Lecture 2

On sense, reference and denotation
Doing semantics

Remember this?
John: *Let’s go to the movies!*
Mary: *I’m tired.*
- What does Mary mean?
- What does Mary say?

As linguists, it is important to distinguish between

**SEMANTICS:** Literal/conventionalised meaning
“core meaning”, independent of context

**PRAGMATICS:** Speaker meaning & contextual effects
What a speaker means when they say something, over and above the literal meaning.
Why is this important?

To successfully analyse meaning as used by speakers of a language, we need to distinguish various aspects of a communicative situation.

Mary utters: *I’m tired.*

Mary’s **UTTERANCE** communicates different meanings in different contexts:

John: *Let’s go to the movies!*
John: *What are you cooking for dinner?*
John: *It’s 9pm and you’re going to bed?*
John: *How are you feeling?*
Why is this important?

Still, the **SENTENCE** that Mary utters is the same across contexts: “I’m tired.”

A sentence is the *grammatical* object that each utterance corresponds to.

Semantics deals with **sentence meaning** and pragmatics with **utterance meaning**.

Semantics is important because sentences carry some meaning that is independent of the context in which they are uttered. And this meaning is **purely linguistic**. This can be the meaning we reproduce when we quote someone: e.g. “Mary said that she is tired.”
How can we approach the semantic content of “I’m tired”? It is convenient to think that a sentence’s meaning is the underlying thought it expresses in all its utterances.

In logical terms, this thought is called a Proposition. Propositions abstract away from the grammatical aspects of sentences:

e.g. “John loves Mary”. vs. “Mary is loved by John”.

Both sentences semantically express the same proposition: there is an entity x and an entity y, such that x is a person called John and y is a person called Mary, and x loves y.
So, our analysis involves the following levels:

**UTTERANCE**
(bound to a specific situation, a specific speaker etc)

**SENTENCE**
(An abstraction of the grammatical and lexical content of an utterance)

**PROPOSITION**
(A further abstraction of the logical content of the sentence)
Semantic content

But how do sentences mean outside of context?

Remember this?

- *The small blue circle is in front of the square.*
- *The square is behind the small blue circle.*

We are capable of verifying that both sentences are **true in this particular situation**.

We know the meaning of these two sentences because we know **what the world must be like** in order for these sentences to be **true**.
Semantic content

**Truth conditions:** In general, we know what a sentence means, when we know the conditions under which it can be taken to be true.

In this sense, linguistic semantics explicates how linguistic meaning is related to the world. (i.e. it deals with the truth conditions of a sentence’s encoded proposition)

- **Lexical semantics** explicates the relationship between words and the conceptual representation of entities in the world (including abstract ones like happiness).
- **Sentential semantics** explicates the relationship between sentences and the propositions they encode.

Let’s see how!
Reference

Imagine you’re standing in front of this painting by Velasquez in Prado:

The guy next to you asks: "Which of those figures is the Princess of Spain?"

You know that it's the figure marked "e3"
Reference

Clearly, there are many ways to reply:

- “the girl in the white dress.”
- “the girl in the middle.”
- “the person being tended to by the kneeling maid.”

Obviously, these different phrases mean different things, i.e. they have different contents.
Reference

But they all **pick out** the same entity in this context:

They all **REFER** to the princess of Spain =>

In a different context, “*the girl in the white dress*” could pick out something different or even nothing at all.
Towards sense

So, reference is a **context-bound speaker action**.

You will probably think: *Then, if semantics is about linking expressions with worldly objects, semantic contents are just referents...*

**Not quite...** (Gottlob Frege -1892- *Über Sinn und Bedeutung*)
Towards sense

‘Superman’ and ‘Clark Kent’ are co-referential expressions (= refer to the same individual in the world), but they have different SENSES.

Substituting these expressions across sentences wouldn’t preserve the same truth value.

e.g.
1. “Lois Lane believes that Superman is handsome”.
2. “Lois Lane believes that Clark Kent is handsome”.

(1) can be true and (2) false at the same time.

Two sentences differ in cognitive significance iff it is possible for a rational agent who understands both to take one to be true while doubting that the other is true.
Towards sense

The postulation of senses helps address these differences in cognitive significance.

Remember this?
Thinking of word meaning as “definition” is problematic because people won’t necessarily agree on definitions, and definitions are either way linguistic, so their components will themselves need definition...

If we take context-independent meanings of expressions to be concepts in our minds, we can say that we have the concept GIRL, when we know the sense of the word ‘girl’.
Towards denotation

In this respect, in everyday use, our concepts (and effectively senses) help us determine reference.

e.g. We need to know what the words ‘girl’, ‘white’, ‘dress’ mean in order to understand which entity in our painting the expression “The girl in the white dress” refers to.

So, if we have acquired the concept GIRL (that is, if we know the sense of the word ‘girl’), we also know its DENOTATION (or extension): the set of things of which the word is true.
The semiotic triangle  (Ogden & Richards, 1923)

CONCEPT
(sense)
GIRL

expression: girl

means

determines

denotes

objects in the world

Semantics -- LIN 1180
Denotation vs. Reference

We therefore distinguish between:

- the **sense** of an expression
- what the expression **denotes**

We should also distinguish:

- Our **knowledge** of the sense and denotation.
- What a person **intends to refer to** by means of a linguistic expression.
Denotation vs. Reference

Denotation is a **stable relationship** between expressions and things:
e.g. The word ũuta (“fish”) always denotes a certain kind of thing in the world. It can only apply to a specific set of objects.

This is independent of who uses the word and when.

Reference depends on **speakers and contexts**:
I can use ũuta to refer to different individual fish in different situations.
So, in each situation, my use can pick out different referents.
Two major theories of semantics

I. The denotational theory

A direct relationship between expressions (words, sentences) and things in the world.
This is a realist view.

linguistic expressions ↔ things & situations
Two major theories of semantics

II. The representational theory

The relationship between expressions (words, sentences) and things in the world is *mediated* by the mind. This is a *cognitivist* view.
Homework

**Core reading:** Saeed, Chapter 1 (AGAIN!!!!) and Chapter 2, section 2.1 (Yes, only pages 23, 24 & 25)

**Additional reading:** Take a look at the first few pages of Frege’s ‘On Sense and Reference’.

**COME BACK WITH QUESTIONS!**