

Denotative meaning is also known as cognitive, descriptive, referential or conceptual meaning. Denotative meaning is the essential, objective and invariable meaning of the word recorded in a dictionary. Many words represent objects or situations in the real world or concepts that are present in the mind. These words can be said to have denotative meaning.

Basically denotative meaning shows the way something really is: it does not stand for something other than what the literal meaning of the word is. In the sentence, *He was reading a book on social equality*, the words *book* and *equality* are used in a denotative manner.

words kind of denotation

book, stone	objects
health, poverty	situation
equality, beauty	concept

Connotative meaning refers to the cultural, affective and subjective associations that contribute to the making of meaning. Thus, the connotations of the same word may vary widely according to who is using it, and can either be positive or negative. The word 'man' denotes an adult male of the human species, but the same word can have connotations of 'bravery', 'virility' and 'strength', depending on the context. When we say, 'Be a man', the connotative meaning of 'strong' or 'brave' is what we are hinting at. It needs to be kept in mind that connotations may vary from culture to culture.

Lexical Relations

Words also acquire meaning from the words that surround them, especially the words that are adjoining. In the sentence 'The cat sat on the mat', the word 'cat' is in a syntagmatic relationship with the preceding word 'the' and the following words 'sat on the mat'. The word 'cat' can be substituted by the word 'dog' and these two words are known to be in a paradigmatic relationship. Let us now explore some of the paradigmatic lexical relations such as synonymy, antonymy, homonymy and polysemy, superordination and hyponymy, and metonymy.

6. Semantics

What is Semantics

The word 'semantics' originates from the ancient Greek word *sēmantikós*, meaning 'significant'. In the past, the word 'semantics' was often used to refer to the historical study of changes in the meaning of words. Some people also use the word in a pejorative sense to talk about the way language can be manipulated in order to mislead people. It is necessary to clarify that semantics today is free from historical bias and it has nothing to do with the popular use of the word in a pejorative sense. Semantics can be defined as a branch of linguistics concerned with the study of the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. The study of semantics covers a wide range of concepts such as how meaning is constructed, interpreted, clarified, obscured and paraphrased. It is important for the understanding of language in social contexts, as these are likely to affect meaning. Semantics also helps us understand processes such as language acquisition (how language users acquire a sense of meaning) and language change (how meanings alter over time).

For a clearer idea of semantics, we may try to understand two related terms: symbol and referent. **Symbol** is a thing which we use to represent another thing, for example, the picture of a child represents the real child. And the thing that the symbol identifies (in this case, the real child) is called the **referent**. It might be a real world object (like the child) or a concept, such as equality or beauty. We can say that semantics studies the nature of the relationship between the symbol and the referent.

Denotative and Connotative Meanings

This brings us to the two important types of word meanings: denotative and connotative meaning.

grief	-	sorrow
haste	-	hurry
wonder	-	amazement
neglect	-	ignore
omit	-	delete/exclude/drop
refuse	-	decline/reject
shatter	-	break/burst
suspect	-	doubt

Antonymy

Antonyms (meaning 'opposed/different name') are words with opposite meanings. Antonymy is primarily a relation between adjectives although it may apply to adverbs, nouns and verbs also. For example, slowly – quickly, boy – girl, agree – disagree, etc. Antonyms can be separate words like young – old, hot – cold, slow – fast, etc., which are morphologically unrelated or they can be words with negative prefixes such as decent – indecent, legal – illegal, attractive – unattractive, possible – impossible, etc. Antonymy is different from synonymy, in that it often exists in binaries (either/or relationships). There are different kinds of antonyms. 'Fat' and 'thin' can be contrasting terms, but if we study them carefully, we realize that both terms are relative to an assumed norm. Such antonyms like far/thin, big/little, hot/cold are called **gradable** antonyms. The difference between them is the difference of degree or scale so they can occur in comparative and superlative forms, for example, fatter – thinner, fattest – thinnest, faster – fastest, etc. If clear either/or conditions are expressed, such as dead/alive or in/out, these are called **complementary** antonyms. When two words represent two sides of a relationship, such as husband/wife, parent/child, borrower/lender, it is called **converse or relational** antonyms. Complementary antonyms and converse or relational antonyms are ungradable antonyms. They do not have comparative and superlative forms because the difference between them is absolute and it is not a question of scale or degree. Hence, forms like *deader or *deatest are impossible.

