

# LING2006 Semantics

## Tutorial: Lexical meaning II

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## Definition

- **Ambiguous** words have **more than one sense** (e.g., *bank*<sub>1</sub> vs. *bank*<sub>2</sub>);
- **Vague** and **indeterminate words** have **only one sense**, which might be either vague (e.g., *tall*, *expensive*, *strong*) or indeterminate w.r.t. certain aspects of the sense (e.g., *kick*, *aunt*).



## Co-occurrence test

- ① a. *bright*<sub>1</sub>: radiating or reflecting light, sunny  
b. *bright*<sub>2</sub>: clever, intelligent
- ② a. After one week's rain, tomorrow's weather finally will turn **bright**!  
b. I'm not sure whether our driver is a **bright** guy.
  - Multiple senses of a word (A. can **B. cannot**) co-occur simultaneously in this word within a sentence; i.e., ambiguity may disappear in a given context.
- ③ a. John drinks **expensive** coffee but drives a **cheap** car.  
b. John's **sisters** are travelling in India now.
  - Vagueness and indeterminacy (A. do **B. do not**) disappear in a word within a sentence.

## Identity test

- Ellipsis requires the antecedent and the elided element to be semantically identical.

① John drives a Toyota, and so does Mary drive a Toyota.

Antecedent                      Ellipsis site

= John drives a Toyota, and Mary drives a Toyota.

≠ John drives a Toyota, and Mary drives a Honda/Mercedes/Tesla.

$\neq$  John drives a Toyota, and Mary rides a motorcycle.

≠ John drives a Toyota, and Mary takes the MTR.

≠ John drives a Toyota, and Mary studies Linguistics.

- Hence, there **cannot be any mismatch** between the **sense of the antecedent** and the **elided element**.



## Identity test

- ① a. *fall*<sub>1</sub>: to descend freely by the force of gravity  
b. *fall*<sub>2</sub>: autumn season
- ② John had a great fall, so did Mary.
  - a. John had a great autumn, and Mary had a great autumn.
  - b. John had a great action of falling, and Mary had a great action of falling.
  - c. \*John had a great autumn, and Mary had a great action of falling.
  - d. \*John had a great action of falling, and Mary had a great autumn.No mismatch (a & b): ✓; Mismatch (c & d): ✕
- This is not the case with indeterminate/vague words: the indeterminacy/vagueness remains and there **could be a mismatch** between the antecedent and the elided element.
- Why? – The indeterminacy/vagueness is within a single sense!



## Identity test

- This is not the case with indeterminate/vague words: the indeterminacy/vagueness remains and there **could be a mismatch** between the antecedent and the elided element.
- Why? – The indeterminacy/vagueness is within a single sense!
- ① (John met his *elder* sister, whereas Bill met his *younger* sister.)  
John met his sister, and so did Bill.  
Mismatch: ✓
- ② (After winning the Mark Six, Mary had a \$500 ice cream at The Peninsula after she bought a \$1,000,000 Porsche)  
Mary's ice cream is expensive, and so is her new car.  
Mismatch: ✓



## Group discussion

- The verb *cook* can be used to describe different actions including baking cakes/bread, grill beef, stir-fry vegetables, frying chicken/fish, boiling soup, etc. It is claimed that the meaning of *cook* is indeterminate instead of being ambiguous or vague. Discuss whether you agree with this claim by taking into consideration of the sentence *John likes to cook, and so does Mary*. Please also use at least one additional new test with example sentence(s) to support your conclusion.

# Review: Ambiguity, Vagueness and Indeterminacy



Tests	Vagueness	Indeterminacy
Truth value is <b>context-dependent</b>	Y (e.g., carrying two pineapples is considered <i>strong</i> for a three-year-old child, but carrying two pineapples is <i>not</i> considered strong for an adult)	N (e.g., They are my <i>cousins</i> when they are in HK, and they will still be my <i>cousins</i> when they are in Japan)
<b>Language-specific</b> and <b>disappears in translation</b>	N ( <i>tall</i> ~ 高)	Y ( <i>aunt</i> ~ 姑媽/姑姐/姨媽...)
Allows <b>borderline cases</b>	Y (e.g., a 50-dollar ice crème might be <i>expensive</i> to some people but not to others)	N (e.g., if John is indeed my <i>cousin</i> , probably nobody will disagree with that)



# Review: Ambiguity, Vagueness and Indeterminacy



Tests	Ambiguity	Vagueness & Indeterminacy
Co-occurrence (in the same sentence)	Different senses of an ambiguous word cannot co-occur in the same context (i.e., ambiguity disappears in a certain context, e.g. <i>buck</i> must mean US dollars in <i>He has five hundred bucks in his pocket</i> )	Vagueness and indeterminacy do not disappear in a certain context (e.g., the gender of them is still unclear in <i>They are my cousins</i> , and which foot is used is also unclear in <i>He kicked the ball</i> .)
Identity (under ellipsis)	Identical meaning is required for the antecedent and the elided element (no mismatch is allowed, e.g., in <i>John saw her duck and so did Bill</i> , either they both saw a water bird or they both saw an action of lowering head)	Mismatch in the meaning between the antecedent and the elided element is still allowed (e.g., in <i>John kicked the ball and so did Bill</i> , John could have used his right foot, whereas Bill could have used his left foot.)
Contradiction (in <i>X but not X</i> )	No contradiction (OK: <i>He is not a child anymore but he is still my child</i> )	There is contradiction (Not OK: <i>He kicked the ball and he did not kick the ball</i> )



- In cases of polysemy, the two senses are felt to be **related** in some way; there is an intelligible connection of some sort between senses of a polysemous word.
- In cases of homonymy, the two senses are **unrelated**; that is, the semantic relationship between the two senses of the two homonymous words is similar to that between any two words selected at random.
- Therefore, two senses of a polysemous word generally share at least one salient feature or component of meaning, whereas this is not in general true for homonyms.



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