



## Escuela Oficial de Idiomas: INGLÉS

### LA PALABRA COMO SIGNO LINGÜÍSTICO. HOMONIMIA. SINONIMIA. ANTONIMIA. "FALSE FRIENDS". CREATIVIDAD LÉXICA

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## 1. THE WORD AS A LINGUISTIC SIGN: SAUSSURE'S APPROACH TO LANGUAGE

### 1.1. Introduction

Saussure led one of the most characteristic trends in the history of modern linguistics. Since his class notes were published posthumously in 1916 under the title of *Cours de linguistique générale* his influence has been a referent for later approaches to language.

His vision of language, called 'structuralism', holds the view that each language is a 'system of relations', more precisely, a set of interrelated systems. The elements belonging to each of these systems -sounds, words...- have no validity independently of the relations of equivalence and contrast which hold between them. Therefore, the system of relations is only meaningful if all the elements are present because for example the contrast between the phonemes /b/ and /p/ is only meaningful when occurring in a context like /bai/ and /pai/.

In other words, a language constructs meaning by a combination of systems which together create words with 'arbitrary' meanings ascribed to them. In fact Saussure said that language:

*'...is a system of signs in which the only essential thing is the union of meanings and sound-images, and in which both parts of the sign are psychological'*<sup>1</sup>

This hypothesis has been called 'double articulation', which means that the units on the 'lower' level of phonology have no function other than that of combining with one another to form the 'higher' units of grammar (words). It is by virtue of the double structure of the expression-plane that languages are able to express economically many thousands of different words.

Each word can be represented by a different combination of a relatively small set of sounds which have also a limited range of variation in their minimal features. The analogy can be drawn with numbers, we are able to make an infinitely large set of natural numbers just by combining the ten basic digits in an appropriate way.

### 1.2. The nature of linguistic signs

Saussure suggested that this relationship between sounds and meanings, i.e., the linguistic sign, is arbitrary and psychological. This is the reason why the same object can be called 'tree' and 'árbol' by the same speaker in the same context, just by changing the code (language) he/she is using. Therefore, Saussure conceived the whole linguistic system as a set of relationships, first between the phonological and the grammatical level, and then between the grammatical level and the semantic level. In this way, we can say that linguistic understanding and production is conventional.

Signs have two 'sides' in their articulation process:

- **A conceptual side:** the 'signified', i.e., the established meaning that speakers of a language give to a particular word: 'tree: plant which grows above an established size, which reproduces by means of seeds, etc...'

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<sup>1</sup> Saussure, F. (1974) *Course in General Linguistics*, p.12. Fontana/Collins



- **A phonological side:** the 'signifier', i.e. the combination of minimal units, phonemes, which together form a higher unit, the word: /t+/r+/i:/.

It is important to realise that the link between both sides is arbitrary, therefore, it cannot be changed by an individual, but it is maintained by tacit social agreement.

### 1.3. Langue and Parole

At this point it is important to introduce for further reference the distinction Saussure made between 'langue' and 'parole'. We will keep the French terms because English equivalents have occasionally been proposed, but most English authors use the French terms<sup>2</sup>. Chomsky's distinction between 'competence' and 'performance' are roughly equivalent to this notion but applied to a particular speaker with regard to a particular language.

'Langue' can be defined as the system which is of concern for the linguist describes and which is a property of the society as a whole. Each individual, therefore, will produce instances of 'parole', the realisations of the language system. All the hypothetical individual productions conform the 'langue'. In Saussure's opinion 'langue' can be described as a 'social fact'<sup>3</sup> more than a purely linguistic one, because it is a property of the speakers.

*'Language is not complete in any speaker; it exists perfectly only within a collectivity'<sup>4</sup>.*

In this way, the meaning of the linguistic sign belongs to the 'langue' domain, however, the different connotations that the words have for each individual speaker will belong to the 'parole' domain.

Language is a system of sound and meaning contrasts, and each specific language imposes a different system of contrasts. This perception applies to grammatical as well as to lexical signs, but not to sentences. Saussure identified the sentence as 'belonging to "parole", not to "langue"<sup>5</sup>. The reason is because he thought that syntactic relationships and syntactic creations belonged to the mind of the individual, since sentences were original to the individual speaker and often showed mistakes in their construction.

