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Semantic Analysis

A Practical Introduction

Cliff Goddard

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PREFACE

If language can be seen as a system for connecting sounds with meanings, then, as Wallace Chafe (1970: 78) once observed, the typical linguistics curriculum seems curiously lopsided: 'A proper concern for meanings should lead to a situation where, in the training of linguists, practice in the discrimination of concepts will be given at least as much time in the curriculum as practice in the discrimination of sounds.' The main goal of this book is to help students develop the knowledge and practical skills for undertaking their own semantic analyses and critically evaluating those of others.

Any introductory text must be selective in its treatment of theories and methods and in its empirical scope, and it must also try to balance breadth and depth of coverage. In this book, the main method used for describing and discussing meanings is reductive paraphrase in natural language, a rigorous but commonsense approach which is relatively accessible to students. Its chief theoretical advocate, and its most prolific practitioner, is Anna Wierzbicka, upon whose work I draw heavily throughout. Other significant figures students will meet in the following pages include Ray Jackendoff, Leonard Talmy, John Searle, Charles Fillmore, Brent Berlin, George Lakoff, and William Labov. Though some chapters treat grammatical and illocutionary topics, the overall coverage is weighted in favour of lexical semantics. A key theme is the relationship between semantics, conceptualisation, and culture. Aside from English, languages drawn on for illustrative purposes include Arrernte, Ewe, Jacaltec, Japanese, Malay, Polish, Spanish, and Yankunytjatjara, among others.

The plan of the book is as follows. The first three chapters go over background concepts and issues, and introduce terminology and approaches. Then follows a series of case studies, beginning with the lexical domains of emotion and colour, both of which raise difficult and controversial issues in semantic methodology. The next two chapters deal with speech-act verbs and discourse particles, areas which, though formally distinct, are both linked with illocutionary semantics. The following chapters deal with two areas of verbal and nominal semantics, respectively, namely, motion verbs, and words for artefacts and natural kinds. The case studies are completed with the chapters on causatives and on grammatical categories.

The final chapter looks into current research within Anna Wierzbicka's 'natural semantic metalanguage' theory, and reviews this theory's applications to language acquisition studies, cultural pragmatics, and non-verbal communication.

Though the case study chapters fit together into a loose thematic sequence, as just described, they have been written to be largely independent of one another in terms of content, so as to give students, teachers, and general readers greater flexibility in choosing a sequence of topics. The topics themselves have been chosen both because they are important to semantics as a field of study and because, in my opinion, they are interesting in their own right. As Arnauld and Nicole (1996 [1662]: 15) said in the introduction to their classic *The Art of Thinking*: 'a book can hardly have a greater fault than not being read, since it is useful only to those who read it. So everything that contributes to a book's readability also contributes to its usefulness.' Each chapter closes with a selection of exercises and discussion questions, some of which have solutions provided at the end of the book. A list of key technical terms is also given for every chapter, and some suggestions for further reading.

In general 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 twin 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 recent years, however, the times have been changing. Generative linguists are rediscovering the lexicon and increasingly embracing the proposition that the grammatical properties of a word follow from its meaning. A recent survey goes so far as to say that: 'The study of lexical semantics no longer divides the field [of theoretical linguistics] . . . but is becoming a unifying focus' (Levin and Pinker 1992: 3). We have also seen what Harris (1993) has called 'the greening of linguistics', referring to the proliferation of developments such as pragmatics, functionalism, and cognitive grammar, all of which are compatible with renewed interest in semantics.

In short, there has never been a better time to get interested in linguistic semantics. Enjoy!

C. G.

University of New England
December 1996

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TYPOGRAPHICAL CONVENTIONS AND SYMBOLS

- *Italics* are used for citing linguistic forms (words, sentences, or phrases) in any language, including English.
- 'Single inverted commas' are used (*a*) for glosses, translations, definitions, and for citing components of explications, and (*b*) for drawing attention to a term, either because it is new or because there is something peculiar or figurative about it.
- SMALL CAPS are used (*a*) for proposed semantic primitives, (*b*) for emphasis, and (*c*) for grammatical morphemes in interlinear glosses.
- **BOLD SMALL CAPS** are used when a key technical term is introduced for the first time.

