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Linguistics- 4th year-

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SEMANTICS

Semantics

Semantics is the study of the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. In semantic analysis, there is always an attempt to focus on what the words conventionally mean, rather than on what an individual speaker might think they mean, or want them to mean, on a particular occasion. This approach is concerned with objective or general meaning and avoids trying to account for subjective or local meaning. Doing semantics is attempting to spell out what it is we all know when we behave as if we share knowledge of the meaning of a word, a phrase, or a sentence in a language.

Meaning

While semantics is the study of meaning in language, there is more interest in certain aspects of meaning than in others. We have already ruled out special meanings that one individual might attach to words or what TSA agents believe words mean, as in Ben Bergen's story quoted earlier. We can go further and make a broad distinction between conceptual meaning and associative meaning. Conceptual meaning covers those basic, essential components of meaning that are conveyed by the literal use of a word. It is the type of meaning that dictionaries are designed to describe. Some of the basic components of a word like needle in English might include "thin, sharp, steel instrument." These components would be part of the conceptual meaning of needle. However, different people might have different associations or connotations attached to a word like needle. They might associate it with "pain," or "illness," or "blood," or "drugs," or "thread," or "knitting," or "hard to find" (especially in a haystack), and these associations may differ from one person to the next. These types of associations are not treated as part of the word's conceptual meaning. One

way in which the study of basic conceptual meaning might be helpful would be as a means of accounting for the “oddness” we experience when we read sentences such as the following: The hamburger ate the boy. The table listens to the radio. The horse is reading the newspaper. We should first note that the oddness of these sentences does not derive from their syntactic structure. According to the basic syntactic rules for forming English sentences (presented in Chapter 8), we have well-formed structures.

NP		V		NP
The hamburger		ate		the boy

This sentence is syntactically good, but semantically odd. Since the sentence The boy ate the hamburger is perfectly acceptable, we may be able to identify the source of the problem. The components of the conceptual meaning of the noun hamburger must be significantly different from those of the noun boy, allowing one, not the other, to “make sense” with the verb ate. Quite simply, the kind of noun used with ate must denote an entity that is capable of “eating.” The noun hamburger doesn’t have this property and the noun boy does.

Compositionality[\[edit\]](#)

[Compositionality](#) is a key aspect of how languages construct meaning. It is the idea that the meaning of a complex expression is a function of the meanings of its parts. It is possible to understand the meaning of the sentence "Zuzana owns a dog" by understanding what the words *Zuzana*, *owns*, *a* and *dog* mean and how they are combined.^[371] In this regard, the meaning of complex expressions like sentences is

different from word meaning since it is normally not possible to deduce what a word means by looking at its letters and one needs to consult a dictionary instead.^[38]

Compositionality is often used to explain how people can formulate and understand an almost infinite number of meanings even though the amount of words and cognitive resources is finite. Many sentences that people read are sentences that they have never seen before and they are nonetheless able to understand them.^[37]

When interpreted in a strong sense, the principle of compositionality states that the meaning of a complex expression is not just affected by its parts and how they are combined but fully determined this way. It is controversial whether this claim is correct or whether additional aspects influence meaning. For example, context may affect the meaning of expressions; idioms like "kick the bucket" carry figurative or non-literal meanings that are not directly reducible to the meanings of their parts.^[37]

Truth and truth conditions^[edit]

Truth is a property of statements that accurately present the world and true statements are in accord with reality. Whether a statement is true usually depends on the relation between the statement and the rest of the world. The truth conditions of a statement are the way the world needs to be for the statement to be true. For example, it belongs to the truth conditions of the sentence "it is raining outside" that raindrops are falling from the sky. The sentence is true if it is used in a situation in which the truth conditions are fulfilled, i.e., if there is actually rain outside.^[39]

Truth conditions play a central role in semantics and some theories rely exclusively on truth conditions to analyze meaning. To understand a statement usually implies that one has an idea about the conditions under

which it would be true. This can happen even if one does not know whether the conditions are fulfilled.^[39]

Semiotic triangle[\[edit\]](#)



The semiotic triangle aims to explain how the relation between language (*Symbol*) and world (*Referent*) is mediated by the language users (*Thought or Reference*).

The [semiotic triangle](#), also called the triangle of meaning, is a model used to explain the relation between language, language users, and the world, represented in the model as *Symbol*, *Thought or Reference*, and *Referent*. The symbol is a linguistic [signifier](#), either in its spoken or written form. The central idea of the model is that there is no direct relation between a linguistic expression and what it refers to, as was assumed by earlier dyadic models. This is expressed in the diagram by the dotted line between symbol and referent.^[40]

The model holds instead that the relation between the two is mediated through a third component. For example, the term *apple* stands for a type of fruit but there is no direct connection between this string of letters and the corresponding physical object. The relation is only established indirectly through the mind of the language user. When they see the symbol, it evokes a mental image or a concept, which establishes the connection to the physical object. This process is only possible if the language user learned the meaning of the symbol before. The meaning of a specific symbol is governed by the conventions of a particular language. The same symbol may refer to one object in one language, to another object in a different language, and to no object in another language.^[40]