

Lecture 2.1

1 Using a search engine, explore the range of uses of the terms 'semantic' and 'semantics' (or their equivalent in other languages) and group them into types. Some will have a clear linguistic focus; some will take you in the direction of computing, knowledge management, commerce, and other domains.

2 Using a dictionary of any language you know, collect examples of the variant forms of a lexeme. What word classes in English have most variants – verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs? What kinds of lexeme typically do not vary? What happens in other languages, especially those with more inflections than occur in English (eg French, Spanish, Latin)?

3 Using a dictionary of any language you know, collect examples of multi-word lexemes of the type illustrated by English 'come in'. Find examples of three-word units (eg 'come up with', 'by means of'). How large a part do these multi-word units play in the vocabulary of a language?

4 Make an estimate of your own vocabulary size using a college-sized dictionary (between 1000 and 2000 pages). Depending on the time you have available, randomly select a percentage of the pages (but ignore the first and last pages of each letter of the alphabet, as they are likely to contain fewer entries). If the book has 1500 pages, 1% would be 15; 2% would be 30, and so on. Using a pencil, lightly tick each lexeme that either (a) you think you know the meaning of (your passive vocabulary), or (b) you think you would actually use yourself (your active vocabulary). If you are doubtful, do not tick. Look out for lexemes that may be hidden within the body of an entry (eg 'rapidly' might be within the entry for 'rapid'). Ignore grammatical variations, whether regular or irregular (eg mouse/mice, good/better/best, go/went), but do count separately words belonging to different classes (noun, verb, adjective, adverb, etc). When you have ticked the words in your sample, add them up and multiply by the appropriate factor (if 1%, multiply by 100;

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if 2%, multiply by 50; etc). The result is your approximate vocabulary size. (Don't forget to rub out the pencil marks afterwards.)

5 Using a dictionary, assign a set of lexemes to semantic fields. Note that some lexemes will belong to more than one field, often distinguishing form from function. The lexeme 'hospital' could belong to the field of 'health' or to the field of 'building', depending on which element of its meaning is primary. If someone says 'I spent a week in hospital' they are thinking of the functional part of its meaning – to restore health; whereas if someone says 'Turn left at the hospital' they are thinking of the form of it as a physical building. It is often difficult, especially with lexemes that have an abstract meaning, to decide which field they belong to. In these cases, reference to the categories used in a thesaurus such as Roget's can be helpful:

<http://education.yahoo.com/reference/thesaurus/category_index>.

6 Go to an online collection of synonyms and antonyms, such as:

<<http://thesaurus.com>>

and search for a lexeme. There will be several synonyms and often several antonyms, and it makes an interesting exercise to decide which pairs make the best opposites, or whether some lexemes have more than one opposite (eg 'happy' versus 'sad' or 'unhappy'). Note how different antonyms can distinguish different senses: for example, 'steep' meaning 'extreme in direction' has such antonyms as 'gentle' and 'moderate'; 'steep' meaning 'very expensive' has such antonyms as 'cheap' and 'inexpensive'.

7 Print out a paragraph of text containing a dozen or so sentences. Cut out each sentence so that it is on a separate piece of paper, and mix them up. Then try to put the paragraph back together again. What linguistic features provide you with the clues you need to determine the coherence of the paragraph? Are there any cases where a sentence could go in alternative positions?

Lecture 2.2

1 Calculate the amount of polysemy in a dictionary. Each lexeme will either be monosemic (have just one sense) or polysemic (have more than one sense), the latter being identified by numbers (sense 1, 2, 3 ...), and sometimes subclassified into subsenses (1a, 1b, 1c ...). Take a sample of pages and work out the proportion of monosemic to polysemic items. What is the average number of senses per entry?

2 Take some polysemic items (eg 'ring', 'bridge', 'take', 'wicked') and make up sentences that distinguish their meanings, as in the example of 'table'. Are there cases where you have to provide other sentences in order to make the distinction? (For example, 'There is a mistake in the table' would usually mean 'table' in the sense of columns and rows; but in a furniture factory it could mean that something was wrong with the piece of furniture. The potential ambiguity would need further context to be resolved.)

3 Find examples of the main processes of word formation in English (or another language you know). You will need to distinguish between elements that express a grammatical contrast (inflections, such as the plural ending '-s') and elements that build new words (prefixes such as 'un-' and suffixes such as '-ness'). How many inflections are there? Classify the suffixes into those that form nouns, those that form verbs, and so on. Classify the prefixes into the kinds of meaning they express (eg those that express a negative meaning, such as 'un-'; those that express extra degree, such as 'super-'). You'll find an initial list at:

<<http://www.southampton.liunet.edu/academic/pau/course/webesl.htm>>.

Restrict your survey to commonly used items. There are many technical prefixes and suffixes used in such fields as chemistry and mathematics, as can be seen at:

<<http://www.scribd.com/doc/240281/MerriamWebsters-a-Dictionary-of-Prefixes-Suffixes-And-Combining-Forms>>.

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4 Compile your own list of blends, using online resources (search for 'portmanteau words') such as:

<<http://www.montgomerycollege.edu/~steuben/blendwords.htm>>

or

<<http://www.english-for-students.com/Portmanteau-Words.html>>.

Analyse the processes involved and create some new blends of your own.

5 Investigate word-order variations in an area of grammar. In English, for example, what happens to the word order if a sentence begins with 'Hardly'? What other adverbs cause a similar change? Or examine sequences of adjectives (eg 'Look at that lovely old country cottage') or adverbials (eg 'I went to town yesterday by bus') and see what variations are possible (eg can you say 'Look at that old country lovely cottage' or 'I went by bus yesterday to town'?).

6 Make a list of variant usage in irregular forms in English. You'll find examples in noun plurals (eg 'formulae' versus 'formulas') and past tenses of verbs (eg 'dreamed' versus 'dreamt'). Note that there may be regional differences, both national (eg 'catched' versus 'caught') and international (eg UK 'dived' versus US 'dove'), as well as humorous differences (eg 'meeces' for 'mice'). Historical differences should be noted too (eg 'dugged' is used in the King James Bible).

7 What stylistic or semantic effects are ignored by prescriptive rules? Choose a rule and collect data to determine how far it reflects linguistic reality. Bear in mind that there may be regional differences (especially between British and American English).

Some topics:

Expressing future time using 'shall' ('I shall take the plane') or 'will' ('I will take the plane').

Ending a sentence with a preposition ('This is the woman I was talking to') or not ('This is the woman to whom I was talking').

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Splitting an infinitive ('I want to really explore the town') or not ('I want really to explore the town').

Positioning 'only' ('I only want one ticket' versus 'I want only one ticket').