

Language in Action

An Introduction to Modern Linguistics

Joanne
Kenworthy

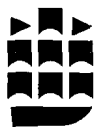


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Introduction

The aim of this book is to present a survey of modern linguistics, the 'scientific study of language'. As with other disciplines, linguistics has various branches. In Chapter One, 'Words', we look at how linguists describe the meaning and the structure of words. In Chapter Two, 'Sounds', we examine phonetics and phonology, the branches of linguistics that deal with how sounds are produced and the way languages organise sounds to convey differences in meaning. Chapter Three, 'Sentences', describes the study of words in sequence – 'grammar' or 'syntax'. Chapter Four looks at 'Texts and Conversations' to see how linguists study the larger patterns of meaning in 'discourse'. Most of the examples used will be from English, but the overall aim is to give a picture of how linguists work, how they approach the study of any language.

When studying language, no matter how detailed and specific the analysis becomes, one must not lose sight of the fact that human language is a means of communication between people. We speak to each other face-to-face, with current technology we can now speak to each other over great distances. We use writing when speaking is impossible or inappropriate, and we can read what was written down centuries ago, and write texts for people we have never met and will never meet. Sometimes our speech is a form of social contact; sometimes we need to exchange vital pieces of information; our writing may also simply be a means of 'keeping in touch' or can be used to explain (as in this book) or to entertain, enlighten, stimulate thought, pass down traditions, etc.

The form of language is determined by its media and purposes. And because the use of language is a kind of action, each chapter in this book will contain a section which explores some aspects of sounds, words, sentences, texts, 'in action'.

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Chapter One

Words

In this chapter we will be looking at how linguists study word meaning and the structure of words in language. The goal of linguists in studying language at the level of words is to be able to represent what native speakers know about words and their meanings. The phrase ‘the meaning of a word’ prompts most people to think in terms of dictionary definitions. But native speakers know and use words long before they learn how to use a dictionary – most children say their first word around the age of one year. We shall take as our starting point what young children know about words and meaning. The following two short conversations took place in a primary school classroom. Let us examine what these children know about words in English.¹

Teacher to small group of primary school children (aged 6 and 7):

Teacher: What is a word?

Shirley: It . . . it’s a bit of language.

Pritti: It . . . when you talk . . . like when you say ‘blue’.

Teacher: That’s very good.

Wayne: When you think hard . . . you get the sense in your head.

A few minutes later the following conversation took place – the teacher had asked the children to try to make up as many words as they could from the letters in the word *orchestra* (they have already discovered such possibilities as *chest*, *roar* and *are*, etc.).

James: I’ve got nine words!

Teacher: Who can find another one?

James: I’ve got it! c–r–e–t.

Teacher: ‘Cret’! ‘Cret’ isn’t a word.

James: Well . . . no . . . but I could make it mean something.

Teacher: Could you? Then would it be a word?

James: Well . . . if I told everybody what it meant . . . yes.

These young schoolchildren are aware of some central points about words in language – that words are symbols which have meanings, or, as

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Wayne puts it, 'a sense', and that these meanings are shared by speakers of a particular language. James knows that he could think up a meaning for c-r-e-t, but if he didn't tell everyone then it would not count as a word in the English language. The linguist, de Saussure, used the phrase 'linguistic sign'² to describe a 'word'.



Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) His book, A Course in Modern Linguistics, is widely considered to be the foundation of the modern subject of linguistics.

Words have meanings, and as speakers of a language we assume that when we use a word our listeners attach the same meaning to it, and therefore understand what we are talking about. Of course, they may not know a word or words we use at all, and then we get involved in giving explanations or definitions. Let us consider what is involved in defining a word.

Defining words

By far the simplest, most straightforward cases of giving definitions are those words which are names of objects of which there is only *one* – *proper names*, e.g. Westminster Abbey or the Leaning Tower of Pisa or Mount Fuji. As proper names these words have *direct reference*. They denote a specific object, person, place, etc., in the world. These proper names are also a good demonstration that the word or name is an arbitrary sign. There is no link or resemblance between the word and the object it denotes. An object, person or place doesn't change its nature by

having its name changed. Juliet knew her Romeo would be the same person if he were called by a different name, ('A rose by any other name would smell as sweet') and when St Petersburg in Russia was renamed Petrograd, and then Leningrad, nothing about the city changed physically.

