

ENG 236: Semantics and Pragmatics ❖ Spring 2006: TUE & FRI 9.00-10.30 @ E 002
Linguistics Section ❖ Department of English Studies ❖ University of Cyprus
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January 27, 2006

CLASS 2: MEANING

OVERVIEW

- “semantics is the study of meaning”
 - so, what is *meaning*?
- what sort of thing is “a meaning”?

WHAT IS A MEANING?

- meanings of words and sentences
 - express the meaning of a given word *with more words* (and of these...?)

¶ **dog**

59 entries found for **dog**. The first 10 are listed below.
To select an entry, click on it. For more results, [click here](#).

dog[1,noun] – dog[2,adjective] – dog[3,transitive verb] – dog[4,adverb] – American dog tick – Australian cattle dog – Bernese mountain dog – bird-dog – bird dog – cant dog

Main Entry: '**dog**
Pronunciation: 'dog, 'däg
Function: *noun*
Usage: *often attributive*
Etymology: Middle English, from Old English *docga*

1 a : **CANID**; *especially* : a highly variable domestic mammal (*Canis familiaris*) closely related to the common wolf (*Canis lupus*) **b** : a male dog; *also* : a male usually carnivorous mammal

2 a : a worthless person **b** : **FELLOW, CHAP** <a lazy dog> <you lucky dog>

3 a : any of various usually simple mechanical devices for holding, gripping, or fastening that consist of a spike, bar, or hook **b** : **ANDIRON**

4 : uncharacteristic or affected stylishness or dignity <put on the dog>

5 *capitalized* : either of the constellations Canis Major or Canis Minor

6 *plural* : **FEET**

7 *plural* : **RUIN** <going to the dogs>

8 : one inferior of its kind: as **a** : an investment not worth its price **b** : an undesirable piece of merchandise

9 : an unattractive person and especially a girl or woman

10 : **HOT DOG** 1
– **dog-like** /'dog- 'lIk/ *adjective*
[\[dog illustration\]](#)

- *semiotics* (F. de Saussure):
 - the study of symbolic systems
 - useless (?) for “scientific” study of meaning in natural language

– *meaning holism* (W.V.O. Quine):

“[T]he meaning of a word or phrase or sentence depends on its relationship with other words, phrases, and sentences.” (PHP: 4)

– functional approach to language, not particularly “scientific”:

- (i) languages don’t express thought in an arbitrary way, rather
- (ii) deep & consistent patterns how languages express meaning

– *idea theory of meaning* (J. Fodor & E. Lepore):

“[M]eanings are something in the mind: concepts, thoughts, or ideas. [...] DOG is the meaning of *dog*.” (PHP: 5)

– terminology (for reading/writing/blackboard use):

- (i) ‘word *x* / **word *x***’ (a particular word, such as *dog*)
- (ii) ‘CONCEPT *X*’ (the concept/idea DOG expresses)
- (iii) ‘member of the class of *x*’ (= the class of all dogs)

• some basic notions we know about meaning

- *synonymy*
- *contradiction*
- *entailment*

¶ lexeme — homonymy (-graphy/-phony), polysemy, vagueness — syntactic ambiguity, context, reading — disambiguation — metonymy, metaphor, differentiation

• *language of thought* (J. Fodor)

“[B]ecause the meanings of certain pieces of language are deeply tied into the grammar of that language, ideas themselves will need a grammar. If our ideas have a grammar, they are a language, and we are thinking of them as a *language of thought*.” (PHP: 7)

– thought experiment: Real Earth / Twin Earth (*water*: H₂O vs. XYZ)

– *word* → CONCEPT → class *express meaning directly from word to class!*

MEANINGS, MINDS, AND THE WORLD

• where does all this leave us now for an understanding of *meaning*?

“[M]eanings are not internal to language, are not in the mind, and are not merely social practices. Rather, they are based in language- and mind-external reality.” (PHP: 11)

• *names* serve as a good example for the general point, which is:

“The meaning of a word *x* implies that it describes all of those things that actually are *x*, regardless of our ability to define it with words or to formulate an appropriate mental concept *X*.” (modified from PHP: 11)