Given below are a few examples of antonyms:

adequate x inadequate
alive x dead

Synonymy

Synonyms (meaning 'same name') are words with the same meaning. English is rich in synonyms because the vocabulary of this language is derived from Anglo-Saxon, French, Latin and Greek languages. However, it is to be noted, though the denotative/reference meanings of synonyms are same, due to differences in connotation, two words can never really be absolute synonyms. If there are two such words, one of them will become redundant and go out of use. Synonymy nearly always means **partial or near synonymy**. The linguistic context determines which of a number of similar words should be used, for example, we talk of pupils in a school, students in a university, disciples of a religious leader and learners at a motor driving school. A person with a well-developed vocabulary will know which word to use in a particular context. Near synonyms can differ at least in one of the following ways:

1. They may belong to different dialects/regional varieties. For example, pail: bucket, lad: boy, lass: girl, tap: faucet, autumn: fall, footpath: pavement: sidewalk, etc.
2. They may belong to different styles/registers. For example, cop: policeman, kids: children, crap: nonsense, cardiac arrest: heart attack, comely: beautiful, etc.
3. They may have different collocations. For example, 'big' and 'large' are synonyms. But 'big' collocates with words like 'business', 'money' and 'surprise'. The word 'large' cannot collocate with these words.
4. They may reflect different attitudes. For example, saying that somebody is slim/slender is different from saying that somebody is skinny/scrawny.

Given below are a few examples of synonyms. Think over the contexts in which words in each of these pairs can be most suitably used:

abrupt	-	sudden
agree	-	consent/concur/assent
apathy	-	indifference
belly	-	stomach
callous	-	cruel
capture	-	catch/nab
decrease	-	lessen
fraud	-	cheat

beautiful x ugly
 compulsory x optional
 conscious x unconscious
 cruel x kind
 decrease x increase
 empty x full/crowded
 friendly x unfriendly
 grateful x ungrateful
 hard x soft/easy
 loyal x disloyal
 noble x ignoble/base
 optimist x pessimist
 possible x impossible
 reject x accept
 superior x inferior
 unfortunate x fortunate

vacant x full
 virtue x vice
 wild x tame

Homonymy

Homonymy refers to the presence of two words which have the same form (written or spoken or both), but have different meanings. For example, the word 'sole' refers to the 'bottom of the shoe', but 'sole' is also a type of fish. This example illustrates **absolute** homonymy. In this kind of homonymy, the two words have same spelling and same pronunciation but they have different unrelated meanings.

Some other examples of total homonymy are given below:

bear: animal
 bear: to carry
 bank: bank of a river
 bank: a financial institution
 pupil: eyeballs
 pupil: students

bat: one that is used to play cricket
 bat: a nocturnal flying animal
 mummy: a word used to address mother
 mummy: a dead body preserved artificially
 sage: a wise person
 sage: a kind of plant

Homography and Homophony

Homography and homophony represent two different kinds of **partial homonymy**.

Homographs are words that are spelled the same, but have different pronunciations and different meanings. The word 'tear' may mean 'to pull something to pieces' or 'the salty liquid that is secreted from the glands of the eye'. Here, the words are spelt identically, but they are pronounced differently (/teə/ and /tɪə/) and they have entirely different meanings.

Look at a few more examples below:

lead	/led/	(a kind of metal)
lead	/li:d/	(as in 'to lead the people')
wind	/wɪnd/	(air in motion)
wind	/waɪnd/	(to wrap/twist something around itself)
sow	/səʊ/	(to put seeds in soil for future growth)
sow	/sau/	(a female pig)

Homophones are words which have identical pronunciations, but different spellings and different meanings. For example, 'meet' and 'meat', both pronounced as /mi:t/; or 'flower' and 'flour', both pronounced as /flaʊə/.

See a few more examples of homophones below:

ail – ale
 feet – feat
 soul – sole
 right – rite – write

in – inn
 sight – site
 pail – pale
 sun – son
 new – knew
 sea – see
 hair – hare
 lesson – lessen
 raise – raze
 steal – steel
 vale – veil
 reek – wreak
 taught – taut
 slay – sleigh
 bridal – bridle
 peer – pier

Polysemy

Polysemy (or polysemia) refers to multiple meanings of the same word. This semantic phenomenon occurs when the meaning of the word is extended metaphorically. We often perceive an object not as it is in itself but in terms of the similarity of its shape and function with another object familiar to us. For example, the word 'foot' means 'the lower extremity of the leg, below the ankle', but it can also mean 'the base of a hill or mountain'. In a similar manner, we also talk about 'mouth of a cave', 'hands of a clock', 'legs of a table' or 'teeth of a comb'. And, if we look closely at all the multiple meanings of a polysemous word, we can see a connection among all of them. Many English words are polysemous. They have a primary or core meaning and other related meanings which are metaphorical extensions of that core meaning. Polysemy is thus, basically, a product of metaphorical creativity and can be sometimes used to evoke humour in literary writing. Look at the examples of polysemy given below:

