

TUTORIAL  
8.7

# The semantic structure of language

Learners will differentiate *Semantic Structure* from *Grammatical Structure*, and *Semantic Units* from *Grammatical Units*. This tutorial will focus on the “concept” as a semantic unit; we will expand into other kinds of semantic units in subsequent tutorials.

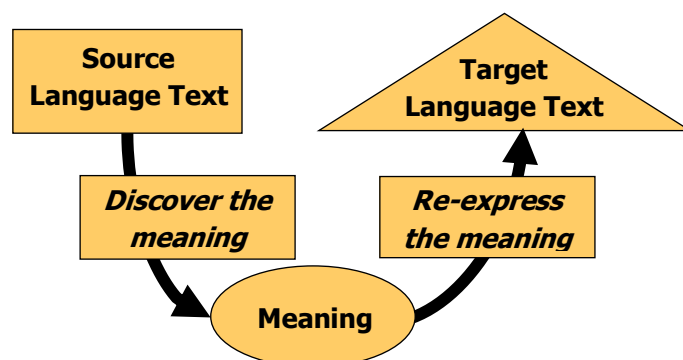
In previous tutorials, we have mentioned the importance of distinguishing between Form and Meaning. It is essential that we clearly recognize:

- The Grammatical Structure (Form)
- The Semantic Structure (Meaning)
- The Skewing Between Them<sup>1</sup>

One of the most common reasons for miscommunication in a cross-cultural context is a lack of understanding of the distinction between the *form* and the *meaning* of the message. Often this contrast becomes blurred, and we link the *meaning* too closely with the *form*.

## Meaning apart from Form

We have seen the Standard Transfer Model, which illustrates the translation process.<sup>2</sup> We start with the *Source Language Text* and dig beneath the surface to discover the meaning. Then we re-express that meaning in appropriate *Receptor Language* forms. But sometimes we wrongly equate the meaning with the form—as if the form itself *is* the meaning.



For example, in Mark 2:9, where it reads: “*Jesus said, ‘...pick up your bed and walk,’*” what is the meaning? Is the meaning “*Jesus said, ‘...pick up your bed*

<sup>1</sup> “Skewing” will be explained and illustrated later in this tutorial. See: Mildred L. Larson, *Meaning Based Translation: a guide to cross-language equivalence*, revised edition, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998), pp. 97-105.

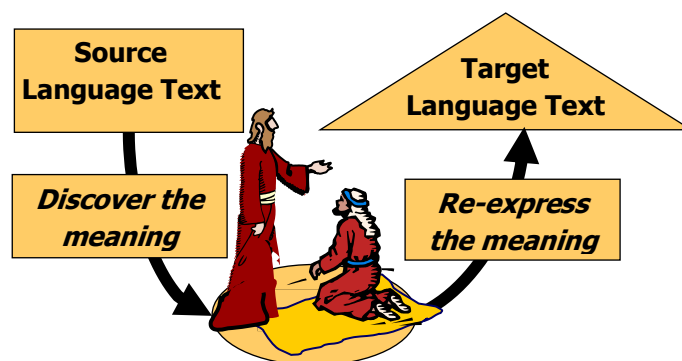
<sup>2</sup> Larson, *Meaning Based Translation*, p. 4 display 1.1; see also: Katharine Barnwell, *Introduction to Semantics and Translation* (Horsleys Green, UK: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1974, 1980), p.14.

*and walk,*”? No. If that were true, our translation of this verse into a receptor language would be:

- A *proper noun*
- Then a *verb* (3rd-person-singular-past-tense)
- Next a *verb phrase* (2nd-person-imperative)
- And a *pronoun* (2nd-person-possessive)
- Followed by another *noun*
- Then a *conjunction*
- Ending with a *verb* (2nd-person-imperative)

However, we need to remember that the words themselves are not the meaning! The real meaning is the *picture* we envision in our minds apart from any words that could be used to express it.

