Semantics
A World of Meaning

plus a little test of colors and tools
Semantics: How do we know the meaning of words?

Made-up words in Lewis Carroll’s *Jabberwocky*:

He *chortled* in his joy. . .

What does *chortle* mean?

What about this:

‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves
And the mome raths outgrabe.

‘twas ADJ, and the ADJ N+pl
did V and V in the N:
all ADJ were the N+pl
and the adj n v.
Why is meaning important?

Semantics is the study of meaning

A traditional definition of meaning:

the relationship between referents and referends; linguistic symbols and the objects or concepts they refer to
when we use words in utterances, to what do they refer?

what is a dog?

Dr. Johnson, 1755:

According to Noah Webster, 1828: ‘A species of quadrupeds, belonging to the genus Canis, of many varieties, as the mastiff, the hound, the spaniel, the shepherds dog the terrier, the harrier, the bloodhound, etc.’
American Heritage Dictionary definition: dog (dôg, dŏg) dog n.

1. A domesticated carnivorous mammal (Canis familiaris syn. Canis lupus subsp. familiaris) occurring as a wide variety of breeds, many of which are traditionally used for hunting, herding, drawing sleds, and other tasks, and are kept as pets.
2. Any of various carnivorous mammals of the family Canidae, such as the dingo.
3. A male animal of the family Canidae, especially of a fox or a domesticated breed.
4. Any of various other animals, such as the prairie dog.
5. Informal
   a. A person: You won, you lucky dog.
   b. A person regarded as contemptible: You stole my watch, you dog.
6. Slang
   a. A person regarded as unattractive or uninteresting.
   b. Something of inferior or low quality: "The President had read the speech to some of his friends and they told him it was a dog" (John P. Roche).
   c. An investment that produces a low return or a loss.
7. dogs Slang The feet.
8. See andiron.
9. Slang A hot dog; a wiener.
10. Any of various hooked or U-shaped metallic devices used for gripping or holding heavy objects.
11. Astronomy A sundog.
Merriam-Webster, *dog*, n.

1a : canid; especially : a highly variable domestic mammal (Canis familiaris) closely related to the gray wolf
b : a male dog; also : a male usually carnivorous mammal
2a : a worthless or contemptible person
b : fellow, chap <a lazy dog> <you lucky dog>
3a : any of various usually simple mechanical devices for holding, gripping, or fastening that consist of a spike, bar, or hook
b : andiron
4: uncharacteristic or affected stylishness or dignity <put on the dog>
5 capitalized : either of the constellations Canis Major or Canis Minor
6 plural : feet
7 plural : ruin <going to the dogs>
8: one inferior of its kind <the movie was a dog>: as
a : an investment not worth its price
b : an undesirable piece of merchandise
9: an unattractive person; especially : an unattractive girl or woman
10: hot dog 1
is there a quality of *dogness* that you can distill?

What about *chair*?

What about *man*?
From the *Oxford English Dictionary*: **man**.

I. A human being (irrespective of sex or age).
from Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary (1755):

MAN 1 n.s. [man, mon, Saxon.]

1. Human being.
2. Not a woman.
3. Not a boy.
4. A servant.
5. A word of familiarity bordering on contempt.
6. It is used in a loose signification like the French on, one, any one.
7. One of uncommon qualifications.
8. A human being qualified in any particular manner.
10. Not a beast.
11. Wealthy or independent person.
12. A moveable piece at chess or draughts.
Noah Webster, 1828:

MAN, n. plu. men. [Heb.species, kind, image, similitude.]

1. Mankind; the human race; the whole species of human beings; beings distinguished from all other animals by the powers of reason and speech, as well as by their shape and dignified aspect.
From the *Century Dictionary* (1890):

"In zoöl., a featherless plantigrade biped mammal of the genus *Homo* (which see); *H. sapiens*, a species of the family *Hominidae* or *Anthropidae*, order *Primates*, class *Mammalia*, of which there are several geographical races or varieties."
From Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary:

1 a (1) : an individual human; especially : an adult male human
The problem of reference--

Does this sentence refer? --

The present king of France is bald.

What about this one:

I am a Cretan; all Cretans are liars.
the limits of reference:

- lexical meaning is mediated by our experience of the world
- words don’t mean in isolation from sentences
- words mean in a physical and a cultural context
- when we isolate words from their context, we limit/change the way they ‘mean’
To interpret a word in context, we sort through the various meanings we know until we find one that suits the context:

*Would you like to adopt a dog?*

We use not just references or dictionary definitions, but also the cognitive skills we have developed for navigating the world to interpret the meaning.
*Jessie doesn’t like beer.*

*Beer doesn’t like Jesse.*

There are two distinct linguistic contexts at work here.
Physical and cultural context play a role in interpretation:

*Hey, dog, how’re ya doin’?*

*I wanna’ dog.*

*My dogs are barking.*

Do you “share” the context of this last sentence?
What do you know that a Martian doesn’t?