Sometimes words *have* been chosen as the name for something because of a sound resemblance, although this is relatively rare in all languages. These are called *phonaesthetic* words – the name imitates the thing. Young children's early words are often representations of the sounds that objects make: *woof-woof* is used by English-speaking children for *dog*, and *meow* for *cat*. Every language probably has some of these phonaesthetic words (some examples from English are *buzz*, *twitter*, *cheep*, *chug*, *hiss*, etc.) but although they are interesting cases, and perhaps give us an insight into the origins of human language, they are still in the minority. Most words are arbitrary symbols or signs.

The task of giving the meaning of proper names – words that have direct reference – is fairly simple; they mean the specific object, place, institution, person, etc. that they refer to, i.e. they have direct and unique reference. Suppose James had decided that he wanted his new word 'cret' to mean the small pond at the end of the garden behind his house. All that James would need to do to 'tell everybody what it meant' would be to show them the pond and say 'This is called the Cret'. He would be using one type of definition – *ostensive definition*, literally 'definition by pointing'.

However, what if James wanted the word 'cret' to mean 'the area of floor directly beneath any piece of furniture'? He could not really use ostensive definition because rather than referring to a unique object or person, the word 'cret' would be used to refer to a class of things, as *window*, *cup*, *lamp*, *room*, etc., do. Each 'cret' would be slightly different from any other, just as each cup or room is slightly different from any other. These words are termed *common nouns* by linguists (as opposed to proper names/nouns). So ostensive definition is of limited value in defining common nouns – our understanding of the word 'cret' would depend on our ability to recognise the shared properties of each example of a 'cret' that we were shown or came across. It is also important to remember a basic difficulty in defining words with other words – if James simply gave people a verbal definition using the words in quotations above, then the listeners' understanding would depend on their prior understanding of the words in the definition itself, e.g. *area*, *furniture*, *beneath*. Defining a common noun can be very frustrating if your listener doesn't know the meaning of the words you use in your definition.

The problems of definition would be increased if James decided that he

wanted to use the word 'cret' as a symbol for an abstract idea (an *abstract noun*) or an action (a *verb*). Suppose James wanted 'cret' to be a verb meaning 'the way you eat food that you don't like but must eat because your parents say it is good for you'. In this situation James could use a different kind of definition – he could find words that were related in meaning, such as *gobble*, *eat*, *consume*, etc. These words share some elements of meaning and he could use them to help specify the meaning of 'cret'. (Of course, as mentioned above, he would still need to assume that his listeners already knew and understood the meaning of the related words, *eat*, *gobble*, etc.)

But James could possibly give his listeners a clearer idea of what it meant to 'cret' by providing some examples of the word used in sentences; for example, 'Yesterday it took me half an hour to cret my vegetables at dinner – I hate vegetables' or 'Fortunately for her, my little sister didn't need to cret her soup because Grandmother was visiting'. The words that co-occur with 'cret' could give some indication of its meaning. In the above sentences they would show that 'cretting' was not a pleasant task. Even more information about the meaning of the word could be supplied by specifying what restrictions there are on its use. Some words may only be used in very formal contexts, some words may be restricted to scientific or technical uses, and so on. James could explain that 'to cret' was an informal expression, like *to mess about*, *to have a go*, *to wallop*, etc.

What is clear from this brief discussion is that the description of the meaning of a word is by no means a simple task. On the contrary, it is a very complex task which involves a number of *perspectives*:

- 1) the referential relation between the word and an entity in the world – in linguistics this is termed its *denotation*.
- 2) the relation between the word and other words in the language – its *sense relations*.
- 3) the other words which co-occur with it in the language – the technical term used is its *collocations*.
- 4) the use of the word in the language in terms of restrictions – its *communicative value*.

This list of perspectives constitutes the area of study in modern linguistics known as *lexical semantics*. In linguistics, word meaning is studied by detailed analysis of the way words are used. Its primary focus is 'the way people relate words to each other within the framework of their language'.³ This emphasis is reflected in the statement by the linguistic philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) – 'the meaning of a word is its use in the language'. In the following sections we will examine each of the above perspectives on word meaning in more detail.

