Introduction to lexicology

Lexicology is a branch of linguistics dealing with the study of the **word** and its **form**, **behavior** and **functions**. Thus, the lexis or the lexicon denotes the sum of words making up the vocabulary of the language, or the total stock of words contained in the dictionary. Lexicologists are interested in the generalizations and regularities characterizing the forms of words and their relations together.

The first chapter[1] you are requested to read deals with the definition of the "word" in the eye of the lexicologists, as being the central unit of investigation in their field of study. It is important to know about the different criteria adopted to decide what a word is. Do articles 'a' / "an"/ "the" constitute words? Are homographs and homophones considered separate words? Are compound nouns considered to be one semantic unit or more? What is a lexeme? What is a dictionary entry? Are inflected forms (cold/colder/coldest) considered separate words or variants of the same word? What aspect of language (written or spoken) is accounted for in the definition of the word? Some words are pronounced the same way and have different meanings (bow/bow); some are written the same way and have different pronunciations (refuse/refuse); some other words have the same spelling and pronunciation (bank/bank), some have the same pronunciation and different meanings (feet/feat). How these words are treated in a dictionary and how much information is needed to define a word in a dictionary? How do lexicographers organize dictionary entries to give meaning of related words and grammatical information pertaining to each word they are defining?

These are some of the question the chapter purports to answer. The chapter will also help you distinguish between orthographic and phonological words, lexemes, single-word lexemes and multi-word lexemes, word-forms, headwords, homophones, homographs, polysemous words, functional (grammatical) and lexical words?

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[1] Howard Jackson (2014): Words and their meaning. Taylor and Francis

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Objectives of the lesson:

The present lecture focusses on the different layers of meaning to a lexeme and how the lexicographer is exploiting information on these layers of meaning in defining different lexemes or head-words. Thus, a word has denotation, connotation, emotive meaning. It may suggest different meanings depending on the situational context and poses different problems in definition for the lexicographer depending on its type (common noun, proper noun, and abstract noun, grammatical or semi-grammatical word). At the end, you will be able to distinguish between denotative, connotative and emotive meaning, between general and specialized definitions (jargon), and between a common and scientific definition. You will also be able to understand the way meaning is provided in a dictionary.

SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

THE WORD AND ITS REFERENCE TO THE WORLD

Part 1: Denotation of different categories of words

The relation between words and entities in the real world is called **reference** or **denotation.**

Is the relation between the word and its referent motivated?

The relation of reference is not a simple and straightforward one. There appears to be no intrinsic (or logical) reason why a particular word should be related by reference to a particular entity. The relation between words and what they refer to is **arbitrary**. There is no obvious connection between the sound or symbol of the word 'rabbit' and the animal that it denotes. After all, the words denoting this animal in other languages are different, "lapin" in French, "أرنب" in Arabic, "conejo" in Spanish…

Is this relation arbitrary with all words?

While the relation between word and what it refers to is arbitrary for the great majority of words, it is not so for all (eg. words such as splash, clash, spit, woosh, grunt, plod, spit, swish, thrum are onomatopoeic). Sometimes a word is 'motivated' by the sound that its referent makes (onomatopoeic words)

Sometimes a fraction of a word may suggest a given meaning. For example the combination of sounds placed initially in some words (sn-) may suggest unpleasant sounds made by humans: snarl, sneer, snitch, sniff, snigger ,snort, snuffle (llok for the meaning of these words in a good dictionary). Similarly, a meaning of 'rounded protrusion' might be associated with the combination of sounds -ump at the end of some words: bump clump, hump, lump, rump, tump.

These features of sounds suggesting meaning are known as the **'phonaesthetic'** properties of words.

Another exception to the non-arbitrary relation between words and referents, in with **proper names** (names of people, places or institutions). Parents sometimes choose names for their children because of a supposed meaning of the name (Iris a name of a flower, Faith is a virtue) . The same thing applies for the name of places (Côte d'Ivoir, Abu Dhabi, Stoutbridge).

The problem of referring to common nouns:

Common nouns refer to classes of things. Their reference is consequently much more difficult to describe than proper nouns. For example, it is not easy to define a unique referent to the word « window », which may be found in many places, and can take different shapes and are used for multiple purposes.

Take this definition of window in the Longman dictionary: **an opening, especially in the wall of a building, for admission of light and air that is usually fitted with a frame containing glass and capable of being opened and shut.**

We might object that not all windows need be capable of opening, that we may have windows in roofs, that we talk of windows in cars and buses, that other transparent materials than glass may be used.

Now, let's compare the definition above with the definition provided by Collins dictionary:

1**. a light framework, made of timber, metal or plastic, that contains glass or glazed opening frames and is placed in a wall or roof to let in light or air or to see through** . .

2. **an opening in the wall or roof of a building that is provided to let in light or air or to see through**.

