

Linguistics 210

Semantics

The screenshot shows a web-based visual thesaurus interface. The central word is "dog". It is connected to several related terms in a radial network:

- dogiron
- fire dog
- andiron
- detent
- click
- pawl
- heel
- hound
- blackguard
- bounder
- cad
- frump
- domestic dog
- canis familiaris
- chase
- chase after
- go after
- tag
- track
- tail
- trail

On the right side, there is a sidebar with various categories and their corresponding definitions:

- NOUNS** (ON/OFF):
 - a member of the genus *Canis* (probably descended from the common wolf) that has been domesticated by man since prehistoric times
 - a dull unattractive unpleasant girl or woman
 - informal term for a man
 - someone who is morally reprehensible
 - a hinged catch that fits into a notch of a ratchet to move a wheel forward or prevent it from moving backward
 - metal supports for logs in a fireplace
- ADJECTIVES** (ON/OFF)
- VERBS** (ON/OFF):
 - go after with the intent to catch
- ADVERBS** (ON/OFF)
- HISTORY**: dog

At the bottom, there is a search bar with "dog" entered and a "GO" button. The interface also includes tabs for "HELP", "DISPLAY OPTIONS", and "RELATIONSHIPS".

Overview

- Semantics = the study of meaning
- Today we'll look at:
 - Legal semantics
 - Word meaning
 - Semantic features and Tourette's Syndrome
 - Acquisition and change of meaning

Why are semantics important in the real world?

Legal semantics

- 1. Insurance contract
 - Woman distraught over being abandoned in a restaurant by her date; drove off in what she thought to be the date's Cadillac, and totalled it. Was she covered by her insurance?
 - “Such insurance as is provided by this policy applies to the use of a non-owned vehicle by the named insured and any person responsible for use by the named insured provided such use is with the permission of the owner.”
 - [named insured and person responsible] [with permission of owner]
 - [named insured] and [person responsible with permission of owner]
 - in this reading *the named insured* isn't qualified by *with permission of owner*
 - California appellate court:
 - She is covered, because wording is ambiguous
-

Legal semantics

■ 2. Statute

- Drug dealer tried to swindle customer by selling him bag of inert powder with only minuscule trace of methamphetamine. Customer was undercover narcotics agent.
- The *substance* had “potential for abuse”, but the *quantity of the substance* did not. Did he break the law?
- “Every person who sells any controlled substance which is specified in subdivision (d) shall be punished...(d) Any material, compound, mixture, or preparation which contains any quantity of the following substances having a potential for abuse associated with a stimulant effect on the central nervous system: Amphetamine; Methamphetamine...”
 - Any material...which contains any quantity [of the following substances having a potential for abuse]
 - Any material...which contains any quantity [of the following substances] having a potential for abuse
- Appellate court: he broke the law

Legal semantics

■ 3. Instructions to a jury

- Defendant convicted of raping and murdering 15-year-old girl; jury imposed death penalty
- US constitutional law forbids any instruction to jury that denies defendant the right to have jury consider sympathy factors raised by the evidence, in his case psychological problems and harsh family background.
- “The jurors must not be swayed by mere sentiment, conjecture, sympathy, passion, prejudice, public opinion or public feeling.”
 - [mere sentiment], conjecture, sympathy, passion, prejudice, public opinion or public feeling
 - mere [sentiment, conjecture, sympathy, passion, prejudice, public opinion or public feeling]
- US Supreme Court, 5-4: mere sympathy, therefore constitutional (i.e. other factors were allowed to be considered)

Legal semantics

- **4. Taxing grant money (Greg Iverson, UWM)**
 - Law prof and linguistics prof both audited by the IRS for having claimed a scholarship deduction on summer research awards received from the university.
 - IRS: since this money came from their employer it was salary, and thus not eligible for the modest scholarship deduction.
 - Legal basis for the IRS ruling: case law citation relating to Iowa State University involving the tax liability of teaching assistants, saying "Iowa State University is not authorized to award grants and scholarships out of the General Education Fund which is used to pay salaries".
 - hence TA income was ruled taxable.
 - Iverson: the statement modifies "General Education Fund" with a restrictive relative clause, not a nonrestrictive one (it's not set off by commas), so the reference is just to that portion of the General Education Fund which is used to pay salaries, not to the entire fund, other portions of which could freely be used for grants and scholarships, even to employees.
- He won the appeal, whereas the law professor lost...

