

Semantics and Pragmatics

Lecture No.9

Study Material

Lexical Semantics: Fields and Collocations

Introduction

- Many of the basic ideas in this topic are derived from de Saussure's notion of 'value'.
- He pointed out that a knight on a chess board is a knight not because of any inherent quality (shape, size, etc.), but because of what it can do in relation to the other pieces on the board (Saussure, 1959:110).
- He stressed this relational aspect of language, saying that there were 'only differences and no positive terms'.
- As differences are in some way related.
- For instance, he argued that 'sheep' in English has a different value from 'mouton' in French because English has also the word 'mutton'.
- Similarly, plural in Sanskrit has a different value from the plural in French (or English).
- In Sanskrit, plural belongs to the three-term system i.e. singular, dual and plural, while in French, it belongs to a two-term system of singular and plural only.
- Consider synonyms such as 'dread, fear, be afraid of'
- If one of these did not exist its 'content' would go to one of the others.
- Thus, the meanings of words have their association with other words which can be in the form of paradigmatic/ syntagmatic relations, sense relations, collocation and idiomatic relations.

Paradigmatic and Syntagmatic Relations - I

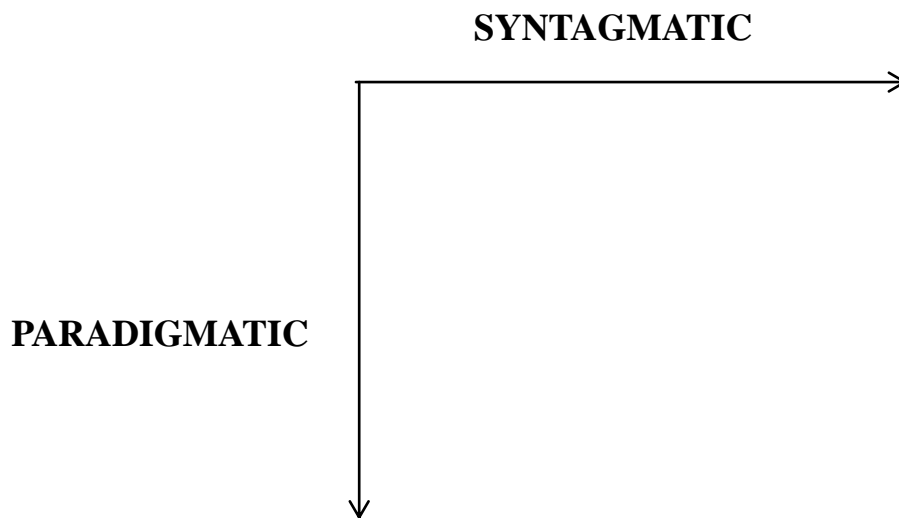
- Saussure distinguished between syntagmatic and paradigmatic (associative) relations.
- Paradigmatic relations hold between concepts belonging to the same grammatical category.
- These relations cover a wide variety of associations between words, including morphological and phonetic.

- For instance, in a ‘red door’ and ‘green door’, ‘red’ and ‘green’ are in a paradigmatic relation to each other.
- To Culler (1976), “Paradigmatic relations are the oppositions between elements that can replace one another...”
- A paradigm is a set of linguistic or other units that can be substituted for each other in the same position within a sequence or structure.
- In this sense, it may be constituted by all words sharing the same grammatical function, since the substitution of one for another does not disturb the syntax of a sentence.
- Linguistics often refers to the paradigmatic dimension of language as the ‘vertical axis’ of selection (Oxford Concise Dictionary).
- e.g. read the following sentence:
- “The cat was sitting on the rug,”
- Imagine the words ‘the’ can be replaced with.
- “the” is chosen from among a number of words such as “a,” “their,” “his,” and “my” that could have filled the same slot, that is, “the ‘vertical axis’ of selection.”
- Also, “cat” is chosen instead of “dog,” “boy,” or “baby,” and “was” instead of “is,” and so on.

Paradigmatic and Syntagmatic Relations - II

- Syntagmatic relations hold between two or more words co-present in a sequence.
- Combinations based on sequential relations are called syntagms.
- The notion of a syntagm applies among others to group of words and to complex units of every size and kind, for example, phrases, sentences.
- For instance, in a ‘red car’ and ‘green car’, ‘red’ and ‘green’ are in syntagmatic relation with ‘car’.
- To Jonathan Culler (1976), “Syntagmatic relations define combinatory possibilities; the relations between elements that might combine in a sequence”.
- Syntagm is a linguistic term designating any combination of units...which are arranged in a significant sequence. A sentence is a syntagm of words.
- The syntagmatic or ‘horizontal’ axis of combination - in a recognized order.

