A contextual approach to lexical semantics

přednáška

- The approach described is a variety of 'contextual' approach' . It is assumed that the semantic properties of a lexical item are fully reflected in appropriate aspects of the relations it contracts with actual and potential contexts.

- In theory, the relevant contexts could include extra-linguistic situational contexts..
- There are good reasons for a principled limitation to linguistic contexts:
1. the relation between a lexical item and extra-linguistic contexts is often crucially mediated by the purely linguistic contexts
2. Any aspect of an extra-linguistic context can in principle be mirrored linguistically.
3. linguistic context is more easily controlled and manipulated
- We should seek to derive information about a word's meaning from its relations with actual and potential linguistic contexts

- Characteristics of words in utterances are constrained not only by their meanings, but also by their grammatical properties.
- Grammatical constraints may overlap and reinforce semantic ones, but they may also be semantically arbitrary.

Meaning and grammar

- distinction - is not an easy task
- They are intimately interwoven
- The distinction between grammar and meaning has a strong intuitive basis.

deviation

- <u>Semantic deviance</u>
  - He harvested a magnetic puff of amnesia.

- <u>Deviance of grammar</u>
  - Them yesterday goed to home.

- It's too light for me to lift.

- I've nearly completed. – (in answer to *How are you getting on with those jobs I asked you to do?*)

- the deviance disappears completely if *light* is substituted by the semantically distinct, but syntactically identical, *heavy*
- the deviance can be cured by inserting *them* after *completed*.

- syntactic deviances can be readily corrected,whereas semantic deviances cannot. For example:

  - He harvested a magnetic puff of amnesia.

  - Them yesterday goed to home.

- More promising strategy is to ask not how or whether a deviant sentence can be corrected, but what the minimal changes are that will render it normal, then we examine the nature of the changes.
  - If a deviant sentence can be normalised by adjusting its grammatical structure - changing the order or syntactic category of elements, or by adding substituting or deleting one or more grammatical elements- GRAMMATICAL DEVIANCE
  - If the minimal change required is one necessarily involving one or more full lexical items- SEMANTIC DEVIANCE

- this procedure would be more informative if we were able to characterise grammatical and lexical elements more explicitly.

- John's kind*ness* amaze*d* Mary.

- This is, in fact, possible in terms of what are called
- **closed set items (**are those belonging to classes whose membership is virtually constant during the lifetime of an individual speaker. They have few or no possibilities of substitution in an actual sentence)
- affixes (dislike, kindness , John's, waited, coming, blacken...) and independent words (sometimes called **markers),** such as articles,conjunctions, prepositions and so on.
- major part of whose linguistic function is to signal the grammatical organisation of sentences
- and **open set items (**are those which belong to classes which are subject to a relatively rapid turnover in membership. They are the lexical roots -the principal meaning-bearing elements in a sentence.

- John's   kindness   amazed   Mary
- Bill-   cool-   amuse-   Sue
- Mary-   rude-   disturb-   John
- Sue -   sad-   shock-   Bill

- If the minimal change required to 'cure' an anomaly in a sentence involves one or more closed set items, then the deviance is grammatical.

- If, however, the sentence can most easily be normalised by replacing one or more open set elements, then the deviance is semantic.

- He harvested a magnetic puff of amnesia.
- To normalise, the lexical roots must be altered.-: *He exhaled a carcinogenic puff of smoke.*
- Them yesterday goed to home
- All the changes needed to normalise involve closed set items.

- It is possible for a sentence to exhibit semantic and grammatical deviance simultaneously :

- The green idea sleep.

- Two separate operations are needed to normalise this sentence:

    - 1. one involving closed set items:

        - The green idea is sleeping.

    - 2. the other involves an open set item :

        - The green lizard is sleeping

- It is not possible to disentangle semantics from grammar completely. One reason for this is that many grammatical elements are themselves bearers of meaning - this is true, for instance, past tense affix *-ed*, and the plural affix *–s*.