On the whole, the linguistic sign represents an essential tool for the understanding of the arbitrariness of word meanings in each language, and an essential element to understand what can be described as classical semantics.

## 2. SEMANTIC STRUCTURE

### 2.1. Introduction

In this section we shall be concerned with the notion of 'sense', i.e., the notion of the meaning of words without making reference to their reference, i.e., what they denote in the real world.

<sup>2</sup> Spanish authors make the distinction between 'lengua' (langue) and 'habla' (parole).

<sup>3</sup> Saussure (op.cit), p.10.

<sup>4</sup> Saussure (op.cit.) p.11.

<sup>5</sup> Saussure (op.cit), p.124.



The vocabulary of a language contains a number of 'lexical systems', i.e., words which are related among themselves according to different fields of human cognition: sports, education, gardening, etc... The semantic structure of these elements can be described in terms of syntagmatic and paradigmatic 'sense relations', and it is important to emphasize that these relations are to be defined as holding between lexical items and not between independently-abstract senses.

In fact this is one of the cardinal points of structuralism, that is, that every linguistic item has its 'place' in the system, and its function, or value, derives from the relations which it contracts with other units in the system. The acceptance of this approach in semantics has the advantage that it enables the linguist to avoid controversial questions about the philosophical and psychological status of 'concepts and ideas'.

In the present section we will study the sense relations of Synonymy, Antonymy and Homonymy.

## **2.2. Synonymy**

### **2.2.1. A stricter and looser sense of synonymy**

In the description of synonymy one may distinguish a stricter and looser interpretation of the term. According to the stricter interpretation (which is the one most commonly found in contemporary semantic theory) two items are synonymous if they have the same sense.

The looser interpretation may be illustrated in the equivalents to a word which are given in Roget's Thesaurus. For example, 'nice' has the following 'synonyms': 'savoury, discriminative, exact, good, pleasing, fastidious, honourable...' Each of these words itself appears in one of the lists of synonyms in the main body of the text, therefore, we may find a whole array of more synonyms for each of these words quoted as synonyms for 'nice'.

### **2.2.2. The quantification of synonymy**

It is sometimes suggested that synonymy is a matter of degree, i.e., that any set of lexical items can be arranged on a scale of similarity and difference of sense. The problem is the distinction of the 'levels of synonymy' that we may describe, and also, the degrees of personal variation that may influence this task.

In other words, for a speaker 'rational' can be in a first degree of synonymy with 'reasoning' and in a second level with logical; however, for a philosopher the order of synonymy degree may be inverted. This simple example shows the likely difficulty to accomplish the task of elaborating a network of synonymous words at different levels.

### **2.2.3. Total synonymy vs. complete synonymy**

It is a widely-held view that there are few, if any, 'real' synonyms in natural languages. This is mainly because of linguistic economy, that is, languages cannot 'afford' having more than one element to transmit a single meaning.



Ullman suggests that synonymy would, therefore, have to fulfil the following two conditions:

- Interchangeability in all contexts.
- Identity in both cognitive and emotive import.

The first condition assumes that words are never synonymous in any context unless they can occur, and have the same sense, in all contexts. This is obviously a radical view on the subject, because the consequence is to deny the existence of synonyms.

Lyons, on the other hand, holds a more practical view and defends that synonymy, like all sense-relations, is also context-dependent; i.e., we can find a word which is synonymous to another in one context, but not in a different one (cognitive and emotive synonymy).

We shall adopt the latter view on the issue and will distinguish between:

- Complete synonymy: that which fulfils the cognitive and emotive sense of the word.
- **Total synonymy**: that which refer to words which are interchangeable in all contexts.

In this way we may have four different kinds of synonyms:

- Complete and total synonymy.
- Complete, but not total synonymy.
- Incomplete, but total synonymy.
- Incomplete, and not total synonymy.

#### 2.2.4. Cognitive and emotive meaning

These meanings reflect the psychological faculties that can be distinguished in the human mind: the intellect, and the imagination and emotions. As a matter of fact, it is often stressed the importance of emotive connotations in the use of vocabulary: e.g. the difference between 'hide' and 'conceal'; 'liberty' and 'freedom'. The speaker or writer will often choose one word of the pairs according to the 'second' meaning he/she wants to give.

