

# Chapter 5

## Derivation and Semantics



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## Contents of this chapter

- Polysemy (and homonymy)
  - relatedness (recall doghouse, warehouse, teahouse, storehouse, townhouse)
- Semantics of derivation
- Semantics of zero-derivation
- Meanings of English -er

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## Semantics

- The most fundamental aspect of a word's meaning is that it **refers** to some entity or relation (real or imaginary) in the world
- Words have different (sometimes related) meanings
  - *Exactly the same goes for affixes*
  - how can all these meanings be learned?
    - some systematic semantic patterns

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## 'To lose'

- He lost his wallet
- He lost his financial backers
- He lost everything when he went bankrupt
- He/she lost ten pounds
- She lost her husband
  - related meanings: same lexeme
    - issue: can we quantify relatedness?
  - more than one meaning: **polysemous** (eye)
  - two different lexemes: **homonymy** (bank, punch)
    - sometimes hard to distinguish between polysemy and homonymy (important for lexicographers)  
e.g. mouse (animal vs. computer)

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## Kinds of (systematic) polysemy

- Count vs. mass
  - I don't like watermelon / pear
  - I bought two watermelons / pears
    - lettuce?
- "Figure-ground reversal"
  - Hugh broke the window
  - The kids climbed through the window
- Container-contained alternation
  - A hot glass will break if cold water touches it
  - Fanny downed the glass in two seconds

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## -cont.

- Place-people alternation
  - The US president lives in the White House
  - The White House announced that talks will continue
- Characteristic-people alternation
  - Sarah had a scratchy voice
  - The Voice never drank alcohol; he wanted to save his composure
- Systematic: by rule

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## -cont.

- Note these sentences:
  - Although I don't like watermelon<sub>mass</sub>, I bought two of them<sub>count</sub> yesterday
  - The kids climbed in through the door<sub>figure</sub> which<sub>ground</sub> Hugh painted yesterday
- Speakers can use/understand the two meanings of a polysemous word at the same time

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## Non-systematic polysemy

- The girl broke her arm in the accident
- This arm of the government deals with agriculture
  - closer to homonymy? (or: branch)
- Related to etymology?
  - bank1/bank2 actually same source
  - historical morphology / semantics

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## The lexicon

- "Every time we hear a word, we revise its lexical entry in some way" (!)
- "The meaning of a word is a compilation of every single use of that word you have ever heard or said"
  - the meaning of a word consists of the whole history: every time you have heard it, all the contexts, etc.
  - cf. frequency: every time you hear a word its representation is "strengthened" a little bit

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## Over- and underextension

- Overextension and underextension: in **child language**
  - Over: using "tree" for trees, plants, flowers, etc.
  - Under: using "dog" only for poodles
  - E.g. corn flakes for all kinds of cereals
- Essay suggestion (morpho / psycho)! Which is more common? Why? Examples?

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## Meaning of affixes

- What kinds of meanings arise through lexeme-formation rules?
- Some affixes have more than one meaning, e.g. -ism:
  - system of principles/beliefs:
    - Buddhism, capitalism, realism, Taoism
  - a peculiarity of speech:
    - spoonerism, Reaganism, colloquialism
- Quite unrelated, but specific meanings
  - like homonyms (bank, punch)

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## Meaning of -er

- Affix -er:
  - persons/professions: baker, dancer
    - relation to -or (actor, author)
  - animals: retriever, warbler
  - material objects: eraser, fertilizer (function)
  - immaterial objects: reminder, thriller
- All meanings are "kinda" related: doing something
  - like polysemy (e.g. to lose)
  - again: words and affixes very similar

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-cont.

- Can we pin down the meaning of **-er** in one rule / statement?
  - **vague** semantic definition: "somebody or something whose function or characteristic it is to perform a particular act"
  - **prototype** approach: -er as a person is prototypical use, others are based on that (different polysemous uses of -er)

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## Meaning of zero derivation

- N → V : **Wide** range of meanings
- Location blanket, roof
  - There is a blanket on the bed
  - The army blanketed the area with bombs
- Duration summer, vacation
  - A hot summer in Shanghai
  - Where do you summer?
- Agent referee, pilot
  - The referee booked the player for a foul
  - The girl offered to referee the match

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-cont.

- Goal powder, orphan
  - The white powder turned out to be flour
  - She powdered her nose
- Instrument nail, ship, glue
  - The ship sailed out to sea
  - We shipped the parcel by EPS
- Miscellaneous lunch, whale
  - We had Caesar's salad for lunch
  - We lunched at the BB bar

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## Formalizing the meaning

- The "affix" in zero-derivation has no segmental content, but can we characterize its meaning (like -ism)?
- Best characterized as "the verb is **related** to the noun" (!)
  - verb: always "some action"
  - relatedness: recall the -house compounds (doghouse, storehouse, teahouse)

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## Meaning of compounds

- Also: the meaning of the compound is **related** to the meaning of the parts, but resulting meaning ranges widely
  - peanut oil made of X
  - corn oil made of X
  - olive oil made of X
  - baby oil NOT! (for X)
  - motor oil for X
  - massage oil to do X

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## Cf. compounds with 'house'

- doghouse where X stay
- teahouse where X is served
- storehouse where goods are X'd
- guesthouse where Xs stay
- lighthouse which makes X
- playhouse where you can watch X
- town house in X
- nuthouse less compos.; inst. for X
- bughouse less compos.; with many X
- greenhouse less compos.; making X
- .....

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## Conclusion

- The meaning of morphologically derived words is *partially* predictable from the meanings of their parts
  - perhaps for some affixes (and zero derivation), we can only say they have a “relatedness” function
- Over time, words may become polysemous (acquire slightly different meanings)
  - the older the compound/affix, the more meanings?
  - how are different meanings learned? how do semantic rules work? (cf. phonology)

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## Homework

- Read chapter 5 especially carefully; note down any questions
- Please prepare exercises **1, 3-7** for discussion in class
- Don't forget to look for new words in Chinese, English or any other language or dialect you are familiar with!

■ Thank you!~!  
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