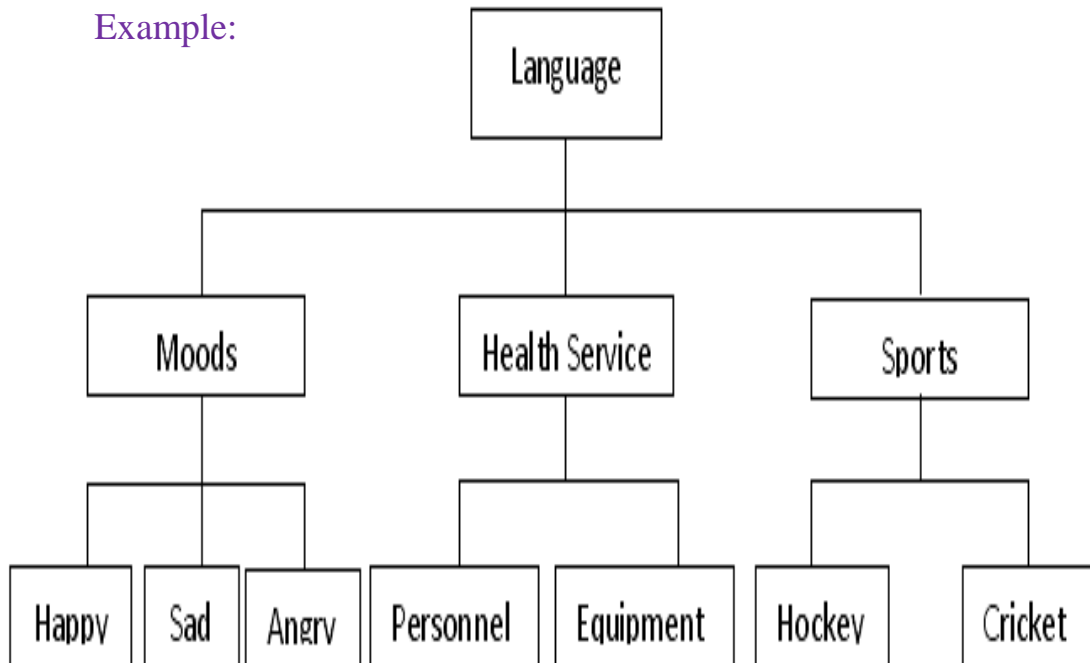
- The ‘linear’ aspect of language (Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms).
- For instance, both the sentences “I write what I know” and “I know what I write” consist of the same units, “I,” “write,” “what,” and, “know.”
- However, the meanings of these two sentences are different because the units that compose the sentences are arranged differently based on the syntagmatic system - the ‘horizontal’ axis.
- As we have seen, any expression that conveys a message is structured along these two systems, the paradigmatic and syntagmatic. These two systems are commonly illustrated diagrammatically as follows:



Semantic Fields

- The meaning of words, cluster together to form fields of meaning, which in turn cluster into even larger fields.
- A meaning of a word is dependent partly on its relation to other words in the same conceptual area.
- The kinds of semantic fields vary from culture to culture.
- Anthropologists use them to study belief systems and reasoning across cultural groups.
- According to Brinton (2000), a semantic field denotes a segment of reality symbolized by a set of related words.
- The words in a semantic field share a common semantic property.

Example:



- Words in a semantic field are not synonymous, but are all used to talk about the same general phenomenon.
- The words *anger*, *happiness* and *sadness* are not synonymous, but they are a part of the semantic field called “emotional state”.
- Items in a field are “unordered”.
- As far as the meaning is concerned, there is no natural way of ordering them in any kind of order. E.g. elephant, giraffe, cow etc.
- However, there are some items which have some sort of order e.g. Sequential, ordinals and cardinals etc.

Collocations

- A collocation is either a highly frequent co-occurrence of two or more words, or a combination of words which represents a fully grammatical structure, e.g. a noun phrase (Sinclair 2003: 173).
- Firth argued that "you shall know a word by the company it keeps" (1957: 11).
- This company, collocation, is a part of the meaning of word.
- The meaning is also found in the context of the situation and all other levels of analysis.
- Nida (1964:98), for instance, discussed the use of ‘chair’ in:

- Sat in a chair
- The baby's high chair
- The chair of philosophy
- Has accepted a university chair
- The chairman of the meeting
- All of these uses are giving different meanings of the words.
- Collocation is a familiar grouping of words, especially words that habitually appear together and thereby convey meaning by association.
- Also defines a sequence of words or terms that co-occur more often than would be expected by chance. e.g.
- Strong tea – correct expression
- Powerful tea – wrong expression
- Advantages of Collocations
- 1) For disambiguation, including both word-sense and structural.
- A word in a particular sense tends to co-occur with a different set of words than when it is used in another sense.
- Thus, 'bank' might co-occur with river in one sense and savings and loan when used in its financial sense.
- 2) For Translation:
- cannot be translated on a word-by-word basis.
- 3) As part of language generation systems - are able to achieve a level of fluency otherwise not possible, by using a lexicon of collocations and word phrases during the process of word selection.
- **Idioms**
- Idioms are expressions "whose meaning cannot be inferred from the meaning of its parts".
- Usually, these are translated with semantically and not necessarily lexically equivalents in the target language.

- Majority of idioms are homophonous, such as ‘by and large’ or ‘far and away’ (Cruse, 1986: 37).
- Grammatically well-formed and semantically transparent expressions.
- we cannot replace its parts by other semantically or syntactically equivalent lexemes.
- An idiom is a rigid word combination to which no generalities apply; neither can its meaning be determined from the meaning of its parts;
- nor can it participate in the usual word-order variations.
- Idioms involve collocation of a special kind.
- For instance, ‘kick the bucket’, ‘fly off the handle’, ‘red herring’.
- Think about the meanings of these idioms!
- Here we not only have the collocation ‘kick’ and ‘the bucket’ but also the fact that the meaning of the combination is opaque – it is not related to the individual words.
- The meaning is nearer to the meaning of a single word ‘die’.
- Idioms have syntactic restrictions such as some have passives, but the others do not.
- The restrictions vary from idiom to idiom -some are more restricted or ‘frozen’ than others.
- A very common type of idiom in English is ‘phrasal verb’ the combination of verb plus adverb of the kind ‘make up, give in, put down’.
- What is and what is not an idiom is, then, often a matter of degree.