With regard to the cognitive meaning, people will often try not to use the same word twice in the surrounding context, or will try to choose a Latin rooted term instead of an Anglo-Saxon one.

#### 2.2.5. Synonymy and 'normal' interchangeability

In traditional semantics, synonymy has generally been regarded as a relationship holding between lexical items; and the definition that has just been given takes this view. It is of course possible to extend the application of the term 'synonymy' so that it also covers groups of lexical items that are brought together in a particular syntagmatic construction.

In other words, one might well say, for example, that the phrases 'female fox' and 'male duck' are synonymous with the lexical items 'vixen' and 'drake', respectively. But it is important to notice



that, in making this statement, one is assuming that the phrases and the lexical items are indeed interchangeable in the normal use of the language. By contrast, '\*male cow' and 'bull', and '\*female bull' and 'cow', are not normally interchangeable. Therefore, the question is that there are lexical items which can be interchanged because speakers feel they mean the same; however, other cases do not allow this alternation.

### 2.2.6. Context-dependent synonymy

The final point we are going to make about synonymy is the context-dependent nature of this particular sense-relation. This kind of synonymy does not offer a structural relationship, in the sense that one may choose not to use a large variety of synonymous elements in his/her speech, but, eventually, that would basically affect the richness of language but not its meaning potential.

This fact implies that the speaker may have alternatively similar ways to convey a particular message by the use, or non use, of contextual synonyms:

For example:

- 1a. I'm flying to New York
- 1b. I'm going to New York by plain
  
- 2a. I'm getting some bread at the shop
- 2b. I'm buying some bread at the shop

This feature is especially clear in the use of reporting verbs, for example: 'he said...; he suggested...; he denied...; etc...'. It is very interesting to notice that young learners of English find it difficult to use these verbs in their exercises. If we look at the problem from the semantic point of view, it might be the case that it is only a question of context-dependent synonymy, and that students do not feel the need for using synonyms in this aspect of grammar.

With regard to second language teaching, another kind of typical exercises that are frequently used by teachers is the substitution of elements which are presumed to be synonymous in a specific text. According to strict semantic theory, the problem with these exercises is that students may only focus on the individual lexical items which are replaced by the synonyms, and are unaware of the contextual significance of these elements. The immediate consequence is that students may use the supposedly synonymous elements in a different context in which the items are not appropriate because of register restrictions.

This area is a very difficult one indeed, because foreign students of a language do not have the feel for appropriacy of register and may, therefore, use 'odd' elements. This fact clearly denotes a lack in the ability to use synonymous element in a proper way.

## 2.3. Antonymy

### 2.3.1. 'Oppositeness' of meaning

Antonymy, or 'oppositeness of meaning', has long been recognised as one of the most important semantic relations. However, it has been the subject of a good deal of confusion, partly because it has generally been regarded as complementary to synonymy and partly because most



semanticists have failed to give sufficient attention to different kinds of 'oppositeness'. Synonymy and antonymy, as we shall see, are sense-relations of a very different kind.

### 2.3.2. Complementarity

The first relation of 'oppositeness' to be discussed is that which holds between such pairs of words as 'single-married; male-female; etc...'. We will use the word 'complementarity' for this. It is characteristic of such pairs of lexical items that the denial of the one implies the assertion of the other and vice-versa.

There are of course cases in which it is possible to cancel the complementarity in the case for example of 'male-female' if we add the category of 'hermaphrodite' or 'homosexual'.

### 2.3.3. Classical antonymy

The original relation to which we are giving the name 'antonymy' may be exemplified by the terms 'big' and 'small' in English. It is characteristic of antonyms of this class that they are regularly gradable. Grading is bound up with the operation of comparison. The comparison may be explicit or implicit. Explicitly comparative sentences fall into two types:

- Two things may be compared with respect to a particular property, and this property predicated of the one in a greater degree than it is of the other: e.g. 'our house is bigger than yours'.
- Two states of the same thing may be compared with respect to the property in question: 'our house is bigger than it used to be'

In daily communication the difference may be blurred, and also we may combine both kinds of comparisons in the same utterance as in: 'our house is bigger than yours used to be'.

### 2.3.4. Implicitly graded antonyms

We may now consider sentences in which antonyms are not explicitly graded. First of all, it may be observed that the denial of the one does not imply assertion of the other. For example, 'our house is not big' does not imply 'our house is small' (although 'our house is big' implies 'our house is not small').

