

the Senior and I have *singles*.

Usually Freshmen can't get singles; they are very few, but I got one without even asking. I suppose the register didn't think it would be right to ask a *properly* brought up girl to room with a *foundling*. You see there are *advantages*.

(From *Daddy-Long-Legs* by J. Webster)

CHAPTER 7

What Is "Meaning"?

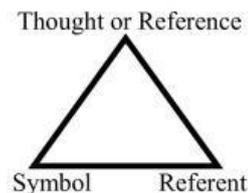
Language is the amber in which a thousand precious and subtle thoughts have been safely embedded and preserved.

(From *Word and Phrase* by J. Fitzgerald)

The question posed by the title of this chapter is one of those questions which are easier to ask than answer. The linguistic science at present is not able to put forward a definition of meaning which is conclusive.

However, there are certain facts of which we can be reasonably sure, and one of them is that the very function of the word as a unit of communication is made possible by its possessing a meaning. Therefore, among the word's various characteristics, meaning is certainly the most important.

Generally speaking, meaning can be more or less described as a component of the word through which a concept is communicated, in this way endowing the word with the ability of denoting real objects, qualities, actions and abstract notions. The complex and somewhat mysterious relationships between *referent* (object, etc. denoted by the word), *concept* and *word* are traditionally represented by the following triangle [35]:



By the "symbol" here is meant the word; thought or reference is concept. The dotted line suggests that there is no immediate relation between word and referent: it is established only through the concept.

On the other hand, there is a hypothesis that concepts can only find their realisation through words. It seems that thought is dormant till the word wakens it up. It is only when we hear a spoken word or read a printed word that the corresponding concept springs into mind.

The mechanism by which concepts (i. e. mental phenomena) are converted into words (i. e. linguistic phenomena) and the reverse process by which a heard or a printed word is converted into a kind of mental picture are not yet understood or described. Probably that is the reason why the process of communication through words, if one gives it some thought, seems nothing short of a miracle. Isn't it fantastic that the mere vibrations of a speaker's vocal chords should be taken up by a listener's brain and converted into vivid pictures? If magic does exist in the world, then it is truly the magic of human speech; only we are so used to this miracle that we do not realise its almost

supernatural qualities.

The branch of linguistics which specialises in the study of meaning is called *semantics*. As with many terms, the term "semantics" is ambiguous for it can stand, as well, for the expressive aspect of language in general and for the meaning of one particular word in all its varied aspects and nuances (i.e. the semantics of a word = the meaning(s) of a word).

As Mario Pei puts it in *The Study of Language*, "Semantics is 'language' in its broadest, most inclusive aspect. Sounds, words, grammatical forms, syntactical constructions are the tools of language. Semantics is language's avowed purpose" [39]

The meanings of all the utterances of a speech community are said by another leading linguist to include the total experience of that community; arts, science, practical occupations, amusements, personal and family life.

The modern approach to semantics is based on the assumption that the inner form of the word (i. e. its meaning) presents a structure which is called the *semantic structure* of the word.

Yet, before going deeper into this problem, it is necessary to make a brief survey of another semantic phenomenon which is closely connected with it.

Polysemy. Semantic Structure of the Word

The semantic structure of the word does not present an indissoluble unity (that is, actually, why it is referred to as "structure"), nor does it necessarily stand for one concept. It is generally known that most words convey several concepts and thus possess the corresponding number of meanings. A word having several meanings is called *polysemantic*, and the ability of words to have more than one meaning is described by the term *polysemy*.

Two somewhat naive but frequently asked questions may arise in connection with polysemy:

- 1 . Is polysemy an anomaly or a general rule in English vocabulary?
2. Is polysemy an advantage or a disadvantage so far as the process of communication is concerned?

Let us deal with both these questions together.