Perspectives on meaning

In Jonathan Swift's political satire *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Gulliver visits the School of Languages in the imaginary country of Laputa. There he observes a discussion among the professors about how to improve the language of Laputa. The professors have a theory that talking is harmful: '... it is plain that every word we speak is in some degree a diminution of our lungs by corrosion, and consequently contributes to the shortening of our lives.'⁴ To prevent this, the professors propose a plan for abolishing all words. They propose that

... since words are only names for *things*, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such things as are necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on ... for short conversations a man may carry implements in his pockets or under his arms ... But if his business be very great, and of various kinds, a man must ... carry a great bundle of things upon his back ...

The professors' proposal is obviously unworkable, but it does highlight the inadequacy of the notion of *meaning* as *reference* to something in the world. Imagine you were a Laputan and you wanted to tell your friend 'My cassette recorder is broken'. You would have to put your cassette recorder in your sack and go to your friend and show him the broken recorder. But how could you make sure he knew it belonged to you? You couldn't pull *my* out of your sack – there is no object to which *my* refers, but it does have meaning – it shows the relationship between the speaker and some object or entity. And what about *broken*? You would probably have to demonstrate this using gesture. If you then wanted to say 'Please mend my cassette recorder quickly' the action of *to mend* would be an even greater challenge, and how could you show the abstract meaning of *quickly*? Rather than improving the life span of Laputans, the abolition of words would lead to total exhaustion and frustration.

As this comical example shows, the notion of words referring to something in the world is inadequate as a theory of meaning with the exception of proper names. The majority of words do not simply refer to 'things' in the world. One proposal that attempts to solve this problem is to say that words refer to *concepts* – there is an indirect relationship of reference. A version of this theory uses a *semiotic triangle* to represent this indirect reference.⁵

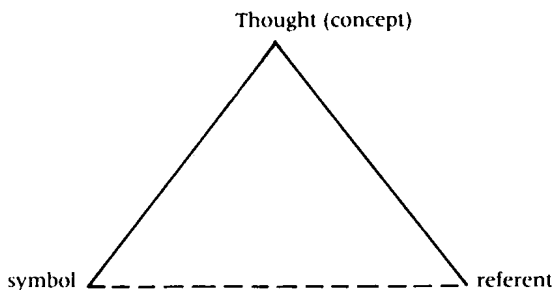


Fig. 1.1 A semiotic triangle illustrating the theory of indirect relationship of reference

This idea does seem satisfying in some ways – we can accept that people have an idea or concept of *love*, *kindness*, *memory* or *quickly* and that these words refer to those mental concepts. But there are still problems with words like *although*, *however*, *if*, etc. More critically, introducing the notion of mental concept doesn't get us any closer to an understanding of *what* is shared by speakers of the same language about the meaning of a word that makes communication – the exchange of meaning – possible. A botanist and a florist probably have quite different mental concepts of the word *flower*, but they both know that *The flower chewed the gum* is a strange sentence. Furthermore, any speaker of English will react to this sentence in the same way. What do the speakers of a language share about the word *flower*?

Componential analysis

One way in which linguists approach the problem of *shared meaning* is to use the technique of *componential analysis*. This involves trying to break down the meaning of words into components or units of meaning. For example, if we say *school* means *a place for study* then the word has been shown to have two components of meaning – *place* and *purpose is study*. Similarly, *hospital* could be broken down into *place* and *purpose – medical treatment*. *Pen* could be broken down into three components: *instrument*; *purpose – writing*; *uses or contains ink*. *Pencil* would also have the first and second components, but the third would be *uses or contains graphite*.

The technique of componential analysis involves several steps. The first step is to select a group of words which seem to be connected in meaning, the assumption being that words which are connected will probably share components. This is certainly true of the examples given above – *pen* and *pencil* are connected in meaning and they share two components; *school* and *hospital* share one component. One of the first groups of words to be

investigated using componential analysis was the group of words for family relationships: *mother, father, sister, brother, son*, etc. Such groups of interrelated words are termed *lexical fields* or *semantic domains*. Here are some examples:

ROOMS

room chamber living-room bedroom library study lounge
office kitchen lobby hall foyer etc.