With regard to this problem Sapir said the following:

*'Such contrasts as 'small' and 'large', 'little' and 'much', 'few' and 'many', give us a deceptive feeling of absolute values within the field of quantity comparable to such qualitative differences as 'red' and 'green' within the field of color perception. This feeling is an illusion, however, which is largely due to the linguistic fact that the grading which is implicit in these terms is not formally indicated, whereas it is made explicit in such judgements as "there were fewer people here than there", or "he has more milk than I". In other words, 'many', to take but one example, embodies no class of judgements clustering about a given quantity norm applicable to every type of experience, in the sense in which 'red' or 'green' is applicable to every experience in which color can have a place, but is, properly speaking, a purely relative term which loses all significance when deprived of its connotation of "more than" and "less than". "Many" merely means any number*

*taken as a point of departure. This point of departure obviously varies enormously according to context'.*

Sapir's explanation is very important because it tries to differentiate between the objective use of graded antonyms, and the subjective use we make of them when the point of reference is our own, with no special reference to quantitative parameters, by applying some internal measures which lie on our perception of the world.

For example, if we ask 'how big is it?', the assumption is that the element being described will be classified as big rather than as small. However, imagine we are talking about a gigantic bug, its size will obviously be smaller than a cat's, but we will describe it as 'big' with reference to its equals.

### 2.3.5. Converseness

The third sense-relation which is frequently described in terms of 'oppositeness' is that which holds between 'buy' and 'sell'; 'husband' and 'wife'. We will use the term 'converseness' to refer to this relation. The word 'buy' is the converse of 'sell', and vice-versa.

Although antonymy and converseness must be distinguished, there is a parallelism between the two relations. The lexical substitution of one term for the corresponding antonym or converse is associated with a syntactic transformation which permutes the noun-phrase. For example:

- John bought the house from Mary
- Mary sold the house to John

## 2.4. Homonymy and Polysemy

Homonymy and Polysemy show two kinds of lexical ambiguity. The different criteria supporting both kinds of ambiguity can be exemplified as follows:

- Port: harbour; kind of fortified wine. Example of homonymy
- Mouth: organ of body; entrance in a cave. Example of polysemy

### 2.4.1. Etymological criteria

One criterion to classify these two words under different headings is the lexicographer's knowledge of the historical derivation of words. It is generally taken to be a sufficient, though not necessary, condition of homonymy that the lexemes in question should be known to have developed from what were formally distinct lexemes in some earlier stage of the language. For example: 'ear': organ of hearing; 'ear': part of such cereal plants as wheat and barley. These words are treated as homonymous because they derive from different lexemes in Old English which merged in Middle English.

In practice, the etymological criterion is not always decisive. First of all, there are many words in English about whose historical derivation we are uncertain. Secondly, it is not always clear what is meant by etymological relationship in this context. The lexeme 'port' meaning harbour derives from Latin 'portus', which is also related to modern English 'ford'. Port (wine) came into English fairly recently and derives from the name of the city in Portugal from which the





particular kind of wine it denotes was exported. But the name of this city 'Oporto' derives in Portuguese from an expression, 'o porto', which originally meant simply 'the harbour', and the Portuguese 'porto' has therefore the same root as the English 'port'. Therefore, both words are etymologically related and everything is a question of how far do we want to go in the analysis of words.

### 2.4.2. Relatedness of meaning

The second major criterion invoked by linguists and lexicographers in drawing the distinction between homonymy and polysemy is unrelatedness vs. relatedness of meaning. Indeed it is arguable that this is the only synchronically relevant consideration. This distinction would correlate with the native speaker's feeling that certain meanings are connected and that others are not.

For example, all speakers of English would probably agree that the noun 'mouth' is a single lexeme with several related senses (i.e., that it is polysemous). They would not use linguistic terms to explain it but they would say that 'the mouth of the bottle, the mouth of the river...' have the same word, 'mouth', as in 'don't speak with your mouth full'. They would say that the other uses are metaphorical extensions of the original meaning.

The obvious problem in trying to define homonymy and polysemy in terms of native speakers' intuitions about relatedness of meanings is the divergence in the opinions they may give, because of their dialectal or personal interpretations of language.

