HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

SEMANTIC STRUCTURE OF THE WORD

Norimova Maftuna
English Teacher, Faculty of Social Sciences and Philology, Asia International University.
(norimovamaftuna@gmail.com)
Doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22852592

Abstract: This article examines the semantic structure of word meaning in English from the perspective of lexical semantics and semasiology. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between lexical, grammatical, and lexico-grammatical meaning; denotational and connotative components; contextual interpretation; and the phenomenon of polysemy. The study considers word meaning as a structured linguistic phenomenon rather than as an isolated association between a word form and an object. It also discusses referential and functional approaches to meaning and explains how context contributes to the selection of particular senses of polysemantic words. Examples from English demonstrate how one lexical item may develop several related meanings while preserving a semantic connection. The article argues that semantic structure is dynamic and systematic and that the study of word meaning is essential for understanding vocabulary development, language use, and communication.

Keywords: semantics, semasiology, lexical meaning, grammatical meaning, lexico-grammatical meaning, semantic structure, denotation, connotation, polysemy, monosemy, context.

Introduction. Meaning is one of the central problems of linguistics because language functions through meaningful signs. When speakers communicate, they select linguistic forms and interpret them according to lexical knowledge, grammatical organization, context, and shared conceptual knowledge. Semantics is concerned with linguistic meaning, while lexical semantics focuses more specifically on the meanings of lexical items and the contribution of those meanings to larger expressions. The lexicon is therefore not simply a list of words: it contains structured information that speakers use in interpretation.

The study of word meaning has traditionally been associated with semasiology, a branch of lexicology concerned with the meaning of words and the development of their meanings. Modern lexical-semantic research demonstrates that lexical meanings may be internally structured and that different senses can be systematically related. Polysemy is particularly important because a single word form can be associated with several related senses, with context helping speakers identify the relevant interpretation [1; 2].

The semantic structure of a word should consequently be understood as a system of interconnected components and senses. These may include denotational information, connotative associations, grammatical characteristics, and contextual possibilities. A full account of word meaning therefore requires attention not only to the relationship between a word and its referent, but also to its relationships with other linguistic units and to the contexts in which it occurs.

The Concept of Word Meaning. The question of what constitutes word meaning has been approached from several theoretical perspectives. A traditional referential approach relates meaning to the connection among the linguistic form, the concept expressed by that form, and the entity or

HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

situation to which the expression refers. This approach is useful because it emphasizes reference and conceptualization. However, reference alone cannot explain all aspects of meaning, since many linguistic expressions do not have a single concrete referent and may acquire different interpretations in different contexts.

A functional or contextual approach places greater emphasis on the distribution and use of a linguistic unit. From this perspective, meaning is revealed through the relationships between a word and other linguistic elements and through the situations in which the word is used. Context may restrict, enrich, or otherwise influence the interpretation of a lexical item. Contemporary lexical semantics therefore treats context as an important factor in the realization of particular senses [2; 3].

The meaning of a word may also change historically. Words can acquire additional senses, lose earlier senses, or develop specialized and generalized meanings. Such changes contribute to the development of the vocabulary and demonstrate that lexical meaning is not always fixed. Research on lexical-semantic change shows that word meanings may vary systematically over time and across varieties of English [4].

Semantic Components of Word Meaning. Word meaning can be described through several related components. Lexical meaning refers to the semantic content associated with a lexical item. Grammatical meaning is associated with grammatical categories and forms. For example, the forms work, works, worked, and working share a lexical core related to an activity, but their grammatical meanings differ in tense, aspect, or agreement. The distinction between lexical and grammatical meaning is therefore necessary for explaining the structure of word forms.

Lexico-grammatical meaning represents the general semantic and grammatical characteristics shared by words belonging to a particular class. Nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs differ not only in their grammatical behavior but also in the kinds of meanings they conventionally express. The interaction of lexical and grammatical information allows speakers to interpret words as parts of larger constructions.