GEOMETRIC FIGURES

octagon hexagon rectangle triangle square pentagon etc.

BEGINNING

start origin dawn birth conception debut kick-off
inaugurate introduce beginning inception initiate etc.

FOLLOWING

follow trail pursue shadow tail tag along tread on the
heels of etc.

CUPS

chalice beaker glass goblet teacup coffee cup wineglass
tumbler etc.

CONTAINERS

vessel bag sack pocket basket can bucket cask pot
bottle basin cup etc.

VEHICLES

train car bicycle sled motorcycle bus wagon etc.

Lexical fields – some questions

How many lexical fields are there? How many members does each field have? How does one decide where one lexical field ends and another begins? In the examples above, the word *cup* is a member of the field CONTAINERS but also a member of the smaller field of CUPS. There is no general agreement on these points and individual analysts are faced with difficult decisions. The decisions each analyst makes are often arbitrary. But the setting up of a lexical field is not the main concern of linguists. Their main concern is to study the *relationship* between the items in each field. If it is indeed impossible to make exact and final decisions about the number and composition of the lexical fields in a particular language (and it looks as if it is impossible) then this fact reveals something interesting about human language itself: overlap and ‘fuzziness’ are part of its nature.

Notice that the members of a lexical field are not restricted to single words; there are examples such as *coffee cup* and *tag along* as well as *goblet* and *pursue*. Because of the way in which English and many other languages are organised, we have to consider multi-word combinations to

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be single items. Linguists use the term *lexical item* to avoid confusion. So *tag along* is a lexical item made up of two words, and even though *tread on the heels of* is made up of five words, it is still considered to be a single lexical item. The term *lexical item* roughly corresponds to the form at the beginning of a dictionary entry.

Having selected a particular lexical field or semantic domain, the next step in componential analysis is to form analogies among the lexical items, and then try to identify the semantic components which emerge, based on these analogies. For example, in the lexical field of **VEHICLES** we can form an analogy between *car* and *motorcycle* and *wagon* and *bicycle*. A *car* is a vehicle with a motor and four wheels, a *motorcycle* has a motor and two wheels. A *wagon* has four wheels and no motor; a *bicycle* has two wheels and no motor. So, from these analogies we can identify four semantic components: **VEHICLE/MOTOR/FOUR WHEELS/TWO WHEELS**. (The names of components will be written in capitals to distinguish them from lexical items, e.g. *motor* versus **MOTOR**.) In componential analysis the symbols '+' and '-' are used as a quick and clear way to show whether a particular lexical item has a semantic component or not, for example, the item *car* does not have the component **TWO WHEELS** so it is '-**TWO WHEELS**' but '+**VEHICLE**, +**MOTOR**, and +**FOUR WHEELS**'. This analysis can be presented in the form of a table or grid:

	VEHICLE	MOTOR	FOUR WHEELS	TWO WHEELS
car	+	+	+	-
motorcycle	+	+	-	+
bicycle	+	-	-	+
wagon	+	-	+	-

From the above analysis it can be seen that each word shares the component **VEHICLE**. So this component identifies the semantic field and can be used as the name or cover term for this field. The other components have the function of distinguishing each member from every other. Notice that each word has a completely distinct set of values for the four components. Notice also that it is not necessary to use a component such as **WINGS OR AIR TRAVEL** because this component would not distinguish any item from any other (all would be given the value 'minus'). But if *airplane*, *glider*, *helicopter*, etc. were added to our example then such a feature *would* be necessary. The aim of componential analysis is to find those components which are sufficient to describe the meaning of every lexical item in the language. In fact, the ultimate aim is to find a *universal* set of components which can be used to describe meaning in each and every language in the world.

