

January 26, 2004

CLASS 1: SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS

THE STUDY OF MEANING [CLASSES 2, 14-16: sec. 1.1, chap. 7, 9-10]

- What does ‘**meaning**’ mean?
- To what extent is it a **linguistic** matter?
- What is the **best theory** of meaning to fit the linguistic facts?

There are many possible answers to these questions. Today we’ll make some observations about how we can **look at linguistic meaning** and some **important distinctions** to make.

MEANING AND LANGUAGE [CLASSES 2-3: chap. 1-2 plus CLASSES 18-19]

Meaning is connected to language via:

- the **lexicon** (where lexical items are stored)
- **grammar** (roughly, syntax and morphology)

Also:

- **what we do** with language

MEANING AND THE LEXICON [CLASSES 3-4, 14: sec. 2.1, 3.1-3.5, 7.3]

- **Componential** analysis
bachelor = [+male, -married]
- **Sense** relations
synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy...

MEANING AND GRAMMAR [CLASSES 2, 4, 13-16: sec. 1.2, 3.4, 6.7, 7.6, 9.7, 10.1-10.3]

Compositional meaning:

Meaning depends on the ways words are **put together**:

The rat bit the cat.
The cat bit the rat.

...as well as the **words themselves**:

The cat chewed the hat.

The **compositional nature of linguistic meaning** allows us to understand sentences that we’ve never encountered before:

The indolent grey feline seated itself upon the sixteenth century Azerbaijani kilim.

SEMANTICS AND GRAMMAR [CLASSES 2, 4, 7: sec. 2.1, chap. 3, 5]

- So linguistic semantics is the **output of combining words** in the syntax
- ... though syntax can produce **'meaningless' grammatical structures** too:

Colourless green ideas sleep furiously.

(even then we have some notion of 'what it would have meant')

THE PRINCIPLE OF COMPOSITIONALITY [CLASS 2: sec. 1.2.3]

The meaning of an expression is a function of the meaning of its parts and the way they are put together. (See e.g. the works of Gottlob Frege or Richard Montague.)

Note that even within this the **syntax-semantics relationship** isn't always straightforward:

- *a white rabbit*
- *a beautiful dancer*
- *a criminal lawyer*

Where do the **differences originate**? The lexicon? Syntax? Pragmatics? (As you'll discover, this is in fact, or at least can be, an **open question** for many phenomena.)

APPROACHING LINGUISTIC SEMANTICS [CLASSES 1-16: the entire Löbner-book]

- We want to account for the **linguistic contribution** to meaning
- **Competence**-based approach:
we aim to characterize the *knowledge* that language users have (cf. the study of syntax)
- ... specifically, knowledge of **how language contributes** to meaning

So we're not interested in just any kind of meaning. In particular, we have to strip away the effects of different contexts, i.e. **pragmatics**.

SEMANTICS VS. PRAGMATICS I [CLASSES 2-7: chap. 1-5, plus CLASSES 17-21]

One view:

- Meaning from the **language** = semantics
- Meaning from the **context** = pragmatics
(identity of / relationship between speaker and hearer, situation, beliefs, intentions...)

Example: *She hit him with the frying pan.*

Meaning: 'A female hit a male with a uniquely identifiable object that has those properties characteristic of frying pans'

Not: 'Geraldine was truly out of her mind and Norman is likely to have serious injuries.'

But what is meaning?

- We've said we're **restricting** ourselves to linguistically-determined meaning
- But what is it to know that **some piece** of linguistic structure affects meaning?
- We need a **theory** of what it means to say that a sentence 'means something'

KNOWLEDGE OF LINGUISTIC MEANING [CLASSES 5-6: chap. 4]

Some things we know about meaning:

- Paraphrase

Bill was killed by Phil.

Phil caused Bill to die.

- Contradiction

Phil is a murderer.

Phil has never killed anyone.

- Entailment

Phil killed Bill.

Phil killed someone.

Someone did something in the past.

SEMANTICS VS. PRAGMATICS II [CLASS 3: sec. 2.2]

*A different criterion: **truth conditions.***

To know what a sentence means is to know the circumstances under which it is true.

- **Semantics** = what must hold true in the world for the sentence to be judged true

- **Pragmatics** = the rest (all speaker- or context-related meaning)

Bill has a fleece and Anne has a waterproof.

