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# Meaning in English

AN INTRODUCTION

Javier Valenzuela

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### An Introduction

This lively, compact textbook introduces readers to semantics – the study of how we construct meaning in communication. Easy to follow, and with a clear structure, it explains formal terminology in a simple and understandable way, without using formal notation or logic, and draws on dozens of examples from up-to-date empirical research findings. Offering a tight integration of classic semantic issues with cognitive science, Javier Valenzuela provides a complete and coherent overview of the main topics in this area, including a review of the empirical methods used in semantic theorizing and discussions of both non-traditional and new topics such as how meaning is acquired by children and how meaning is constructed cross-linguistically. Featuring illustrations, exercises, activities, suggestions for further reading, highlighted key terms and a comprehensive glossary, this book is accessible to beginners and undergraduates, including those from non-linguistic backgrounds with no prior knowledge of linguistic analysis. It will be an essential resource for courses in English language, English studies, linguistics and the cognitive sciences.

JAVIER VALENZUELA is a Tenured Professor in Linguistics at the University of Murcia. He is the author of *Lingüística y cognición: el lenguaje desde la lingüística cognitiva* (with Iraide Ibarretxe-Antuñano, forthcoming, 2017) and editor of *Lingüística Cognitiva* (with Iraide Ibarretxe-Antuñano, 2012) and he has published in journals including *Cognitive Science*, *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* and *Language Sciences*. He also served as President of the Spanish Cognitive Linguistics Association from 2012 to 2016.

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Cambridge Introductions to the English Language is a series of accessible undergraduate textbooks on the key topics encountered in the study of the English language. Tailored to suit the needs of individual taught course modules, each book is written by an author with extensive experience of teaching the topic to undergraduates. The books assume no prior subject knowledge, and present the basic facts in a clear and straightforward manner, making them ideal for beginners. They are designed to be maximally reader-friendly, with chapter summaries, glossaries and suggestions for further reading. Extensive exercises and discussion questions are included, encouraging students to consolidate and develop their learning, and providing essential homework material. A website accompanies each book, featuring solutions to the exercises and useful additional resources. Set to become the leading introductions to the field, books in this series provide the essential knowledge and skills for those embarking on English Language studies.

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*The Sound Structure of English* Chris McCully

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## Preface

When I was commissioned by Cambridge University Press to write an introduction to semantics, I was elated; I knew I was in for a great ride. This is the case even if I was perfectly aware of an unavoidable fact: it's impossible to write an introduction to semantics that will satisfy everybody. Many great scholars will feel you are ignoring them (or more probably, just plain wrong about your choices). While it's evident that different traditions have very smart people in their camps who cannot be completely wrong, there's really no way around it: in a book like this, you have to choose sides. And then face the music.

So, as expected, some level of disagreement can be found in almost any topic in semantics we choose: whether the tools of logic are useful or not; whether meaning is something embodied or symbolic, whether metaphor is useful or useless, whether semantics and pragmatics are to be distinguished or not, whether language influences thought significantly or not, and a very long etcetera. That's why I said that writing a book on semantics (especially an introduction, where there's not much space to give all possibilities their due), is probably a surefire way of creating enemies. Well, that's life.

I am in complete agreement with the saying that 'education is not the filling of a vessel, but the lighting of a fire'. This is the approach I've tried to take here: even more important than the facts themselves is the feeling of excitement and enthusiasm that emanates from all the work that is being carried out in the field right now. As I see it, the story of semantics is not a mere recollection of facts from the past, but something that is being written in these very moments. I firmly believe these are topics that are central to our understanding of language, our minds and ourselves, and in this sense, they should be interesting for just about anyone (especially for anyone interested in how language and our minds work).

A great deal of effort in this book has gone into two goals: first, aiming for an explanation of topics accessible to anyone, while trying to avoid oversimplification at the same time. This is really tricky, because most issues in semantics are notoriously complicated and each single point can be modified, qualified and nuanced *ad nauseam*. The second goal has been trying to provide an 'organic' feel to the whole book. As much as possible, I have tried to convey a coherent and homogenous view of how meaning is constructed and expressed, and how it structures our cognition. This is why there are a number of (intended) recurrences throughout the book: frames are mentioned in Chapters 4, 5, 8 and 9; intention-reading in Chapters 6 and 9; the distinction between symbolic and embodied approaches show up in Chapters 1, 2 and 3, 7 and 8; metaphor is mentioned in chapters 2, 5, 6 and 7, and so on. The objective is to let the reader perceive semantics as a single system, more than as a collection of unrelated phenomena.

On a more practical note, the book can be read by anyone on their own, or be taught by an experienced teacher. There are suggested answers to the exercises on the book's website; for instructors, there are also some suggested activities that have worked wonderfully for me during the years. Oh, and I'm also thinking about starting a t-shirt company with some of the great illustrations that my friend Sergio has created for the book.

But the conclusion, again, is that I had a great time writing it, and I hope that all my readers will enjoy it as much as I did.

# Acknowledgments

This book is the result of many years of teaching semantics, which means that I have a lot of people to thank: many friends and colleagues have helped shape my view of language throughout the years. First among them should be Joe Hilferty; but also Iraide Ibarretxe, Ana Rojo, Cristina Soriano, Julio Santiago, Paco Calvo and Cristóbal Pagán, who have informed me and often challenged my views (and continue to do so). Liz Murphy, Jose Antonio Mompeán (and Joe and Iraide again) have helped me sound a bit less foreign. Many people in Cambridge University Press have been really helpful and offered great collaboration; Helen Barton should be mentioned in the first place, but also three anonymous reviewers who provided many suggestions which I have been grateful to accept; many thanks also go to Valerie Appleby and Jennifer Miles Davis. On a more formal note, I gracefully acknowledge the help of the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness under Grants FFI2013-45553-C3-1-P & FFI2015-70876-P and the Fundación Séneca under grant 19482/PHCS/14.

