

Introducing English Semantics

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Preface

This textbook is intended to introduce principles of linguistic semantics at university level. In writing it I have had two groups of students in mind: I hope it will be useful for imparting a knowledge of semantics to students specializing in linguistics and that it also can be used in a general liberal-arts curriculum, in a course that leads non-specialists to think about the nature of language as they might otherwise not do. Little or no background in linguistics is assumed.

As the title suggests, the book differs from any other text now in print in its special focus on the English language and in the attention it gives to the lexical and grammatical devices that English employs to express meanings. Students should finish the course with a sense of what semantics is about and how semantic analysis is done; they should also have a deeper appreciation of English and of the nature of language in general.

I have avoided extensive formalism or an overly theoretical framework. And, since the field of semantics includes much more than an introductory text can cover, some instructors will want to supplement what is here. I hope the suggested reading lists at the end of each chapter will be of use for that purpose.

Learning linguistics requires a heavy involvement with data – words, phrases, sentences and more extended discourse – and I have tried to provide these both in the presentation of



PREFACE

concepts and in material for practice. The discussion, throughout the book, is carried along through numerous illustrative sentences which serve as points of departure for the concepts and definitions introduced. Technical terms are given in bold when they are first introduced; the most important of these are explained in the Glossary at the end of the book. When an asterisk precedes a phrase or sentence, it indicates that the construction is not acceptable; it is something that speakers of English do not say. Practice exercises in every chapter call on students to participate continually in the development of topics, mainly by leading them to examine their own use of the English language. Some of the exercises have obvious answers; in other instances it will be found that speakers of the language do not entirely agree about some meaning, or are not sure. Here group discussion can be a valuable part of the learning experience.

I am grateful to a number of anonymous readers of the manuscript for helpful suggestions and indeed for making me see my own weaknesses and strengths. The staff of Routledge have been remarkably kind and smoothly efficient in bringing this work to publication. Responsibility for the contents rests with me, of course.

C. W. K.

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The study of meaning

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In this chapter we consider different approaches to the investigation of meaning. Linguistic semantics, the approach taken in this book, is concerned with what knowledge individual speakers of a language possess which makes it possible for them to communicate with one another. This leads us to a brief consideration of what language is and how a child acquires it. Finally we demonstrate some of the knowledge that all speakers have about the nature and expression of meaning in their language.

1.1 The systematic study of meaning

We are all necessarily interested in meaning. We wonder about the meaning of a new word. Sometimes we are not sure about the message we should get from something we read or hear, and we are concerned about getting our own messages across to others. We find pleasure in jokes, which often depend for their humor on double meanings of words or ambiguities in sentences. Commercial organizations spend a lot of effort and money on naming products, devising slogans, and creating messages that will be meaningful to the buying public. Legal scholars argue about the interpretation – that is, the meaning – of a law or a judicial decision. Literary scholars quarrel similarly over the meaning of some poem or story.

Three disciplines are concerned with the systematic study of ‘meaning’ in itself: psychology, philosophy and linguistics. Their particular interests and approaches are different, yet each borrows from and contributes to the others.

Psychologists are interested in how individual humans learn, how they retain, recall, or lose information; how they classify, make judgements and solve problems – in other words, how the human mind seeks meanings and works with them.

Philosophers of language are concerned with how we know, how any particular fact that we know or accept as true is related to

other possible facts – what must be antecedent (a presupposition) to that fact and what is a likely consequence, or entailment of it; what statements are mutually contradictory, which sentences express the same meaning in different words, and which are unrelated. (There is more about presupposition and entailment later in this chapter.)

Linguists want to understand how language works. Just what common knowledge do two people possess when they share a language – English, Swahili, Korean or whatever – that makes it possible for them to give and get information, to express their feelings and their intentions to one another, and to be understood with a fair degree of success? Linguistics is concerned with identifying the meaningful elements of specific languages, for example, English words like *paint* and *happy* and affixes like the *-er* of *painter* and the *un-* of *unhappy*. It is concerned with describing how such elements go together to express more complex meanings – in phrases like *the unhappy painter* and sentences like *The painter is unhappy* – and telling how these are related to each other. Linguistics also deals with the meanings expressed by modulations of a speaker's voice and the processes by which hearers and readers relate new information to the information they already have.

