Semantics, semantic fields, overlaps, synonyms, opposites, hyponyms.

Semantics is the study of meaning. In a language we may discover that certain words and also constructions can be combined together to bring the meaning in a semantically acceptable way, while others cannot. Certain phrases and sentences also have similar meanings, while others have not. Anyone who knows the language can recognize ambiguous sentences and he also understands the surrounding context. This is what semantics is interested in.

The word meaning is to a large extent connected with **lexical items**. It is easier to discover with content words such as *nut, yellow, dog,* rather than with function words. It is also easier to discover with straightforward **descriptive meaning**, rather than **emotive meaning** or **connotations**. We also must not forget that meaning is connected with the other words in the system as well as with a certain class of recognizable objects in the external world. Every language "labels" the external world in different ways. The number of words and their meaning covering certain area (certain **semantic field**) in one language does not always correspond with words in another language. The field of colour terminology can illustrate this. *Sinnij* and *goluboj* in Russian does not cover the same meaning as in Czech *světle modrý* and *tmavě modrý* or *blue* in English. Every word fits into surrounding words and into the conditions where it is used. This does not mean that for every item and every phenomenon and situation there is a word in a language. Sometimes two or more words have to be used to express one thing. It only means that we have to study the meanings of the words together with their places in relation to the other members of the utterance.

In morphology we divided the sentence into smaller components. We can do the division also in semantics. Lets divide lexical items into component parts in meaning. E.g. *hen* consists of the components "female, bovine, adult". It is opposed to *cock,* which consists of the components "male, bovine, adult". What we have just done is called **componential analysis**. Thanks to componential analysis we evaluate so called semantic properties and also overlaps can be discovered. E.g. *hen, cow, tigress* overlap because they share the component "female".

There exist different types of relationship between words. For example the words that have the same or nearly the same meaning are called **synonyms**. Lexical items are synonymous if they can be interchanged in an utterance and the change does not alter the meaning of the whole utterance. Usually the meaning of the word only partially overlaps another. Perfect, absolute synonymy is rare. E.g. in science Czech words slepé střevo vs. appendix. It also can be found between formal and informal words, e.g. matika vs. matematika.
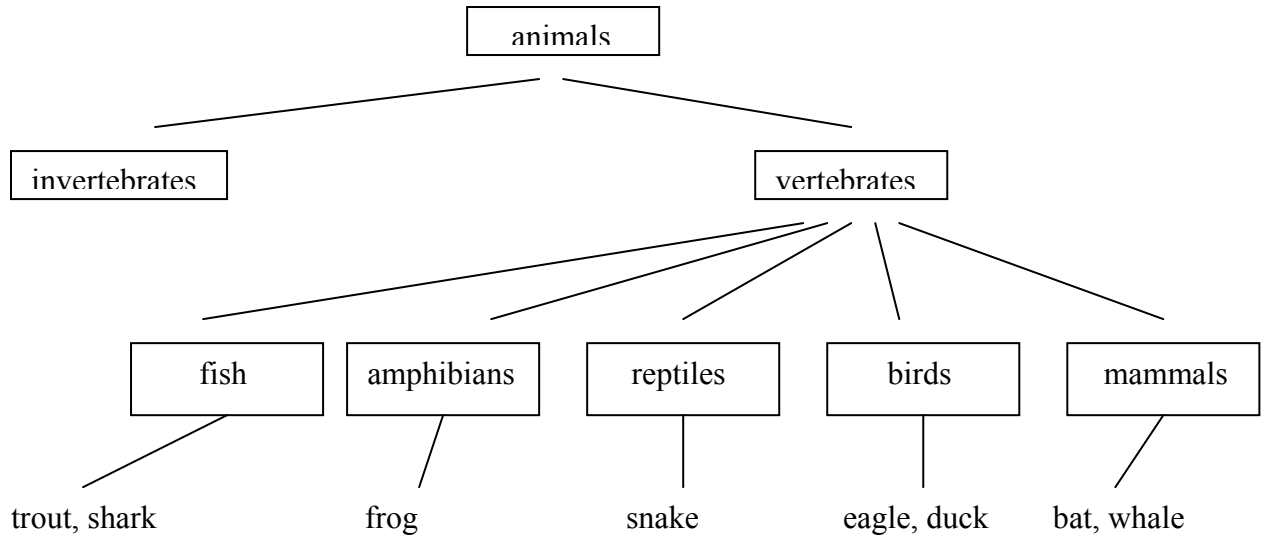
When the words express opposite meanings they are called **opposites**. We can distinguish several different **types of opposites**:
1 one word implies the negative of the other: *full up* vs. *hungry. Full up = not hungry. Hungry = not full up.*
2 the meaning of the word is relative to some standard depending on the context. E.g. *What a small dinosaur!* Vs. *What a large mole! Small* and *large* used in the sentences above imply some comparison.
3 One word is the converse of the other and the choice of the word depends on the angle of view. E.g.: *She **gave** him an apple.* Vs. *He **took** the apple.*

As for the meanings the words in a language are partially hierarchically structured. Zoology offers a nice example:

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                              ┌─────────┐
                              │ animals │
                              └─────────┘
                    ┌──────────────┘        └──────────────┐
          ┌───────────────┐                          ┌─────────────┐
          │ invertebrates │                          │ vertebrates │
          └───────────────┘                          └─────────────┘
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fish	amphibians	reptiles	birds	mammals

trout, shark   frog   snake   eagle, duck   bat, whale

The word *animals* has a list of hyponyms under it. **Hyponyms** are lexical items subsumed under one word with more general meaning. The same hierarchical example can be found in food, drinks, sports etc.

Language is a flexible phenomenon. People use it inconsistently sometimes. E.g. the same object, with the same visible shape can be called a *vase* or a *glass* depending on what is inside. This phenomenon is called **fuzziness** proving that words often have fuzzy edges.

Sometimes words cover a whole range of things, e.g. means of travel. The things share characteristics with one another (as do members of a family). But we are not able to think up a set of characteristics that would suit them all. We talk about **family resemblances**. To make the situation easier we use so-called prototypes. **Prototypes** are typical examples. E.g. fish. You can imagine its shape, eyes, mouth … and an ability to live and move in water.

Words linked together by means of the syntax make **sentences**. The words in sentences function thanks to their meanings according to certain rules. Therefore we cannot use a sentence *My uncle is a laundress.* It would be contradictory. We work out logical relationships when we make or hear sentences and in addition, we use our common sense, too.