

## 3 Meaning and readings

### 3.1. Lexemes

- **Lexical meaning** is carried by single words and composite expressions.
  - *Composite expressions* are idioms, e.g. *throw in the towel*, *white lie*, *broad bean*, *little finger*, particle verbs, e.g. *give up*, *look forward*, *figure out*, etc.
- An expression carries lexical meaning if this meaning cannot be compositionally derived but must be known, i.e. permanently stored in the mind.

- **Lexical items**

Expressions with lexical meaning are called lexemes or lexical items.

- **Lexicon**

Lexemes constitute the lexicon of the language, i.e. the mental lexicon.

- **Grammatical categories**

Lexical items differ in their grammatical behavior and are accordingly assigned to different grammatical categories (word classes) such as nouns (N), verbs (V), adjectives (A), adverbials (Adv), prepositions (P), determiners (Det), complementizers (C), conjunctions (Con), particles (Prt), etc.. The grammatical category determines the way in which a lexical item can be used within a sentence.

# Lexicon

## descriptive, referring expressions

### self-referring expressions

N

*cat, sister*

V

*sleep, eat*

Proform

*she, it*

### non-self-ref. expressions

A

*green, cold*

Adv

*fast, nearly*

P

*in, before*

## functional expressions

Det

*a, the, many*

Particle

*even, yet*

Conjunction

*and, but*

Complementizer

*that, whether, if*

- In English, many expressions can be used as members of more than one category, i.e. one expression may correspond to more than one lexical item:
  - *light*  
V-trans, N, A
  - *walk*  
V-trans, V-intrans, N
  - *too*  
Adv, Part.
- The members of certain grammatical categories in a language may exhibit *inherent grammatical properties* such as gender. The gender can determine the form of the article and/or adjectives – cf. German, French, Russian, etc..

- The grammatical category determines the range of **grammatical forms** a lexical item can take.
  - English LIs with grammatical forms
  - English LIs without grammatical forms
- The grammatical forms indicate grammatical meaning:
  - tense, mood, person, aspect, number, gender
- Each grammatical form of a LI has a sound and a spelling form, respectively.
  - cf. - *fridges*, *fridge's*, *fridges'*  
1 sound form : different spellings

- An LI is defined by the following specifications:
  - its sound form and its spelling
  - its grammatical category
  - its inherent grammatical properties (for some languages)
  - the set of grammatical forms it may take, in particular irregular forms
  - its lexical meaning
- If two linguistic items differ in one of these points, they are considered different LIs.

- Exceptions:
  - orthographic variants: *rhyme/rime*
  - word accent: *laboratory/labóratory*
  
- Differences count in any event if they are connected with a difference in meaning:
  - German: *bank* 'institution connected with money'/ 'bench'
    - The difference in meaning is reflected in the plural forms: *Bänke – Banken*  
inflectional class: *Rappe – Rappen, Drache – Drachen*
  - English: *bank* 'river bank'/'institution connected with money'
  
- In general, one speaks of two different LIs if there is a difference in meaning accompanied by a difference in some other respect. If a form exhibits minor variation in only one point, one will assume one LI. There are borderline cases hard to decide.

## 3.2 Homonymy, polysemy, and vagueness

- Compare
  - *bank*  
'river bank'/'institution connected with money'
    - The meanings of 'bank' are not interrelated.
  - *body*  
'the whole physical structure of a human being or an animal', 'trunk', 'corps', 'group of people working or acting as a unit'
    - The meanings of *body* are interrelated.
- **Homonymy:**  
More than one LI with different, not interrelated meanings and the same sound form
- **Polysemy:**  
One LI having several interrelated meanings, i.e. what is meant by 'minor variation'.
- Homonymy and polysemy are cases of **lexical ambiguity**.