Crane: 1. a large bird with a long neck

2. a machine with a long arm used for lifting heavy objects
3. to stretch your neck to see something

Position: 1. place/location of an object/person

2. opinion/stand on a particular issue
3. post in a job

Mole: 1. a small dark animal that digs tunnels under ground to live in

2. a spy who works against enemy espionage
3. a small dark brown spot on the skin

Wake: 1. the consequences of an event (especially a catastrophic event)

2. the wave that spreads behind a boat as it moves forward
3. a vigil held over a corpse the night before burial
4. the turbulent air left behind a flying aircraft

Rage:

1. a feeling of intense anger
2. something that is desired intensely
3. an interest followed with exaggerated zeal

Difference between Homonymy and Polysemy

Superficially, homonymy and polysemy may appear to be the same but they are essentially different from each other in the following ways:

1. The difference of perception: Homonyms are perceived by native speakers as two different words, whereas in polysemy, despite the multiplicity of meanings, the polysemous words are perceived as a single word.
2. The meanings of homonyms are unrelated, as in the case of 'bank', while the multiple meanings of a polysemous word are connected because they are metaphorical extensions of a primary meaning.
3. Homonyms have distinct etymological antecedents: They are derived from different etymological sources, while polysemous words have the same etymology.

4. Homonyms are generally given separate entries in dictionaries, whereas the multiple meanings of a polysemous word are given under a single entry.

Superordination and Hyponymy

Superordination and hyponymy refer to the relation of inclusion of meaning, inclusion occurring between a generic term and a specific term. Superordinate terms (also called hypernyms) are words (nouns) that can be used to stand for an entire 'class' or 'category' of things. Thus, a superordinate term acts as an 'umbrella' term that in its meaning includes the meaning of other words. For example, 'bird' is the superordinate term covering 'owl', 'peacock', 'canary' and 'parrot'. Similarly 'animal' is a superordinate term covering 'cat', 'dog', 'cow' and 'horse'.

Hyponymy is a closely related concept. It is a relationship of hierarchy in which the 'upper' term is the 'superordinate' and the 'lower' term is the 'hyponym', for example, 'parrot' is a hyponym of 'bird', and 'rose' a hyponym of 'flower'. Hyponymy is basically a matter of class membership. It is a relation of inclusion. However, all hyponyms may not have a superordinate term. Hyponyms of a single superordinate term are called co-hyponyms. For example, 'rose', 'lily', 'lotus', 'jasmine', 'marigold' and 'tulip' are co-hyponyms because the superordinate term 'flower' includes them all. Hyponymy involves entailment. 'This is a rose' entails that 'This is a flower'.

The concepts of superordination and hyponymy generally apply to nouns, but they may apply to verbs and adjectives also. Thus 'jog', 'trot', 'run' and 'sprint' are hyponyms of the verb 'run'. Similarly, 'navy blue' and 'sky blue' are hyponyms of the adjective 'blue'.

Metonymy

In metonymy one entity is made to refer to another entity which is very closely associated with it. The word 'metonymy' is derived from Greek and it means 'name change'. It involves a semantic transfer or transfer of name. The name of the referent is replaced by the name of an entity which has a close association with the referent. Thus, 'crown' is a metonym for 'monarchy' and 'White House' is a metonym for the

president of the United States. 'The pen is mightier than the sword' is a well-known metonymic saying which means that writing is more powerful than warfare. Metonymy is akin to **synecdoche** in which the referent is strictly replaced by its part as in, 'A faint heart can never win a fair heart.' Thus, synecdoche is also a kind of metonymy. In both metonymy and synecdoche there is no flouting of the maxim of quality and the same semantic plain/field continues to be retained.

Given below are a few examples of metonymy:

The town felicitated him for his services. ('town' as a metonym for the people in the town)

I enjoy watching Hitchcock more than Spielberg. ('Hitchcock' and 'Spielberg' as metonyms for their films)

He is too fond of the bottle. ('bottle' as metonym for the alcoholic drink)

That sounds like A. R. Rahman. (A. R. Rahman as metonym for his music)

Suggestions for Further Readings

- Cruse, David A. 2004. *Meaning in Language: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
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