The fact that the definitions differ between dictionaries illustrates the problems associated with describing the reference of words like window, or of any words denoting things in our everyday environment. They are of a generic nature, referring to classes of items that may differ from other members of the class in a myriad ways and yet have enough properties in common for native speakers of the language to use a single lexeme to denote them.

Another reason for the looseness of the reference relation of many words is that the vocabulary of our language in some sense reflects what we choose to name in our experience of the world, or the way in which English speakers carve up reality. We see a continuity between the windows of buildings and the windows of vehicles, and so use the same lexeme to denote both.

It is clear that to some extent the lexemes of a language reflect the distinctions that speakers of the language wish to make in talking about the world, and indeed particular groups may wish to make more detailed distinctions than the general speakers. For example, for many speakers the lexeme car is sufficient to denote the several kinds of motor vehicle that others would want to distinguish by the terms: saloon, coupe, estate, hatchback, convertible, roadster.

Similarly, the lexeme warship suffices for most speakers to refer to the various vessels that a specialist would want to distinguish by the terms: destroyer, frigate, cruiser, aircraft, carrier minesweeper.

Specialist groups have a vocabulary to talk about their specialism, which outsiders have no access to, and part of the task of becoming a specialist in any field is learning the appropriate vocabulary or **jargon**; that is, learning to carve up that bit of reality in a more differentiated way.

This means that some lexemes refer generally, while others refer more specifically. For example, we can organize the following lexemes (cake-fork-, cutlery, fish-knife,fork, knife, spoon, teaspoon) from general to specific as follows:
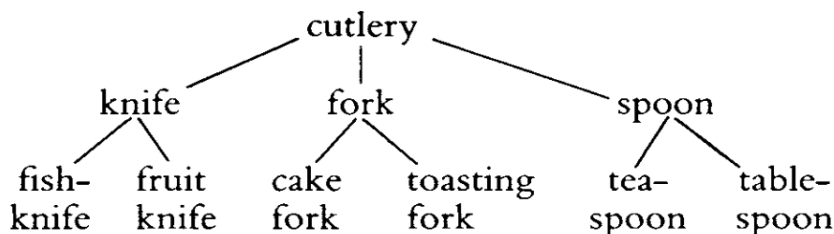
 What we are illustrating here is the lexical relation of **hyponymy**. Knife, fork and spoon are **hyponyms** of cutlery.

The generic nature of the reference of a lexeme is just an abstraction from the various objects in the world denoted by it.

The examples discussed up to now as related to **concrete nouns.** What about **abstract nouns**?

The problem of referring to abstract nouns:

Consider the 'abstract' noun "purpose", as in the sentence: My purpose in writing is to persuade you to visit us. How would you describe the denotation of this lexeme?

What we can do perhaps is to cite a number of example sentences which illustrate what a 'purpose' is. The latter half of the sentence above would be such an example of a purpose: 'to persuade you to visit us'. Dictionary definitions often resort to finding synonyms, e.g. for purpose: the object for which something exists or is done; the intention, where purpose is partly defined by the synonym 'intention'.

In the verb class the denotation of activity verbs, such as blow, run, throw, is easier to describe than that of cognitive verbs such as believe, remember, understand. The actions denoted by activity

verbs are observable. Longman dictionary defines **throw**, for example, as: **to propel through the air in some manner, especially by a forward motion of the hand and arm.**

With cognitive verbs, on the other hand, we use, as with abstract nouns, examples for illustration and synonyms for definition, as the Longman dictionary entry for understand shows: to grasp the meaning of; comprehend ...

The denotation of some adjectives can be described easily, either because they relate to words of other classes, especially nouns (e.g. prickly = 'having prickles'), or because they refer to observable and/or measurable qualities, e.g. colour adjectives. Yellow, for instance, refers to a colour of a certain hue (أصل اللون). Other adjectives denote either relative qualities (e.g. big, soft) or abstract qualities (true, furious), and their reference cannot be described so easily. Similarly, most adverbs have an abstract reference (bravely, lazily, fast) and their denotation may be best described by paraphrase or synonym, or by relating them to words from which they are derived, usually adjectives.

<u>The difficulty of reference to grammatical words</u>: with grammatical word-classes, the relation of reference does not apply in the same way. Grammatical words like pronouns, determiners, prepositions and conjunctions often make no contribution to the lexical reference of a sentence. This is not always the case, however. Consider the use of the preposition "into" in these sentences:

We will look into your complaint.

They looked over the wall into the garden.

In the first sentence "into" is merely a grammatical connective; it forms part of the prepositional verb look into (= 'investigate'), and it has no reference by itself. In the last sentences, "into" refers to a particular spatial orientation; it contrasts with other prepositions denoting alternative spatial orientations (out of, across), but it also acts as a grammatical connective for the noun phrase the garden. Similarly, a conjunction like 'although' may connect a subordinate clause to a main clause (grammatical function), but it also denotes a particular kind of connection ('concession' = semantic function). Thus, there is a gradation from fully lexical to fully grammatical word-classes.

