JOHN LYONS

Semantics

2

SEMANTICS

Volume 2

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Typographical conventions

SMALL CAPITALS

For sense-components and other more abstract elements, or correlates, of meaning (cf. 9.9).

Italics
1. For forms (as distinct from lexemes or expressions: cf. 1.5) in their orthographic representation.
2. For certain mathematical and logical symbols, according to standard conventions.

Single quotation-marks
1. For lexemes and expressions (cf. 1.5).
2. For the citation of sentences (i.e. system-sentences: cf. 1.6).
3. For titles of articles.

Double quotation-marks
1. For meanings (cf. 1.5).
2. For propositions (cf. 6.2).
3. For quotations from other authors.

Asterisk
For technical terms when first introduced and occasionally thereafter to remind the reader of their technical sense.

Notes
1. When a term has been furnished with an asterisk, single quotation-marks are not used.
2. Single quotation-marks are omitted when a sentence, expression or lexeme is numbered and set on a different line; but italics and double quotation-marks are still used in such circumstances.
3. In quotations from other authors, the original typographical conventions have usually been preserved. Occasionally adjustments have been made in order to avoid confusion or ambiguity.

Preface

When I began writing this book six years ago, it was my intention to produce a fairly short one-volume introduction to semantics which might serve the needs of students in several disciplines and might be of interest to the general reader. The work that I have in fact produced is far longer, though in certain respects it is less comprehensive, than I originally anticipated; and for that reason it is being published in two volumes.

Volume 1 is, for the most part, more general than Volume 2; and it is relatively self-contained. In the first seven chapters, I have done my best, within the limitations of the space available, to set semantics within the more general framework of semiotics (here defined as the investigation of both human and non-human signalling-systems); and I have tried to extract from what ethologists, psychologists, philosophers, anthropologists and linguists have had to say about meaning and communication something that amounts to a consistent, if rather eclectic, approach to semantics. One if the biggest problems that I have had in writing this section of the book has been terminological. It is frequently the case in the literature of semantics and semiotics that the same terms are employed in quite different senses by different authors or that there are several alternatives for what is essentially the same phenomenon. All I can say is that I have been as careful as possible in selecting between alternative terms or alternative interpretations of the same terms and, within the limits of my own knowledge of the field, in drawing the reader's attention to certain terminological pitfalls. At one time, I had hoped to be able to follow the practice of never using non-technically any word that was also employed anywhere in the book in some technical sense or other. I soon had to abandon this rather quixotic ambition! Some of the most ordinary words of English (e.g. 'case', 'feature', 'aspect') are employed in a highly specialized sense in lin-

guistics and related disciplines; and, however hard I tried, I found it impossible to get by without them. I trust that the context (and the device of using asterisks for introducing technical terms) will reduce, if it does not entirely eliminate, ambiguity and the possibility of mis-understanding.

The last two chapters of Volume 1 are devoted to structural semantics (or, more precisely, to structural lexicology). This is a topic that I have been concerned with, on and off, for the best part of 20 years; and, although the so-called structuralist approach to semantics is no longer as fashionable among linguists as it once was, I still believe that it has much to contribute to the analysis of language.

Volume 2 may be read, independently of Volume 1, by anyone who is already familiar with, or is prepared to take on trust, notions and distinctions explained in Volume 1. In Volume 2, which (apart from the chapter on Context, Style and Culture) is concerned with semantics from a fairly narrowly linguistic point of view, I have been tempted to do something more than merely clarify and systematize the work of others; and this accounts for the fact that the book, as a whole, has taken me far longer to write than I had expected it to take. Five of the eight chapters in Volume 2 – two of the three chapters on Semantics and Grammar, the chapter on Deixis, Space and Time, the chapter on Mood and Illocutionary Force, and the chapter on Modality – contain sections in which, unless I am mistaken, there are a few ideas of my own. *Caveat lector!*

As I have said, the book is, in certain respects, less comprehensive than I intended. There is nothing on etymology and historical seman-tics, or on synonymy; and there is very little on the structure of texts (or so-called text-linguistics), or on metaphor and style. If I had dealt with these topics, I should have had to make my book even longer. Sometimes one must stop even if one has not finished!

As I write this Preface, I am all too conscious of having just moved from Edinburgh where I have now spent twelve years, in one of the finest Departments of Linguistics in the world. Throughout this time I have benefited, in my writing and in my teaching, from the advice and criticisms of my colleagues in several Departments. Many of them have helped me, as far as the present book is concerned, by reading sections of it for me in draft and commenting upon them or by discussing (and in some instances originating) the ideas that have found their way into my text: John Anderson, R. E. Asher, Martin Atkinson, Gillian Brown, Keith Brown, John Christie, Kit Fine, Patrick Griffiths, Stephen Isard,

W. E. Jones, John Laver, Christopher Longuet-Higgins, J. E. Miller, Keith Mitchell, Barry Richards, and James Thorne. Ron Asher and Bill Jones have been especially helpful: each of them has read the whole typescript; and Bill Jones has undertaken to do the index for me. Apart from these Edinburgh and ex-Edinburgh colleagues, there are many others to whom I am indebted for their comments on drafts of parts of the book: Harry Bracken, Simon Dik, R. M. Dixon, Françoise Dubois-Charlier, Newton Garver, Gerald Gazdar, Arnold Glass, F. W. Householder, Rodney Huddleston, R. A. Hudson, Ruth Kempson, Geoffrey Leech, Adrienne Lehrer, David Makinson, P. H. Matthews, G. A. Miller, R. H. Robins, Geoffrey Sampson, the late Stephen Ullmann, Anthony Warner. There are doubtless many errors and inadequacies that remain but without the aid of so many friends, whose specialized knowledge in many of the relevant fields is far greater than my own, I should have gone astray more often than I have done.

