Meanings and readings

LING-053 Semantics 1
UCSC
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Ambiguity = an expression or an utterance is ambiguous if it can be interpreted in more than one way.

Lexical ambiguity

- An expression has **lexical meaning** if this meaning cannot be compositionally derived but must be learned (i.e. it cannot be derived from the meaning of the parts together with the modes of composition).

- **Lexical items** = expressions with lexical meaning.

- Examples of lexical meanings:
  1. Below the level of the word: -able
     
     (1) *drink-able* = that can be drunk
  2. Above the level of the word: **idioms**
     
     (2) *to kick the bucket* = to die
**lexicon** = the set of lexical items

- Different lexical items have different grammatical categories: verbs, nouns, adjectives.

  (3) \( \text{walk}_V \)
  \[
  \text{to walk for an hour}
  \]

  (4) \( \text{walk}_N \)
  \[
  \text{to take a walk}
  \]

- **Inherent grammatical properties**: inherent property of the lexical item. E.g. gender in Italian nouns (the same holds for Latin, Spanish, German, Russian, etc.):

  (5) a. \( \text{il sole} \) (masc.)
  \[
  \text{the sun}
  \]

  b. \( \text{la luna} \) (fem.)
  \[
  \text{the moon}
  \]
• The grammatical category of the lexical item determines which grammatical forms the lexical item can take.

• A lexical entry:

  1. sound and spelling;

  2. grammatical category;

  3. inherent grammatical property (if any);

  4. set of grammatical forms it may take;

  5. lexical meaning
Homonymy:

1. **total homonymy**: two lexical items share the same grammatical category and grammatical properties, the set of grammatical forms, sound, spelling, but they have different meanings.

2. **partial homonymy**: two lexical items share some grammatical forms but not all, but they have different meanings.

(6) Total homonymy:

a. \( light_{Adj} \): opposite of \( dark \).

b. \( light_{Adj} \): opposite of \( heavy \).
**Polysemy**: A lexical item has more than one (interrelated) meaning, i.e. meaning variant.

(7) *light*:
   a. Turn the *light* on.
   b. Move to the *light*.

- Polysemy is separate from homonymy: of two homonymes, each can be polysemous.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><em>light</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sound</td>
<td>SOUND<em>light</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grammatical category</td>
<td>Noun</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| meaning variants     | 1. visible radiation  
|                      | 2. illuminated areas  
|                      | ...              |

- Polysemy is a matter of single lexical items. Whether a lexical item will or will not have a certain range of meanings is not predictable.
**Vagueness**: a word (typically, an adjective or and adverb) is vague if its meaning depends on the CoU. The corresponding concept has flexible boundaries.

(8) (We are at the natural science museum, in the butterfly room:) That butterfly is big.

(9) Jumbo the elephant is big.

(10) (Jumbo is the youngest of a family of elephants.) Jumbo the elephant is small.

- The interpretation of the adjectives *big* and *small* is not kept constant in the interpretation of the above sentences. If it were, (9) and (10) would be contradictory, and (8) and (9) would be inconsistent. But they are not.
• Vagueness in the **adverbs**: 

(11) (Generally, Jimmy does not show up at work before noon. Today he came in at 10.) Today, Jimmy arrived at work **early**.

(12) (Tom and Bill generally arrive at work at 8am. Today, they came at 9:30.) Today, Tom and Bill arrived at work **late**.

• These examples show two things:

1. The predicates that are vague are **gradable predicates**, where $G$ is a gradable predicate if different objects can be $G$ in different **degrees**.

    \[ d_1 \prec d_2 \prec d_3 \prec d_4 \prec d_5 \ldots \prec d_n \]

• The interpretations of gradable predicates is context dependent, i.e. depends on the CoU.
• Not all modifiers are gradable. For example, consider the adjective dead. Being dead or full is not a matter of degrees.

• That the gradability of modifiers is a syntactic property or at least a property that has syntactic repercussions is shown by the following tests:

1. **More . . . than**

   (13) A car is more expensive than a bike.

   (14) #John is more dead than Bill.

2. **Modifiers**

   (15) This car is very/quite expensive.

   (16) #John is very/quite dead.
3. Too ... to

(17) John is too smart to fail the test.

(18) #John is too dead to tell the truth.

• Interestingly, then, these properties of modifiers have repercussions on the syntactic structure of the sentence in which they occur.