Trying to overcome this problem would imply giving a different lexical entry to each of the meanings associated to a lexical item, with the subsequent redundancy in dictionaries. This approach is called 'maximization of polysemy' and implies the end of homonymy.

Having stated the difficulties of drawing a difference between homonymy and polysemy, we will now try to describe both sense-relations.

### 2.4.3. A description of homonymy

The classical definition of homonymy requires that the elements having the same lexeme fulfil the following features:

- The lexemes with which they are associated are syntactically equivalent, and,
- The morphosyntactic words in question are inflexionally equivalent.

The first of these conditions may be referred to as a condition of lexical equivalence. Grammatical equivalence (the second condition) is a relationship between the morphological variations that a word may have: case, number, gender, etc... (notice that we are speaking in general terms because in English we do not have so much inflectional variation).

In order to tie down the concept of homonymy we could resort to the concepts of 'homophony' and 'homography'. Homophony is when two words have the same pronunciation, e.g., 'sew' and 'sow'. Homography is when two words have the same graphic form, e.g. 'lead' (guide) and 'lead' (metal). Obviously, these relations show variations with the concept of homonymy, as matter of fact, homonymous items should also be homographs and homophones, This is the reason why traditional semantics do not use the categories of homography and

homonymy in its descriptions, because they show relationships between morphosyntactic words instead of between semantic forms. In other words, they study the medium rather than the substance.

### 3. LEXICAL CREATIVITY

When we speak of lexical creativity we must distinguish between two different areas by which words appear in the lexicon of a language: 'productivity' and 'individual creativity'.

#### 3.1. Productivity

This process refers to the faculty of an individual language to expand its lexicon by means of a given set of rules of word-formation<sup>6</sup>. This is usually a feature which does not apply to the ordinary user of English, since very seldom does he/she create new lexical items.

An interesting example of literary lexical productivity is Anthony Burgess' novel 'Clockwork orange', in which the characters have invented a great deal of new lexical items which are incomprehensible for the standard speaker of English.

#### 3.2. Individual creativity

This process is the one that really interests us because it relates to the speaker's perception of the vocabulary of his/her language. Creativity would account for the speaker's freedom to use language in a creative way, which is, on the whole, what we intend our students to do in daily communication.

The two broad areas of creativity are the following:

\* Firstly, there are cases where no semantic lexicalisation is required, but merely some formal reorganisation which leaves the semantics of the base unchanged. This is preeminently true of nominalisations. Thus, instead of saying 'We ought to be able to punish whoever scribbled this foul message', we might say:

- The scribble of this foul message should be punished.
- The scribbling of this foul message should be punishable.

In other words, this process of creativity is linked to the individual option in the creation of a message. However, the important thing is that the speaker is competent to make the appropriate option and is aware of the variety of possibilities that the language offers.

This is especially interesting in the case of second language teaching, in which students tend to use only one variety of the possible forms. Therefore, teachers should encourage their pupils to use as many alternatives as possible.

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<sup>6</sup> This aspect belongs to Unit 10.



\* Secondly, it is obvious that there is a limited freedom to create new formations in order to satisfy by lexicalisation a terminological need which may be as ad hoc and temporary as the formation concerned. This process is called 'nonce' formation.

Nonce formations are often preceded by an explicit indication of the coinage to come (which may simultaneously function as an apology for thus interfering with the theoretically finite state of the lexicon). Formulae of this kind are for example: 'what I might call...; 'and I shall refer to this as...!'

The commonest process of word-formation of this kind is compounding. If we imagine for example a scientist describing a condition arising through weightlessness that may resemble the effect of alcohol, he may say 'I shall call this space-inebriation'. Compounding may coincide with abbreviation, for example communication under the water may be 'subcom' (submarine communication).

Famous coinages that have become widely known are for example: 'mediagenic', i.e., likely to promote good relations with the media; and 'workaholic', i.e. somebody who cannot stop working.

The difference between both kinds of creativity is that the first one is more informal and familiar than the second, which implies more intellectual work. As a matter of fact the second kind of creativity is typical of the scientific domain. New terminology often comes through this method, for example: 'maglev', magnetic levitation.