Like all teachers, I have learned more from my students over the years than they have learned from me. It has been my privilege to conduct several research seminars and to supervise a fair number of Ph.D. dissertations on semantics during the period when I was writing this book. Two of my students I must mention by name, since I am very conscious of having derived directly from them some of the points that appear in the book: Marilyn Jessen and Cláudia Guimãraes de Lemos. I have no doubt, however, that others of my students are also responsible for much of what I think of as being original in the second volume.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to Rena Somerville who, as my secretary in the last few years (the best secretary that I have ever had), has typed so many versions of certain sections of my manuscript that she could probably reproduce at least the gist of them from memory! Much of this work she has done at home in the evenings and at the week-end: I trust that her family will forgive me for the time that I have stolen from them in this way.

Without the specialized assistance provided by the Cambridge University Press this book would never have seen the light of day. Jeremy Mynott read both volumes in typescript and made many valuable editorial suggestions. Penny Carter was responsible for the sub-editing and had to cope with far more inconsistencies and handwritten changes in the typescript than an author should have been allowed to make. I am grateful to both of them for their help and their forbearance.

Finally, I must record my gratitude to my wife and children for their willingness to put up with my frequent bouts of depression, ill-temper

or sheer absent-mindedness while I was writing the book and the postponement of so many promised outings and holidays. More particularly, I wish to thank my wife for the love and support that she has always given me, in my writing as in everything.

Falmer, Sussex   J.L.
February 1977

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Semantics and grammar I

10.1. *Levels of analysis*

Most linguists distinguish at least three levels* of structure in their analysis of sentences: the phonological, the syntactic and the semantic.[1] To these three they may or may not add morphology to serve as a bridge between the syntax and the phonology in particular languages.

Looked at from the point of view of its phonological structure, every sentence may be represented as a sequence of phonemes with a certain prosodic contour superimposed upon it (cf. 3.1). The phonemes of a language are conventionally represented by means of letters enclosed within a pair of oblique strokes. For example, there is in English a phoneme /b/ which occurs in the initial position of the forms *bed*, *bread*, *boil*, etc., and is pronounced as a bilabial, voiced, non-nasal stop; and this phoneme, like all the other phonemes of English, has a characteristic distribution throughout the word-forms of the language. It is part of the phonologist's job to list, for the language that he is describing, all the phonemes that occur in that language and to specify the principles which determine their co-occurrence, or combination, in actual and potential word-forms. He will tell us, for example, that the combination of /b/ with /n/ is impossible in the first two positions of English word-forms; and he may account for this in terms of the more general principle that stop consonants do not precede nasal consonants in English at the beginning of a syllable. Not only is there no actual word-form which, if it did occur, might be written *bnit*. The existence of such a form (in any dialect or accent of English) is prohibited by the phonological regularities of the language.

In contrast with such phonologically impossible forms as /bnit/, there are very many forms whose non-occurrence in English is, from the phonologist's point of view, inexplicable: /blit/, /prek/, /stin/, etc. They are potential word-forms of English that have not been actualized.

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[1] For the use of asterisks, see the list of Typographical Conventions, p. x.

The phonologist must not only account for the phonological accept-ability of the totality of potential word-forms in the language that he is describing. He must also account for such prosodic features as stress and intonation. Every sentence of English, if it is produced as a spoken utterance, must be uttered with one of a limited set of stress-patterns and intonation-patterns; and these patterns (as well as a variety of other features that we have described as paralinguistic: 3.2) play an essential part in the interpretation of spoken utterances in all languages.

Whether stress and intonation are more appropriately handled as part of the structure of sentences or as part of another layer of structure that is superimposed upon sentences in the course of their utterance is a question that we need not go into here. Like most linguists we take the view that at least some part of what is covered by the term 'prosodic' should be handled in describing the structure of sentences. Since sen-tences are cited here in their standard orthographic form, which does not allow for the representation of stress and intonation, it must be constantly borne in mind that every sentence is assumed to have associated with it an appropriate representation of its prosodic structure. For convenience, and without making any attempt to justify this terminological decision on theoretical or methodological grounds, we will allow for the possibility that the same sentence may have several different prosodic patterns superimposed upon it. If the reader prefers to think of a set of different sentences, rather than a single sentence associated with a set of distinct prosodic patterns superimposed upon it, he is free to do so: none of the theoretical points made in this book rests upon our adopting one view of sentences rather than the other.

