

# Semantics Meaning Structure and Cognition

刘世理 编著

## 语义学

意义·结构·认知

世界知识出版社

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江苏工业学院图书馆  
藏书章

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世界出版 出版社

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图书在版编目 (CIP) 数据

语义学: 意义、结构与认知 / 刘世理编著. —北京:  
世界知识出版社, 2006. 9  
ISBN 7-5012-2948-1

I. 语... II. 刘... III. 语义学—高等学校—教材  
—英文 IV. H030

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2006) 第 103972 号

---

责任编辑 / 刘砦  
责任出版 / 赵 玥

出版发行 / 世界知识出版社  
地址电话 / 北京市东城区干面胡同 51 号 (010) 65241433  
E-mail: [gcgjlz@public.bta.net.cn](mailto:gcgjlz@public.bta.net.cn)

邮政编码 / 100010

经 销 / 新华书店

排 版 / 夸实鑫诺

开本印张 / 850 × 1168 1/32 8.375 印张 290 千字

版 次 / 2006 年 9 月第一版 2006 年 9 月第一次印刷

定 价 / 14.80 元

# 前 言

语义学作为语言学研究的一个独立学科，其历史并不久远。上个世纪七十年代，语言学家莱昂斯（J. Lyons）的巨著《语义学》（*Semantics*）确立了语义学研究的地位。八十年代以后，语言学家开始对语言的意义进行全方位、多角度的研究，杰弗里·利奇（Geoffrey Leech）把语义与句法和音位并列研究，搭建了逻辑学、句法学与语义学的关系桥梁。但语义学在研究方法上仍继承语言哲学和逻辑学对语言的描述方法，形成所谓的形式语义学，研究句子的内涵和外延以及句子所含的真值条件。与此同时，乔姆斯基（N. Chomsky）的转换生成语法给语义学研究注入新的观念，形成了生成语义理论。如卡茨（J. Katz）的生成语义学，描写词义、短语句义到句义的构成规律，杰肯道夫（R. Jackendoff）的概念语义学，从描述心理表征来描述意义。然而，语义学研究面临的真正挑战来自于心理学界，即认知语义学。语言意义反映现实结构而又超出现实结构，与人类认知能力和方式有着密切的关系。其中，原型和范畴化理论、意象图式理论有着较强的解释力，继而对隐喻的广泛研究为认知语义学提供了丰富的语料。这一领域的领军人物主要有莱可夫（G. Lakoff）、兰盖可（R. Langacker）、菲尔莫（C. Fillmore）、格瑞茨（D. Geeraerts）、斯威彻（E. Sweetser）等。

不少学者在其语义学研究中，不拘泥于一种理论或形式，综合了前人从不同角度对语言意义的研究，把语言的意义、形式、功能、语用和认知联系起来，不仅能够让读者较全面地了解语言的意义与人类和客观世界之间的联系，而且还可以了解对语义学

研究的不同方法。笔者认为值得一提的是《语义学》（Saeed, I. 1997. *Semantics*）、《词汇、语义学和语言教学》（Hatch, E. & Brown, C. 1995. *Vocabulary, Semantics, and Language Education*）、《语义学与语用学：语言与话语中的意义》（Jaszczolt, K. 2002. *Semantics and Pragmatics: Meaning in Language and Discourse*）、《句法：结构、意义与功能》（Van Valin, R. & Lapolla, R. 1997. *Syntax: Structure, Meaning, and Function*）和《语义学教程》（李福印, 1999）等几本著作，让笔者受益匪浅。本书的编写在很大程度上吸收了他们的研究成果，在此表示衷心感谢。

该书吸收前人在语义学、句法学和认知语言学领域的研究成果，综合形式语义学、句法语义学和认知语义学对语言意义、语义结构和人类认知与语言意义及客观世界关系的研究，揭示语义学应解决的三大任务，即意义、结构与认知。该书稿是在笔者的语义与句法课程讲义的基础上编制而成的，以英语文字写作更能体现前人研究的原貌，亦便于研究生和相关学者领会和借鉴。由于该书的写作和编排是根据笔者个人的见解，不妥之处在所难免。欢迎读者批评指正，笔者将不断对此进行提炼和完善。

编著者

2006年5月

## Foreword by Wenxu

Nothing is as easily overlooked, or as easily forgotten, as the most obvious truths. The tenet that language is a tool for expressing meaning is a case in point. Nobody would deny it, but many influential schools and trends in modern linguistics have ignored it, and have based their work on entirely different and often incompatible assumptions.

It would be fair to say that the twentieth century has not been a very friendly one for semantics, dominated as it has been by the two figures of Leonard Bloomfield, who believed that meaning lay outside the scope of scientific inquiry, and Noam Chomsky, whose primary focus has always been on formal syntax. In many cases, the conviction that meaning can be more or less ignored in the study of language is clearly linked with a conviction that semantics is an independent field, which can be left to those who happen to be interested in meaning, while other linguists can devote themselves to something else, in particular, to syntax. Syntax is seen as more or less autonomous of semantics, and can be pursued independently. In recent years, however, the times have been changing. We can see "the greening of linguistics", referring to the proliferation of developments such as pragmatics, functionalism, and cognitive linguistics, all of which are compatible with renewed interest in semantics. And semantics has become the Cinderella of

linguistics.

*Semantics: Meaning, Structure and Cognition* is one of the recent publications on semantics in China. The author, professor Liu Shili, is an expert in the field of semantics, who is engaged in teaching and research of semantics for many years. Thus, I am not in the position to give my comments in detail. Yet, what I want to point out here is that this book has its own prominent characteristics.

The ten chapters in this book are well elected and organized to deal with the important and hot topics in semantics. Sure, one cannot expect the author to exhaust every aspect of semantics. Nevertheless, we are delighted to find that the author has done a good job to provide us with the latest findings in semantics, cognitive semantics in particular. Extremely important, and highly informative, to say nothing of those witty, critical and insightful remarks which abound in the lines.

The book also has elaborate discussion of the fundamental concepts for linguistic semantics, combining theoretical exegesis of several methods of inquiry with some detailed semantic analysis. It aims to equip the reader with the basic tools and skills needed to progress to original research in semantics. I think the readership of this book can be undergraduate and graduate students of linguistics and relevant areas of philosophy, psychology, and education.

Expressing meaning through language is deeply influenced by the cognitive, and socio-interactive functions of language. Semantics must explain how this is achieved by giving a rational account of the structure of the meaningful categories

and constructions of human language, their properties, interrelations, and motivations. This book, I think, takes up the challenge to elucidate paths to that goal.

Finally, I want to stress that one of the problems with using semantics is that all the semantic theories are largely based on Western languages. Thus, they have assumptions that might not be as applicable to Chinese. We encourage our Chinese scholars to begin workings to develop some new theories of semantics based on assumptions that are inherent in our own language and culture. No doubt this development could be quite welcome.

We welcome this new addition to the scholarship on semantics and look forward to future developments in Chinese scholarship in this area. And it is sincerely hoped that Professor Liu Shili will make greater contributions to the literature of semantics in China.

文旭 博士  
西南大学教授  
博士生导师  
2006 年 8 月



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# Chapter One: About Semantics

## 1.1 Introduction

Previously grammar, language philosophy (study the way people communicate and the true/false value of sentences), psychology (perception of language) were the main trends of linguistic studies. Semantics was not an independent branch. Saussure's **semiotics** (instead of semantics) mainly concerns itself with the human habit of identifying and creating signs which make one thing stand for another. Three concepts are of importance: 1. **icon**: a similarity between a sign and what it represents (e. g. portrait and real life subject); 2. **index**: the sign is closely associated with its signified, often in a causal relationship (e. g. smoke is an index of fire); 3. **symbol**: only a conventional link between the sign and its signified (e. g. insignia/military rank; mourning/black clothes in some culture or white clothes in others).