This *picture* is the *meaning* that needs to be translated from the Source Language to the Receptor Language. If we do our job correctly as translators, the picture should basically be the same no matter what language we translate into. Of course, some of the unspecified details could be seen differently by various target-language hearers—for example, a person’s height or the color of their clothing—but the essential elements of the picture would be the same in every language. This picture is the Semantics.



## Which Language?

Those of you who speak more than one language fluently can probably identify with me when I say there have been times that I heard someone say something, but later, when I thought about it, I wasn’t sure what language they were speaking, because that person and I share more than one language. The meaning was very clear to me, but the actual form had escaped me—even to the point that I didn’t remember what language the person was speaking.

## Peering Inside the Magic Eye®

Clearly perceiving *Meaning* apart from *Form* could be likened to looking at a picture in one of those Magic Eye® picture books. Buried deep inside of the multicolored shapes and patterns is an intricate three-dimensional image. In order to see the three-dimensional image, you need to look past the forms on the surface. If you concentrate on the actual forms and shapes themselves, you will not be able to see the hidden picture.

## Depth Perception

We all have various degrees of “depth perception”—the ability to see the *meaning* that is buried beneath the surface-level *forms*. Generally, this is something we have developed over time. Our natural tendency is to tie meaning closely to the forms of our own language—linking the surface-level forms with the underlying meaning. For most people, this link between *meaning* and *form* grows stronger as they move from childhood to adulthood.

## Easier for Children

Children generally have an easier time than adults do when it comes to understanding meaning apart from form. A very small child will begin to grasp the meaning of things that directly affect him before he fully understands the spoken language all around him. Even after a child is old enough to talk, he still will *not* have the same deep-seated link in his mind between underlying meaning and the surface-level forms that most adults have.

Several years ago, I was on an Air Niugini flight in Papua New Guinea with my son, when he was about 4 years old. The flight attendant gave a full explanation of the seat belt, the life vest, the oxygen mask, etc. She said it one time through in English, and then a second time through in New Guinea Pidgin. When she finished, my son leaned over to me and asked, “*Why did she say all of that twice?*”

The *form* of the explanation in both languages was completely familiar to him, since he is fluent in both English and Pidgin. But his focus wasn’t on the form—it was on the meaning. He knew that the meaning was the same both times; he just didn’t happen to notice that the form was different—even to the point that it was in a different language.

## Grammatical & Semantic Structure<sup>3</sup>

When we describe the grammatical structure of language, we have a full set of grammatical terms to designate each grammatical element, including words like *noun*, *verb*, *subject*, *object*, etc. So it is with the semantic structure of language. There is a completely separate set of terms used to describe semantic structure.

The smallest semantic unit is called a “meaning component.” The meaning component on the semantic side often corresponds to the “morpheme” on the grammatical side.

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<sup>3</sup> Larson, *Meaning Based Translation*, pp. 59-70.

The “word” level on the grammatical side often corresponds to a semantic unit called the “concept.” Semantic “concepts” are classified into four groups: Things, Events, Attributes and Relations.

Concepts	Definition & Examples
THING	All animate beings, natural and supernatural and all inanimate entities <u>Examples:</u> <i>boy, ghost, angel, stone, galaxy, blood</i>
EVENT	All actions, changes of state (process), and experiences. <u>Examples:</u> <i>eat, run, think, melt, stretch, smile</i>
ATTRIBUTE	All those attributes of quality and quantity ascribed to any Thing or Event <u>Examples:</u> <i>long, thick, soft, rough, slowly, suddenly, few, all</i>
RELATION	All those relations posited between any two of the above semantic units <u>Examples:</u> <i>with, by, because, since, and, therefore, after, or</i>

Just as a “concept” on the semantic side often corresponds with a “word” on the grammatical side, so semantic *things, events, attributes* and *relations* on the semantic side correspond to certain kinds of *words* on the grammatical side. (See chart below.)

