

# **Paradigmatic delimitation of lexical units**

# Introduction

There are two kinds of elements relevant to lexical semantics:

- lexical units
- lexemes

They have different functions which impose different constraints of their nature.

# Lexical units

- form-meaning complexes with stable and discrete semantic properties
- stand in meaning relations – antonymy (long x short), hyponymy (dog, animal)
- interact syntagmatically with contexts in various ways to produce different sorts of anomaly
- semantic identity of particular lexical unit is expressed by such relations, but these relations do not provide exhaustive characteristic of the unit

# Lexical units

- **sense** = meaning aspect of a lexical unit

- senses need to represent unitary 'quanta' of meaning, but they do not need to be finite in number

antonymy: there should necessarily be only a finite number of opposite pairs in language

# Lexemes

- items listed in the lexicon ('ideal dictionary') of the language
- a lexeme may be associated with infinite number of senses but the set of lexemes must be finitely enumerable

(a) *a topless dress*      x      (b) *a topless dancer*

- lexically distinct – they have different typical contrasts
- relatively stable across the contexts
- number of possible distinct uses of *topless* seems to be open:

*topless bar; the topless watchdog committee; topless by-laws;*

=> attempts to draw up a determinate closed list would be of questionable validity => (a) and (b) are not different lexemes

Someone picks up an apple in greengrocery:

*Is this the fruit you mean?*

- 1 particular apple?
- apples in general?
- variety of apple?
- fruit from a particular supplier?
- number of possible readings is limited only by imagination

# Selection and modulation of senses

- basic problem of lexical semantics: multiplicity of semantic uses of a single word without grammatical difference
- the meaning of any word form is in some sense different in every distinct context in which it occurs



# Selection and modulation of senses

- two types of variation in the semantic contribution:

- **selection of different units of sense**

*Sue is visiting her cousin. We finally reached the bank.*

- **contextual modification of a single sense**

# Selection and modulation of senses

- two ways in which contexts have a restrictive influence on the meanings associated with word forms occurring within them:

## **\*modulation**

- a single sense can be modified in an unlimited number ways in by different contexts; each context is emphasizing certain semantic traits and obscuring and suppressing others

- variation is continuous and fluid

## **\*contextual selection**

- activation by different contexts of different senses associated with ambiguous word forms

- variation proceed rather in discreet jumps

# Modulation

- two types of modulation:

1. changes in the status of semantic traits along the dimension of necessity:

- **promotion**

*A nurse attended us.*

- **demotion**

*A pregnant nurse attended us.*

*Arthur poured the butter into a dish.*

\* linkage of traits – butter not only liquid, but also hot

# Modulation

## 2. **highlighting** and **background** of semantic traits

*The car needs servicing.*

*We can't afford that car.*

*The car needs washing.*

*Our car couldn't keep with his.*

# Normality

When a sentence is uttered, it is rarely the utterer's intention that it should be interpreted in two or more different ways simultaneously.

- 2 types of normality

## **\*sentence-internal normality**

- more than 1 ambiguous word form in a sentence

=> negotiation for achieving the most normal combination

*Several rare ferns grow on the steep banks of the burn where it runs into the lake.*

# Normality

## **\*contextual normality**

- involves relevance, informativeness, consistency

*A: It's dark in here, isn't it?*

*B: Yes, aren't there any lights?*

# Indirect test for ambiguity

I. If there exists a synonym of one occurrence of a word form which is not a synonym of a second, syntactically identical occurrence of the same word form in a different context, then that word form is ambiguous, and the two occurrences exemplify different senses.

*Guy struck the match.*

*The match was a draw.*

# Indirect test for ambiguity

**II.** If there exists a word/expression standing in a relation of antonymy to one occurrence of a word form, which does not stand in the same relation to a second, syntactically identical occurrence of the same word form in a different context, then that word form is ambiguous, and the two occurrences exemplify different senses.

