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**Linguistics**

**The Study of Language**

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**Lesson One : Semantics**

**The words Fire Department make it sound like they're the ones who are starting fires, doesn't it? It should be called the "Extinguishing Department."**

**We don't call the police the "Crime Department." Also, the "Bomb Squad" sounds like a terrorist gang.**

**The same is true of wrinkle cream. Doesn't it sound like it causes wrinkles? And why would a doctor prescribe pain pills?**

**I already have pain! I need relief pills! Carlin (1997)**

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**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 an individual speaker might want them to mean on a particular occasion .**

**This approach is concerned with objective or general meaning and avoids trying to account for subjective or local meaning. Doing semantics is attempting to spell out what it is we all know when we behave as if we share knowledge of the meaning of a word, a phrase, or a sentence in a language .**

**Meaning**

**We can make a broad distinction between conceptual meaning and associative meaning.**

**Conceptual meaning : covers those basic, essential components of meaning that are conveyed by the literal use of a word. It is the type of meaning that dictionaries are designed to describe. Some of the basic components of a word like needle in English might include "thin, sharp, steel instrument." These components would be part of the conceptual meaning of needle.**

**Associative meaning : is the type of meaning that people might connect with the use of words that is not part of conceptual meaning ( e.g. needle = '' painful'' ) .**

**Different people might have different associations or connotations attached to a word like needle. They might associate it with "pain," or "illness," or "blood, " or "drugs," or "hard to find" , and these associations may differ from one person to the next. These types of associations are not treated as part of the word's conceptual meaning.**

**Semantic features : are basic elements used in the analysis of the components of word meaning ( e.g. +human , - human )**

**One way in which the study of basic conceptual meaning might be helpful would be as a means of accounting for the "oddness" we experience when we read sentences such as the following:**

**The hamburger ate the boy.**

**The table listens to the radio.**

**The horse is reading the newspaper.**

**We should first note that the oddness of these sentences does not derive from their Syntactic structure. According to the basic syntactic rules for forming English sentences , we have well-formed structures.**

**NP V NP**

**The hamburger ate the boy**

**This sentence is syntactically good, but semantically odd. Since the sentence :**

**The boy ate the hamburger .**

**is perfectly acceptable , we may be able to identify the source of the problem. The components of the conceptual meaning of the noun *hamburger* must be significantly different from those of the noun *boy*, thereby preventing one, and not the other, from being used as the subject of the verb *ate*. The kind of noun that can be the subject of the verb *ate* must denote an entity that is capable of "eating." The noun *hamburger* does not have this property and the noun *boy* does.**

**We can make this observation more generally applicable by trying to determine the crucial element or feature of meaning that any noun must have in order to be used as the subject of the verb ate. Such an element may be as general as "animate being."**

**We can then use this idea to describe part of the meaning of words as either having (+) or not having (-) that particular feature. So, the feature that the noun boy has is "+animate" (= denotes an animate being) and the feature that the noun hamburger has is ''-animate" (= does not denote an animate being).**

**This simple example is an illustration of a procedure for analyzing meaning in terms of semantic features. Features such as "+animate, -animate," "+human, -human," "+ female, -female," for example, can be treated as the basic elements involved in differentiating the meaning of each word in a language from every other word. If we had to provide the crucial distinguishing features of the meanings of a set of English words such as :**

**table, horse, boy, man, girl, woman,**

**Part of the problem seems to be that the approach involves a view of words in a language as some sort of "containers" that carry meaning components. There is clearly more to the meaning of words than these basic types of features.**