Semantic Structure	Grammatical Structure
meaning component	morpheme
CONCEPT	WORD
Things	Nouns, pronouns
Events	Verbs
Attributes	Adjectives, adverbs
Relations	conjunctions, prepositions

### Why Do We Need Two Lists?<sup>4</sup>

You may be wondering why there are two separate sets of terms: one for *grammatical* units and another for *semantic* units. Why can’t we just use the grammatical terms—*noun, verb, adjective*, etc.—for both grammar and semantics? The reason is because of “skewing.” *Skewing* is a mismatch between semantic units and grammatical units. Every language uses skewing.

We mentioned that a “noun” on the grammatical side often corresponds with a “thing” concept on the semantic side; but that is not always the case. Sometimes a grammatical *noun* may be a semantic *event*.

**Example: “The work is difficult.”**

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 62-64.

In this sentence, the word “work” is classified as a noun grammatically because it is the subject of the sentence. Semantically, however, “work” is an *event* which is an action. This is an example of skewing between the semantic and grammatical classes. “Work” in this context is not a “thing” that I put in my back pocket and carry around with me. Also, it is not something I would carry on a conversation with.

Remember, in the chart above, we noted that semantic things are: Animate Beings (natural and supernatural) and Inanimate Entities.

### More Examples (Note the Skewing)

**E**

Like a lamb that is led to slaughter (Is. 53:7)

**(noun)**

**E**

They all condemned Him to be deserving of death (Mk. 14:64)

**(noun)**

**E**

The Lord was not in the earthquake.

**(noun)**

**E**

Her singing is too loud.

**(noun)**

**E**

Eating is very necessary.

**(noun)**

**E**

The man knifed him to death.

**(noun)**

**E**

Prayer comes first each day

**(noun)**

### Identify the Semantic Events (Mark 1:4)

- appeared (verb)
- preaching (verb)
- baptism (noun)
- repentance (noun)
- forgiveness (noun)
- sins (noun)
- Baptist (noun)

Of all these semantic EVENTS, only 2 of them are VERBS grammatically.

## One-to-one Correlation


We already noted that if there is no skewing, the one-to-one correlation of semantic concepts to grammatical words could be described as follows

Semantic Terms (Concepts)	Grammatical Terms (Words)
Things	Nouns, pronouns
Events	Verbs
Attributes	Adjectives, adverbs
Relations	Conjunctions, prepositions, enclitics, etc.

The previous examples show that other grammatical forms can represent semantic events.

Here is the full chart of Semantic and Grammatical terms:

Semantic Terms	Grammatical Terms
Discourse	Text
Semantic part	Part
Episode cluster	Division
Episode	Section
Semantic paragraph	Paragraph
Propositional cluster	Sentence
Proposition	Clause
Concept Cluster	Phrase
Concept	Word
Meaning component	Morpheme (roots and affixes)



In this tutorial we will primarily focus on the Paragraph level and below. When you get above the paragraph level, the terminology varies from one author to another.

## Example: From English to Lamogai

“I heard John’s call”

## Meaning and Form

Sometimes it may seem like “Semantics” is mysterious and elusive—difficult to get a handle on. Actually, *semantics* (the “meaning”) is the part of language that is universal and consistent. If we translate the meaning correctly, it should

be the same in every language. It is the *Form* (grammar & lexicon) is inconsistent—different in every language.

Translation involves a double challenge: First we need to “un-skew” the source language text. Then we reconstruct the same meaning using appropriate receptor language skewing.



## ACTIVITIES

### *The semantic structure of language*

1. Download the Translation **Activity Sheet 8.7** for this exercise
  - Identify the Semantic Events in Mark 1 and 2
  - Place the letter **E** over each semantic event
  - Remember: Due to skewing between grammar and semantics, some grammatical verbs may not be a semantic event; and some semantic events may not be a verb.