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LEXICAL RELATIONS

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Not only can words be treated as containers of meaning, or as fulfilling roles in events, they can also have “relationships” with each other. In everyday talk, we often explain the meanings of words in terms of their relationships. If we’re asked the meaning of the word conceal, for example, we might simply say, “It’s the same as hide,” or give the meaning of shallow as “the opposite of deep,” or the meaning of pine as “a kind of tree.” In doing so, we are characterizing the meaning of each word, not in terms of its component features, but in terms of its relationship to other words. This approach is used in the semantic description of language and treated as the analysis of lexical relations. The lexical relations we have just exemplified are synonymy (conceal/hide), antonymy (shallow/deep) and hyponymy (pine/tree).

Synonymy

Two or more words with very closely related meanings are called synonyms. They can often, though not always, be substituted for each other in sentences. In the appropriate circumstances, we can say, What was his answer? or What was his reply? with much the same meaning. Other common examples of synonyms are the pairs:

almost/nearly big/large broad/wide buy/purchase cab/taxi car/automobile couch/sofa freedom/liberty

We should keep in mind that the idea of “sameness” of meaning used in discussing synonymy is not necessarily “total sameness.” There are many occasions when one word is appropriate in a sentence, but its

synonym would be odd. For example, whereas the word answer fits in the sentence Sandy had only one answer correct on the test, the word reply would sound odd. Although broad and wide can both be used to describe a street in a similar way, we only talk about being in broad agreement (not wide) and in the whole wide world (not broad). There are also regional differences in the use of synonymous pairs, with candy, chips, diaper and gasoline in American English being equivalents of sweets, crisps, nappy and petrol in British English. Synonymous forms may also differ in terms of formal versus informal uses. The sentence My father purchased a large automobile has virtually the same meaning as My dad bought a big car, with four synonymous replacements, but the second version sounds much more casual or informal than the first.

Antonymy

Two forms with opposite meanings are called antonyms. Some common examples are the pairs:

almost/nearly big/large broad/wide buy/purchase cab/taxi car/automobile couch/sofa freedom/liberty alive/dead big/small enter/exit fast/slow happy/sad hot/cold long/short male/female married/single old/new rich/poor true/false

Antonyms are usually divided into two main types, “gradable” (opposites along a scale) and “non-gradable” (direct opposites). We can use gradable antonyms in comparative constructions like I’m smaller than you and slower, sadder, colder, shorter and older, but richer. Also, the negative of one member of a gradable pair does not necessarily imply the

other. For example, the sentence My car isn't old doesn't have to mean My car is new. With non-gradable antonyms (also called "complementary pairs"), comparative constructions are not normally used. We don't typically describe someone as deader or more dead than another. Also, using the "negative test," we can see that the negative of one member of a non-gradable pair does imply the other member. That is, My grandparents aren't alive does indeed mean My grandparents are dead. Other non-gradable antonyms are the pairs: male/female, married/single and true/false. Although we can use the "negative test" to identify non-gradable antonyms in a language, we usually avoid describing one member of an antonymous pair as the negative of the other. For example, while undress can be treated as the opposite of dress, it doesn't mean "not dress." It actually means "do the reverse of dress." Antonyms of this type are called reversives. Other common examples are enter/exit, pack/unpack, lengthen/shorten, raise/lower, tie/untie

I. What is Wordplay?

Wordplay (or *word play*, and also called *play-on-words*) is the clever and witty use of words and meaning. It involves using literary devices and techniques like consonance, assonance, spelling, alliteration, onomatopoeia, rhyme, acronym, pun, and slang (to name a few) to form amusing and often humorous written and oral expressions. Using wordplay techniques relies on several different aspects of rhetoric, like spelling, phonetics (sound and pronunciation of words), and semantics (meaning of words).

II. Examples of Wordplay

Here are some simple jokes that use wordplay for their humor:

Q: What did the ram say to his wife?
A: I love ewe.
Puns are some of the most frequently used forms of wordplay. Here, when spoken aloud, "I love ewe" sounds like "I love you." But, the word "ewe" is the term for a female sheep.

Q: What did the mayonnaise say when the girl opened the refrigerator?
A: Close the door, I'm dressing!
This joke relies on two meanings of the word "dressing" for its humor—one for "dressing" as in putting on clothes, and one for mayonnaise being a type of salad "dressing."