- But otherwise the meaning they carry is not of a radically different sort from that carried by lexical roots, and grammatical and lexical elements frequently interact semantically.

- I visited Arthur next week.
    - I shall visit Arthur next week.
    - I visited Arthur last week.

- Some sentences can be normalised either by grammatical adjustment or by lexical adjustment.
  - The cake was baken.
    - The cake was baked.
    - The cake was taken.

Criteria for deciding whether an anomalous sentence is semantically or grammatically deviant :

- An anomaly which can only be removed by replacing one or more open set items is **semantic**;

- an anomaly which cannot be removed by replacing one or more open set items, but can be removed by changing one or more closed set items, is purely **grammatical**;

- an anomaly which can be cured either by changing one or more *closed set items* or by replacing one or more open set items is **semantic** (albeit with grammatical implications) if the *open set replacements* are distinguished by the possession of certain semantic properties; otherwise, it is purely **grammatical**,

- A poetic context can also condition the reader or hearer to accept grammatical deviance, especially if syntactic well-formedness is clearly being sacrificed to some higher aesthetic end, such as the maintenance of rhyme,or metre, or some other patterning

The data of semantics

- For a study of lexical semantics, there would seem to be two principal sources of primary data:

  - One source is the productive output, spoken or written, of native users of the language.

  - The second principal source of primary data on which a study of lexical semantics can be based is furnished by intuitive semantic judgements by native speakers of linguistic materials of one kind or another.

- It might seem obvious that, if one is studying word-meanings, one ought to find native speakers' intuitions concerning the meanings of words the most informative.
- The intuitions most relevant to a study of meaning would seen at first sight to be intuitions about what things mean.

- He watched it with intense concentration for a few moments, then left the room.

- He looked at it with intense concentration for. a few moments, then left the room.

- The ability to 'explain' meanings is an uncommon skill.
- The answer is to elicit not intuitions OF meaning, but intuitions ABOUT meaning

DISCIPLINING INTUITIONS

- No empirical science can operate without human intuitive judgement intervening at some point.

- One of the simplest and most basic semantic judgements one can make concerning an utterance in one´s native language is whether it is to some degree odd or not.

- What can informants do is to distinguish a fully normal sentence from one which is to some degree odd.

- An odd sentence is not necesarilly meaningless, or incapable of conveying a message. On the contrary, an oddness of one sort or another is frequently a signal that an expression is being used creatively, in a novel extension of its usual sense.

SEMANTIC ANOMALIES

- **ZEUGMA**-inappropriate linking, e.g.*Arthur and his driving licence expired last Thursday.*

- **PLEONASM**, can be normalised by replacing one of its elements with something more specific

- *A female mother. ODD*

- *A lesbian mother. NORMAL*

- *Kick it with one of your feet. ODD*

- *Kick it with your left foot. NORMAL*

- **DISSONANCE**, can only be be cured by replacing one element by something less specific, conflict of words.

- *The cat barked. ODD*

- *The animal barked. NORMAL*

- **IMPROBABILITY**

- *He walked by car.*

- *The sun very shines today.*

ENTAILMENT

- A proposition P is said to entail another proposition Q when the truth of Q is a logically necessary consequence of the truth of P (and the falsity of P is a logically necessary consequence of the falsity of Q).

- We shall use the term to refer to an analogous relation between sentences.

- A sentence THAT´S A DOG can be used to express an indefinetly large numbers of proposions

- The sentence THAT´S A DOG entails the sentence THAT´S AN ANIMAL and can be viewed as a kind of shorthand for the pattern of normality like the following:

- IT´S A DOG THEREFORE IT´S AN ANIMAL

- IT CAN´T POSSIBLY BE A DOG AND NOT BE AN ANIMAL.

TYPES OF ENTAILMENT

1. UNILATERAL ENTAILMENT

- It´s a dog unilaterally entails It´s an animal.

2. MUTUAL ENTAILMENT

- The meeting began at 10.00 a.m. And is entailed by The meeting commenced at 10.00 a.m.