On the other side, there is the exuberance of slang talk between familiar friends which denotes a high degree of creativity, for example: 'kneejerk', one who acts automatically; 'mind-blowing', overwhelming; 'get it together', to organise oneself.

To sum up, creativity depends less on the social context than on the particular individual. We vary enormously in our desire (and in our ability) to be lexically innovative.

#### 4. FALSE FRIENDS

'False friends' are elements in the lexicon of a language that bear great resemblance with the lexeme of another language, but with a variation of meaning. This is a typical problem of learners of a foreign language, who usually understand in a wrong way a foreign word.

Some examples of this kind in English and Spanish are the following:

- Eventually, which is not 'eventualmente', but 'finalmente'.
- Library, which is not 'librería', but 'biblioteca'.
- Sympathetic, which is not 'simpático', but 'compasivo'.
- Actually, which is not 'actualmente', but 'de hecho'.
- Sensible, which is not 'sensible', but 'responsable'.
- Constipated, which is not 'constipado', but 'estreñido'
- Consistent, which is not 'consistente', but 'consecuente, lógico'
- Disco, which is not 'disco', but 'discoteca'
- Dishonored, which is not 'desgraciado', but 'deshonrado'



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## ESQUEMA TEMA 11

### LA PALABRA COMO SIGNO LINGÜÍSTICO. HOMONIMIA. SINONIMIA. ANTONIMIA. "FALSE FRIENDS". CREATIVIDAD LÉXICA.

#### 1. THE WORD AS A LINGUISTIC SIGN: SAUSSURE'S APPROACH TO LANGUAGE

##### 1.1. Introduction

- Saussure's approach to language based on the *Cours de linguistique generale* is called 'Structuralism'. The basic assumption is that language is a set of interrelated systems.
- The notion of 'double articulation' which basically implies the possibility of an infinite creation of elements with a limited set of basic phonetic elements.

##### 1.2. The nature of linguistic signs

- Signs have a psychological basis, and consist of the 'signified', the reference in the real world, and the 'signifier', the actual lexeme which carries the conventional meaning attached to it.

##### 1.3. Langue and Parole

Langue is the system of language belonging to the society. Parole is the individual realisation of language.

#### 2. SEMANTIC STRUCTURE

##### 2.1. Introduction

- The nature of sense-relations is of basic concern for structuralism.

##### 2.2. Synonymy

###### 2.2.1. A stricter and looser sense of synonymy

The stricter sense implies interchangeability of synonymous elements in all contexts, the looser sense differentiates contextual information.

###### 2.2.2. The quantification of synonymy

Some linguists would suggest that synonymy is a question of quantification in the sense that words can be more or less synonymous according to certain degrees.

###### 2.2.3. Total synonymy vs. complete synonymy

Complete synonymy is that which fulfils the cognitive and emotive sense



of the original word.

Total synonymy is that which implies that a given word is interchangeable in all contexts.

#### **2.2.4. Cognitive and emotive meaning**

Emotive meaning regards the implications that a given word has for the user of a language.

Cognitive meaning regards the linguistic demands that the speaker has about his/her production.

#### **2.2.5. Synonymy and 'normal' interchangeability**

Classical linguistic synonymy does not imply that all synonyms can replace words in all contexts, due to cultural and social demands on the use of language.

#### **2.2.6. Context-dependent synonymy**

This is the most interesting kind of synonymy because it directly relates to the speaker's perception of language in the sense that he/she is free to choose alternative ways to express the same meaning.

### **2.3. Antonymy**

#### **2.3.1. 'Oppositeness' of meaning**

Antonymy has traditionally been regarded as a kind of synonymy by opposition.

#### **2.3.2. Complementarity**

Complementarity, e.g. man - woman, has traditionally been regarded as a kind of synonymy in which the assertion of one element implies the denial of the other.

#### **2.3.3. Classical antonymy**

Classical antonymy like 'big - small' implies a question of degree which is very different to measure in daily communication because we tend to compare the elements in terms of our perception of the world.

#### **2.3.4. Implicitly graded antonyms**

Some elements are implicitly graded because of our knowledge of the world: e.g. 'a big ant' is smaller than 'a small cat'.



### **2.3.5. Converseness**

This relationship occurs with verbs like for example 'buy - sell'. We can convey the same meaning by syntactic modifications such as active and passive.