*The room was painted in light colours.*

*Arthur has rather a light teaching load.*



# Indirect test for ambiguity

**III.** If there exists a word standing in a paronymic relation to one occurrence of a word form, but does not stand in the same relation to a second, syntactically identical occurrence of the same word form in a different context, then that word is ambiguous, and the two occurrences exemplify different senses.

*The race was won by Arcle.*

*They are a war-like race.*

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- nothing can be reliably deduced from the fact that a word form has different meaning relations in different contexts

# Direct criteria for ambiguity

I. Senses of an ambiguous word form should not in every case be totally conditioned by their contexts, unlike the interpretations which arise as a result of contextual modulation => an ambiguous word form set in a disambiguating context may well carry more information that can be accounted for in terms of interaction between the context-independent meaning of the word form and the semantic properties of the context

*Arthur washed and polished the car.*

*John lubricated the car.*

*The Rutarian monarch is expecting her second baby.*

*Her husband is the manager of a local bank.*

*At this point, the bank was covered with brambles*

*John prefers bitches to dogs.*

*Incredibly, John prefers an aged, half-blind bitch to a dog, as his canine companion.*

*John prefers bitches to canines.*

# Direct criteria for ambiguity

II. Separate senses should be independently **maximisable** – under certain conditions, the application of certain terms must be maximised within the current universe of discourse, even at the expense of oddness.

*Mary likes mares better than horses.*

*Mary prefer mares to theses horses.*

A: *Is that a dog?*

B: *Yes, it's a spaniel.*

*No, it's a bitch.*

A: *Is the subject of the poem a monarch?*

B: *Yes, it's a queen.*

*No, it's a king.*

# Direct criteria for ambiguity

**III.** Independent senses of a lexical form are antagonistic to one another => they cannot be used simultaneously without oddness; contexts activating more than one sense at a time give rise to the variety of oddness (**zeugma**)

*John and his driving licence expired last Thursday.*

*John's driving licence expired last Thursday; so did John.*

*My cousin, who is pregnant, was born on the same day as Arthur's, who is the father.*

Identity test for ambiguity

*Mary is wearing a light coat; so is Sue.*

*Mary has adopted a child; so did Sue.*

# Other examples

## 1. unit-type ambiguity

*A: Is this the jacket you want?*

*B: Yes. (It's the type I want)*

*No. (This particular one is shop-soiled)*

*This is our best-selling jacket, do try it on.*

*My sister has the skirt Sue is wearing right now.*

*The skirt Sue is wearing belongs to Mary; my sister has it, too.*

ambiguous readings are related – one reading entails another

# Other examples

## 2. ambiguous readings are related – one reading entails another

*Mary bought a dog; so did Bill.*

*Arthur wants to know if that is a dog; so does Mike.*

*Dogs can become pregnant at 12 months.*

*Dogs mature later than bitches.*

*Dogs can become pregnant at 12 months, but mature later than bitches.*

# Other examples

3.

the door has a cat-flap; the door is standing open, a cat goes through the cat-flap but not through the doorway

*Did the cat go through the door?*

*The door was smashed in so often that it had to be bricked.*

# Non-lexical sources of ambiguity

## Pure syntactic ambiguity

*Old men and women*  
*French silk underwear*

## Quasi-syntactic ambiguity

*The astronaut entered the atmosphere again*  
*A red pencil*

*Did the cat go through the door?*

*The door was smashed in so often that it had to be bricked.*



# Establishment of senses

**Potential senses** – those which have never been realised in use

**Established senses** – well-utilised

⇒ 2 kinds of contextual selection:

passive selection

productive selection

*His new novel will be published next spring.*

*Why is your desk always piled with novels?*

*I'm not interested in the cover design, or the binding – I'm interested in the novel.*

*I'm not interested in the plot, or the characterisation, or anything of that nature – I'm interested in the novel.*

**THE END**

(finally)

**Thank you for your attention**

