Semantics +
Language Preservation

December 8, 2010
Updates

• Syntax homeworks to hand back.
• Semantics/pragmatics homework is due today.
  • (Now would be a good time to turn it in.)
• Homework #5 will be graded by Friday (hopefully).
  • ⇒ You can pick it up at the review session (on Friday) or from my office (next week).
• Remember the final exam:
  • Craigie Hall C 105
  • Wednesday, December 15th, 8-10 am
Big Picture

• Today’s plan:
  • Wrap up some semantic loose ends.
  • Some thoughts on language death, language preservation, and maybe even language resurrection.

• As linguists, we want to know what competent speakers of a language need to know in order to produce meaningful utterances in that language.
  • = the semantic features of a language

• There are language-specific and language-universal semantic features.
  • Whatever is language-universal may be attributed to our innate mental endowment for both language and thought.
Semantic Features

• For all languages, the semantic content of particular words can be broken down into semantic features.

• Noun example:
  • mare, hen, woman all share the feature [FEMALE]

• Verb example:
  • fly, walk, run, crawl all share the feature [GO]

• There are also different types of nouns:
  • count: shoes, coins
  • mass: footwear, change
Semantic Priming

• Beyond semantic features, the meanings of words can be related to each other in very subtle ways.

• Ex: When we hear one word, it can make us (subconsciously) think of other words with related meanings.

(1) Example of part of a semantic association network.
Word Association Data (2010)

• war - treaty primes:
  peace (6), battle (2), Canada (2), country, cruelty, gun, history, Korea, lot, pact

• party - treaty primes:
  group (2), politics (2), alcohol, America, birthday, drinking, government, legislation, native, party hat, people, promise, tea

• war - kitchen primes:
  chicken, commercial, disaster, explosions, food, food fight, fork, galley, Gordon Ramsay, gun, knives, Ramsay, rolling pin, thanksgiving, water, wet
Semantic Priming Effects

• Lexical Decision
  • it is easier to determine that “doctor” is a word if you’ve just seen the word “nurse” than if you’ve just seen the word “butter”

• Word Naming
  • you can read a word out loud more quickly after you’ve read a semantically related word

• Subliminal perception
Word Nets

For more word connections, check out:
http://wordnet.princeton.edu/
Presuppositions

• The meaning of particular expressions also depends on something called **presuppositions**.

• Consider statements like:
  
  Santa Claus is asleep right now.
  
  John stopped beating his wife.

• In order to make sense of these statements, we have to **pre-suppose** that:
  
  Santa Claus exists.
  
  John was beating his wife.

• A **presupposition** is a necessary condition for a statement to be either true or false.
Sneaky

- Presuppositions are often used in advertising:
  
  “Have you had your daily vitamins?”
  
  “I used to think it was my fault that Windows didn’t work properly.”

- And in court:
  
  “How did you know that the defendant bought a knife?”

- Presupposition can be used to assert ideas without stating them explicitly.
Non-Compositional Meaning

• Sometimes, phrases or sentences have meanings which cannot be constructed from the literal meanings of their parts.
  • He had to eat crow.
  • She put her foot in her mouth.
  • Bite your tongue!
  • Break a leg!
  • They let their hair down.
  • I’ve been meaning to give you a piece of my mind.
  • Don’t put the cart before the horse.
Idioms

• Syntactic transformations of idioms do not preserve their meaning.

• That old man gave me a dirty book.
  → That old man gave a dirty book to me.

• That old man gave me a dirty look.
  → ?That old man gave a dirty look to me.

• The meaning of idioms simply has to be learned on a case-by-case basis…
  • and is probably stored in something like the mental lexicon.
Idioms across languages

• That dog’s bark is worse than its bite.
  • Spanish: The dog that barks, doesn’t bite.
• It’s a small world.
  • German: How small the world is.
• Burn your bridges/cross the Rubicon.
  • Chinese: Break the woks and sink the boats.
• That’s dumb luck.
  • German: The dumbest farmers have the thickest potatoes.
Language Death

• Language death occurs when a language is:
  • no longer acquired as a native language
  • and is no longer used by native speakers

• Many languages have died throughout history.
  • e.g., Cornish, Etruscan
    • not: Latin, Sanskrit, etc.

• Also: dialect death
Types of Language Death

• Sudden language death
  • All the speakers of a language die or are killed.
  • Ex: Tasmanian, Nicoleno (California)

• Radical language death
  • All the existing speakers stop speaking the language
  • “Language suicide”

• Gradual language death
  • Number of speakers slowly declines

• Bottom-to-top language death
  • Language survives in specific contexts (Latin, Ge’ez)
Endangered Languages

• In the present day, many languages are in danger of dying out.

• There are approximately 6,000 (give or take a thousand) languages spoken in the world.

• Distribution:

  - Europe 4%
  - Americas 15%
  - Africa 31%
  - Asia + Pacific 50%

  (Indonesia + Papua New Guinea: 25%)
Endangered Languages

• Languages with less than 20,000 speakers are technically considered “endangered”

• Note also: Breton (France)
  • 1.4 million speakers in 1905
  • 250,000 speakers today

• Languages may become endangered because of government policies

• Also because of:
  • Extent to which language is used at home
  • Economic motivations
  • Decline in number of younger speakers
The Rich Get Richer

• 9 major languages are the native language of over 40% of the world’s population.
  • Top 10: Mandarin, English, Spanish, Bengali, Hindi, Portuguese, Russian, Japanese, German, Wu
• 4% (240) of the world’s languages are spoken by 96% of the world’s population
• 52% of languages are spoken by fewer than 10,000
• 50% of languages are not being transmitted to children
  • In particular: Australian and Amerindian languages
  • These languages are expected to be lost in the next century
Language Preservation

• Many linguists attempt to stem the tide of language death.
  • They disseminate grammatical information on dead or near-dead languages
  • Develop instructional texts and educational programs
  • Develop technical vocabulary
  • Make audio or video recordings of the language in use
• Basic idea: collect as much linguistic data as possible on dying languages
  • …in order to develop language descriptions
• Linguists at the U of C work on endangered aboriginal languages, such as Blackfoot, Sarcee, and Dogrib.
Language Resurrection

• It is possible to bring a dead language back to life.
  • Ex: Modern Hebrew
• Latin (sort of)
• Also: Australian language Dharug
  • http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7992565.stm
• And: Celtic languages
  • Welsh, Scots Gaelic, Manx…even Cornish!
  • http://www.cornish-language.org/skwardya/