

Semantics is the study of the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. In semantic analysis, there is always an attempt to focus on what the words conventionally mean, rather than on what an individual speaker might think they mean, or want them to mean, on a particular occasion. This approach is concerned with linguistic meaning that is shared by all competent users of the language.

### Meaning

While semantics is the study of meaning in language, there is more interest in certain aspects of meaning than in others. We have already ruled out special meanings that one individual might attach to words. That is, our main interest is in what we might describe as the widely accepted objective or factual meaning of words and not their subjective or personal meaning. This distinction is generally presented in terms of referential meaning as opposed to associative or emotive meaning, such as feelings or reactions to words that may be found among some individuals or groups but not others. Referential meaning covers those basic, essential components of meaning that are conveyed by the literal use of a word. It is the type of

meaning that dictionaries are designed to describe. Some of the basic components of a word like needle in English might include “thin, sharp, steel instrument.” These components would be part of the referential meaning of needle.

However, different people might have different **associations** or **connotations** attached to a word like needle. They might associate it with “**pain**,” or “**illness**,” or “**blood**,” or “**drugs**,” or “**thread**,” or “**knitting**,” or “**hard to find**” (especially in a haystack), and these associations may differ from one person to the next. These **associations** can’t be part of the word’s referential meaning.

One way in which the study of basic referential meaning might be **helpful** would be as a means of accounting for the “**oddness**” we experience when we read sentences such as the following:

1. **The hamburger ate the boy.**
2. **The table listens to the radio.**
3. **The horse is reading the newspaper.**

We should first note that the **oddness** of these sentences does not derive from their **syntactic structure**. According to the basic syntactic rules for forming English sentences, we have well-formed structures. **NP V NP** The hamburger ate the boy. This sentence is *syntactically* good, but

*semantically* odd. Since the sentence **The boy ate the hamburger is perfectly acceptable**, we may be able to identify the source of the problem. The components of the referential meaning of the noun hamburger must be significantly different from those of the noun boy, allowing one, not the other, to “make sense” with the verb ate. Quite simply, the kind of noun used with ate must denote an entity that is capable of “eating.” The noun hamburger doesn’t have this property and the noun boy does.

### Semantic Features

We can make this observation more generally applicable by trying to determine the crucial element or **feature of meaning that any noun must have in order to be used as the subject of the verb ate**. Such an element may be as general as “animate being.” We can then use this idea to describe part of the meaning of words as having either plus (+) or minus (–) that particular feature. So, the feature that the noun boy has is “+animate” (= denotes an animate being) and the feature that the noun hamburger has is “–animate” (= does not denote an animate being). This simple example is an illustration of a procedure for analyzing meaning in terms of semantic features. Features such as “+animate / –animate,” “+human / –human,” “+female / –female,” for

example, can be treated as the basic elements involved in differentiating the meaning of each word in a language from every other word. If we had to provide the crucial distinguishing features of the meanings of a set of English words such as table, horse, boy, man, girl, woman, we could begin with the chart in the following table.

	table	horse	boy	man	girl	woman
<b>Animate</b>	-	+	+	+	+	+
<b>Human</b>	-	-	+	+	+	+
<b>Female</b>	-	-	-	-	+	+
<b>Adult</b>	-	+	-	+	-	+

From a feature analysis like this, we can say that at least part of the meaning of the word girl in English involves the elements [+human, +female, -adult]. We can also characterize the feature that is crucially required in a noun in order for it to appear as the subject of a particular verb, supplementing the syntactic analysis with semantic features. We can then predict which nouns (e.g. hamburger, horse, table) would make the sentence semantically odd.