*Lather, rinse, repeat.*
The problem of shared meaning:

What’s at issue in this Nancy cartoon in terms of meaning?
What are the presuppositions that underlie this statement:

*I’ll have a cheeseburger.*
Presupposition

Grover the waiter
Semantic relationships:

hyponomy: from general to specific; *dog, spaniel*

meronymy: relationship of whoe to part: dog, *tail/paw*
synonymy: differences in denotation and connotation:

what’s up dawg? / what’s up? / *what’s up, my friend? (is it really unlikely, as the authors claim?)

the thesaurus: part of the problem or part of the solution?

denotation : reference; connotation: implication

few cases of true synonymy (cemetery/graveyard [cf. litchfield]; others differ regionally (pop/soda) or by some other variable)
antonymy

gradable: fat/thin, hot/cold, good/bad, slow/fast

nongradable: (complementary): single/married  (what about, it’s complicated?)

male/female [are there other categories of gender?]

dead/alive [and yet we can say, he was more dead than alive; and what about the undead?]

converseness
  parent/child  [a person with a child/a person with a parent]
homonymy: different words in the same form: sink (plumbing fixture, verb)

homonyms: radically different meaning/sharing same form

homophone: share pronunciation
homograph: share spelling

sometimes they are both: rose; sometimes not: sink/sync
processes of semantic change:

the word *wit*

in IE, ‘to see’
in OE: ‘mind, understanding, intelligence’ (other words for mind: mod, > MnE ‘mood’)

the 5 senses
sanity: out of one’s wits
mental talent, genius
practical ability (mother wit)
talent for saying sparkling things, bons mots
cleverness, intellectuality
generalization:

lovely, ‘capable of being loved’ > general positive term, ‘very nice’
awful: ‘inspiring awe’ > general negative term

specialization:

meat ‘food’ > animal flesh > red meat;
liquor ‘liquid’ > potable liquid > alcoholic beverage (not beer or wine)

metaphorical extension:

crane bird > construction equipment

on board from ships to trains to planes to rockets to ideas
Descriptive rule (constitutive rule):

You have to win at least 270 electoral votes to become president.

Prescriptive rule:

You can’t be re-elected president if the unemployment rate is over 7.2%

What’s the difference?
taboo:

- the n-word;
- the c-word;
- the s-word (socialism)

everybody has words they can’t say

euphemism:

words for dying, being drunk, body parts, sex, excrement

dysphemism:

insult terms (racial, ethnic and religious)

pejoration:

- a word develops a negative quality: the 1980s

amelioration:

- a word develops a positive quality: gay, bitch, ho (reappropriation)
linguistic relativity

does language determine thought?
Humboldt: language > worldview (*Weltansicht*)

Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and linguistic relativity: does language limit or constrain cognition?

“We dissect nature along the lines laid down by our language”

objectivism: we can access reality, bypassing language

linguistic relativity: differences in language create differences in thought
linguistic determinism: thought is determined by the categories available in language -- ie, we can’t think outside the box

argument for: desensitization
argument against: creativity

all languages are capable of expressing what their speakers need to express

we cannot assume world view based on language –

English has no future tense, but that doesn’t mean we can’t or don’t think about the future
Politically correct language

original meaning: used by the left to mean a dogmatic and mindless liberaliti

revived by the right in the 1980s to mean knee-jerk liberalism

it’s generally a *dysphemism* but can be used neutrally

PC language reform assumes a Whorfean view: language encodes meanings that channel our thinking about people – but words *do* have connotations:

  waitress, stewardess, lady doctor, lady lawyer, male nurse
girl / woman / lady
Miss/ Mrs. / Ms.

Examples of politically correct language?
Naming rights:

Geneva Smitherman on sociolinguistic determinism:

*African American, black, colored, Negro*

other ethnic and racial terms/preferences?

responses to *Asian* as a category?

LGBTQ, gay, queer, lesbian, homosexual . . .

trans pronouns:

Chelsea Manning and *she*
the case for *they* or an invented pronoun like *xie, jie*
Catalogs give creative names to colors, but what in the spectrum do these represent?

capri
glacier
storm
light ginger
seedling
waterfall
brook
autumn berry
cadet
mist
safari
vine
endive
heather smoke
geranium
glacier
storm
light ginger
waterfall
brook
mist
safari
vine
heather smoke
geranium
A world of color balanced by a world of tools: