



## **Semantics and Pragmatics**

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## **Semantics and Pragmatics**

Semantics and pragmatics are concerned with aspects of meaning in language. Generally, semantics deals with the description of word and sentence meaning. Pragmatics is concerned with the characterization of speaker meaning. It studies the factors, which govern a language user's choice of utterance. Pragmatics is applied to the study of language from the point of view of the users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on the other participants in an act of communication. For instance, people must not tell jokes at funerals (there is no law, in fact, which says that, but it is generally not done). Also, there are norms of formality and politeness, which everyone has intuitively assimilated. How to talk to older people, for example, people of the opposite sex or people of special rank and so on.

## **Denotation and Connotation**

When linguists investigate the meaning of words in a language, they are normally interested in characterizing the denotative (also called conceptual) meaning and less concerned with the connotative (also called the associative or stylistic) meaning of words. Denotation (designation/literal or cognitive meaning) is that aspect of meaning of a particular word or group of words, which is based on a clear reference to a given section of the observable 'external world' and on some kind of conventionalisation. Moreover, it covers those basic, essential components of meaning which are conveyed by the literal use of a word (i.e., dictionary definition). For example, 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 denotative meaning of 'needle'. However, we may have 'associations' or connotations attached to a word like 'needle' which led

us to think 'painful' whenever we encounter the word. This association is not treated as part of the denotative meaning of 'needle'. Another example is the word 'adolescent', which sometimes refers merely to 'a person of a certain age', but it often implies, as well, that the person referred to is (awkward, immature, obstinate, and moody). These are the emotional overtones or connotations of 'adolescent'. It refers to that aspect of meaning of a particular word or group of words which is based on the feelings and ideas, it arouses in the minds of speakers (or writers) and hearers (or readers).

### **Semantic Field**

Here, we would talk about how a semantic approach helps us to understand something about the nature of language. For example, the 'oddness' of the following sentences is not derived from their syntactic structure which is acceptable (NP + V + NP). They are well-structured sentences. They are syntactically good but semantically odd (meaningless): e.g.,

1. \*The hamburger ate the man.
2. \*My cat studied linguistics.
3. \*The table was listening to some music.

### **Semantic Features**

It is a procedure that is used as a means of analyzing meaning. Features such as [+ animate]; [- animate]; [+ human]; [- human]; [+ male] [- male], for example, can be treated as the basic features involved in differentiating the meanings of each word in the language from every other word. If you were asked to give the crucial distinguishing features of the meanings of this set of English words (table, cow, girl, woman, boy, man).

- *Note (1): From a feature analysis like this, you can: a. Say that at least part of the basic meaning of the word 'boy', for instance, in English involves the components (+ human; + male; - adult). b. Also characterize that feature which crucially required in a noun in order for it to appear as the subject of the verb, supplementing the systematic analysis with semantic the features: The ----- is reading a book. Noun [+ human] a crucial feature*
- *Note (2): This approach gives us the ability to predict what nouns would make the above sentence semantically odd. These are nouns as 'table', 'river', 'lion', etc., because they all have the feature [- human].*

### **Problems relevant to Semantic Features**

Problems relevant to Semantic Features can be outlined as follows:

1. For many words in a language, it may not be so easy to come up with neat-components of meaning, e.g., 'advice' or 'threat'.
2. Part of the problem seems to be that the approach involves a view of words in a language as some sort of 'containers', carrying meaning-components. Of course, this is not the only way in which we can think of the meaning of words in our language.