Then there is the **Definitions theory** about the meaning of language. According to this theory, to give the meaning of linguistic expression we should establish definitions of the meanings of words (e. g. dictionary definition). This idea is too simple and incomplete because 1) linguistic knowledge (about the meaning of the words) is

different from encyclopedic knowledge ( about the way the world is ), e. g. whether whale is regarded as fish or mammal, we know it is dangerous; 2) contribution of context to meaning, e. g. different interpretations for “Marvelous weather you have here on the island”. Semantic analysis must be more complicated than attaching definitions to linguistic expressions.

Modern linguistic description has different levels of analysis: phonology, syntax, and semantics. **Semantics** is generally defined as the study of meaning, which has always been a central topic in human scholarship. But a distinction is usually made between two different approaches to meaning. **Linguistic semantics** is the approach in which more attention is paid to the meaning to the linguistic units themselves, words and sentence in particular. **Logical semantics** is the approach more concerned with the relationship between linguistic expressions and the phenomena in the world to which they refer, and the condition under which such expressions can be said to be true or false.

This book is entitled “Meaning, Structure and Cognition” on the basis of the relationship between semantics and language. Semantics is generally regarded as the study of meaning communicated through language. Since language is a system, semantics also refers to the study of the systematic ways those meanings are expressed in language. Semantics has to deal with the syntax and function of language. But cognitive linguists claim that language is a way of externalizing general mechanisms of the brain. Our mind categorizes the world and some of these conceptualizations become conventionalized, shared by people. This is how meaning arises, ( Lakoff, 1987a ) so semantics should study thinking and cognition.

## 1.2 Linguistic starting point for semantics

**Two principles of modern linguistic approach to semantics:**

- 1) There is no escape from language;
- 2) Seeing the task of language as the explication ( explanation ) of the linguistic competence of the native speaker of a language.

Leech (1981) argues that the study of meaning should be free from subservience to other disciplines. This leads naturally to the challenge: "How then should meaning be studied? What sort of questions should we be trying to answer in setting up a theory of meaning? What principles should form its foundations?" Leech's attitude is "the search for an explanation of linguistic phenomena in terms of what is not language is as vain as the search for an exit from a room which has no doors or windows, for the word 'explanation' itself implies a statement in language".

**Paraphrase or synonymy:** sameness of meaning. e. g. "The defects of the plan were obvious" is a paraphrase of "the demerits of the scheme were evident".

**Entailment and presupposition:** types of meaning dependence holding between one utterance and another. e. g. "The earth goes round the sun" entails "The earth moves". "John's son is called Marcus" presupposes "John has a son".

**Logical inconsistency:** a type of semantic contrastiveness between utterances. "The earth goes round the sun" is inconsistent with "The earth is stationary".

**Tautology:** a statement which has to be true by virtue of its meaning alone. e. g. "Monday came before the day which followed



it" is communicatively empty.

**Contradiction:** statements that are, by virtue of meaning, necessarily false. e. g. "Everything I like I dislike" and "My brother had a toothache in his toe" are not just informationally vacuous, but are downright nonsensical.

### 1.3 Language and the real world

For the linguist, as for the philosopher, a crucial difficulty lies in drawing a boundary not simply between sense and nonsense, but between the kind of nonsense that arises from contradicting what we know about the language and meaning, and the kind of nonsense that comes from contradicting what we know about the "real world". For example,

- (1.1) a. My uncle always sleeps standing on one toe.
- b. My uncle always sleeps awake.

Sentence (1.1a) would be unbelievable because of what we know about the world we live in, more specifically about the posture in which sleep is possible. Sentence (1.1b) would be more than unbelievable. It would point to the unimaginable, because of the contradiction between the meanings of *sleep* and *awake*.

But the difference felt between (1.1a) and (1.1b) above is brought out in the different strategies we adopt in trying to make sense of them. It seems to be an incontrovertible principle of semantics that the human mind abhors a vacuum of sense; so a speaker of English faced with absurd sentences will strain his interpretative faculty to the utmost to read them meaningfully.

For (1.1a), two strategies of interpretation seem possible. The