



LEXICAL MEANING AND SEMANTIC FEATURES: A COMPONENTIAL APPROACH

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Abstract. *The theme explores challenges in dissecting meaning into components within contemporary lexicology. Delving into the intricacies of compone analysis, the abstract likely addresses evolving linguistic theories and methodologies, shedding light on the complexities inherent in deciphering meaning structures in the lexicon of the present day.*

Key words: *lexicology, lexeme, lexicon, present day lexicology, lexis, branch, semantic, compone analysis, implicational component, inferential components, core component, semantic domain.*

Introduction. There are many different ways to approach the problems of meaning, since meaning is related to many different functions of language. The meanings of words in a language are interrelated and they are defined in part by their relations with other words in the language. Analyzed in the same semantic domain, words can be classified according to shared and differentiating features. Breaking down the sense of a word into its minimal distinctive features, componential analysis of meaning can be a useful approach in the study of meaning, particularly in determining the meaning of a lexeme. Although componential analysis has some difficulties and limitations in its application, it is still used in modern linguistics.

Finegan¹ distinguishes three types of meaning, i.e. linguistic, social, and affective meaning. Linguistic meaning encompasses both sense and reference. One

¹ Finegan, Edward. 2004. Language. Its Structure and Use. 4th ed. United States of America: Thomson Wadsworth. 181-182 pp.



way of defining meaning is to say that the meaning of a word or sentence is the actual person, object, abstract notion, event, or state to which the word or sentence makes reference. Referential meaning may be the easiest kind to recognize, but it is not sufficient to explain how some expressions mean what they mean. For one thing, not all expressions have referents. Social meaning is what we rely on when we identify certain social characteristics of speakers and situations from the character of the language used. Affective meaning is the emotional connotation that is attached to words and utterances.

A word or lexeme presents a complex semantic structure. A lexeme is built up of smaller components of meaning which are combined differently to form a different lexeme. The meaning of a lexeme is a complicated structure where elements of meaning have definite interrelation². All semantic elements in a word are not equally important. One (or some) of them is the dominant semantic element and it organizes around itself all the other ones, which may be more or less important for the meaning of a lexeme³.

A lexeme can be analyzed and described in terms of its semantic components, which help to define different lexical relations, grammatical and syntactic processes. The semantic structure of a lexeme is treated as a system of meanings. To some extent we can define a lexeme by telling what set it belongs to and how it differs from other members of the same set. Some obvious sets of this sort are sports (*tennis, badminton, soccer, golf, basketball,...*), colors (*red, blue, yellow, green, pink, ...*) and creative writing (*novel, poem, short story, essay, biography,...*). It is not difficult to say what the members of each set have in common.

According to Semantic field (or semantic domain) theory, lexemes can be classified according to shared and differentiating features. Here are more examples. Wasp, hornet, bee and other items denote 'flying, stinging insects'; moth and housefly, among others, denote insects that fly but do not sting; ant and termite are

² Crystal, David. 1987. The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 104 p

³ Lyons, John. 1995. Linguistic semantics: An introduction. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1408 p.

Leech, Geoffrey. 1983. Semantics. Harmondsworth: Penguin Ltd, 89 p



names of insects neither fly nor sting. The semantic features explain how the members of the set are related to one another and can be used to differentiate them from one another. The determination of such features has been called componential analysis. This writing treats only the componential analysis of referential meaning.

Palmer⁴ says that the total meaning of a word can be seen in terms of a number of distinct elements or components of meaning (1976: 85). Components have a distinguishing function and serve to distinguish the meaning of a lexeme from that of semantically related lexemes, or more accurately they serve to distinguish among the meanings of lexemes in the same semantic domain. To determine the meaning of any form contrast must be found, for there is no meaning apart from significant differences. Nida states “If all the universe were blue, there would be no blueness, since there would be nothing to contrast with blue. The same is true for the meanings of words. They have meaning only in terms of systematic contrasts with other words which share certain features with them but contrast with them in respect to other features”. Jackson in “Words and their meaning”⁵ dan Nida in “Componential Analysis of Meaning”⁶ categorize the types of components into two main types, i.e. common component and diagnostic or distinctive component.

Before going further with the componential approach, it is important to consider possible differences in the roles of diagnostic components. The differences can be best designated as (1) **implicational**, (2) **core**, and (3) **inferential**.

Implicational component are those implied by a particular meaning, though they do not form an essential part of the core meaning. On the contrary, implicational components remain associated with a meaning, even when other components are negativized by the context. The word repent has three diagnostic components: (1) previous wrong behavior, (2) contrition for what has been done, and (3) change of behavior, and the first component is implicational. Whether in a positive or negative context, e.g. he repented of what he did or he didn't repent of what he did, the

⁴ Palmer, F. R. (1983). *Semantics* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 85 p.

⁵ Jackson, Howard. 1996. *Words and Their Meaning*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman Inc, 83 p.

⁶ Nida, Eugene A. 1975. *Componential Analysis of Meaning*. Belgium: Mouton, 32 p.



implication is that the person in question did something wrong. The negation affects the core components which specify the central aspects of the event, but does not modify the implicational component.

The inferential components of meanings are those which may be inferred from the use of an expression, but which are not regarded as obligatory, core elements. In the expression the policeman shot the thief, 'the thief was killed' is the inference, and without further contextual condition assumed to be the case. However, it is possible to deny this inference, e.g. '*the policeman shot the thief but didn't kill him*'. At the same time an inferential component may be explicitly stated, e.g. the policeman shot the thief to death or the policeman shot and killed the thief.

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