The following symbols are used in interlinear glosses, without further explanation. Other interlinear symbols are either self-explanatory (e.g. PAST for past tense) or are explained at the time they are used. Generally speaking, I have retained the interlinear symbols used by the original authors.

1sg	first person singular (i.e. 'I')
2sg	second person singular (i.e. 'you' singular)
3sg	third person singular (i.e. 'he/she')
SUBJ	grammatical subject
OBJ	grammatical object
DEF	definite

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1

Semantics
The Study of Meaning

1.1 Language and meaning

Semantics, the study of meaning, stands at the very centre of the linguistic quest to understand the nature of language and human language abilities. Why? Because expressing meanings is what languages are all about. Everything in a language—words, grammatical constructions, intonation patterns—conspires to realise this goal in the fullest, richest, subtlest way. To understand how any particular language works we need to understand how its individual design works to fulfil its function as an intricate device for communicating meanings. Equally, semantics is crucial to the Chomskyan goal of describing and accounting for linguistic competence, that is, the knowledge that people must have in order to speak and understand a language. Semantic competence is a crucial part of overall linguistic competence.

Another concern of semantics is to shed light on the relationship between language and culture, or, more accurately, between languages and cultures. Much of the vocabulary of any language, and even parts of the grammar, will reflect the culture of its speakers. Indeed, the culture-specific concepts and ways of understanding embedded in a language are an important part of what constitutes a culture. Language is one of the main instruments by which children are socialised into the values, belief systems, and practices of their culture.

Meaning variation across languages

It's hard to believe the colossal variation in word-meanings between languages. You might assume, for instance, that since all human beings have the same kind of bodies all languages would have words with the same meanings as English *hand* and *hair*. But no. In many languages, the word which refers to a person's hand can apply to the entire arm; the Russian word *ruka*, for example, is like this. In many languages, different words are used to refer to head-hair and to body-hair; for example, in Yankunytjatjara (Central Australia) *mangka* refers to head-hair and *yuru* to body-hair (as well as fur).

You might think that since environmental features like the sun, moon, sky, and clouds are found everywhere on earth, all languages would have words for these things. Well, in a sense that's true. In any language, one can say things about the sun and about clouds, for instance, but not necessarily using words which correspond precisely in meaning to English *sun* and *clouds*. In the Australian language Nyawaygi, for instance, there are different words for 'sun low in the sky' and for 'hot sun' (i.e. overhead), *bujira* and *jula*, respectively (Dixon 1980: 104). In many Australian languages, such as Yankunytjatjara, there are several words for different kinds of clouds but no general word like English *cloud*.

The same applies to words for events and actions, as well. It is natural (in English) to think that 'breaking' is a single, simple event. But in Malay there are three words which can cover the range of the English word, one (*putus*) for where the thing is completely severed or broken off (like a pencil being broken in two), another (*patah*) for when the break isn't complete (like a branch which is broken but not broken off completely), and still another (*pecah*) which is more like 'smash' (like what happens when you break a glass).

If even concrete and seemingly universal meanings like 'hand', 'sun', and 'break' are actually not universal but vary from language to language, just think of the variation that exists in relation to more abstract and culture-related meanings. How many languages would have words with the same meanings as English *privacy*, or *apologise*, or *work*? How many languages would draw a distinction, as English does, between *guilt* and *shame*? Obviously, we can't say precisely, but we can say that the number is much, much smaller than most non-linguists would ever imagine. In a similar fashion, every language has its own culture-specific meanings, which don't translate readily into English. Admittedly, each word in itself makes only a small contribution to the differences between languages,

but when you sum up the meaning variation over 10,000 words, perhaps you can see why linguists sometimes say that every language represents a unique way of seeing and thinking about the world.