Polysemy is certainly not an anomaly. Most English words are polysemantic. It should be noted that the wealth of expressive resources of a language largely depends on the degree to which polysemy has developed in the language. Sometimes people who are not very well informed in linguistic matters claim that a language is lacking in words if the need arises for the same word to be applied to several different phenomena. In actual fact, it is exactly the opposite: if each word is found to be capable of conveying, let us say, at least two concepts instead of one, the expressive potential of the whole vocabulary increases twofold. Hence, a well-developed polysemy is not a drawback but a great advantage in a language.

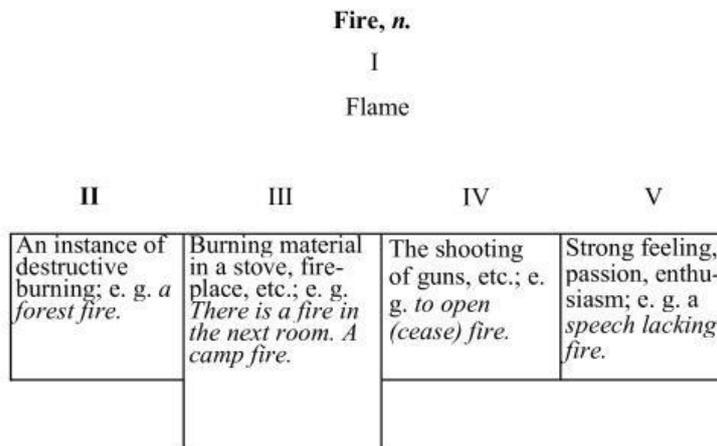
On the other hand, it should be pointed out that the number of sound combinations that human speech organs can produce is limited. Therefore at a certain stage of language development the production of new words by morphological means becomes limited, and polysemy becomes increasingly important in providing the means for enriching the vocabulary. From this, it should be clear that the process of enriching the vocabulary does not consist merely in adding new

words to it, but, also, in the constant development of polysemy.

The system of meanings of any polysemantic word develops gradually, mostly over the centuries, as more and more new meanings are either added to old ones, or oust some of them (see Ch. 8). So the complicated processes of polysemy development involve both the appearance of new meanings and the loss of old ones. Yet, the general tendency with English vocabulary at the modern stage of its history is to increase the total number of its meanings and in this way to provide for a quantitative and qualitative growth of the language's expressive resources.

When analysing the semantic structure of a polysemantic word, it is necessary to distinguish between two levels of analysis.

On the first level, the semantic structure of a word is treated as a system of meanings. For example, the semantic structure of the noun *fire* could be roughly presented by this scheme (only the most frequent meanings are given):

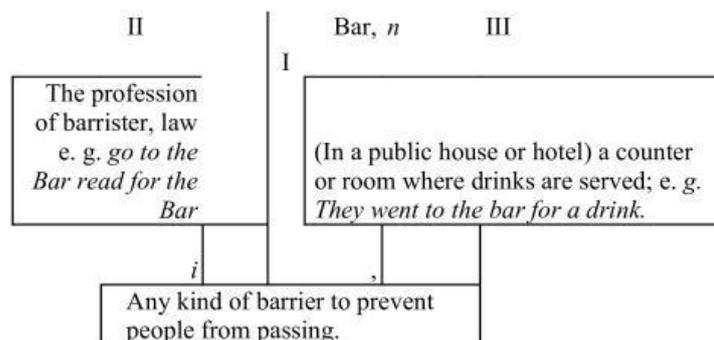


The above scheme suggests that meaning I holds a kind of dominance over the other meanings conveying the concept in the most general way whereas meanings II—V are associated with special circumstances, aspects and instances of the same phenomenon.

Meaning I (generally referred to as *the main meaning*) presents the centre of the semantic structure of the word holding it together. It is mainly through meaning I that meanings II—V (they are called *secondary meanings*) can be associated with one another, some of them exclusively through meaning I, as, for instance, meanings IV and V.