Another useful distinction is between denotational and connotative meaning. Denotational meaning concerns the basic conceptual or referential content associated with a word. Connotative meaning includes additional associations, attitudes, evaluation, emotion, or stylistic coloring. For instance, the words child, kid, and youngster may refer to a similar general category but differ in register and connotative value. Such differences demonstrate that meaning includes more than simple reference.

Semantic Structure and Polysemy. Polysemy is the association of one lexical form with two or more related senses. It is a major property of natural language and is especially common among frequently used English words. Importantly, polysemy differs from homonymy: in polysemy, the different senses are semantically related, whereas homonymous forms may have unrelated meanings. Modern research emphasizes that polysemous senses can form structured networks rather than functioning as completely independent dictionary entries [5].

Consider the word bright. It can describe a source of light, as in a bright lamp, and it can describe intelligence, as in a bright student. The second sense is historically and conceptually related to the first through an association between light and mental clarity. Similarly, the verb get has a broad range of uses, including obtain, become, understand, and arrive. The particular interpretation is normally determined by grammatical and contextual information.

HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

The word book also illustrates semantic richness. It may refer to a physical object or to the informational content of that object. A sentence such as The book is heavy refers naturally to the physical volume, whereas The book is interesting highlights its content. Such examples show that lexical meaning can provide access to closely related aspects of a concept [5].

Polysemy is important for vocabulary expansion. Instead of creating a completely new form for every new concept, languages frequently extend existing lexical items. This process allows speakers to use familiar forms in new conceptual domains. As a result, the vocabulary can expand through semantic development as well as through derivation, borrowing, and compounding.

Context and the Realization of Meaning. Context plays a central role in determining which sense of a polysemantic word is activated. A lexical item does not always contribute exactly the same semantic interpretation in every occurrence. Co-occurring words, grammatical constructions, discourse context, and knowledge of the situation may guide interpretation. Studies of lexical-semantic variation show that context can disambiguate or select particular meanings of polysemous expressions [4].

For example, the adjective poor may describe people lacking financial resources, a poor performance lacking quality, or a poor result that fails to meet an expected standard. The core idea of insufficiency remains recognizable, while the specific semantic dimension is determined by the noun and context. This demonstrates that semantic structure can be both stable and flexible: a lexical item retains a recognizable semantic organization while allowing context-sensitive interpretation.

The relationship between semantics and context is also important in language learning. Learners who know only a single dictionary definition may experience difficulty when a familiar word appears in an unfamiliar construction. Teaching polysemy through contextualized examples can therefore support deeper vocabulary knowledge. It helps learners recognize semantic connections instead of memorizing isolated translations.

Semantic Change and Development of Meaning. Lexical meanings change as languages develop. Several common mechanisms contribute to semantic change, including specialization, generalization, metaphorical extension, metonymic extension, and evaluative change. Specialization occurs when a word develops a narrower meaning in a particular domain, while generalization occurs when its meaning becomes broader. Borrowed words may also undergo semantic change when they enter a recipient language and acquire meanings that differ from those in the source language.

Semantic change is closely connected with polysemy because a newly developed sense often coexists with an older sense for a period of time. Over time, one sense may become dominant, while another may become restricted or obsolete. Historical comparison can therefore reveal the development of the semantic structure of a lexical item. Research on World Englishes also shows that meaning-form relationships can vary across varieties and communities of English [4].

The dynamic nature of lexical meaning demonstrates why dictionaries and linguistic descriptions must account for usage, context, and historical development. A dictionary definition provides an important representation of meaning, but actual language use may reveal additional patterns, associations, and emerging senses.

The Role of Semantic Relations in Vocabulary Organization. Words do not exist independently within the mental and linguistic lexicon. They enter into semantic relations with other words, and these relations contribute to the organization of vocabulary. Synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, meronymy, and collocation provide different types of connections among lexical units. For

HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

example, big and large are close in meaning in many contexts, while hot and cold express an opposition. A word such as vehicle may function as a superordinate term for car, bus, and bicycle. These relations help explain why speakers can select an appropriate lexical item rapidly during communication.

