Lexical Structure

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Semantic or lexical fields

- One way of imposing order on the thousands of lexemes which make up the English vocabulary is to group them into semantic fields. What are semantic fields? Semantic field is a useful notion in investigating lexical structure. They are also called lexical fields. Semantic field is a named area of meaning in which lexemes interrelate and define each other in specific ways. For example, if we think of all the lexemes we know to do with fruit, or colours, or vehicles, and so on. But one important question is, To what extent is it possible to assign all the lexemes in English to a semantic field in an unambiguous way?
Semantic fields

- Some lexemes seem to belong to fields which are very difficult to define, or which are vague. For example, to what semantic field should noise or difficult belong?
- Secondly, some lexemes seem to belong to more than one field – for example, does orange belong to 'fruit' or 'colour'?
- And finally, some lexemes seem to fall midway between two fields – does tomato belong to 'fruit' or 'vegetable'?
- There is also the question of how best to define a semantic field: shall we say that tractor belongs to the field of 'agricultural vehicles', or just 'vehicles'?, or on the other hand, is flavour part of the semantic field of 'taste', or taste part of the semantic field of 'flavour', or are both members of some broader semantic field, such as a 'sensation'?
Semantic fields

- At the same time, the existence of these difficulties must not hide the fact that a very large number of lexemes can be grouped together into fields and subfields in a fairly clear-cut way.
- The findings of these semantic analyses also very useful in foreign language teaching and speech therapy, where it has proved helpful to present learners with sets of related lexemes, rather than with a series of randomly chosen items.
- Psychology has also shown that young children learn much of their vocabulary by bringing lexemes together in this way.
If we go back where we started, saying something about the ordering lexemes into semantic fields, we asked the question *how exactly do the lexemes within a field relate to each other?* It is obvious from dictionary definitions and thesaurus groupings that some lexemes do 'belong together'. How can we define what this 'belonging together' consists of?

A well-established model of lexical structure makes us think of lexemes as being related along two intersecting dimensions.
Semantic fields

- On the horizontal dimension, we sense the relationships between lexemes in a sequence. There is a certain mutual expectancy between the main lexemes in the sentence *He writhed on the ground in excruciating pain*. The linguistic intuition of an English-language speaker tells that *excruciating* tends to occur with pain, agony, and a few other lexemes, and not with *joy, ignorance,*, and most other nouns in the language. Likewise, *writhe* and *agony* commonly co-occur, as do *writhe* and *ground*.

- 'Horizontal' expectancies of this kind are known as *collocations*. We can say that *excruciating* collocates with 'pain'.


Semantic fields

- On the vertical dimension, we sense the way in which one lexeme can substitute for another, and relate to it in meaning. In the sentence *My aunt has bought a red automobile*, we can focus on any of the lexemes, and replace it. We might replace *bought* by a lexeme of similar meaning (a synonym), such as *purchased*; or by one of contrasting meaning (an antonym), such as *sold*. We might replace *automobile* by a lexeme of more specific meaning (a hyponym), such as *Ford*, or by one of more general meaning (a hypernym), such as *vehicle*. Or, of course, we might replace *automobile* by a lexeme which has nothing to do with it in meaning at all, such as *dress*, or *pencil*. The predictable links between lexemes are called *sense relations*, and we have dealt with them in two previous sessions.
Collocations

- The notion of collocation focuses our attention on the extent to which lexemes come together randomly or predictably. Often, a sequence of lexemes is governed by chance – that is, by factors which are controlled by an individual speaker, and not by tendencies in the language as a whole. For example, the sentence I like – gives us no clue about which lexeme will come next. Almost anything that exists can be liked. It is up to the individual to choose. Such sequences as I like flowers, or I like films are said to be free combinations of lexemes. They are not collocations, because there is no mutual expectancy between the items. Thousands of lexical juxtapositions in everyday speech and writing fall into this category.
Collocations

- On the other hand, the lexical items involved in a collocation are always to some degree mutually predictable, occurring regardless of the interests or personality of the individual user. All mature native speakers use such sequences as commit a murder, and not, e.g. commit a task, although the sense of 'carry out' would be applicable in the second case.

