Week 7: Meaning

LING 201, The College of Staten Island

Prof. Joseph Pentangelo

Quiz

1. The textbook describes three different ways of conceptualizing word senses, none of which is perfect. What's one of these ways, and how does it work?

2. What is word reference? What does "elephant" refer to? (Note – I want reference, **not** sense.)

3. What is hyponymy? Give an example of any two words in a hyponymous relationship.

Fall 2024

I will be teaching the following courses:

Sociology of Language

- Ling 380 29663
- Hybrid:

    W 6:30–8:10pm in-person.

    Rest of time online.

Cross-listed with Soc 427

Sign Language Linguistics

- Ling 412 29705
- In-person:

    Th 6:30–9:50pm

No ASL experience necessary!

Semantics

- What is semantics? The field of linguistics that studies meaning.
- Lexical semantics
  - "the meaning of words and other lexical expressions"
- Compositional semantics
  - "phrasal meanings and how phrasal meanings are assembled"

Meaning

- What is meaning?
- Words, or expressions, have two components to their meaning:
- Sense

  "to know the sense of an expression is to have some **mental representation** of its meaning"
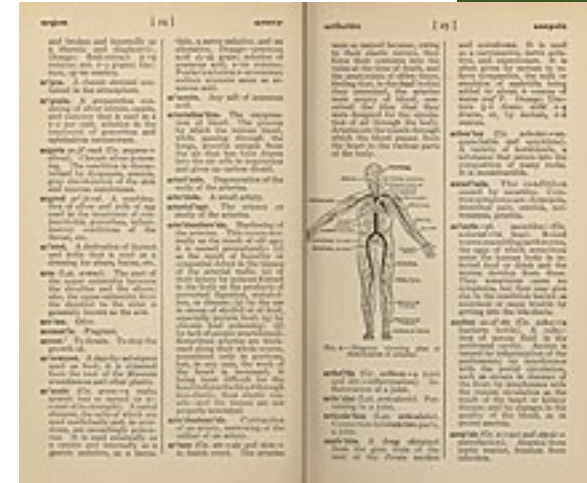
  For now, we'll be dealing with **dictionary-style** senses.

- Reference

  The things in the world that that sense applies to.

Sense and definition

- A word's sense is kind of like a word's definition as it exists in our lexicon – our own personal mental dictionary.

- Often, when we think of "meaning," this is what we have in mind.

- Why is this different than just having a dictionary tell us a word's definition?

- Dictionaries are inflexible, but a word's sense is updated often – our understanding of what a word means changes as we learn more.

- Dictionaries are not authoritative: they reflect use, but don't prescribe it.

Sense and Reference

- You can know a word's sense and not be able to figure out its reference.

- Think of all the people who've mistakenly tried to use counterfeit money to buy something. They know the **sense** of money, but couldn't accurately identify the word's referents.
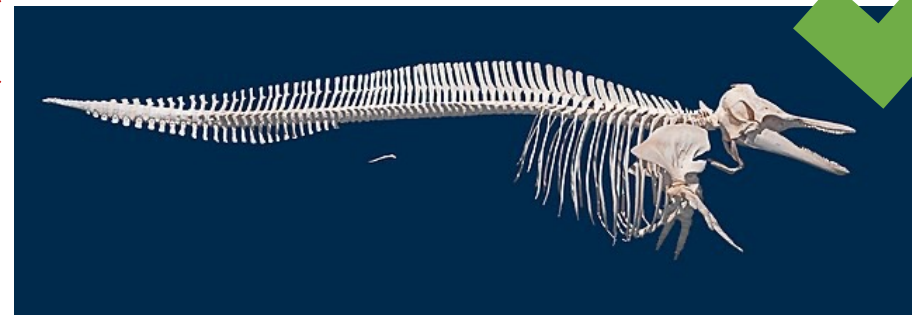
This is a spy camera, disguised as a wristwatch. It depends upon people who know the sense of camera not accurately identifying this item as a referent of that word.

Skeleton

The (reasonably complete) set of bones of an animal or person.

Reference

The items marked with a check are the **referents** of the word "skeleton."

Television

An electronic device with a screen and speakers that's capable of receiving signals from an antenna, cable box, satellite dish, and/or other media-playing peripherals.

