

## Chapter 7

# Lexical Semantics: Relativity and Transfer

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Lexical semantics is concerned with inherent aspects of word meaning and the semantic relations between words, as well as the ways in which word meaning is related to syntactic structure. This chapter provides an introduction to some of the main themes in lexical semantic research, including the nature of the mental lexicon, lexical relations, and the decomposition of words into grammatically relevant semantic features. The mapping between the semantics of verbs and their associated syntax is discussed in terms of thematic roles, semantic structure theory, and feature selection. A review of some of the most influential findings in second language research involving both open-class and closed-class lexical items reveals important implications for classroom pedagogy and syllabus design in the domain of vocabulary instruction.*

### **WHAT IS SEMANTICS?**

Semantics is the study of how language is used to represent meaning. More precisely, semantics aims to explain how literal meanings are linguistically encoded and decoded by speakers and hearers. Other approaches to meaning include pragmatics, which deals with how meanings are inferred in relation to context, and semiotics, which is a more general study of how we interpret both linguistic and non-linguistic signs. For example, if one person shows a ring to another, saying “Here is the ring”, there are several layers of meaning that could be examined. At the level of semantics, the deictic pronoun *here* indicates a proximal location; the verb *be* signifies existence in a location; the determiner *the* shows that both speaker and hearer have previous knowledge of this ring; and the word *ring* picks out a particular type of object in the world. At the level of pragmatics, depending on the context, the hearer might infer that this speech act is a proposal of marriage, or a request for a divorce, or a directive to embark upon a magical quest. In terms of semiotics, the ring itself may be understood as a symbol of a bond, alliance,

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or vow, which by extension might signify matrimony, allegiance to a college, or religious authority. In comparison with pragmatics and semiotics, semantics has a narrower scope of investigation in that it restricts its concern to linguistic aspects of meaning. Within semantics, there are various theoretical approaches, including formal semantics, which uses propositional logic to capture relations between linguistic expressions and the things to which they refer, and cognitive semantics, which sees meaning in language as emerging from general cognitive principles. These important lines of research are beyond the bounds of the current chapter, which deals with a different aspect of semantics with direct relevance to the language classroom: lexical semantics, the study of how meaning is encoded in words, and how word meaning relates to sentence meaning.

In the following section, fundamental concepts of lexical semantics are introduced, including the traditional distinction between reference and sense, the mental lexicon as a network, and the various types of meaning relations between words. Most modern research in this domain focuses on elements of meaning below the word level, and investigates both features inside words as well as features that words can require in their surrounding linguistic context. An overview is given of the fascinating and ongoing debate among researchers concerning how the meanings of words determine syntactic structure. In the second part of this chapter, several examples of second language (L2) research are presented in order to illuminate how lexical semantics might be relevant for language learning in the classroom. Such research addresses questions of how word meanings in a new language are acquired, given that learners initially assume equivalence between words in translation, even though words rarely have the same meaning in two different languages. It is argued that several findings in L2 lexical semantics are of direct relevance to teaching practice, materials development, and syllabus design.

## THE MENTAL LEXICON: A WORLD OF WORDS

### Reference, Sense, and Lexical Relations

An important traditional distinction in lexical semantics, as most influentially articulated by Frege (1980 [1892]) and Saussure (1983 [1916]), is between **reference** and **sense**. The reference of a word is the thing, event, or state that it points to in the world. It is what the word denotes, and it is external to the mind. Thus if someone refers to a particular piece of wooden furniture with four legs and a back using the word *chair*, the reference is to that object in the world. In contrast to reference, the sense of a word is its meaning in relation to the linguistic system of which it is a part, and this meaning is internal to the mind. The precise meaning of the word *chair* in English is related to other words such as *beanbag*, *bench*, *pew*, *seat*, *sofa*, *stool*, etc. Translational equivalents of words are rarely completely accurate because the precise set of things a word can denote varies from language to language, in part due to this relational aspect of meaning. In a given language, the translation of the English word *chair* might denote both chairs and stools, or there might be two words corresponding to different types of chair. Moreover, different words or phrases with distinct senses could point to the same individual in the world, for example *Bill*, *Shakespeare*, *Ann's husband*, *the author of Hamlet*, and *the Bard of Avon* might all refer to the same person but they carry different meanings. As Frege (1980 [1892]) observed, using two senses to denote the same referent is quite different from a repetition of terms. The planet Venus may be referred to as the morning star or the evening star, but for someone who is unaware that these terms denote the same object, example (1) carries information, while example (2) does not.

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