It is more difficult to say what syntax is without getting involved in irrelevant theoretical controversies than it is to give a rough-and-ready account of what comes within the scope of phonology. The boundary between syntax and semantics has long been, and remains, the subject of dispute. It is interesting, in this connexion, to note that linguists have never experienced the same kind of problem in drawing a distinction between phonology and syntax. They have argued, at times, about the necessity or possibility of describing the phonological structure of utterances without reference to their syntactic structure or their mean-ing. But the arguments have been very largely methodological; and the adoption of one methodological position, rather than another, does not radically affect our view of the scope of phonology. No linguist would seriously maintain, for example, that such strings of forms as *the mouses has came* (in an appropriate phonemic representation) are phonologically

unacceptable in English. Each of the word-forms is an actual form of English (cf. *mouse's*, *louses*, *louse's*); and there is no way of ruling out this string in terms of permissible and impermissible combinations of phonemes. The point is that the distinction between phonology and syntax depends upon the acknowledged properties of duality* and arbitrariness* that are found, to a greater or less degree, in all human languages (cf. 3.4). We could, in principle, change the phonological structure of every word-form in a language without affecting in any way at all the distribution of the resultant word-forms throughout the sentences of the language or the meaning of the sentences; and this is done, commonly and successfully, for the written language, by means of simple codes and ciphers based on the principle of substitution. What cannot be done, it would appear, is to change the distribution* of all the word-forms in a language whilst holding constant the meaning of the lexemes of which they are forms or to change the meaning of the lexemes without affecting the distribution of the associated word-forms (cf. Householder, 1962).[2] The theoretical conclusion to be drawn from this fact is that there is an intrinsic connexion between the meaning of words and their distribution; and it is for this reason that it is difficult to draw the boundary between syntax and semantics.

But we have still not said what syntax is. Let us adopt, for the moment, the following definition: by the syntax* of a language is to be understood a set of rules which accounts for the distribution of word-forms throughout the sentences of the language in terms of the permissible combinations of classes of word-forms. This definition, it will be observed, does not say anything about the nature of the rules or whether they make any appeal to the meaning of lexemes. These questions will be taken up later. For the present, it is sufficient to note that a syntactically acceptable sentence is a string of word-forms which satisfies the following two conditions: (i) that each of the word-forms is a member of some form-class*; (ii) that the word-forms occur in positions that are defined to be acceptable for the form-classes of which they are members. Let us assume, for example: (i) that *the* is a member of the form-class Article (Art), *boy* is a member of the form-class Singular Noun (NSing), *runs* is a member of the form-class Present-Tense, Third-Person Singular, Intransitive Verb (VIn3SingPres) and *fast* is a member of the form-class Adverb of Manner (AdvMann); and that (ii) the syntactic rules of English define the string of form-classes

[2] The distribution of a unit is the set of contexts in which it occurs throughout the well-formed sentences of the language (cf. Lyons, 1968: 70ff, 143ff).

Art+NSing+VIn3SingPres+AdvMann

to be syntactically well-formed. If, and only if, these two conditions are satisfied is *The boy runs fast* defined to be a syntactically acceptable sentence of English.

Form-classes should not be confused with parts of speech: nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.[3] The parts of speech are classes of lexemes ('boy', 'sing', 'pretty', etc.), not classes of forms (*boy, boys*; *sing, sings, sang, sung*; *pretty, prettier, prettiest*; etc.). What then, it may be asked, is the relationship between the two kinds of classes? There is, unfortunately, no standard and universally accepted answer to this question. Much will depend upon whether the linguist who is describing English, or whatever the language happens to be, recognizes in addition to the levels of syntax and phonology a level of morphology that serves as a bridge between them. It is arguable that languages fall into different types (isolating*, agglutinating*, fusional*, etc.: cf. 3.4); and that for certain languages, though not for others, it is necessary to set up a separate level of morphological analysis. But it is always possible to draw a theoretical distinction between morphology and syntax, on the one hand, and between morphology and phonology, on the other; and this is what we will do here. This will enable us to discuss the relationship between semantics and grammar in a relatively non-technical manner and without prior commitment to any of the currently available theories of grammar.

We have said that the syntax of a language is a set of rules which accounts for the distribution of word-forms throughout the sentences of a language; and we have seen that this definition presupposes the assignment of every word-form to one or more form-classes. How do we know that *runs*, for example, is a member of the form-class Present Tense, Third-Person Singular, Intransitive Verb? The form *runs* will not appear in any conventional dictionary of English. What we will find is an entry for the lexeme 'run', listed under the conventionally accepted citation-form* *run*. Now it so happens that the citation-form of most lexemes in English can also be regarded as the stem-form, to which

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[3] The traditional term 'part-of-speech' is not as widely employed nowadays by linguists as it used to be, but the terms 'form-class' and 'word-class', which are used in preference to it, are hardly more precisely defined in the literature. The distinction that is drawn here between form-classes and parts-of-speech would seem to be both useful and workable. For a useful discussion of the issues involved cf. Matthews (1967) and other articles in the same volume. The term 'word-class' is used, and discussed in relation to 'part-of-speech', by Robins (1971).