Part 2: connotative and emotive meaning

Connotation and denotation:

Denotation has already been explained so far (the relation of the word to what it refers to in reality**). Connotation** relates to the associations that a word has over and above its denotation. Linguistically there are significant associations that a word carries for a whole language community or at least for a defined group within a language community. For example, the word '**caviar**' denotes 'the salted roe of large fish (e.g. sturgeon)" but it may be said to connote **luxury, high living and sumptuous food.**

Connotations are subjective:

Connotations are far more indeterminate than denotations. On the one hand, they may be subject to considerable variation from one generation to the next (e.g. consider what the word siren means to the generation that experienced the Second World War). On the other hand, they may be rather subjective and not shared in the same way by all speakers of a language: our individual experience of language and its relation to the world is to some extent unique.

Connotations shared by a group of language users or a whole language community are part of the culture we inherit with the language itself.

Emotive meaning:

Another term that is associated with connotation, though rather narrower in scope, is **emotive meaning**. In any culture at any time there are words which are used by sloganisers, political or otherwise, to stand, some for positive and some for negative values, judged as such by that culture. Sometimes these 'emotive' overtones have been more important in a word's use than the denotation of the word. We may cite as examples words such as the following: imperialism, revolution, freedom, democracy republic, justice, equality, progress, rights, law. Similarly, advertisers have a series of adjectives (and images) whose emotive meanings overturn their denotations, such as: modern, delicious, special, fine, real, fresh, pure, genuine, healthy.

The importance of situational context for referential meaning

The referential meaning of a lexeme therefore, its denotation and connotation, depends on the context of its use. First of all, it depends on its linguistic context, the other words in the same sentence, paragraph or even text. The lexeme 'freedom' has a different meaning in the context of prisoner, gaol, cell, sentence and warder than it has in the context of oppression, dictator, injustice, regime and junta. Secondly, the referential meaning of a lexeme depends on its situational context: who is using the word, who the audience is, what the occasion of use is. Freedom for a dissident in the Soviet Union might mean the capacity to read, hear, say and write what he or she thinks; in South Africa, on the other hand, freedom for a black person might mean the lifting of apartheid restrictions on movement and residence.

Clearly, the definitions of lexemes that we find in dictionaries cannot take account of the kinds of variation in referential meaning. The meaning of a lexeme that we find given in a dictionary entry

must therefore be regarded as 'potential', **a distillation of the essentials, awaiting actualisation in a particular linguistic and situational context**.

Denotation and definition

The definition of salt is likely to contain the chemical term 'sodium chloride' and perhaps even the chemical formula 'NaCl'. It is unlikely that any language user would recognise the substance from this definition: is this 'scientific' definition a true reflection of the denotation of this lexeme? It must be said though that the definition is likely to contain some mention of the use of salt for 'seasoning and preserving' food, which comes a little nearer to everyday use. In general we have noted that 'concrete' nouns do have definitions that are descriptions of the 'things' denoted by their lexemes; some dictionaries, indeed, contain drawings or photographs for this purpose.

In the case of 'activity' verbs like decorate, the definition often describes the action denoted by the verb, in this case 'to apply new coverings of wallpaper or paint' or 'to make more attractive by adding ornament, colour, etc'. When we turn to more 'abstract' lexemes, dictionary definitions tend to be less descriptive and analytical. The definition of the adjective astute, for example, probably relies largely on the citation of synonyms, or a synonymous paraphrase, e.g. 'shrewdly perspicacious', 'having insight or acumen; perceptive; shrewd'. The same is true for the adverb offhand: 'without forethought or preparation', 'without preparation or warning; impromptu'.

Reference:

Howard Jackson (2014): Words and their meaning. Taylor and Francis

Howard Jackson (2002). Lexicography: an introduction. Routledge

Exercises

1. Attempt a description of the denotation of the following 'concrete' nouns.
   - Then check your attempt with a definition in one or more dictionaries.
   cup, jam , path, screw, wine
   - What difference do you notice in the way these dictionaries treat this denotation?

2. What verbs can you think of in English that refer to the activities of :

(a) taking people on for work (e.g. in a business), and

(b) causing people to cease from work?

- What differences in meaning do you notice between them?

3. What adjectives do we have in English that refer to the experience of:

 (a) good and

 (b) bad smells?

 4. What connotations do you think the following nouns have in English? charity, iron, mole, snow, street

5. Which of the following nouns has its reference described 'scientifically' in your dictionary (as salt = 'sodium chloride')? badger; mushroom; robin; sodium; spider.