## 3.2.1 Homonymy

- *light*<sub>A1</sub>:
  - opposite of *dark*
  - derives from a historical source which in German developed into *licht* as in *ein lichter Raum*.
- *light*<sub>A2</sub>:
  - opposite of *heavy, difficult*
  - derives from a historical source which in German developed into *leicht*.
  - *light*<sub>A1</sub> and *light*<sub>A2</sub> are considered two different LIs since they have different historical sources (=homonymy).
- *light*<sub>N</sub>: related to *light*<sub>A1</sub>  
kind of visible radiation as well as certain sorts of objects that emit light.
- ❖ *light*<sub>V</sub>: related to *light*<sub>A1</sub> and *light*<sub>N</sub>
- Words with the same historical origin are called **cognates**.  
*light*<sub>A1</sub> and *licht* are cognates ohg, os *licht*  
*light*<sub>A1</sub> and *leicht* are cognates ohg. *lihti*, os. *liht-*

- **Total homonymy:**

if two LIs share all distinctive properties (grammatical category, grammatical properties, the set of grammatical forms, sound form and spelling) and yet have unrelated different meanings

- *light*<sub>A1</sub> and *light*<sub>A2</sub>

- **Partial homonymy:**

if two LIs with different unrelated meanings coincide in some but not all of their grammatical forms

- *lie*<sub>v1</sub> (*lay, lain*) and *lie*<sub>v2</sub> (*lied, lied*)
- *Bank: Bänke – Banken*
- *Rappe – Rappen, Drache – Drachen*

- **Homography:**

if two LIs with unrelated meanings have the same spelling

- $bow_{N1}$

(bəʊ) as in *bow and arrow* (German cognate: *Bogen*)

- $bow_{N2}$

(baʊ) 'the front of a ship' (German cognate: *Bug*)

- $bow_{N3}$

(baʊ) 'bending' (German cognate: *Ver-beug-ung*)

- Homonyms

- **Homophony:**

if two LIs with unrelated meanings have the same sound form

- $bow_{N2}$  and  $bow_{N3}$ , homonyms

## 3.2.2 Polysemy

- An LI constitutes a case of **polysemy** if it has two or more interrelated meanings, i.e. **meaning variants**.
  
- *light*<sub>N</sub>(*l<sub>u</sub>1*, *l<sub>u</sub>2* ... *l<sub>u</sub>n*), *composition* (*c<sub>u</sub>1*, *c<sub>u</sub>2*, ... *c<sub>u</sub>n*), *green* (*g<sub>u</sub>1*, *g<sub>u</sub>2*, ... *g<sub>u</sub>n*), ...
  - Each of these meaning variants has to be learnt separately to in order to be understood.
  - Polysemy is independent of homonymy, of two homonyms each can be polysemous
    - *light*<sub>A1</sub>:            opposite of *dark*
    - *light*<sub>A2</sub>:            opposite of *heavy, difficult*  
*a light bag, a light question*
    - *light*<sub>N</sub>:             visible radiation  
electric lamp, traffic light, ...

- Polysemy results from a natural economic tendency of language. Rather than inventing new expressions for new objects, activities, experiences, etc., language communities usually opt to applying existing terms to new objects.
- Scientific vocabulary contributes to polysemy
  - *meaning, reference, composition* are polysemous
  - But: *Lexeme, homography, polysemy* are original scientific terms.
- Further examples:
  - *green*, 'color property', 'unripe', 'immature'
  - *understand* 'cognition', 'perception', 'evaluation'
  - *mouse*
  - *tube*

### 3.2.3 Vagueness

- **Vagueness** is a property of **conceptual meaning**. It can be observed with all concepts that depend on properties varying on a continuous scale – cf. color terms like *red, green, blue*, emotion describing terms like *sad, regret, enjoy*, nouns like *baby, ...*
- Vagueness can occur in combination with polysemy. The meaning variants of *light*<sub>A2</sub> (opposite of *heavy, difficult*) are a matter of different underlying scales (of weight, difficulty, etc.). The meaning of *light* describes a low degree on this scale, but each meaning variant in itself is vague.