## **2.4. Homonymy and Polysemy**

### **2.4.1. Etymological criteria**

Homonymy is not etymologically related and Polysemy is. This criterion is often not enough.

### **2.4.2. Relatedness of meaning**

The native speaker's criterion about relatedness of words is considered in this decision.

### **2.4.3. A description of homonymy**

Syntactic and morphological identity.

## **3. LEXICAL CREATIVITY**

### **3.1. Productivity**

Productivity is the faculty of a language to create new words.

### **3.2. Individual creativity**

Creativity is the faculty of an individual to create new words.

## **4. FALSE FRIENDS**

It is said of the words in a language which have formal resemblance with others from a different language, but which do not share the same meaning and, therefore, offer some confusion to non-native speakers.



## CUESTIONES BÁSICAS TEMA 11

1. EXPLAIN THE NATURE OF THE LINGUISTIC SIGN.
2. EXPLAIN THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN COMPLETE AND TOTAL SYNONYMY.
3. ETYMOLOGICAL CRITERIA TO DIFFERENTIATE HOMONYMY FROM POLYSEMY.
4. DESCRIBE THE PROCESS OF INDIVIDUAL CREATIVITY IN A LANGUAGE.
5. DEFINE 'LANGUE' AND 'PAROLE'





## CUESTIONES BÁSICAS TEMA 11: RESPUESTAS

### 1. EXPLAIN THE NATURE OF THE LINGUISTIC SIGN

Saussure suggested that the relationship between sounds and meanings, i.e., the linguistic sign, is arbitrary and psychological. This is the reason why the same object can be called 'tree' and 'árbol' by the same speaker in the same context, just by changing the code (language) he/she is using. Therefore, Saussure conceived the whole linguistic system as a set of relationships, first between the phonological and the grammatical level, and then between the grammatical level and the semantic level. In this way, we can say that linguistic understanding and production is conventional.

Signs have two 'sides' in their articulation process:

- A conceptual side: the 'signified', i.e., the established meaning that speakers of a language give to a particular word: 'tree: plant which grows above an established size, which reproduces by means of seeds, etc...'
- A phonological side: the 'signifier', i.e. the combination of minimal units, phonemes, which together form a higher unit, the word: /t+/r+/i:/.

It is important to realise that the link between both sides is arbitrary, therefore, it cannot be changed by an individual, but it is maintained by tacit social agreement.

### 2. COMPLETE VERSUS TOTAL SYNONYMY

It is a widely-held view that there are few, if any, 'real' synonyms in natural languages. This is mainly because of linguistic economy, that is, languages cannot 'afford' having more than one element to transmit a single meaning.

Ullman suggests that synonymy would, therefore, have to fulfil the following two conditions:

- Interchangeability in all contexts.
- Identity in both cognitive and emotive import.

The first condition assumes that words are never synonymous in any context unless they can occur, and have the same sense, in all contexts. This is obviously a radical view on the subject, because the consequence is to deny the existence of synonyms.

Lyons, on the other hand, holds a more practical view and defends that synonymy, like all sense-relations, is also context-dependent; i.e., we can find a word which is synonymous to another in one context, but not in a different one (cognitive and emotive synonymy).

We shall adopt the latter view on the issue and will distinguish between:

- Complete synonymy: that which fulfils the cognitive and emotive sense of the word.
- Total synonymy: that which refer to words which are interchangeable in all contexts.



In this way we may have four different kinds of synonyms:

- Complete and total synonymy.
- Complete, but not total synonymy.
- Incomplete, but total synonymy.
- Incomplete, and not total synonymy.

### 3. ETYMOLOGICAL CRITERIA IN THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN HOMONYMY AND POLYSEMY

One criterion to classify these two words under different headings is the lexicographer's knowledge of the historical derivation of words. It is generally taken to be a sufficient, though not necessary, condition of homonymy that the lexemes in question should be known to have developed from what were formally distinct lexemes in some earlier stage of the language. For example: 'ear': organ of hearing; 'ear': part of such cereal plants as wheat and barley. These words are treated as homonymous because they derive from different lexemes in Old English which merged in Middle English.