And last but not least, thanks to my students, for their explicit feedback, for their blank stares informing me when the material was too hard or too boring, and for the twinkle in their eyes telling me I was on the right track.

*Abbreviations, Key Terms and Further Reading*

## 1.1 Some Preliminaries

Meaning controls memory and perception. Meaning is the goal of communication. Meaning underlies social activities and culture. To a great degree, what distinguishes human cultures are the meanings they give to natural phenomena, artifacts, and human relations. (Glenberg and Robertson, 2000)

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# What is Semantics?

## In this chapter ...

In this chapter, we introduce the subject of semantics, stressing its essential role in linguistics and other cognitive disciplines. We will look at some common definitions, and will come up with a list of questions about meaning that we would be interested in answering. We also review briefly the place of semantic studies in linguistic theorizing in the last century; in order to get a feel of the difficulties involved in semantic analysis, we will examine the meaning of a single word. The second part of the chapter will be devoted to reviewing the ways in which meaning can be expressed, both non-linguistically (introducing the discipline of semiotics) and linguistically, examining the different types of meaning expressed by the different linguistic levels (phonology, morphology, lexicon and syntax). The chapter ends with some notes on the general organization of the book.

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## 1.1 Some Preliminaries

Meaning controls memory and perception. Meaning is the goal of communication. Meaning underlies social activities and culture. To a great degree, what distinguishes human cultures are the meanings they give to natural phenomena, artifacts, and human relations (Glenberg and Robertson, 2000).



The importance of semantics for the study of language cannot be overstated. Understanding how we construct meanings from the words and expressions we hear can be said to be the core of linguistic studies, since it amounts to understanding how language performs its main task, which is to convey meaning. Semantics is thus essential for all aspects of language study: how language is acquired (be it a first language or a second one) and how it is structured; how language changes over time and how it varies in different social contexts; how languages should be taught and how we (or machines) translate it; how language-related conditions such as aphasia work, etc. You could say that semantics lies at the very heart of the study of language. The practical applications of knowing in an accurate and detailed way how people associate their thoughts to linguistic objects, and how hearers use those objects to recover the intended meaning in a communicative exchange, are obviously enormous. Semantic search in the web has been called ‘the holy grail of computer-assisted research’ (McCloskey, 2013); natural-language computer query systems such as Apple’s Siri or IBM’s Watson would be delighted to have a complete story of how meaning really works.

But semantics goes even further than that: it is also relevant for learning about the way in which we structure our thoughts. Indeed, many authors think that there are deep connections between our language and our conceptual structure and that semantics is a window that allows us to peek into the functioning of a substantial part of our cognitive system. Language has been shown to be one of the driving forces in our evolution, influencing our hearing range and the specific shape of our larynx and our vocal organs. In all probability, our semantic system and our brain structure also co-evolved, transforming us into the species we are today. The capacity to produce and understand language seems to be uniquely human, distinguishing our species from other animals in our world. It is thus easy to understand why the problem of meaning has stirred the interest of scholars of many different traditions, including philosophers, linguists, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and neuroscientists, among other scholars.

The present book will provide an overview of the main areas of interest of semantics, specifying the main mechanisms involved in meaning production and comprehension, and the methodologies used to learn about these mechanisms, pointing along the way to the connections with a variety of neighbouring disciplines, such as linguistics, psychology, philosophy and neuroscience.

## 1.2 What is Semantics? Some Definitions

Many introductions to semantics begin by asking the following question: *what is semantics?* What does semantics actually study? This seems like



Table 1.1 *Some Definitions of Semantics*

Semantics is the study of meaning	Lyons (1977)
Semantics is the study of meaning in language	Hurford and Heasley (1983)
Semantics is the study of meaning communicated through language	Saeed (1997)
Semantics is the part of linguistics that is concerned with meaning	Löbner (2002)
Linguistic semantics is the study of literal, decontextualized, grammatical meaning	Frawley (1992)
Linguistic semantics is the study of how languages organize and express meanings	Kreidler (1998)

a sensible way to start a course on semantics, so we can begin by looking at some of the answers that different authors provide.

Table 1.1 provides a selection of definitions. As can be immediately noticed, there is no complete agreement. For some authors, semantics concerns the study of meaning as communicated through language, while for some others, semantics studies *all* aspects of meaning and they have to add the label ‘linguistic’ to arrive at a more precise definition. However, probably most authors would agree with Kreidler’s definition (to choose just one of them): *linguistic semantics is the study of how languages organize and express meanings*.

This leaves us with a second question, though: what do we understand by ‘meaning’? What are those ‘meanings’ that are organized and expressed by languages? In very general terms, speaking consists of communicating information: somebody (the speaker) has something in his/her mind (an idea, a feeling, an intention, or whatever), and decides to communicate it linguistically. Vocal noises are then emitted that are heard by a second person (the hearer), who seems to ‘translate’ these noises back into ideas, with the result being that this hearer somehow knows what the first person had in mind. That ‘something’ that was at first in the speaker’s mind and now is also in the hearer’s mind is what we call meaning. What can it be? The problem is that it can be virtually anything: objects (concrete, abstract or imaginary), events and states (past, present, future or hypothetical) or all sorts of properties of objects, feelings, emotions, intentions, locations, etc. We can talk about anything we can think of (or perhaps almost). And even if we were to arrive at a rough idea of what meaning is, we would nevertheless have another list of questions waiting in line. These are some of them, in no particular order:

- How can the meaning of a given word or expression be defined or measured?
- How can the meaning of a word or expression be represented?