Semantic features

- *murder* : 'kill' > 'murder'
- What features have been added to the lexical entry for *murder* ?
 - [+human victim]
 - [+unlawful]
 - [+intentional]
- Cf. banananomia: affects semantic classes defined by semantic features [+fruit], [+red], etc.
- Cf. also coprolalia:

Coprolalia

■ Tourette's Syndrome

- 3 manifestations:
 - **Coprolalia** 'uncontrollable use of obscene language'
 - **Coprographia** 'uncontrollable writing of obscene things'
 - **Copropraxia** 'uncontrollable doing of obscene things'
- Tourette's is typically claimed to involve profanity, specifically involving body parts and functions
- the cross-linguistic data (from Tourette's patients who speak other languages) show that all that matters is the taboo; the words involved can originally mean anything:
 - Italian **porco de dio** 'pig of god!', **sporca Madonna** 'dirty Madonna!', **porca la miseria** 'pig misery!', etc.

Semantic change

- **Broadening**
 - OE docga 'mastiff' > ModE dog
- **Narrowing**
 - murder, starve < 'die'
 - deer < 'animal' (cf. German Tier)
- **Amelioration**
 - nice < 'foolish'
 - queen < 'woman'
- **Pejoration**
 - hussy < 'housewife'
 - whore < 'dear one, friend'
 - wench < 'girl'
 - harlot < 'young fellow'
- **Circumlocution/taboo**
 - toilet, bathroom, washroom, necessary, water closet...
- **Inversion**
 - spendthrift, bad, oversight, table a motion...



Acquisition ⇒ semantic change

■ Quine's gavagai problem

- hook up
- mung, smegma

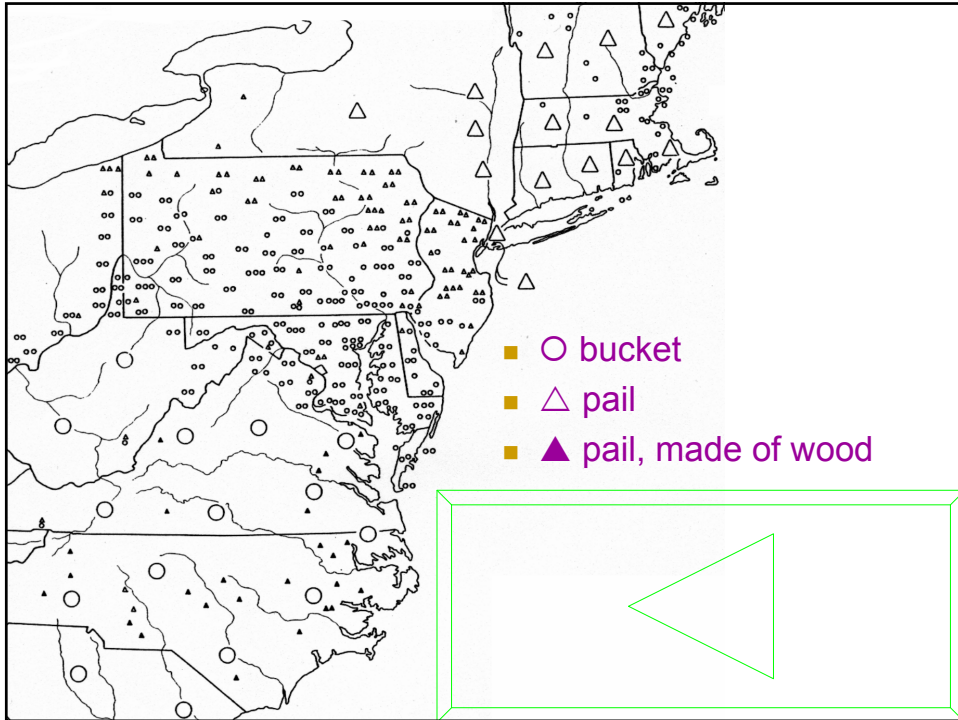


■ Human avoidance of synonymy

- pewter and biff (Markman, Pinker)
 - show child pair of pewter tongs and call it *biff*, child interprets *biff* as tongs in general; when asked for more *biffs*, it picks out plastic tongs.
 - If shown a pewter cup called *biff*, child assumes it means pewter, not cup, since it already has a word for 'cup'. When asked for more *biffs*, the child chooses pewter spoon or pewter tongs.
- pail/bucket
- big road you go fast on
- crank/prank call, basement/cellar

Conclusions

- Our knowledge of semantics includes knowledge of **word meanings**, which appear to be composed in part of **features**. The challenges inherent in acquiring these components play a role in semantic change.
- Syntactic structure is important in determining meaning (as in the legal examples).
- Note that much of our semantic knowledge is **abstract** and **has not been taught to us**.



Big road you travel fast on

79. What is your **general** term for a big road that you drive relatively fast on?

- a. highway (57.00%)
- b. freeway (11.98%)
- e. expressway (4.85%)
- g. a freeway is bigger than a highway (5.13%)
- i. a freeway has limited access (no stop lights, no intersections), whereas a highway can have stop lights and intersections (14.75%)
- i. other (4.53%)

