

# SEMANTICS

**Instructor: Nguyen Minh Thien, PhD.**

# Class regulations

- You are expected to attend all classes.
- Attendance will be checked regularly.
- Being 10 minutes late accounts for one period absence.
- You are permitted no more than 06 periods during the term.
- You are expected to participate actively in class activities.
- You are required to complete all assignments & tests during the course.

# Testing & Assessment

	Ratio	Note
Participation	10%	Attending 10 classes
Assignments	10%	04 assignments (at home)
Mini tests	10%	02 mini tests (at class)
Group assignments	10%	02 group assignments (at class)
Mini project	10%	01 mini project (individual & at home)
Mid-term test	20%	on the 7 <sup>th</sup> week, at class
Final test	30%	Depending on the schedule of Dept. of Training & Examination
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	

# Textbooks

## Required textbooks:

- [1] To, Minh Thanh (2020). *Ngữ Nghĩa Học Tiếng Anh - English Semantics*. Ho Chi Minh City: Publishing House of Vietnam National University-Ho Chi Minh City.

## Recommended books:

- [2] Kroeger, P. R. (2018). *Analyzing meaning: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics*. Berlin: Language Science Press.
- [3] Fromkin, V. (2018). *An Introduction to language*. (11<sup>th</sup> ed.) Boston: Cengage Learning.

# Content

- SECTION 1. INTRODUCTION
- SECTION 2. WORD MEANING
- SECTION 3. SENTENCE MEANING
- SECTION 4. UTTERANCE MEANING

# **Format of the final semantics test**

## **Multiple-choice final test**

- Theory: 20%
- Figures of speech: 20%
- Semantic relationship: 20%
- Presupposition: 20%
- Conversational implicature: 20%

# Section 1 – Introduction

- What is semantics?

Semantics is *a branch of linguistics which deals with meaning*.

- Linguistics has three main branches: **syntax, semantics and pragmatics**.
  - Syntax is the study of grammar: *phonology, morphology, syntax*
  - Semantics is the study of *meaning in language*
  - Pragmatics is concerned with *meaning in context*

# Semantic meaning & pragmatic meaning

(1) A: 'Would you like a piece of cake?'

B: 'I'm on a diet.'

- *Semantic* meaning is context-free.

→ The semantic meaning of 'I'm on a diet' in (1) is 'I want to lose weight by eating the food which is not rich in fat, sugar, etc.'

- *Pragmatic* meaning is context-dependent.

→ The pragmatic meaning of 'I'm on a diet' in (1) is 'I don't want any piece of cake' or 'I'm afraid that I have to refuse your invitation.'



# Three main aspects of Semantics

- **Word meaning or lexical meaning** is what a word means - “what counts as the equivalent in the language concerned.”
- **Sentence meaning** is what a sentence means, regardless of the context and situation in which it may be used.
- **Utterance meaning** is **what a speaker means** when he makes an utterance in a particular situation.

# Three main aspects of Semantics

Example: **remarried**

- At the word level, **remarried**: [+human], [ $\pm$ male], [+used to be married], and [+married again]
- At the sentence level, in **She is not remarried.**, only the fourth semantic feature of the word, namely [+married again], is *informative*, i.e. it is part of the statement.
- At the utterance level,
  - A: *How is the pastor?* - B: *He is remarried.*

when **remarried** occurs in B's response, it is **the word** that helps **the utterance presuppose** that pastors are allowed by rule to get married and **implicate** that the pastor was once married.

# **Section 2: Word meaning or lexical meaning**

## 2.1. Semantic features

- **Definition**

- ✓ **Semantic features** or *semantic components* or *semantic properties* are “*the smallest units of meaning in a word.*”
- ✓ We identify the meaning of a word by its semantic features.

Example:

**father:** [+human], [+male], [+mature], [+parental] and [+paternal].

**hen:** [+animate], [+bird], [+fowl], [+fully grown] and [+female].

## 2.1. Semantic features - Characteristics

### 1. A redundancy rule:

- If father is [+human], it is therefore [−inhuman];  
+human = -inhuman
- If father is [+male], it is therefore [−female];

### 2. Different words may share the same semantic feature:

- *Doctor, engineer, teacher, physicist, chemist, tailor, hairdresser, etc.* all share the same semantic feature **[+professional]**
- *Mother, father, son, daughter, brother, sister, grandparent, aunt, uncle, etc.* are all **[+kinship]**

## 2.1. Semantic features - Characteristics

**3. The same semantic feature can occur in words of different parts of speech.**

➤ **[+female]** is part of the meaning of  
the noun *mother*,  
the verb *breast-feed*  
the adjective *pregnant*.