Semantics is the systematic study of meaning, and linguistic semantics is the study of how languages organize and express meanings. Linguistic semantics is the topic of this book, but we need to limit ourselves to the expression of meanings in a single language, English. Here and there throughout the book we make comparisons with other languages, but these are meant to be illustrative of language differences, not full accounts of what differences exist.

1.2 The nature of language

All animals have some system for communicating with other members of their species, but only humans have a language which allows them to produce and understand ever-new messages and to do so without any outside stimulus. Bees, birds, dolphins and chimpanzees, among other animals, transmit and interpret a fixed number of messages that signal friendliness or hostility, the presence of food or of danger, or have to do with mating and care of offspring. But human language differs from these animal communication systems in two crucial ways (Hockett 1957: 574–85; Bickerton 1990:

10–16). First, animals can communicate only in response to some particular stimulus. Bees, when they have located a source of nectar in some group of plants, fly back to their hive and report this discovery by doing a dance that indicates the approximate direction and distance to the site, but in general non-human communication takes place on the spot, and is concerned with what is immediately present. No animal can tell another one about past experiences, and still less are they able to communicate their plans for the future. Humans alone are able to talk about vast numbers of things which come from accumulated knowledge, memory and imagination. Human language is **stimulus-free**. Second, while animals have only a fixed repertoire of messages, human language is **creative**: we are always producing new utterances which others understand; we comprehend new sentences which others have produced (as you understand this sentence, though it is not likely you have read it before).

The importance of stimulus-freedom and creativity is often overlooked. Throughout history various thinkers have tried to describe and explain language as if language is only related to the phenomenal world, the objects and events that we can observe through our senses. The simple fact is that the human mind deals easily and frequently with what does not exist, or what does not yet exist. Nobody can explain just how people are able to abstract elements from their sensory world and put these elements together in ways that are partly familiar, partly new. Yet that is just what happens when the architect envisions a building not yet erected, the composer puts together a concerto that is still to be played, a writer devises a story about imaginary people doing imaginary things, or when all of us take delight in nonsense and concoct names for things that might exist or might not.

The productivity of language is due to another feature which distinguishes our communication from that of other animals. While some bird songs are different arrangements of a repertory of elements, generally each signal emitted by a dog or donkey or dolphin is an indivisible unit, different from any other signal that the animal may utter. Human utterances, on the other hand, are composed of interchangeable units on two levels. An utterance consists of words in a particular sequence (at least one word and usually more than one), and a word consists of sound-units, or phonemes, in a particular order. A fairly small number of phonemes, which are

meaningless, combine to make a vast number of meaningful words; for example, the English words *pat*, *tap* and *apt* consist of the same three phonemes, differently arranged, and these three phonemes occur over and over in combinations with a relatively small number of other phonemes to make up thousands of combinations that we call words.

This freedom from context is possible only because language is conventional, or has the feature of **arbitrariness**. There is no natural relation between the word *goat*, for instance, and what that word designates. Since ancient times people have been arguing about whether language is 'natural' or not. We can only conclude that it is natural for humans to have language – that a human child has a natural propensity to acquire the language which is used by the members of its family. But the ways in which meanings are communicated through language are not natural, nor is one language more natural than another.

All human societies have language and – contrary to some popular but unfounded opinions – every known language is complex and subtle, capable of expressing whatever its speakers need to express and capable of changing to meet the changing needs of the speakers.