Bill has a fleece but Anne has a waterproof. – same truth conditions

Gottlob has earlobes.

Even Gottlob has earlobes. – same truth conditions

LANGUAGE AND TRUTH CONDITIONS [CLASSES 6, 16: sec. 4.6, 10.4]

- Two ways to **define semantics**:

- (i) *what the forms of the language give us;*

- (ii) *truth conditions*

Both are ways to get at the **invariant, non-context-specific meaning** of a sentence ('sentence meaning', as opposed to utterance meaning).

Linguistic meaning **often coincides** with truth-conditional meaning, but not always:

She even hit him with the bloody frying pan.

- (i) Truth conditions go beyond linguistic meaning: *she, him, the bloody frying pan* must be associated with particular objects

- (ii) Linguistic meaning goes beyond truth conditions: *even, bloody*

Nevertheless, we will continue to treat a sentence as 'having truth conditions'

- **Enables** discussion of semantic knowledge (paraphrase, contradiction, entailment, etc.)

- **Connects** linguistic meaning to the world

PROPOSITIONS [CLASSES 3, 6, 12-13, 15-16: sec. 2.2-2.4, 4.6, 9.5, 10.4, chap. 6]

- “A sentence has truth conditions” – equivalently, it conveys a **proposition**
- A proposition has a **truth value** (T or F)

The proposition expressed: a statement of what must be true for the sentence to be true.

A proposition is itself usually itself expressed as a sentence — we can use **quotes to distinguish propositions**:

Sentence: *She hit him with the bloody frying pan.*

Proposition: ‘Mary hit John with the frying pan.’

Another possibility would be to express propositions in a **non-English metalanguage**.

DIFFERENT LEVELS OF MEANING [CLASS 2: sec. 1.1]

- **Sentence meaning** (linguistic semantics)
- **Propositional meaning** (truth-conditional semantics)
- **Utterance meaning** (semantics + pragmatics)

Example: *I would like you to read Löbner.*

Your task: **Determine the sentence, propositional, and utterance meaning!**

SHORT-TERM LOAN [This is a selection of useful books available on reserve at the library.]

Cann, R. 1993. *Formal Semantics: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chierchia, G. and S. McConnell-Ginet. 1990. *Meaning and Grammar: An Introduction to Semantics*. Cambridge, Mass.; MIT Press.

Cruse D.A. 1986. *Lexical Semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

de Swart, H. 1998. *Introduction to Natural Language Semantics*. Stanford, Calif.: CSLI Publications.

Dowty, D.R. 1979. *Word Meaning and Montague Grammar*. Dordrecht: Reidel.

Dowty, D.R., R.E. Wall, and S. Peters. 1981. *Introduction to Montague Semantics*. Dordrecht: Reidel.

Givón, T. 1993. *English Grammar: A Function-Based Introduction*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Harris, R. and T.J. Taylor. 1997. *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought 1: The Western Tradition from Socrates to Saussure*. London; Routledge.

Jackendoff, R. 1990. *Semantic Structures*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Matthews, P. 2001. *A Short History of Structural Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Partee, B, A. ter Meulen, and R.E. Wall. 1993. *Mathematical Methods in Linguistics*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Pustejovsky, J. 1995. *The Generative Lexicon*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Saeed, J.I. 1996. *Semantics*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Thomason, R.H. (ed.). 1974. *Formal Philosophy: Selected Papers of Richard Montague*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press. [OUT OF PRINT — MIGHT BE UNAVAILABLE]

Ungerer, F. and H.-J. Schmid. 1996. *An Introduction to Cognitive Linguistics*. London: Longman.

Verschueren, J. 199. *Understanding Pragmatics*. London: Arnold.

Verschueren, J., J.-O. Ostman, and J. Blommaert (eds.). 1997. *Handbook of Pragmatics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Verschueren, J., J.-O. Ostman, and J. Blommaert (eds.). 1997. *Handbook of Pragmatics: Manual*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Wierzbicka, A. 1996. *Semantics: Primes and Universals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[Disclaimer: Dan Wedgwood made available some material from which I drew liberally for this handout, downloadable at <http://ling.ed.ac.uk/teaching/undergrad/L2/modules/sem.>]