a car since that is what the word means.

• The question that we want to ask is: what do we know when we know that the word car means car?
• A word is a pair of sound and meaning.

• The English word can be represented as follows: \( \text{car} = \langle \text{SOUND}_{\text{car}}, \text{MEANING}_{\text{car}} \rangle \)

• To know the meaning of the word car is to know what concept is associated with \( \text{SOUND}_{\text{car}} \).

• When you learn a new word in a language \( \text{L} \), you learn a pair of a sound and a meaning, i.e. you learn what concept is associated in \( \text{L} \) to a particular sound.

• Once you have learned what concept the word car is expresses, you also know whether something is a car or not:

• When you know the meaning of the word car, you know whether, for any object \( x \), \( x \) is a car is true or false.
• The definite article contributes the information that Mary is talking about a salient car, presumably her car. (Compare it with a car.)

• Now, we can have partial knowledge of the meaning of a word.

• Take the two words *elm* and *beech*: we all have concepts for these two words, even though most people’s concepts would be too poor to enable them to know what things in the world the word refers to.
Meanings are concepts: the meaning of a sentence

- Once you know the meaning of the noun phrase *the car*, the meaning of the verb *to start*, the meaning of the adverb *today*, the meaning of the verbal form *-ing*, and the meaning of negation, you will be able to compose the meaning of the whole sentence.

(2) The car is not starting today.

- The descriptive meaning of a whole sentence is a concept for a type of situation:

(3) The situation at the time of utterance is a situation in which a salient car in the context of utterance (CoU) is not starting at the time when the assertion is made.
• We’ll call a concept for a type of situation a **proposition**.

• Only full sentences express propositions, i.e. thoughts.
Interim Summary

- **MEANING OF A WORD** (whether it’s a content word or a functional word) is a concept that provides a description of a certain kind of entity.

- **MEANING OF A SENTENCE** is a proposition, i.e. a concept that provides a description of a situation that the sentence potentially refers to.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expression type</th>
<th>Descriptive meaning</th>
<th>Reference type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>car</td>
<td>[definition]</td>
<td>object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>start</td>
<td>[definition]</td>
<td>event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>today</td>
<td>the referent is the day of the utterance</td>
<td>time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the</td>
<td>the referent of the noun is salient in the CoU</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ing</td>
<td>the event is ongoing at the time of utterance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>see above</td>
<td>situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not</td>
<td>the proposition is false in the CoU</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(4)
• As we said above, the meaning of a word is a concept for its potential referents. It determines a category of entities, i.e. those entities to whom the concept applies truthfully.

• The **denotation** of a content word = the set of all its potential referents.

• Therefore, the meaning of a word in a language L has two components (again, this goes back to our eminent German logician Gottlob Frege):

  1. **concept** (also called “sense”) = the description associated with the word.

  2. **denotation** (also called “reference”) = the set of objects to whom the description applies truthfully.

What’s the relation between these two entities?
• The meaning of a sentence \( S \) of a language \( L \) has two components too:

1. **proposition** (“sense”): the description of the situation associated with the word.

2. **denotation** (“reference”): the set of situations to which the description applies truthfully.

• The notion of the denotation of a sentence is related to another very important notion: that of **truth conditions**.

(5) **Truth conditions of a sentence** \( S \): conditions under which \( S \) is true.

• If you know the truth conditions of \( S \), you know what situations \( S \) refers to (i.e. you know its denotation). If you know what situations \( S \) refers to, then you know its truth conditions.
• Some expressions of natural language, in fact some very common expressions, are particularly sensitive to the CoU. Consider the following sentences:

(6) a. **You** look sick **today**.
b. Jack looks sick on January 12.

(7) a. I didn’t open **that yesterday**.
b. Michela didn’t open a box of chocolates on January 11.

• The sentences in (6-b) and (7-b) express propositions, i.e. complete thoughts, in that their truth value (whether they are true or false) could not change depending for example on the CoU: they are either true or false.

• Now consider (6-a) and (7-a): is the sense of these sentences complete? That is, do they always express the same thought?

• Answer: **NO!**
• Expressions like I, you, today, that, are called **INDEXICALS**.

• The part that the indexical contributes depends on the CoU: for example if John utters (7-a), then John will be part of the proposition expressed; if Mary utters (7-a), then Mary will be part of the propositions expressed.

• However, in both cases, the indexical I plays the same role. When we understand a word like I, we seem to know a **rule** taking us from a CoU to a certain object, the **speaker**.
• Take these two sentences:

(8) It is sunny today. (as uttered on January 11)

(9) It was sunny yesterday. (as uttered on January 12)

• They express the same proposition, but its expression is different in both cases. Better, they express the same proposition because its expression has changed.
• **Sentence type**: Sentences may differ in their grammatical sentence type. A sentence can be an assertion as in (10), an interrogative sentence as in (11), or an imperative sentence as in (12).

(10) The car is starting today.

(11) Is the car starting today?

(12) Start today! (screaming at the car)

• The sentences above have different “forces”: (10) is an assertion; (11) is a question; (12) is a command.

• **Note**:

1. The semantic contribution of the grammatical sentence type is **not** part of the proposition.
2. The notion of **truth** does not apply to (11) and (12).
Social meaning

- Social meaning is part of the *lexical meaning* of certain words, phrases or grammatical forms. If an expression has social meaning, it does independently of the particular CoU in which the expression is used.

- Addressing a French person, I can either utter (13) or (14):

  (13) **INFORMAL**
  As tu mangé?
  Have you\textsubscript{sg} eaten?
  “Have you eaten?”

  (14) **FORMAL**
  Avez vous mangé?
  Have you\textsubscript{pl} eaten?
  “Have you eaten?”
• The choice between the plural or the singular pronoun indicates what kind of relationship the speaker is establishing with her interlocutor.

(15)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expression type</th>
<th>social meaning</th>
<th>descriptive meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>French <em>tu</em></td>
<td>informal relationship</td>
<td>the person addressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French <em>vous</em></td>
<td>formal relationship</td>
<td>the person or persons addressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English <em>you</em></td>
<td>–</td>
<td>the person or persons addressed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Expressive meaning

• Expressive meaning, like social meaning, is part of the lexical meaning of certain expressions.

• Two kinds of expressives:

  1. Expressives with only expressive content: ouch, wow, oops, etc.

  2. Expressives with both descriptive and expressive content: bastard, idiot

• Take wow and it’s descriptive counterpart That’s incredible!: (“#” means infelicity, inappropriateness)

(16)   A: That’s incredible!
     B: No, I don’t agree.

(17)   A: Wow!
     B: # No, I don’t agree.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Expression</th>
<th>Expressive meaning</th>
<th>Descriptive meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
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<td>surprise</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
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<td>dislike</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>dislike</td>
<td>person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adverb</td>
<td>fortunately</td>
<td>preference</td>
<td>–</td>
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