The role of meaning in grammar

In this book we are concerned primarily with semantics, not with other areas of language description such as morphology and syntax. Since many readers will have some familiarity with these other fields of linguistics, however, it is worthwhile mentioning the relevance of semantics to the broader domain of linguistic theory.

One of the main concerns of linguistic theory is to identify the governing principles that account for the regularity and orderliness of languages. In other words, to answer questions like: Why does language X have the grammatical rules it has? Why does language Y differ from language X in the way it does? What underlying principles apply to both X and Y?

For many years the orthodoxy was that semantics did not have much relevance to questions like these, because it was believed that the syntactic workings of language were independent of meaning. In recent years, however, as Thomas Wasow (in Sells 1985: 204–5) points out, 'contemporary syntactic theories seem to be converging on the idea that sentence structure is generally predictable from word meanings . . . the surprising thing (to linguists) has been how little needs to be stipulated beyond lexical meaning'. If so, semantics is not just an 'add on' to the study of morphology and syntax, but can provide invaluable keys to understanding why morphology and syntax work as they do.

1.2 The nature of meaning

Whether we are interested in exploring the connections between meaning and culture, or between meaning and grammar, or simply in exploring meaning for its own sake, the first thing we need is a consistent, reliable, and clear method of stating meanings—a system of semantic representation. Not surprisingly, the main theoretical controversies in semantics concern the nature of the optimal system of semantic representation.

The vexed question of the nature of meaning is easiest to approach indirectly, by first asking what meaning is not.

Meaning is not reference

People sometimes think that the meaning of an expression is simply—and merely—the thing that it identifies or 'picks out' in the world (the so-called REFERENT). This seems sensible enough in relation to names, for instance *Margaret Thatcher, the Sydney Harbour Bridge, Mexico,* or definite descriptive noun phrases, such as *the President of the United States.* But to see that meaning is distinct from reference, we only have to think of words which do not refer to anything at all, such as *nothing, empty, unicorn, and, usually, hullo.* These words are not meaningless, so whatever the meaning of a word may be, it must be something other than what the word refers to.

Another argument against the view that meaning equals reference is that if this view were correct, expressions which referred to the same thing would have the same meaning. The most famous counter-examples are the expressions *The Morning Star* and *The Evening Star,* which clearly differ in meaning, even though objectively they refer to the same thing, namely the planet Venus. A more prosaic, but very nice, example (from Allan 1986) is furnished by the two expressions *the man who invented parking meters* and *the man who invented the yo-yo.* I'm sure you will agree that these two expressions convey different meanings, and I don't

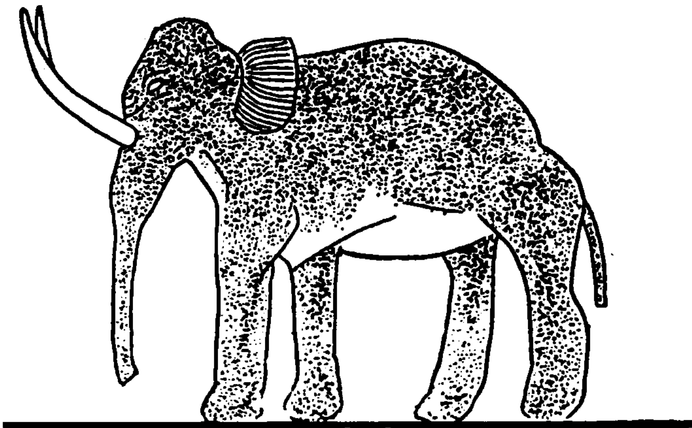

Figure 1.1. '[I]f in Sanskrit, for example, the *elephant* is now called the twice-drinking one, now the two-toothed one, and now the one equipped with a single hand, as many different concepts are thereby designated, though the same object is meant. For language never represents the objects, but always the concepts that the mind has spontaneously formed from them in producing language' (Wilhelm von Humboldt 1988 [1836]: 84)

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