Reference

The items marked with a check are the **referents** of the word "television."

Green

Being the same color as broccoli. (Not the best, but it's what I got…)
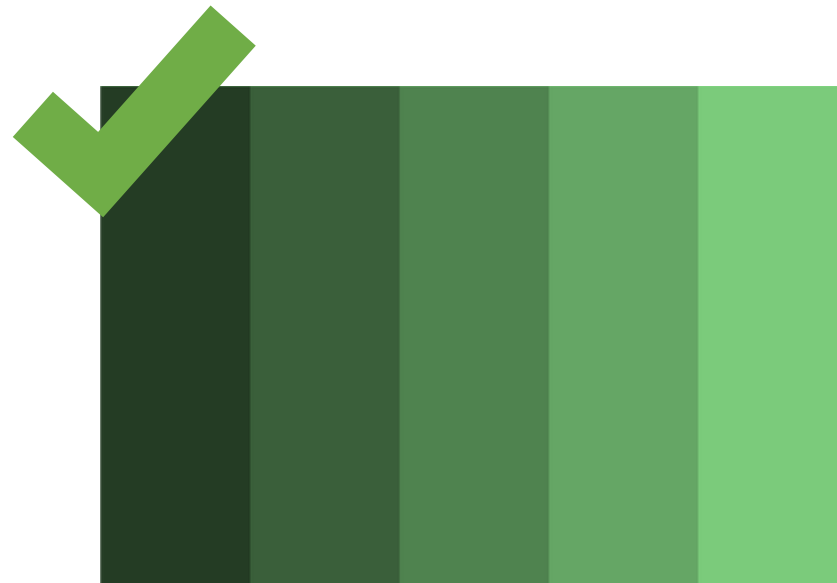
Reference

The items marked with a check are the **referents** of the word "green." In other words, *green* refers to all things that are green.

"A dictionary-style entry doesn't explain the meaning of a word or phrase in terms of something more basic—it just gives paraphrases (gives you one lexical item for another). People can and do learn the meanings of some words through dictionary definitions, so it would be unfair to say that such definitions are completely unable to characterize the meanings of words, but it should be clear that dictionary-style definitions can't be all there is to the meanings of the words in a language. In other words, it may be useful for us to define words in terms of other words, but that type of definition cannot be the only way in which meanings are stored in our heads." (p.250)

Green

Being the same color as broccoli.

Sense and mental image

- What is a *bird*?
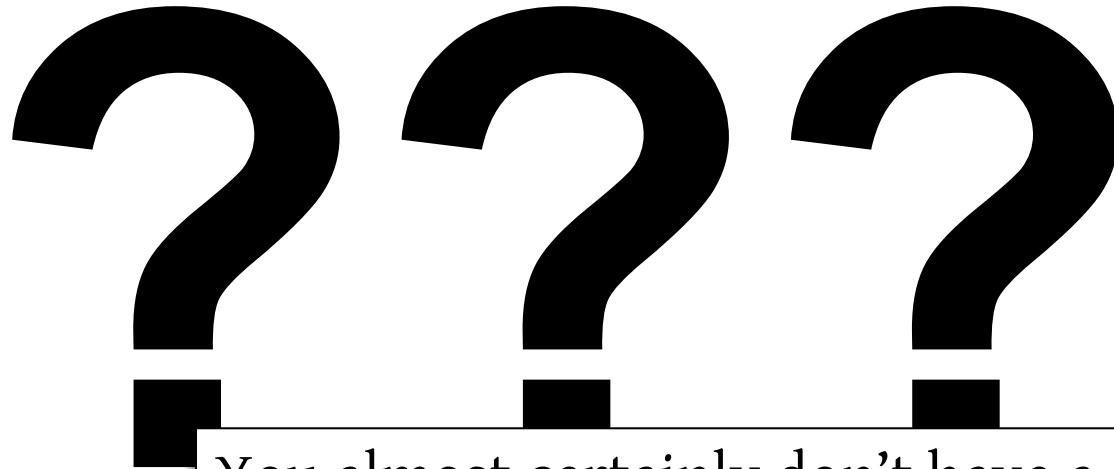- Which of these is most like what you envision?

You probably envisioned something most like the sparrow. This core mental image is called a **prototype**.