1.3 Language and the individual

Every human child, with a few pathological exceptions, learns the language of the society in which it grows up. A child acquires the fundamentals of that language in the first five or six years of life – perhaps the greatest intellectual feat of its lifetime. How the child does this is one of the most intriguing puzzles in the study of human nature. All we know is that the child follows a general timetable in the process of acquisition. Just as the baby sits up, then crawls, stands and walks according to an innate timetable, so the child, at about the age of twelve months, begins to imitate its parents' ways of naming what is in the environment (*bed, bottle, doll, baby, mama*, etc.) and of telling the characteristics and events in which these things can be observed (*wet, empty, up, sit, all-gone*). Children who can hear learn speech and deaf children learn sign language, provided they are exposed to a medium which they can perceive. By the age of eighteen months the child is likely to be producing two-word utterances (*Baby*

up, Daddy byebye, Mama shoes, Dolly sit). Soon utterances become more and more complex, and these utterances are clearly invented, not just repetitions of what parents may have said. Processes like making questions and negative statements are acquired – processes that go beyond a mere reflection of what is in the environment and make it possible for the child to express himself and interact with others (Lenneberg 1967; Clark and Clark 1977: 295–403).

The child acquires the ability to make use, as speaker and hearer, of the most important communication system of the community. Through this possession the individual enjoys a life of being able to inform, to express feelings and thoughts, perhaps to influence others in smaller or larger ways, and to learn.

Our ability to use language and our ability to think and conceptualize, develop at the same time and these abilities depend on each other. So, while we may retain some memory of learning to read and write, which we began around the age of six, we do not remember learning to understand what was spoken to us in the first four or five years of life and still less our struggles to speak. Thus it happens that the knowledge which each of us has about our native language is partly conscious and explicit but to a large extent unconscious and implicit. We know the language but we do not fully know what we know. We know in the sense that we successfully communicate our intentions to others and we correctly interpret what others tell us – we know how to use the language. But we are not likely to be cognizant of the multiple meanings that common words can have, of the ways in which words are related to one another, of all the potential ambiguities that are always lurking in language.

Because language is creative, our communication is not restricted to a fixed set of topics; we constantly produce and understand new messages in response to new situations and new experiences. At the same time, language use is subject to very specific rules and constraints. There seems to be an infinite number of things we can say, but a language does not have an infinite number of words nor an infinite number of ways of combining words. If it had, we could not learn it.

What is the knowledge that a speaker of a language has about that language? Quite simply, a vocabulary and the ways to use it. More specifically, speakers have two vocabularies, one that they use in producing utterances and a somewhat larger one that is needed for understanding a variety of people. The vocabulary contains numerous

names of people and places, as well as what we might think of as ordinary words. The productive vocabulary grows rapidly in early childhood, and for most people changes somewhat throughout life.

And what knowledge does one have that makes one capable of using the vocabulary, productively and receptively? We have to know how to combine the vocabulary items into utterances that will carry meanings for others and we have to grasp the meanings of complex utterances that others produce. With this goes the knowledge of how to pronounce words and utterances and how to recognize the pronunciation of words and utterances produced by others. So, for every word that speakers know, for production or recognition, they must know the pronunciation, how it fits into various utterances, and what it means.

Because we acquire our native language so early in life, our knowledge is mostly implicit. The linguist's task is to explicate this implicit knowledge. To describe a language the linguist writes a grammar. As Chomsky and Halle (1968: 1) put it, we use the term **grammar** to mean two things: the implicit knowledge that a speaker has and the explicit description and explanation of it by the linguist.

Whether we think of the grammar of a language as the knowledge that every speaker of the language has, or the explicit description made by a linguist, or both, the grammar must contain three parts. One part, of course, is semantics, the knowledge (from the point of view of the individual who speaks and hears others speaking), or the description (from a linguist's point of view), of meaningful units like words and meaningful combinations of words like sentences. This whole book is about semantics; here it is more appropriate to consider the other parts of a grammar.

Phonology is the knowledge, or the description, of how speech sounds are organized in a particular language – there are units called phonemes which combine in various possible ways (but not all possible ways) to express meaningful units such as words. These phonemes contrast with one another to make different units of meaning. Sometimes two words sound the same but have different meanings (homonyms), and sometimes sequences of words with the same pronunciation have different interpretations (ambiguity). We discuss homonyms in Chapter 3 and ambiguity in Chapters 3, 7 and 8. One part of phonology is prosody, the melodies with which utterances are spoken; different melodies can make differences of meaning. There is a section on prosody in Chapter 2.