➤ **[+educational]** is a semantic feature found in  
the nouns *school, teacher, textbook*, etc.  
the verbs *teach, educate, instruct*, etc.

## 2.1. Semantic features - Characteristics

4. “The semantic properties of words determine what other words they can be combined with.” (Fromkin and Rodman, 1993: 148-149)

- *\*My brother is an only child.*
- *\*The bachelor is pregnant.*
- *\*Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.*

→ the above sentences that are grammatically correct and syntactically perfect but semantically anomalous.

**Exercise 1:** For each group of words given below, **state what semantic features are shared by the (a) words and the (b) words**, and **what semantic features distinguish between the classes of (a) words and (b) words**. The first one is done as an example.

1. (a) lobster, shrimp, crab, oyster, mussel

(b) trout, sole, herring, salmon, mackerel

The (a) and (b) words are [+edible water animal].

The (a) words are [+shellfish].

The (b) words are [+fish].

2. (a) widow, mother, sister, aunt, seamstress

(b) widower, father, brother, uncle, tailor

The (a) and (b) words are \_\_\_\_\_[+human]\_\_\_\_\_

The (a) words are \_\_\_\_\_[+female]\_\_\_\_\_

The (b) words are \_\_\_\_\_[+male]\_\_\_\_\_

3. (a) bachelor, son, paperboy, pope, chief

(b) bull, rooster, drake, ram, stallion

The (a) and (b) words are \_\_\_\_\_[+male]\_\_\_\_\_

The (a) words are \_\_\_\_\_[+human]\_\_\_\_\_

The (b) words are \_\_\_\_\_[+animate]/[+animal]\_\_\_\_\_

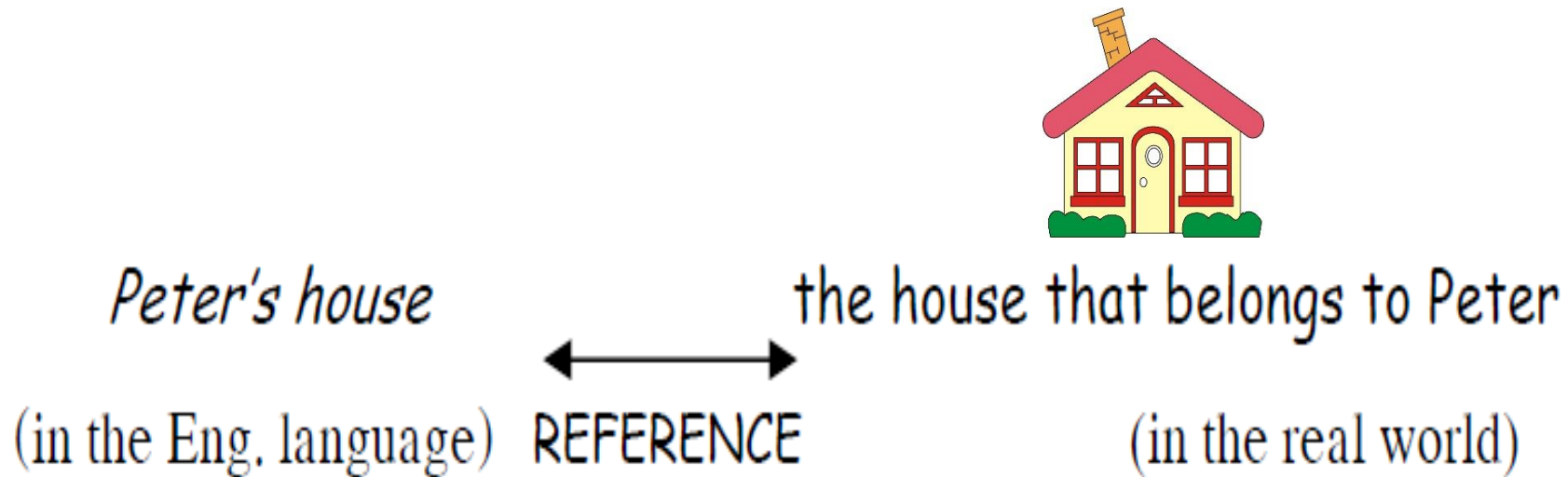


• **Exercise 2**: Identify the semantic features in each of the following words.