- Collocations may occur, moreover, with apparent disregard for the observable situation to which they relate: we may be green with envy, and a book may have a purple passage, even though no colour is evident on the face or page. Collocations cannot be predicted from a knowledge of the world. Coffee with milk may look hazel, beige, khaki, bronze, copper, amber, brown... but we normally call it white coffee.
Collocations

- All that is required for a sequence of lexemes to be described as a collocation, is for one item to call up another in the mind of a native speaker. Sometimes the predictability is weak, or strong. But when sequences are so highly predictable that they allow little or no change in their lexical elements, we do not analyse them as collocations. Such minimally varying sequences are usually referred to as fixed expressions, or idioms, and require a separate analysis.
Collocations

- Take the noun *kettle*, referring to a device for heating water. If the word *kettle* occurs in a sentence, there is a strong likelihood that the (verb) word *boil* will also occur, e.g.
  - *I’ll just boil a kettle.*
  - *Is the kettle boiling yet?*
- The co-occurrence of *kettle* and *boil* has a degree of predictability, and they each thus contribute to the meaning of the other.
- Part of the meaning of *kettle* is that it co-occurs predictably with *boil*, and part of the meaning of *boil* is that it co-occurs predictably with *kettle*, though the collocation in this direction is less predictable than from kettle to boil. The number of verbs that regularly co-occur with kettle is less than the number of nouns that regularly co-occur with boil.
Collocations

- Collocation most clearly occurs between words in specified syntactic relations, e.g. Subject + verb (kettle+boil), or Verb+Object (boil+kettle), or Adjective + Noun (red+wine).
- The kind of collocation that we have been discussing and illustrating is sometimes more explicitly referred to as *lexical collocation*. This is to differentiate it from *gramatical collocation*, which is a grammatical rather than a semantic relation.
- In the narrowest sense, grammatical collocation refers to the specific preposition that must occur after a particular verb, noun, or adjective: *rely+on, fear+of, fond+of*. More widely, it refers to to any kind of syntactic element that must accompany a particular word (usually verb, noun or adjective in English), e.g. Infinitive clause after *promise, attempt; that clause after afraid*, and so on.
Idioms

- Two central features identify an idiom. The meaning of the idiomatic expression cannot be deduced by examining the meanings of the constituent lexemes. And the expression is fixed, both grammatically and lexically. Thus, *put a sock in it!* means 'stop talking', and it is not possible to replace any of the lexemes and retain the idiomatic meaning.
Lexical phrases

- Beside collocations and idioms we can find other patterns within lexical sequences. These items are usually called lexical phrases. Lexical phrases can be described as prefabricated components used in building a sentence. They are chunks of language in which all the items have been preassembled. Hundreds of such phrases exist, of varying length and complexity, such as *it seems to me...*, *would you mind...*, *lived happily ever after...*, and so on. Such phrases are used frequently in both speech and writing, but they are especially important in conversation, where they perform a number of roles – for instance, expressing agreement, summing up an argument, introducing an example, or changing a topic...

- One study of lexical phrases groups them into four main types:
Lexical phrases

- POLYWORDS – Short phrases which function very much like individual lexemes. They cannot be varied, and their parts cannot be separated:
  - *in a nutshell, by the way, so to speak, so far so good, once and for all...*
- INSTITUTIONALISED EXPRESSIONS – Unit of sentence length, functioning as separate utterances. Like polywords, they are invariable, and their parts cannot be separated. They include proverbs, aphorisms, and other quotable utterances.
  - E.g. *how do you do?, have a nice day, give me a break, long time no see, ...*
- PHRASAL CONSTRAINTS – These are phrases which allow some degree of variation; they are usually quite short: e.g. *as I was saying, as far as I, ...*
- SENTENCE BUILDERS – Phrases which provide the framework for whole sentences; they allow considerable variation:
  - *not only...but also, my point is that..., that reminds me of..., let me begin by....*
Proverbs and quotations

- Proverbial expressions have been given a variety of labels: adages, dictums, maxims, mottoes, truisms, etc. These terms all convey the notion of a piece of traditional wisdom, handed down by previous generations. In most cases, the origin of proverbs is unknown.

- The effectiveness of a proverb lies largely in its brevity and directness. The syntax is simple, the images vivid, and the allusions domestic, and thus easy to understand. Memorability is aided through the use of alliteration, rhythm, and rhyme.

- A quotation is a fragment of socially-embalmed language. It is a language which has been placed on a pedestal, freely available for anyone to use, but readily sensitive to abuse. Anything which someone has said or written can be a quotation, but the term usually refers to those instances which have become ‘famous’ over the years.