## 3.3 Synonymy

- Two LIs are synonymous if they have the same meaning.
  - **Total synonymy**  
includes all meaning variants of two polysemous LIs and it includes all meaning parts, i.e. descriptive, social, and expressive meaning. This condition is almost never fulfilled.
  - **Partial synonymy**  
if two LIs have one meaning variant in common
    - *spectacles* - *glasses*
      - *glasses* can also be used to express the plural of *glass*
    - *The United States* - *America*

## 3.4 Sentence readings and meaning shifts

### 3.4.1 Lexical and syntactic ambiguity

- **ambiguity**
  - syntactic, lexical, pragmatic ambiguity
- **syntactic ambiguity**
  - i. She watched the man with the binoculars.  
She watched [<sub>DP</sub> the man with the binoculars]  
She watched [the man] [with the binoculars]
  - ii. Flying planes can be dangerous. (Chomsky)  
[<sub>DP</sub> Flying planes] can be dangerous.  
[<sub>VP</sub> Flying planes] can be dangerous.
  - iii. John and Mary are married.  
John and Mary are married with each other.  
John and Mary are married with Paul and Anna.



- **lexical ambiguity**

- homonymy or polysemy

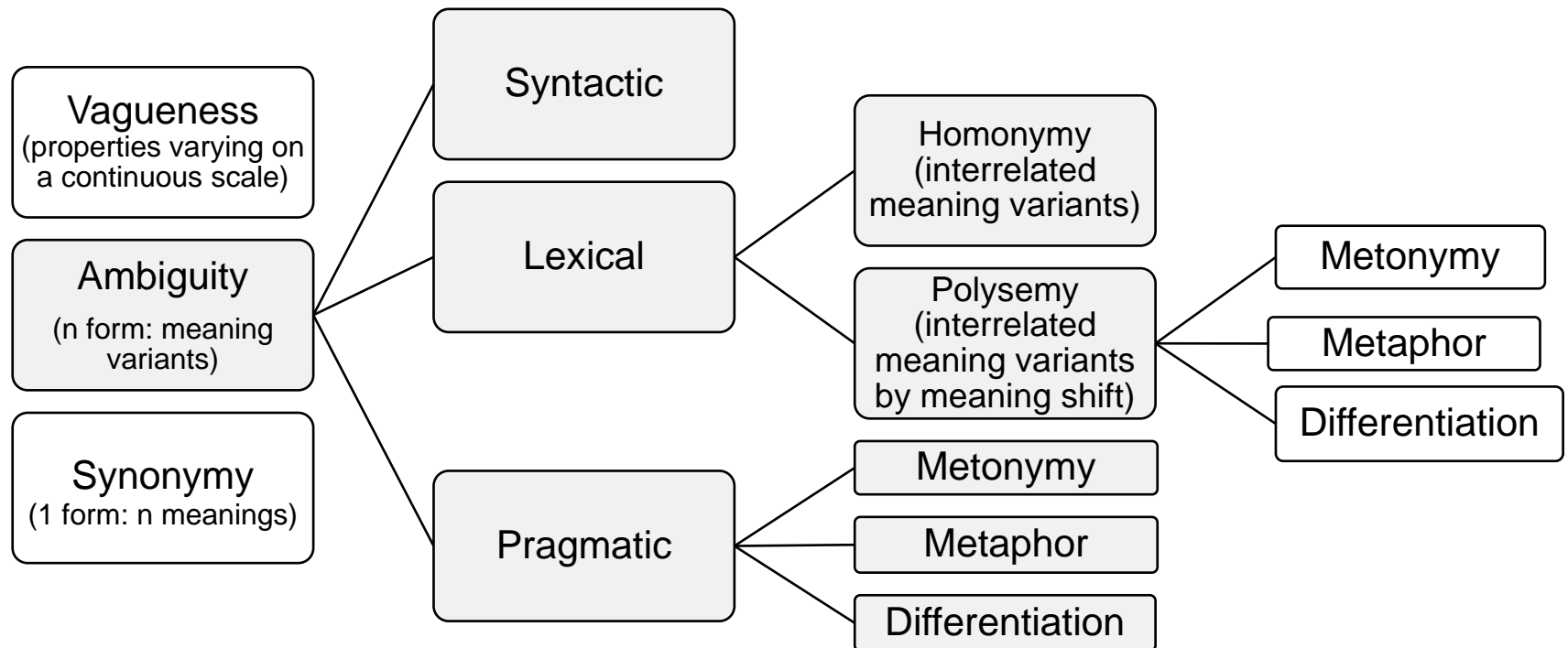
