Lecture II

Meaning. Concept

I. Approaches to Lexical Meaning

There are two main approaches to lexical meaning: referential and

functional. The referential approach studies the connection between words and

thins or concepts they denote. Functional approach studies relations between

words.

The referential model of meaning is the so-called basic semantic triangle. It consists of:

1. The sound-form (Sign) of the word: [bз:d].

2. The referent (Denotatum) – the object which the word names: the actual bird.

3. The concept (Designatum) – The essential properties of this object which are reflected in human mind: “a feathered anial with wings“.

Meaning is closely connected with all parts of the semantic triangle but cannot be equated with any of them. Generally speaking, meaning can be 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 absract notions.

The functional approach assumes that the meaning of a linguistic unit can be studied only through its relation to other linguistic units and not through its relation to concept or referent, e.g. we know that the meaning of “bird n“ and “bird v“ is different because they function in speech differently. Analysing various contexts in which these words are used we can observe that they have different distribution.

As the distribution of the two words is different, their meanings are different too.

The same is true of a polysemantic word: Look at me – You look tired.

Consequently, semantic investigation is confined to the analysis of the difference or sameness of meaning. the functional approach is a valuable complement to the referential theory.

II. Lexical Meaning and Concept

Meaning and concept are very closely associated but not identical. Meaning is a linguistic category. Concept is a logical and psychological category, a unit of thinking.

Meaning and concept coincide only in scientific terms that have no general meanings (morpheme, phoneme, amoeba) and in terminilogical meanings of polysemantic words, e.g. legal, medical or grammatical usages of the word case. In other aspects meaning and concept do not coincide:

1. Concept is emotionally and stylistically neutral. Meaning may include non-conceptual parts: kid, gorgeous, birdie.

2. One and the same concept can be expressed differently: die – pass away, kick the bucket.

3. The number of concepts does not correspond to the number of words and meanings. One concept may be expressed by several synonymous words:

child, kid – infant. One polysemantic word may express several concepts: draw – “move by pulling“ (draw a boat out of the water), “obtain from a source“ (draw water from a well), “make with a pen, pencil or chalk“ draw a straight line). Some words do not express concepts at all: well, must, perhaps.

4. Concepts are mostly international. Meanings are nationally specific.

Words expressing identical concepts may have different meanings and different semantic structures in different languages: house – дом; blue - синий, голубой.

III. Types of Lexical Meaning

The content plane of words includes denotative and connotative meanings.

Denotative or referential meaning, the basic type of lexical meaning, is the word‘s reference to the object. This reference may be individual (The dog is trained) or general (It‘s not a dog). That is why denotative meaning is subdivided into demonstrative and significative.

The type of denotative meaning varies in different groups of words.

The meaning of situational words is relative – it depends on the situation and context: here, son, my, this, now.

Pronominal words do not name the referent, they only point to it: he, she, they. Their meaning in isolation is very general: he – any male. but in speech their reference is always individual: he – this particular male.

The referent of proper names is always an individual object or person. They refer to each member of a particular class: London, Paris (cities), John, Bob (men).

Specific and generic terms differ in the size of the referent group: rose –flower; flower – plant. General terms have a wider meaning and can substitute for any specific term: dog – English bulldog, French poodle, cocker spaniel.

The referent of abstract words can be perceived by the mind and not by the senses: miracle, polite, to manage.

Connotative meaning includes various additional meanings: emotional,

evaluative intensifying and expressive, e.g. hillock, to devour. As a rule,

connotation co-exists with denotation. However, sometimes it comes to the fore and weakens the word‘s denotative meaning.

Words also may have a certain stylistic value. It means that they refer to this or that situation or functional style: science, everyday life, business: get – obtain –procure; child – kid – infant.

IV. Lexical and Grammatical Meaning

The word is a lexical-grammatical unity. Its content plane includes two types of meaning: lexical and grammatical.

Lexical meaning is individual, unique. It does not belong to any other word in the same language: bicycle – a vehicle with two wheels, handle-bars to guide it with, a seat, and two pedals to make it go. Grammatical meaning is general, standard. It belongs to a whole class of words and word-forms: bicycle – a noun in the common case, singular.

At the same time lexical and grammatical meanings co-exist in the word and are interdependent:

1. Lexical meaning affects grammatical meaning: abstract or mass nouns

have no plural form (joy, sugar), relative adjectives have no degrees of comparison (watery), statal verbs are not used in progressive tenses (see, understand).

2. Grammatical meaning affects lexical meaning. Different meanings of the polysemantic word go have their own grammatical peculiarities: He has

gone to China – moved (go + adverb of place); They are going to get married soon – are planning (be going + to-infinitive); The children went wild with eycitement – became (go + adjective).

3. Combinability of the word depends both on its lexical and grammatical (part-of-speech) meaning, e.g. the noun tea combines with strong but not with strongly.

4. Grammatical form may be isolated from the paradigm and become

lexicalized: works – factory.

5. Lexical meaning may be grammaticalized, e.g. some notional verbs may

be used as link-verbs: give a smile, turn red.