Semantics—General Overview
--otherwise known as “Introduction to Linguistic Semantics”

The following is derived from the semantics chapter of George Yule’s masterpiece, The Study of Language, 2nd. Edition.

I once referred to a character in one of my cartoons as a “dork” (a popular insult when I was growing up), but my editor called me up and said that “dork” couldn’t be used because it meant “penis.” I couldn’t believe it. I ran to my New Dictionary of American Slang and, sure enough, he was right. All those years of saying or being called a “dork” and I had never really known what it meant. What a nerd.

Gary Larson (1989)

- Semantics is the study of the meaning of words, phrases and sentences
- In semantic analysis, there is always an attempt to focus on what the words conventionally mean, rather than on what a speaker might want the words to mean on a particular occasion
- This technical approach to meaning emphasizes the objective (factual) and the general. It avoids the subjective (personal) and the local
- Linguistic semantics deals with the conventional meaning conveyed by the use of words and sentences of a language

Conceptual versus associative meaning—
Linguists (or for our purposes, semanticists), investigate the meaning of words in a language in order to characterize their conceptual meaning; they are less concerned with associative (stylistic) meaning of a word

- Conceptual meaning covers those basic, essential components of meaning which are conveyed by the LITERAL use of a word
  - Ex: “needle”: basic components = ‘thin, sharp, steel, instrument’
    - So these components comprise the conceptual meaning of “needle”

- Associative meanings, or connotations, of “needle,” however, lead you to think of ‘painful’ whenever you encounter the word (the reader is immediately compelled to think of one dangling over flesh, or a drill over gums, etc.)
  - This ‘association’ is not treated as part of the conceptual meaning of “needle”
  - Another example of associative meaning: low-calorie
    - When used to describe a product, we associate this expression with “good for you”—but this is NOT the basic conceptual meaning of the expression. Poets and advertisers use strategies like this one all the time. (We’ll explore these devices a little later on in the semester, but for now let’s focus on conceptual meaning)
In other words, conceptual meaning is not funneled through the experience of the reader/listener. A reader or listener’s experience has taught them to view the word “needle” as something that ignites pain—making it painful—rather than the object itself (thin, sharp, steel, instrument). So conceptual meaning aims to signify objective connections. (It’s a whole other ball of wax, though, to view the “objectiveness” of “thin, sharp, steel, instrument,” as philosophers and literary theorists have debated, for example, what sharp actually is, for years; we’ll see more of this with Nietzsche and Barthelme)

**Semantic features**

We know an “odd” sentence when we see one:

The hamburger ate the man.

The cat studied linguistics.

A table was listening to some music.

- We experience oddness when encountering—in print or audibly—sentences like those above—but why?
  - A semantic approach can help us to answer this question
- Note how each sentence’s syntactical structure is perfectly acceptable: the nouns appear in the right place, as do the verbs. Consider the first of these three sentences:

  The hamburger ate the man.

- Syntactically we have a NP (either an indefinite [a/an] or definite [the] article), followed by a verb (any word whose root can take an –ed, -en, -s, or –ing suffix), and another noun phrase. All a syntactically-correct sentence needs in English is a NP+VP
  - More to the point: all a noun needs in English syntax is the ability to take either a plural or possessive [s]. Since we can say “hamburgers, hamburger’s, and man’s” in English, we’re able to tell that the sentence is syntactically sound
- Yet we can’t deny the oddness of this sentence. How does a hamburger EAT a man, really?
  - Hence semantics, specifically conceptual versus associative meaning
  - Obviously the conceptual meaning of the noun “hamburger” differs significantly from those of the noun “man”—especially when those nouns are used as subjects of the verb “ate”
  - Any noun that’s used as a subject of the verb “ate” should denote an entity which is capable of, well, EATING, shouldn’t it?
  - Since the noun “hamburger” lacks this property (and “man” has it), we’re met with the “oddness” experienced when encountering the sentence
But can we be more general in determining the crucial component of meaning which a noun must have in order to be used as a subject of the verb “ate”? Isn’t there a component by which we can determine among a whole list of nouns (not just “hamburger”) what makes each one able to “eat” something?