An example of componential analysis

Let us examine a particular lexical field in detail – the field of THINGS PEOPLE WEAR OF HUMAN ATTIRE. This is, of course, a fairly large field and we will restrict our discussion to eight lexical items:

belt waistband cuff collar necklace bracelet ring necktie

All of the items share the component HUMAN ATTIRE, so this can be used as the cover term for the field. The component which distinguishes *ring* and *bracelet* and *necklace* from the other items is + JEWELLERY. All the eight items share the feature GO ROUND A PART OF THE BODY – we can shorten this to + ENCIRCLE. To distinguish *necklace*, *bracelet* and *ring* from each other we need the components +NECK +WRIST and +FINGER. The first two components are also needed to distinguish *cuff* from *collar*, and since *belt* and *waistband* are both worn around the waist, we can propose +WAIST. With these features the grid would look like this:

	H. ATTIRE	ENCIRCLE	JEWELLERY	WAIST	WRIST	NECK	FINGER
belt	+	+	–	+	–	–	–
waistband	+	+	–	+	–	–	–
cuff	+	+	–	–	+	–	–
collar	+	+	–	–	–	+	–
necklace	+	+	+	–	–	+	–
bracelet	+	+	+	–	+	–	–
ring	+	+	+	–	–	–	+
necktie	+	+	–	–	–	+	–

Note that *belt* and *waistband* still have the same value for each component, so we need another component to distinguish them. We could use + LEATHER because belts are usually made of leather – but what about the waistband of a leather skirt? +DETACHABLE seems more satisfactory because waistbands are a part of a skirt or trousers, whereas belts are not. The component seems possible for cuff and collar (both with + value) because at one time cuffs and collars were detachable, although it doesn't seem to be particularly relevant to the modern meaning of these two lexical items. *Necktie*, *necklace*, *ring* and *bracelet* would also have to be + DETACHABLE, but again this doesn't seem to be an important part of their meanings. Maybe +DETACHABLE isn't a very useful feature and we should think of another component to distinguish *belt* from *waistband* – perhaps PART OF A GARMENT – *waistband*, *collar* and *cuff* are parts of skirts, shirts and trousers. Doing componential analysis certainly makes one think carefully about the meanings of words.

Some problems for componential analysis

Does componential analysis give a complete specification of the

meaning of these words? Is the meaning of *necktie* – encircling piece of human attire worn around the neck? What about the fact that a necktie is usually worn by men? What about its connections with formal dress? How central are these elements of meaning to the meaning of *necktie*? This question raises an even more general question – how does one decide on centrality of meaning? If the words *crown* and *headband* had been included in the set of words, then features which are much more abstract would have to be used in order to show the symbolic meaning of *crown*, which *headband* doesn't have – in many different cultures a *crown* symbolises power, hereditary status, victory, or pre-eminence (as in sports contests). But each culture has slightly different institutions, conventions and customs, so any particular componential analysis may be 'culture-specific'. As an analytic technique it is not without problems.

The examples used so far in the discussion have all been for tangible objects; it is much more difficult to deal with abstract lexical fields. For example, consider what components would be needed to distinguish the following words for *reactions*:

disappointment anger shock rage fury confusion
amazement irritation surprise

One problem that would arise would be how to distinguish *anger*, *fury* and *rage*. The word *anger* does not suggest the same intensity of feeling as *rage*, and *fury* suggests even more intense feeling with possible temporary lack of control. If we propose a feature of INTENSITY then these three words could be given graded values, instead of simply + or –.

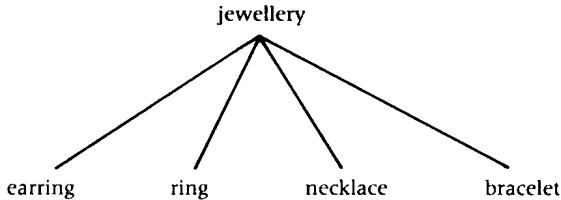
INTENSITY	
anger	1
rage	2
fury	3

As we have seen, componential analysis does have difficulties. It also has limitations – it is designed to distinguish items in a particular field from each other, and not to give a complete specification of meaning. Perhaps its most serious disadvantage is that the analysis is often *ad hoc*; there are no guidelines for deciding on either the appropriacy of features or what features are central to the meaning of a word. However, it does provide some interesting insights into word meaning. It shows us that the words of a language are organised – some words clearly 'belong together' because they are related in meaning – they 'share components'. Componential analysis has made a contribution to the study of word meaning in linguistics, but it is only one perspective on meaning. In the investigation of word meaning, linguists have also explored the *sense relations* between words.