In practice, the etymological criterion is not always decisive. First of all, there are many words in English about whose historical derivation we are uncertain. Secondly, it is not always clear what is meant by etymological relationship in this context. The lexeme 'port' meaning harbour derives from Latin 'portus', which is also related to modern English 'ford'. Port (wine) came into English fairly recently and derives from the name of the city in Portugal from which the particular kind of wine it denotes was exported. But the name of this city 'Oporto' derives in Portuguese from an expression, 'o porto', which originally meant simply 'the harbour', and the Portuguese 'porto' has therefore the same root as the English 'port'. Therefore, both words are etymologically related and everything is a question of how far do we want to go in the analysis of words.

### 4. INDIVIDUAL CREATIVITY

This process is the one that really interests us because it relates to the speaker's perception of the vocabulary of his/her language. Creativity would account for the speaker's freedom to use language in a creative way, which is, on the whole, what we intend our students to do in daily communication.

The two broad areas of creativity are the following:

\* Firstly, there are cases where no semantic lexicalisation is required, but merely some formal reorganisation which leaves the semantics of the base unchanged. This is preeminently true of nominalisations. Thus, instead of saying 'We ought to be able to punish whoever scribbled this foul message', we might say:

- The scribble of this foul message should be punished.
- The scribbling of this foul message should be punishable.

In other words, this process of creativity is linked to the individual option in the creation of a message. However, the important thing is that the speaker is competent to make the appropriate option and is aware of the variety of possibilities that the language offers.



This is especially interesting in the case of second language teaching, in which students tend to use only one variety of the possible forms. Therefore, teachers should encourage their pupils to use as many alternatives as possible.

\* Secondly, it is obvious that there is a limited freedom to create new formations in order to satisfy by lexicalisation a terminological need which may be as ad hoc and temporary as the formation concerned. This process is called 'nonce' formation.

Nonce formations are often preceded by an explicit indication of the coinage to come (which may simultaneously function as an apology for thus interfering with the theoretically finite state of the lexicon). Formulae of this kind are for example: 'what I might call...'; 'and I shall refer to this as...'

The commonest process of word-formation of this kind is compounding. If we imagine for example a scientist describing a condition arising through weightlessness that may resemble the effect of alcohol, he may say 'I shall call this space-inebriation'. Compounding may coincide with abbreviation, for example communication under the water may be 'subcom' (submarine communication).

Famous coinages that have become widely known are for example: 'mediagenic', i.e., likely to promote good relations with the media; and 'workaholic', i.e. somebody who cannot stop working.

The difference between both kinds of creativity is that the first one is more informal and familiar than the second, which implies more intellectual work. As a matter of fact the second kind of creativity is typical of the scientific domain. New terminology often comes through this method, for example: 'maglev', magnetic levitation.

On the other side, there is the exuberance of slang talk between familiar friends which denotes a high degree of creativity, for example: 'kneejerk', one who acts automatically; 'mind-blowing', overwhelming; 'get it together', to organise oneself.

To sum up, creativity depends less on the social context than on the particular individual. We vary enormously in our desire (and in our ability) to be lexically innovative.

## 5. LANGUE AND PAROLE

We will keep the French terms because English equivalents have occasionally been proposed, but most English authors use the French terms. Chomsky's distinction between 'competence' and 'performance' are roughly equivalent to this notion but applied to a particular speaker with regard to a particular language.

'Langue' can be defined as the system which is of concern for the linguist describes and which is a property of the society as a whole. Each individual, therefore, will produce instances of 'parole', the realisations of the language system. All the hypothetical individual productions conform the 'langue'. In Saussure's opinion 'langue' can be described as a 'social fact' more than a purely linguistic one, because it is a property of the speakers.

'Language is not complete in any speaker; it exists perfectly only within a collectivity'. In this



way, the meaning of the linguistic sign belongs to the 'langue' domain, however, the different connotations that the words have for each individual speaker will belong to the 'parole' domain.

Language is a system of sound and meaning contrasts, and each specific language imposes a different system of contrasts. This perception applies to grammatical as well as to lexical signs, but not to sentences. Saussure identified the sentence as 'belonging to "parole", not to "langue"'. The reason is because he thought that syntactic relationships and syntactic creations belonged to the mind of the individual, since sentences were original to the individual speaker and often showed mistakes in their construction.

On the whole, the linguistic sign represents an essential tool for the understanding of the arbitrariness of word meanings in each language, and an essential element to understand what can be described as classical semantics.