Sense and mental image

- What is *lactose intolerance*?
- Try to envision it in your head.

???

You almost certainly don't have a strong mental image for *lactose intolerance*. So not all words have mental images, just like not all words have a good word-based definition.

Usage-based sense

- There are problems with both kinds of sense we've dealt with so far.
- One thing we **definitely** know when we know a word is when to use it. We can often even predict which word will go where.

I was reading a _____ about the Roman Empire.

book | post | television | banana

- This principle is how ChatGPT and other LLMs work – predicting words based on context.

One thing I never ____ is why he's so well-liked.

understood | got | eat | specific

Reference test

- Who or what is referred to by the following?

Joseph Pentangelo

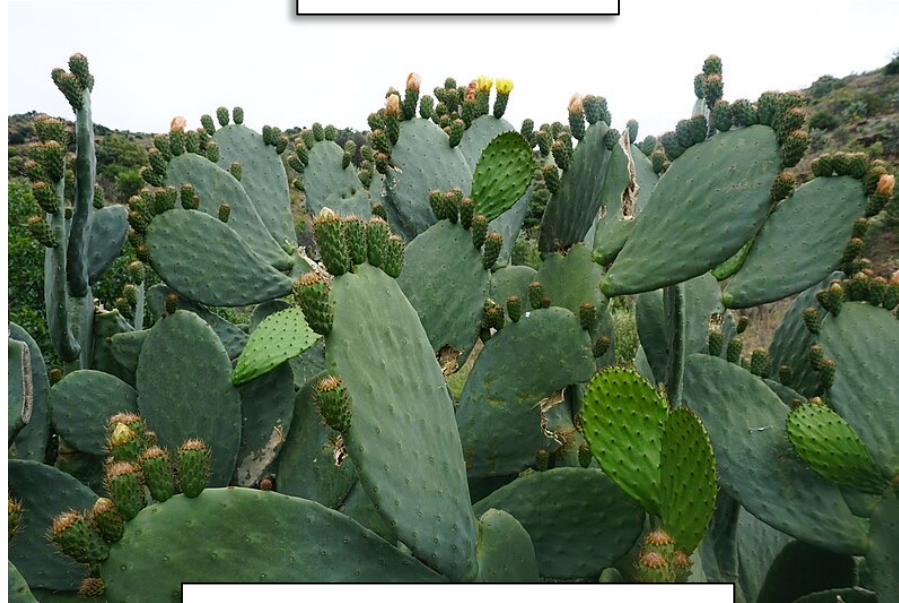Barack Obama

the tallest mountain in the world

mountain

cactus

I

handsome

beautiful

blonde

swim

eat

these cacti

this picture of cacti

The Treachery of Images, René Magritte, 1929

Sense without reference

- Unicorn

  Basically a horse with a long horn protruding from the middle of its head.

- This doesn't actually refer to anything. No such animal exists!

- The queen of the United States

  The female monarch of the United States of America.

- Again, there's no such person.

Hyponymy

- Hyponymy is a relationship between meanings.
- A sheep is a kind of mammal.
- *Sheep* is a subset of *mammal.*
- All sheep are thus mammals.
- Are all mammals sheep? No.
- *Sheep* is a **hyponym** of *mammal.*
- *Mammal* is a hypernym of *sheep*.

Synonymy

- Synonymy is another relationship between meanings.

- In synonymy, the set of references is exactly the same.

- *Rabbit* and *bunny*, for example.

- With this understanding, are the below words synonyms?

| the tallest mountain in the world | Mt. Everest |

| the President of the United States | Joe Biden |

| dogs | animals |

Antonymy

- Two words that are opposites in some way are antonyms.
- Lots of different kinds of antonymy.
- Complementary antonyms are binary: alive/dead.
- Gradable antonyms have a range of values in between: tall/short.
- Reverses imply opposite actions: create/destroy, expand/contract.
- Converses imply the same action from two different perspectives: give/receive.

For next week...

- Read pp. 257–265 in *Language Files*. There will be a quiz on this reading at the start of class.

- Complete discussion board #5 by 11:59pm on Sunday, 31 March. (It requires you to make a comment of your own *and* to respond to someone else's comment, so don't put this off until last minute.)

- We'll go over the midterm next week.