It would hardly be possible to establish any logical associations between some of the meanings of the noun *bar* except through the main meaning:¹

¹ We give only a fragment of the semantic structure of *bar*, so as to illustrate the point.



Meanings II and III have no logical links with one another whereas each separately is easily associated with meaning I: meaning II through the traditional barrier dividing a court-room into two parts; meaning III through the counter serving as a kind of barrier between the customers of a pub and the barman.

Yet, it is not in every polysemantic word that such a centre can be found. Some semantic structures are arranged on a different principle. In the following list of meanings of the adjective *dull* one can hardly hope to find a generalised meaning covering and holding together the rest of the semantic structure.

Dull, adj.

- I. Uninteresting, monotonous, boring; e. g. *a dull book, a dull film.*
- II. Slow in understanding, stupid; e. g. *a dull student.*
- III. Not clear or bright; e. g. *dull weather, a dull day, a dull colour.*
- IV. Not loud or distinct; e. g. *a dull sound.*
- V. Not sharp; e. g. *a dull knife.*
- VI. Not active; e. g. *Trade is dull.* VII. Seeing badly; e. g. *dull eyes* (arch.). VIII, Hearing badly; e. g. *dull ears* (arch.).

Yet, one distinctly feels that there is something that all these seemingly miscellaneous meanings have in common, and that is the implication of deficiency, be it of colour (m. III), wits (m. II), interest (m. I), sharpness (m. V), etc. The implication of insufficient quality, of something lacking, can be clearly distinguished in each separate meaning.

In fact, each meaning definition in the given scheme can be subjected to a transformational operation to prove the point.

Dull, adj.

- I. Uninteresting ----- > deficient in interest or excitement.
- II. ... Stupid ----- > deficient in intellect.
- III. Not bright----- > deficient in light or colour.
- IV. Not loud----- > deficient in sound.
- V. Not sharp ----- > deficient in sharpness.
- VI. Not active ----- > deficient in activity.
- VII. Seeing badly ----- > deficient in eyesight.
- VIII. Hearing badly----- > deficient in hearing.

The transformed scheme of the semantic structure of *dull* clearly shows that the centre holding together the complex semantic structure of this word is not one of the meanings but a certain *component* that can be easily singled out within each separate meaning.

This brings us to the second level of analysis of the semantic

structure of a word. The transformational operation with the meaning definitions of *dull* reveals something very significant: the semantic structure of the word is "divisible", as it were, not only at the level of different meanings but, also, at a deeper level.

Each separate meaning seems to be subject to structural analysis in which it may be represented as sets of semantic components. In terms of *componential analysis*, one of the modern methods of semantic research, the meaning of a word is defined as a set of elements of meaning which are not part of the vocabulary of the language itself, but rather theoretical elements, postulated in order to describe the semantic relations between the lexical elements of a given language.

The scheme of the semantic structure of *dull* shows that the semantic structure of a word is not a mere system of meanings, for each separate meaning is subject to further subdivision and possesses an inner structure of its own.

Therefore, the semantic structure of a word should be investigated at both these levels: a) of different meanings, b) of semantic components within each separate meaning. For a monosemantic word (i. e. a word with one meaning) the first level is naturally excluded.

Types of Semantic Components

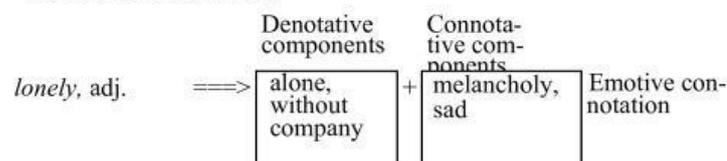
The leading semantic component in the semantic structure of a word is usually termed *denotative component* (also, the term *referential component* may be used). The denotative component expresses the conceptual content of a word.