*The light in the darkness*

- **pragmatic ambiguity**

- meaning shift

*The university starts in April.*

*The university has closed the Linguistic Department.*



## 3.4.2 Interpretation in context

- Interpreting descriptive expressions means to fix a concrete referent

$m_e$        $\longrightarrow$        $m_u$   
reading

➤ ***unambiguous expressions***

$m_{e1}$        $\longrightarrow$        $m_u$

- $m_e$  is taken over as it is and enriched with contextual information

*My sister* is my mother's daughter.

- ***ambiguous expression***

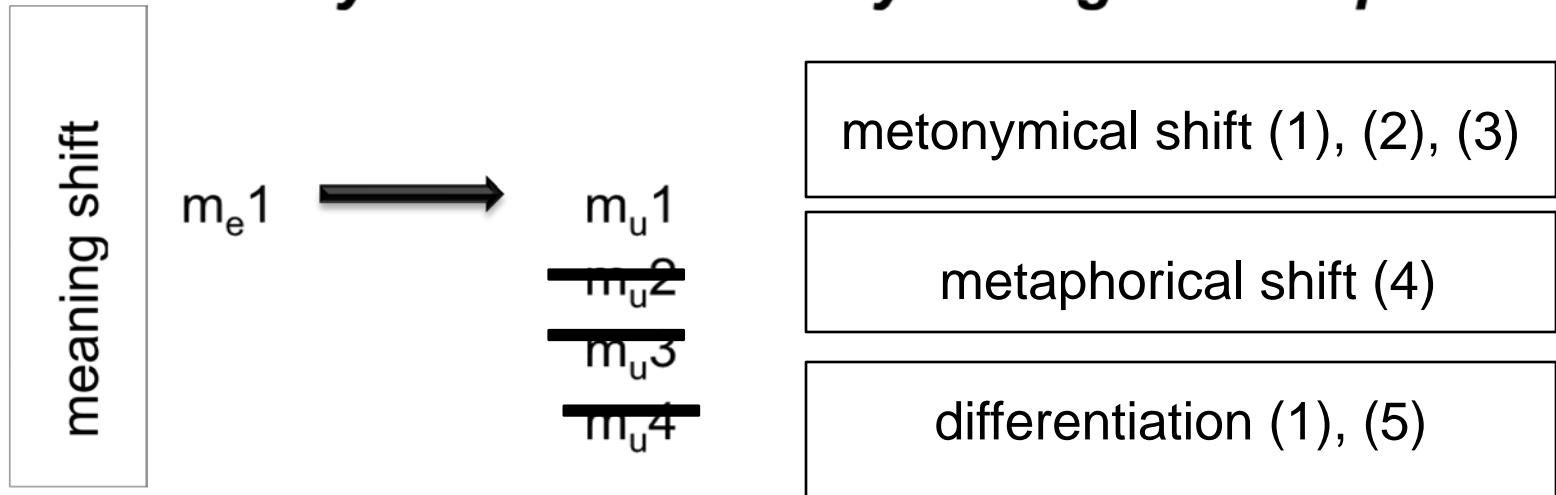
- disambiguation by context by eliminating the inappropriate meaning variant
- ***homonyms***



Johnny wrote a letter ( $m_e1$  /  $m_e2$ )

- *Johnny wrote a letter ( $m_e1$ ) to Patty.*
- *Johnny wrote a letter ( $m_e2$ ), the gamma which is the third letter of the Greek alphabet.*

- **lexically and non-lexically ambiguous expressions**



- (1) (James Joyce is difficult to understand.
- *JJ's writings* are difficult to understand.
  - *The way JJ talks* is difficult to understand.
  - *The way JJ expresses himself* is difficult to understand.
  - *JJ's behavior* is difficult to understand.