1. Child: \_\_[+human], [+/-male], [-mature]\_\_\_\_\_
2. Aunt: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Flower: \_\_[+plant], [+a part of a plant], [+colorful], [+/- smell], [+**blossom**]\_\_\_\_\_
4. Palm: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Bachelor: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Actress: \_\_\_\_\_
7. Fly: \_\_\_\_\_
8. Stallion: \_\_\_\_\_
9. Beauty: \_\_\_\_\_
10. Chalk: \_\_\_\_\_

## 2.2. Referent, reference and sense

- A **referent** is *an object or an entity in the real world or in the world of your imagination*, e.g. your school, your classmates, your teacher, the idealistic working conditions you have ever dreamed of, etc.
- The **reference** of a word or a linguistic expression is *the relationship between that word or expression and the thing (book), the action (read), the event (graduate from university), the quality (sincerity), etc. it refers to.*



## 2.2. Referent, reference and sense

- The **sense** of a **word** or a **linguistic expression** shows *the internal relationship between that word or expression and others* in the vocabulary of a language.

Ex1. *Teacher* and *student* have the sense relationship of the former is the one *who gives a lesson* and the latter is the one *who has the lesson given by the former*.

Ex2. *A dog is chasing a cat* has some sense.

However, *a dog is human* has no sense.

Identify **referent**, **reference** and **sense** via **their main features**.

	REFERENT	REFERENCE	SENSE
	in the external world	between a language and the external world	in a language
	either real or imaginary	abstract	abstract
<i>bachelor</i>	a man who has not ever been married	the relationship between <u>the word</u> <i>bachelor</i> and a certain unmarried man	<i>unmarried man</i>
<i>Bạch Tuyết</i>	the lovely princess in a fairy tale which I have already read	the relationship between <u>the name</u> <i>Bạch Tuyết</i> and the very princess	<i>“Tuyết Trắng”</i>

# Distinction between **variable reference**, **constant reference** and **co-reference**

- When **the same linguistic expression refers to different referents**, it has **variable reference**: *the present prime minister used in Britain in 1944 is Mr. Churchill and in 1982 is Mrs. Thatcher.*
- When **one linguistic expression refers to one and the same referent**, it has **constant reference**: *the sun, the moon, Halley's comet, the People's Republic of China, Angola, the United Nations, FIFA, UNESCO, etc.*
- When **two or more linguistic expressions share the same referent**, they have **co-reference**: *the morning star and the evening star both refer to the planet called Venus.*

## 2.4. Denotation and connotation

- The denotation (denotative meaning) of a word is **the core, central or referential meaning** of the word found in a dictionary.
- The connotation (connotative meaning) of a word is **the additional meaning** that the word has beyond its denotative meaning. It shows *people's emotions and/or attitudes* towards what the word refers to.

Ex1. **Child** is denotatively described as [+human], [−mature] and [±male].

- Positive connotation: [+affectionate] or [+innocent].
- Negative connotation: [+noisy] or [+irritating].

Ex2. **Woman** is denotatively described as [+human], [+mature]&[+female].

- Positive connotation: [+devoted] or [+patient].
- Negative connotation: [+wicked] or [+talkative].

# Distinction between **denotation** and **connotation**

		DENOTATION	CONNOTATION
		what a lexical item means	emotions and/or attitudes towards what a lexical item refers to
		core, central	peripheral
		referential	social, affective
<i>bachelor</i>	<i>unmarried man</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- still single after the usual age for marrying</li><li>- decided by himself to stay single</li><li>- enjoying freedom, friendship, life, etc.</li><li>- ready for his impending marriage</li></ul>
<i>spinster</i>	<i>unmarried woman</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- still single after the usual age for marrying</li><li>- <u>not</u> decided by herself to stay single</li><li>- left in an unfavourable state</li><li>- a symbol for some failure in life</li></ul>