Semantic relations are also important for describing the internal structure of lexical fields. A lexical field consists of words that are connected because they refer to a common conceptual area. The vocabulary of education, for example, includes terms such as teacher, student, classroom, lesson, examination, curriculum, and university. Each item has an individual lexical meaning, but its interpretation is strengthened by its relationship with other items in the same field. Consequently, semantic structure should be studied both within individual words and across the larger vocabulary system.

Collocation provides another important dimension of semantic organization. Some words regularly occur with particular lexical partners, and these patterns influence interpretation. The adjective strong can occur with coffee, argument, evidence, or wind, but the semantic contribution of strong is slightly different in each combination. Similarly, make a decision and do homework are conventional combinations in English. Such examples demonstrate that lexical meaning is partly shaped by habitual patterns of use.

Corpus-based approaches are particularly useful for identifying these recurrent combinations and for describing meaning as it occurs in authentic language.

Semantic relations are especially relevant to foreign-language teaching. Learners often acquire vocabulary as isolated equivalents in their first language, but successful communication requires knowledge of how words behave in English contexts. Teaching semantic networks, collocations, and related senses can therefore develop more flexible lexical competence. Instead of presenting one translation for a polysemantic word, teachers can show several examples and ask learners to identify the common semantic core and the contextual differences.

The examples discussed in the article are interpreted within the framework of lexical semantics and semasiology. Particular attention is given to recurrent semantic relationships and to the interaction between a lexical item and its surrounding linguistic context. This approach makes it possible to describe word meaning as a structured and dynamic phenomenon rather than as a simple one-to-one relationship between a word and a referent.

The present study applies descriptive, comparative, and contextual methods to the analysis of English word meaning. The descriptive method is used to identify the principal components of lexical meaning and to characterize semantic structures. Comparative analysis is applied to distinguish lexical, grammatical, and lexico-grammatical meanings. Contextual analysis is used to demonstrate how different senses of polysemantic words are selected in actual linguistic environments.

Conclusion. The semantic structure of a word is a complex and systematic phenomenon involving lexical, grammatical, lexico-grammatical, denotational, connotative, and contextual dimensions. The study of semantics and semasiology demonstrates that words cannot always be understood through a single fixed definition. Their meanings are organized within the lexical system and are realized through interaction with grammar, context, conceptual knowledge, and communicative purpose.

Polysemy provides particularly clear evidence of this complexity. A single lexical form may develop several related senses, and these senses can be activated according to context. Semantic

HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

change further demonstrates that word meaning is dynamic and responsive to changes in society, cognition, communication, and language use. Therefore, analyzing semantic structure is essential not only for theoretical linguistics but also for lexicography, translation, language teaching, and effective communication.

A systematic understanding of semantic structure can help learners and researchers distinguish between related meanings, identify contextual variation, and understand how vocabulary develops. Future research may combine traditional semasiological analysis with corpus-based and cognitive approaches in order to provide a more comprehensive account of how lexical meanings are represented, connected, and interpreted. In addition, attention to semantic variation can improve dictionary design and translation practice because translators must select meanings according to discourse, register, and communicative purpose.

References

1. Cruse, D. A. (2011). Meaning in Language: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics. 3rd ed. Oxford University Press.
2. Riemer, N. (2010). Introducing Semantics. Cambridge University Press.
3. Saeed, J. I. (2016). Semantics. 4th ed. Wiley-Blackwell.
4. Schneider, E. W. (2023). Lexicosemantic diffusion in World Englishes: Variable meaning–form relations in prospective verbs. English Language & Linguistics, 27(3), 719–748.
5. Vicente, A., & Falkum, I. L. (2020). On the nature of the lexicon: The status of rich lexical meanings. Journal of Linguistics, 56(4), 865–891.
6. Evans, V. (2005). The meaning of time: Polysemy, the lexicon and conceptual structure. Journal of Linguistics, 41(1), 33–75.
7. Lyons, J. (1977). Semantics. Vol. 1. Cambridge University Press.
8. Palmer, F. R. (1981). Semantics. 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press.