- ***metonymical shift***

If a term is used to refer to objects which are related to its referent proper, we speak of ***metonymy***. The corresponding type of meaning shift is called ***metonymical shift***.

(1) James Joyce is difficult to understand.

- JJ's writings are difficult to understand.
- The way JJ talks is difficult to understand.
- The way JJ expresses himself is difficult to understand.
- JJ's behavior is difficult to understand.

(2) Peter is preparing a paper he will give on Friday.

*paper* refers to a talk

Peter is preparing a paper to cover the table.

*paper* refers to material

- Further metonymies

(3) The university lies in the eastern part of the town.

*university* refers to the campus.

The university has closed down the faculty of law.

*university* refers to the institutional body.

The university starts again on 15 April.

*university* refers to the courses.

- ***metaphorical shift***

If concepts, notions, models, pictures from a source domain are borrowed for the description of things in a target domain, one speaks of a ***metaphor***.

Metaphorical language can be characterized as talking about things in the target domain in terms of corresponding things in the source domain.

*Newsweek*, 19 October 1998, p. 30:

- (4) They were China's cowboys. The swaggering, fast-talking deal makers threw around grand projects and big figures as if the money would never stop flowing. Then the sheriff came to town. Last week Beijing said it was shutting down one of the flashiest investment institutions



- ***differentiation***

If  $m_e$  is underspecified in that it can refer to referents of different types and if the context specifies the underspecified  $m_e$ , we speak of meaning differentiation.

(1) James *Joyce is difficult to understand*.

- JJ's writings are difficult to understand.
  - to understand the content (cognition)
- The way JJ talks is difficult to understand.
  - to understand an articulated, auditive signal (perception)
- The way JJ expresses himself is difficult to understand.
  - to understand an auditive signal as well as its content
- JJ's behavior is difficult to understand.
  - to understand the reason for ... (cognition, evaluation)

- *lose*

$m_e$  of 'stop having, due to some event'

(5) John lost his friend in the overcrowded subway station.

- Loss of contact

John lost his friend in a tragic car accident.

- Loss of a close person

John lost his friend as he could never suppress making bad jokes about him.

- loss of a friendly relationship

## Disambiguation of $m_e$ by context

Elimination of an inappropriate  $m_e$  out of  $m_{e1} \dots m_{en}$  (lexicon)

polysemy

metonymy  
*paper*

differentiation  
*understand*

metaphor  
*mouse*

homonymy  
*letter, bank*

Meaning shift from  $m_e$  to  $m_u$  (from linguistic to conceptual level)

metonymy  
*JJ, university*

metaphor  
*cowboy*

differentiation  
*green*

Types of shifts

Lexical  
meaning  $m_e$

Shifted  
meaning  $m_e$

Process

*The university starts in April*

metonymy

educational  
institution

courses at  
the univ.

building a new  
concept out of the  
original one

*The were China's cowboys*

metaphor

a man who  
herds cattle

s.o. behaving  
like a cowboy

building a new  
concept in the target  
domain

*JJ is hard to understand*

differentiation

percieve the  
meaning

process the  
meaning

adding conditions to  
the original concept

- ***Principle of Consistent Interpretation***

The interpretation is guided by the following:

- A complex expression is always interpreted in such a way that its parts fit together and that the whole fits the context.
- The statement in question should not be contradictory or tautological.

(6) Johnny's age shivered.

(7) Mary comes and does not come.

(8) A rectangle has four sides.

(9) Mary comes or does not come.

- The linguistic context and the CoU determine the interpretation of a lexical item:
  - phrase context
    - *the old university:* campus, institution reading
  - sentential context
    - *Johnny wrote a letter to Patty.*
    - *Johnny wrote a letter, the gamma which is the third letter of the Greek alphabet.*
    - *The university lies in the eastern part of the town.*
    - *The university has closed down the faculty of law.*
    - *The university starts again on 15 April.*
  - CoU
    - *James Joyce is difficult to understand.*