

THE SYNTAGMATIC DELIMITATION OF LEXICAL UNITS

■ **The syntagmatic delimitation of lexical units:**

- is a feature of language in virtue of which the meaning of a sentence is a function of the meanings of its constituent parts
- for example: the meaning of the sentence “*John thought the dog fetched the stick.*” is a function of the meanings of the component phrases “*the dog fetched the stick*” and “*John thought,*” whose meanings are in turn a function of their parts.

Lexical units: A lexical unit is a form-meaning complex with discrete semantic properties.

It is a single word or chain of words that forms the basic elements of a language`s lexicon (vocabulary).

Sense is the meaning aspect of a lexical unit.

In the case of the syntagmatic delimitation, we have to consider three aspects of the delimitation of a lexical item.

1) delimit the form of a lexical item syntagmatically

- it means to state in any sentence where the boundaries between lexical items are

2) having set up syntagmatic units, we observe that many of them appear to operate in a variety of grammatical environments

3) a word form may well display a split semantic personality, too, even within a constant grammatical frame.

The basic syntagmatic lexical units of a sentence are defined as the smallest parts which satisfy the following 2 criteria:

a) a lexical unit must be at least one semantic constituent

b) a lexical unit must be at least one word

Examples that are not the lexical units:

- the prefix *dis-* of *disobey* is not the lexical unit because, although it is a semantic constituent, it is smaller than a word.
- the *pulled* of *Arthur pulled a fast one* is not the lexical unit because, although it is a word, it is not a semantic constituent.

Semantic constituents

Any constituent part of a sentence that bears a meaning which combines with the meanings of the other constituents to give the overall meaning of the sentence.

The meaning of a sentence is complex in that it results from the combination of meanings which are in some sense simpler. The simpler meanings are carried by identifiable parts of the sentence.

The meaning of *The cat sat on the mat* is: the + cat + sat + on + the + mat, combined in the ways signalled by the syntactic structure, which tells us that *on* goes with *the mat*, rather than with *the cat*.

Two types of the constituents:

- 1) a semantic constituent – any constituent part of a sentence that bears a meaning which combines with the meanings of the other constituents to give the overall meaning of the sentence
- 2) a minimal semantic constituent – a semantic constituent which can not be segmented into more elementary semantic constituents

On the mat is a semantic constituent of *the cat sat on the mat*.

But the semantic constituent is not used to refer to a meaning only but also to a form-plus-meaning complex. It means that the semantic constituent is a meaningful form with a determinate grammatical function.

An important indication that a part of a sentence is a semantic constituent is that semantic contribution to the sentence is the same as that which it makes to other, different sentences.

1. The *sacks* had been hung out to dry.
2. A woman was repairing *sacks*.
3. Everywhere there were *sacks* full of potatoes.

All sentences contain the meaning “sacks”. The only formal element they have in common is the graphic sequence *sacks*. We can identify *sacks* as the bearer of the meaning “*sacks*”. However, this is not sufficient to guarantee semantic constituency.

The test of recurrent semantic contrast – an important diagnostic test for semantic constituency. This test locates the form responsible for a given meaning and at the same time ensures that its role is that of a semantic constituent.

The cat sat on the mat. – We can substitute one of its constituent parts, *cat*, by a different but syntactically identical element such a *dog*. The result is change in the meaning of the sentence.

Collocational uniqueness:

- no contrast in which the unique element participates can be tested in a distinct linguistic environment

Semantic tallies:

- **do not carry meaning**
- **part of minimal semantic constituents**
- **main target is to distinguish from other semantic constituents with the same semantic categoriser**

Example: cranberry – it is a variety of berry but what exactly does *cran-* mean? For example creation like *cranbeads* means nothing, although one might have expected some interpretation such as “small round red beads.” The fact is that element like *cran-* does not carry any meaning at all.

Semantic categoriser:

- partner element of the semantic tally
- indicates a general category
- a semantic tally in combination with a semantic categoriser constitutes a minimal semantic constituent
- *cranberry*: *cran-* is a semantic tally and the partner element *-berry* is a semantic categoriser

Semantic indicators:

- general term for elements which fall short of being constituents, but have a semantic function relating to the meanings the same forms carry when they are semantic constituents
- they are not constituents but have a semantic function

examples: *black-* and *bird-* in *blackbird* or *green-* and *house-* in *greenhouse*

Words

A word is typically the smallest element of a sentence which has positional mobility. It can be moved around without destroying the grammaticality of the sentence.

John saw Bill.

Bill saw John.

Bill, John saw.

The morphemes constituting a single word have a rigidly fixed sequential order. We have word *unwillingly*, but we can not say *lywillingun* or *unlywilling*.

The word is also typically the largest unit which resists ‘interruption’

Idioms

An idiom is an expression whose meaning can not be inferred from the meanings of its parts. The meaning does not follow the meaning of the individual words of which it is composed.

Idioms typically admit two different interpretations: a literal one and a nonliteral
(figurative) one

Idioms are often colloquial metaphors. The most common ones can have deep roots, traceable across many languages.

Many have translations in other languages, some of which are direct.

For example: *get lost!* – which means *go away* or *stop bothering me*

kick the bucket – to die

never look a gift-horse in the mouth – you should accept a received gift without trying to find a fault in it

it's raining cats and dogs – used to refer to severe rainstorms. Cats were associated with heavy rain and dogs with storm and wind. Nowadays, it has become old-fashioned.

pull someone's leg – to tell someone something that is not true as a way of joking with them

Most idioms are homophonous with grammatically well-formed transparent expressions. A few are not in this sense well-formed, although some grammatical structure is normally discernible. Such cases, of which *by and large* and *far and away* are examples, are often called **asyntactic idioms**.

Collocations:

- refer to sequences of lexical items which habitually co-occur, but which are nonetheless fully transparent in the sense that each lexical constituent is also a semantic constituent
- the collocation of a word plays a major role in determining its meaning in context
- collocations, like idioms, need to be individually learned

examples : *fine weather, torrential rain, light drizzle, high winds*

Idioms and ‘dead’ metaphors:

- expressions whose meanings cannot be inferred from the meanings of their parts
- is a type of expression which is included in the category of idiom, but which ought to be kept distinct, and that is what is sometimes called ‘frozen’ or ‘dead’ metaphor.
- a metaphor induces the hearer or reader to view a thing, state of affairs as being like something else
- dead metaphor is a figure of speech that has lost its force and imaginative effectiveness through frequent use
- dead metaphor has lost the original imagery of its meaning due to extensive, repetitive popular usage. Because dead metaphors have a conventional meaning that differs from the original, they can be understood without knowing their earlier connotation.

Examples of dead metaphors:

- flower**bed**
- **head** teacher
- to lose **face**
- to lend a **hand**
- a computer **mouse**

Thank you for your
attention!