The following list presents denotative components of some English adjectives and verbs:

	Denotative components
<i>lonely</i> , adj.	----- » [alone]
<i>notorious</i> , adj.	----- » [widely]
<i>celebrated</i> , adj.	----- » [widely]
<i>to glare</i> , v.	----- » [to look]
<i>to glance</i> , v.	----- » [to look]
<i>to shiver</i> , v.	----- » [to tremble]
<i>to shudder</i> , v.	----- » [to tremble]

It is quite obvious that the definitions given in the right column only partially and incompletely describe the meanings of their corresponding words. To give a more or less full picture of the meaning of a word, it is necessary to include in the scheme of analysis additional semantic components which are termed *connotations* or *connotative components*.

Let us complete the semantic structures of the words given above introducing connotative components into the schemes of their semantic structures.



<i>notorious</i> , adj.	==>	widely known	+	for criminal acts or bad traits of character	Evaluative connotation, negative
<i>celebrated</i> , adj.	-	widely known	+	for special achievement in science, art, etc.	Evaluative connotation, positive
<i>to glare</i> , v.	—	to look	+	steadily, lastingly in anger, rage, etc.	1. Connotation of duration 2. Emotive connotation
<i>to glance</i> , v.	==>	to look	+	briefly, passingly	Connotation of duration
<i>to shiver</i> , v.	—	to tremble	+	[lastingly] + (usu) with the cold	1. Connotation of duration 2. Connotation of cause
<i>to shudder</i> , v.	—	[to tremble	+	[briefly with horror, disgust, etc.	1. Connotation of duration 2. Connotation of cause 3. Emotive connotation

The above examples show how by singling out denotative and connotative components one can get a sufficiently clear picture of what the word really means. The schemes presenting the semantic structures of *glare*, *shiver*, *shudder* also show that a meaning can have two or more connotative components.

The given examples do not exhaust all the types of connotations but present only a few: emotive, evaluative connotations, and also connotations of duration and of cause. (For a more detailed classification of connotative components of a meaning, see Ch. 10.)

Meaning and Context

In the beginning of the paragraph entitled "Polysemy" we discussed the advantages and disadvantages of this linguistic phenomenon. One of the most important "drawbacks" of polysemantic words is that there is sometimes a chance of misunderstanding when a word is used in a certain meaning but accepted by a listener or reader in another. It is only natural that such cases provide stuff of which jokes are made, such as the ones that follow:

Customer. I would like a book, please. Bookseller. Something light? Customer. That doesn't matter. I have my car with me.

In this conversation the customer is honestly misled by the polysemy of the adjective *light* taking it in the literal sense whereas the bookseller uses the word in its figurative meaning "not serious; entertaining".

In the following joke one of the speakers pretends to misunderstand his interlocutor basing his angry retort on the polysemy of the noun *kick*:

The critic started to leave in the middle of the second act of the play.

"Don't go," said the manager. "I promise there's a terrific kick in the next act."

"Fine," was the retort, "give it to the author."¹

Generally speaking, it is common knowledge that context is a powerful preventative against any misunderstanding of meanings. For instance, the adjective *dull*, if used out of context, would mean different things to different people or nothing at all. It is only in combination with other words that it reveals its actual meaning: *a dull pupil, a dull play, a dull razor-blade, dull weather*, etc. Sometimes, however, such a minimum context fails to reveal the meaning of the word, and it may be correctly interpreted only through what Professor N. Amosova termed a second-degree context [1], as in the following example: *The man was large, but his wife was even fatter*. The word *fatter* here serves as a kind of indicator pointing that *large* describes a stout man and not a big one.

Current research in semantics is largely based on the assumption that one of the more promising methods of investigating the semantic structure of a word is by studying the word's linear relationships with other words in typical contexts, i. e. its *combinability* or *collocability*.

Scholars have established that the semantics of words characterised by common occurrences (i. e. words which regularly appear in common contexts) are correlated and, therefore, one of the words within such a pair can be studied through the other.