- In other words, which nouns would be acceptable subjects of the verb “ate”? Which verbs can’t be acceptable? Is there a method to determine this?
- Perhaps we can say that all nouns, in order to be used as a subject of the verb “ate,” must be an “animate being”
  - So the part of the meaning of all acceptable nouns would be determined by their either possessing (+) or lacking (-) the status of “animate being”:
    - +animate (= denotes an animate being) or –animate (= does not denote an animate being)
  - Such thinking is a way to analyze meaning in terms of semantic features
  - Features in this sense are basic ways to differentiate the meaning of each word in English from every other word. For example: +animate, -animate; +human, -human; +male, -male (literary theory calls this structuralism)
- Let’s try to use this principle to give the crucial distinguishing features of the following set of English words: table, cow, girl, woman, boy, man

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SEMANTIC FEATURES</th>
<th>table</th>
<th>cow</th>
<th>girl</th>
<th>woman</th>
<th>boy</th>
<th>man</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>animate</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>human</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td>male</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adult</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Consider the word “boy” as it appears above. We can see that at least part of the word’s basic meaning involves the components (+human, +male, -adult)
- The above chart also lets us characterize that feature which is crucially required in a noun in order for it to appear as the subject of a verb. With the above information, in fact, we can find a noun that lets us supplement a syntactic analysis with semantic features:
  
  The __________ is reading a book.
  
  N(+human)

- We can predict, then, what nouns would make the above sentence semantically odd (despite its syntactic correctness)
  - For example, to plug in the words “table,” “tree,” or “dog” would make the sentence semantically odd because these words all possess the feature
(-human). And what non-humans do you know who are capable of reading a book?

But the above approach does have its problems. Many words in English avoid such neat components of meaning. How can we use components or features to distinguish the nouns “advice,” “threat,” and “warning,” for example?

For a comprehensive chart like the one above to work words in English would need to be viewed as some sort of “container,” carrying meaning-components. But philosophers and schools of literary criticism have debated monolithic words ever since Plato

**Semantic roles—**

- Every word doesn’t come in its own container; we use the same word for different purposes depending on the situation of the sentence—or poem, commercial, etc.
  - So words fulfill **semantic roles** within these described situations
- Situations can be simple events: “The boy kicked the ball,” for example
  - The verb describes an action (*kick*); the noun phrases (*the boy, the ball*) describe the roles of entities, such as people and things, involved in this action
- Let’s focus on a small number of semantic roles for these noun phrases

**AGENT**

- Consider our simple event: “The boy kicked the ball”
- One semantic role is taken by *the boy*—the entity that performs the action. Such an entity is known as the **agent**
  - Agents are typically human, but they can also be
    - non-human forces: Ex: *The wind blew the ball away*
    - machines: Ex: *The car ran over the ball*
    - creatures: Ex: *The dog caught the ball*

**THEME**

- Same sentence: “The boy kicked the ball”
- Another semantic role is taken by *the ball*—the entity that is involved in or affected by the action. Such an entity is known as the **theme**
  - The theme can also be an entity that is simply being described, as in *The ball was red*
  - Theme can also be human: Ex: *The boy kicked himself*
    - Here “the boy” is agent and “himself” is theme

Semantic roles of entities denoted by noun phrases in any English sentence, then, can be identified as either the agent or the theme, shown vertically below:

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NP = The boy: AGENT
    kicked
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NP = the ball: THEME

In other words, this is how we can tell that the ball didn’t “kick” the boy: by identifying the noun phrases and assigning them the appropriate title of “agent” and “theme.”

It may well be, though, that creative writers want to give us a semantically “odd” sentence like “The ball kicked the boy,” in which case, depending on the context, we can identify “the ball” as the agent and “the boy” as the theme. Such a sentence would really need to be implied as creative, though: you wouldn’t see such prose in the everyday newspaper unless it was in error!

**INSTRUMENT**

- We know that agents are either human, non-human forces, machines, or creatures
- If an agent uses another entity in performing an action, that entity fills the role of instrument
  - Ex: writing with a pen; eating with a spoon
    - the “pen” and “spoon” have the semantic role of instrument

**EXPERIENCER**

- If you see, know or enjoy something, you do not really have to perform any action (hence you are NOT an agent)—you are in the role of experiencer
  - Ex: Did you hear that noise?
    - Experiencer = “you”; theme = “that noise”

Other roles designate where an entity is in the description of the event:
- **LOCATION**—where an entity is (on the table, in the room)
- **SOURCE**—where an entity moves from
- **GOAL**—where an entity moves to

  Ex: When we talk about transferring money “from savings to checking,”
  the source = savings and the goal is checking

The semantic roles above are illustrated in the following scenario (look beneath specific words and phrases):

Mary saw a mosquito on the wall
EXPERIENCER THEME LOCATION

She borrowed a magazine from George
AGENT THEME SOURCE

and she hit the big with the magazine
AGENT THEME INSTRUMENT

She handed the magazine back to George.
AGENT THEME GOAL

“Gee thanks,” said George.
AGENT