

Semantics

Week 5

Linguistic Context

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A. Context as meaning

The most extreme view

∅ sees the meaning of the word as wholly stateable in terms of context in which it occurred

∅ structuralist (1950s) → the idea of distribution

The notion of Distribution

∅ investigation of the environments in which the linguistic elements occur (the distribution of the linguistic elements)

∅ usage according to environment

In phonology :

Two 'l's in leaf and 'feel' à
complementary distribution

Phoneme /p/ à allophones [ph]
[p]

In morphology :

'a' and 'an' are 'complementary'

They are two different forms of the same word



Syntagmatic vs Paradigmatic relations

	Syntagmatic		
Paradigmatic	The cat	sat	on the mat
	His dog	slept	in front of the door
	A bird	sings	inside its cage

Distribution à syntagmatic relations

B. Collocation

A much less extreme view

Ø Firth : 'we shall know a word by the company it keeps'

Ø words that can 'go together'

The study of linguistic context:

ü it enables us to distinguish between different meanings

ü The distribution of words may not always be determined by their meaning

Rather,

ü words may have more specific meaning in particular collocations, e.g.

exceptional/ abnormal weather

exceptional/ abnormal child

Collocational restriction

Ø based wholly on the meaning of the item

Ø based on range

Ø strictest sense, neither meaning nor range

C. Idioms

- Ø collocation of a special kind
- Ø not referring to the meaning of the individual word
- Ø it does not function as a single word, thus, cannot be seen as one
- Ø some may be put in passive voice, but some may not

Can idioms be translated?

D. Collocation and Grammar

“Selectional Restrictions”

∅ any sentence which does not comply to them is ruled out and the grammar will not generate it,

e.g. The idea cut the tree

I drank the bread

He frightened that he was coming

He elapsed the man

Chomsky's *Colourless green ideas sleep furiously*