3. CONTRARIETY

- It´s a cat and It´s a dog stands in a contrary relation: It´s a cat unilaterally entails It´s not a dog.

4. CONTRADICTION

- It´s dead entails and is entailed by It´s not alive.

INTUITIVE JUDGEMENT

- Another useful and reliable intuition is that of recurrence of semantic contrast or semantic proportion.

- For instance, speakers are well able to judge that the contrast between 1A and B is the same as that between 2 A and B.

- 1A I like him

- 1B I dislike him.

- 2A They approved of the idea.

- 2B They disapproved of the idea.

THE MEANING OF A WORD

- We shall say, that the meaning of a word is fully reflected in its contextual relations and that the meaning of a word is constituted by its contextual relations.

- We can picture the meaning of a word as a pattern of affinities and disaffinities.

- A SYNTAGMATIC AFFINITY-there is a syntagmatic affinity between DOG and BARKED, since *THE DOG BARKED* is normal

- A SYNTAGMATIC DISAFFINITY is revealed by a syntagmatic abnormality, *THE LIONS ARE CHIRRUPING.*

- PARADIGMATIC AFFINITY- cat and dog have a fairly high degree of P.A.:

- *I STROKED THE CAT/DOG.*

- *WE HAVE A CAT/DOG AT HOME.*

SEMANTIC TRAIT

- A particular word-meaning which participates in this way in the meaning of another word is termed a SEMANTIC TRAIT of the second word.

- We shal define a number of statuses of semantic traits:

- CRITERIAL, EXPECTED, POSSIBLE, UNEXPECTED, EXCLUDED.

SEMANTIC TRAITS

- CRITERIAL and EXCLUDED traits can be diagnosed by means of entailment relations between sentences.

- For example, „animal" is a criterial trait of dog because IT´S A DOG entails IT´S AN ANIMAL

- „FISH" is an excluded trait of dog because IT´S A DOG entails IT´S NOT A FISH.

- For the diagnosis of expected, possible and unexpected traits, the but-test is extremely useful.

EXPECTED, UNEXPECTED, POSSIBLE TRAITS

- Consider the status of „can bark" as a trait of dog, „can bark" is not a criterial trait.

- **EXPECTED TRAIT:**

- *It´s a dog, but it can bark.* (ODD)

- *It´s a dog, but it can´t bark.* (NORMAL)

- The sort of oddness may be termed EXPRESSIVE PARADOX.

- **UNEXPECTED TRAIT:**

- *It´s a dog but it can sing.* (normal sentence, unusual dog, „can sing" is unexpected trait of dog)

- *It´s a dog, but it can´t sing.* (EXPRESSIVE PARADOX)

- **POSSIBLE TRAIT:**

- *A possible trait is signalled when both test sentences exhibit expressive paradox, and P and Q is normal.*

- *It´s a dog, but it´s brown.*

- *It´s a dog and it´s brown.*

SEMANTIC TRAITS-TASK

- TASK:

- Consider the relation between „adapted for flight" as a semantic trait of bird, and „possesses four legs" as a trait of a dog. They are alike in that neither is criterial, both are expected.

- It´s a bird does not entail *IT IS ADAPTED FOR FLIGHT.* (There are birds such as ostrich, kiwi..)

- It´s a dog does not entail IT HAS FOUR LEGS. (A dog may have a birth abnormality...)

- Create 2 sentences with BUT, 1 would be normal, 2 is odd:

TASK-SOLUTION

- It´s a bird, but it´s adapted for flight. (odd)
- It´s a bird, but it´s not adapted for flight. (normal)
- It´s a dog, but it has four legs. (odd)
- It´s a dog, but doesn´t have four legs. (normal)

CANONICAL TRAITS

- Semantic traits whose absence is regarded as a defect will be called CANONICAL TRAITS.

- Canonical traits can be distinguished from non-canonical expected traits in a number of ways:

- *The typical bird is adapted for flight.*

- *Birds are typically adapted for flight.*

- *What kinds of bird are not adapted for flight?*

- Canonical traits are not only to be found in words denoting living things.