Thus, if one intends to investigate the semantic structure of an adjective, one would best consider the adjective in its most typical syntactical patterns *A + N* (adjective + noun) and *N + I + A* (noun + link verb +

kick. *n.* -- 1 thrill, pleasurable excitement (*inform.*); 2. a blow with the foot adjective) and make a thorough study of the meanings of nouns with which the adjective is frequently used.

For instance, a study of typical contexts of the adjective *bright* in the first pattern will give us the following sets: a) *bright* colour (flower, dress, silk, etc.). b) *bright* metal (gold, jewels, armour, etc.), c) *bright* student (pupil, boy, fellow, etc.), d) *bright* face (smile, eyes, etc.) and some others. These sets will lead us to singling out the meanings of the adjective related to each set of combinations: a) intensive in colour, b) shining, c) capable, d) gay, etc.

For a transitive verb, on the other hand, the recommended pattern would be *V + N* (verb + direct object expressed by a noun). If, for instance, our object of investigation are the verbs *to produce, to create, to compose*, the correct procedure would be to consider the semantics of the nouns that are used in the pattern with each of these verbs: what is it that is produced? created? composed?

There is an interesting hypothesis that the semantics of words regularly used in common contexts (e. g. *bright colours, to build a house, to create a work of art*, etc.) are so intimately correlated that each of them casts, as it were, a kind of permanent reflection on the meaning of its neighbour. If the verb *to compose* is frequently used with the object *music*, isn't it natural to expect that certain musical associations linger in the meaning of the verb *to compose*?

Note, also, how closely the negative evaluative connotation of the adjective *notorious* is linked with the negative connotation of the nouns with which it is regularly associated: *a notorious criminal*,

thief, gangster, gambler, gossip, liar, miser, etc.

All this leads us to the conclusion that context is a good and reliable key to the meaning of the word. Yet, even the jokes given above show how misleading this key can prove in some cases. And here we are faced with two dangers. The first is that of sheer misunderstanding, when the speaker means one thing and the listener takes the word in its other meaning.

The second danger has nothing to do with the process of communication but with research work in the field of semantics. A common error with the inexperienced research worker is to see a different meaning in every new set of combinations. Here is a puzzling question to illustrate what we mean. Cf.: *an angry man, an angry letter*. Is the adjective *angry* used in the same meaning in both these contexts or in two different meanings? Some people will say "two" and argue that, on the one hand, the combinability is different (*man* — name of person; *letter* — name of object) and, on the other hand, a letter cannot experience anger. True, it cannot; but it can very well convey the anger of the person who wrote it. As to the combinability, the main point is that a word can realise the same meaning in different sets of combinability. For instance, in the pairs *merry children, merry laughter, merry faces, merry songs* the adjective *merry* conveys the same concept of high spirits whether they are directly experienced by the children (in the first phrase) or indirectly expressed through the merry faces, the laughter and the songs of the other word groups.

The task of distinguishing between the different meanings of a word and the different variations of combinability (or, in a traditional terminology, different usages of the word) is actually a question of singling out the different denotations within the semantic structure of the word.

- Cf.: 1) *a sad woman*,
2) *a sad voice*,
3) *a sad story*,
4) *a sad scoundrel* (= an incorrigible scoundrel)
5) *a sad night* (= a dark, black night, arch, poet.)

CHAPTER 8

How Words Develop New Meanings

It has been mentioned that the systems of meanings of polysemantic words evolve gradually. The older a word is, the better developed is its semantic structure. The normal pattern of a word's semantic development is from monosemy to a simple semantic structure encompassing only two or three meanings, with a further movement to an increasingly more complex semantic structure.

In this chapter we shall have a closer look at the complicated processes by which words acquire new meanings.

There are two aspects to this problem, which can be generally described in the following way: a) Why should new meanings appear at all? What circumstances cause and stimulate their development? b) How does it happen? What is the nature of the very process of development of new meanings?

Let us deal with each of these questions in turn.