Sense relations

Hyponymy

John Lyons has described the relationships words have with each other as a 'web of words'.⁶ One relationship between words which can be studied through lexical field and componential analysis is *hyponymy*. In the analysis of the lexical field HUMAN ATTIRE we saw that the items *necklace*, *bracelet*, etc. shared the same feature +JEWELLERY. In lexical semantics, these words are called *hyponyms* of the word *jewellery*, and the word *jewellery* itself is called the *superordinate* term. Hyponymy is a sense relation – basically it is a relation of inclusion. The meaning of *jewellery* includes the meaning of *necklace*, *ring*, etc., so we can say 'A necklace is a kind of jewellery' (but not 'A jewellery is a kind of necklace'). The lexical items *necklace*, *ring*, etc. are co-hyponyms of *jewellery*. The relationship can be shown in a simple diagram.



The study of the sense relation of hyponymy has revealed some very interesting differences between languages. Let us look at an example which shows how different languages can be in the way words relate to one another. Teen is a language spoken in Africa by the Tenbo people. In Teen the word *gusuko* (plant) has three co-hyponyms: *diilo* (food plants), *dansu* (plants used for making sauces) and *waro* (wild plants). These categories are very different from the lexical field of plants in English, which is based more on botanical form (*tree*, *fern*, *flower*, *grass*, *bush*, etc.) The difference between this lexical field and the lexical field of *plant* in English is demonstrated by this anecdote. A Tenbo woman was being shown the garden planted by a visiting lecturer from Europe. The lecturer asked her not to step on the flowers he had planted. She replied 'Oh, do you use these plants for your sauces?' Her remark reveals the pragmatic way she looked at 'plants' – they were wild or planted by people, edible or inedible.⁷

Native speakers are very sensitive to the relationship of hyponymy in their languages. In fact, knowing that a word is a hyponym of some superordinate term may be all that a speaker knows about a word. For example, many speakers of English know that *asp* is a kind of snake, but they know nothing else about it. Another illustration that hyponymy is

an important part of knowing a language is the way native speakers simplify their language when speaking to foreigners. In English, a *bonnet* is a kind of hat; it is usually worn by females as an adornment rather than as protection against bad weather and is usually decorated with ribbon and artificial flowers. When speaking to a foreigner, instead of using the word *bonnet*, a native speaker might replace it with the superordinate term *hat*, assuming that because the latter is the more inclusive word it will be easier for the foreign speaker to understand.

Incompatibility

The members of some lexical fields show the relation of incompatibility, in other words, they are *mutually exclusive*. Some good examples are the fields of geometric figures, days of the week and musical instruments. A geometric figure cannot be a triangle and a rectangle – it is one or the other. A musical instrument cannot be both a harp and a drum. But in many other fields the relation of incompatibility does not hold between items. For example, in the lexical field of *reactions* it is possible to say someone is *disappointed* and *angry* – one feeling does not exclude the other. Of course, it is only relevant to use the term ‘incompatible’ when discussing members of a particular lexical field – to say ‘the meaning of *door* is incompatible with the meaning of *flower*’ is irrelevant because *door* and *flower* do not belong to the same lexical field. But to say ‘the meaning of *chair* is incompatible with the meaning of *bench*’ is revealing because both are members of the lexical field of *furniture*.

Antonymy

Words may also be opposite in meaning – this is the relation of antonymy. Some common examples are:

pass – fail dead – alive asleep – awake
male – female legal – illegal boy – girl
true – false man – woman married – single

In the case of each of these pairs, the negative of one word implies the positive of the other – if John did not pass his examination, then he failed it; if someone is not asleep, they are awake. But the following pairs of antonyms are different:

big – small old – young high – low
rich – poor good – bad wide – narrow

If someone says ‘John is not old’, this does not imply ‘John is young’; if Mary is not rich, then this doesn’t mean she is poor. Each of these pairs represents extreme points on a scale, but there are also intermediate