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English 侯涛 著  
Semantics and  
Pragmatics

英语

语义语用学

山西人民出版社

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## Foreword

*In 2001-2002, I had the great pleasure in teaching Hou Tao, a 3 AU ( Academic Credit) postgraduate course entitled " Fundamentals of Pragmatics". She was part of a delegation of Singapore government scholarship holders who were invited to do a Postgraduate Diploma in English Language Teaching ( PG-DELT) at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Among all the student of that memorable batch, she is the first with the foresight and initiative to read, reflect, and write more in depth on the study of Semantics and Pragmatics. This book is a commendable fruit of her labour and we hope there will be many more.*

*Since her graduation from the PGDELT program in NIE Singapore, Hou Tao has become more interested and diligent in studying pragmatics and discourse analysis. She is interested in critical thinking in the areas of language use, liberty and democracy. So far, she has researched in the fields of 1) Aesthetic*

*Principle and Politeness in teacher talk; 2) Ideology and language use; 3) Textual and Conversational Coherence; and 4) Language Teaching. Her papers have appeared in academic journals.*

*This book deals with an important branch of linguistic studies. Not only will it help individual teachers and students to build up their knowledge and understanding of the subject, but it will also contribute to advancing the study of pragmatics and semantics, a much neglected field, as a discipline in Chinese universities and colleges. Hou Tao's initiative and foresight in writing such a book lies in her desire to shift the focus from teaching language in abstraction to the teaching of speech in context.*

*I hope that Chinese students will find this book a useful training resource and a catalyst for self-reflection on the role of semantic and pragmatic meaning in daily life. Last but not least, I hope that Hou Tao's efforts will inspire and motivate other scholars in China to write in this area.*

**Dr Phyllis Ghim-Lian CHEW**

**National Institute of Education,**

**Nanyang Technological University,**

**Visiting Professor/Beijing Foreign Studies University**

**December, 2005**

## Preface

*This book is based on my lecture notes for the course English Semantics and Pragmatics I have been teaching since 1998 to both undergraduates and graduate English major students in Taiyuan University of Technology. It is also part of the results of a research project “A pragmatic study of English discourses”, devoted to the study of meaning of English conversations and texts in special registers.*

*It explains the pragmatics-related meaning theories in such a way as to show their features in explaining the English discourses. To the author, a theory on meaning can never be complete until it explains the entire process of meaning—the internal and the external information, or the referential meaning as well as the implications and inferences. For acquisition of communicative competence to take place, knowledge of abstract grammar rules and discrete cultural notes have to be amended by knowledge of concrete pragmatic principles conditioning peo-*

*ple' s conventional or selected use of language forms. There exist universal social-cultural or cognitive patterns by which people shape their contribution to communicative events, while there have emerged mechanisms with which human beings interpret communication via language.*

*Another practical concern for the book is how a modern linguistics course of semantics and pragmatics should be conducted to young students whose knowledge on linguistics is still limited for them to comprehend the various theories of meaning as a coherent whole. Special care is given to present the theories in such a manner as can be easily accepted on the one hand and put into practical use on the other.*

*Under the above considerations, the book begins from Chapter One which introduces the origins, the evolution, of the study of meaning and the different concepts of meaning. It then goes on to the more stable aspects of meaning as reference in Chapter Two, scripts and functional semantics in Chapter Three and Four, through the more intangible and lively aspects of meanings as speech acts in Chapter Five, genre in Chapter Six, presupposition and conversational implicature in Chapter Seven and Eight respectively, linguistic politeness in Chapter Nine, conversation structure in Chapter Ten until the more complex discourse analysis in Chapter Eleven.*

*The book features wide scope of current theories, semantics and pragmatics for discourse analysis, updated and appropriate examples, and particular concerns with communicative English teaching.*

*The book is helpful to all those who want to gain insights in-*

*to the practical use of the language to mean and to interpret and is especially beneficial to post graduates majoring in applied linguistics.*

**Hou Tao**

Acknowledgements

Special thanks must go to Dr. Phyllis Chew, NIE, NTU, Singapore, for her insightful and extremely interesting lectures of pragmatics while I was studying in the PGDELT program. Dr. Antonia Chandrasegaram, whose lectures on textual analysis and English syntax I have also benefited greatly from as well as to Dr. Yue'e Lee who tutored my Master Thesis under the title "Classroom Interaction" and who has been encouraging me to venture into the number of areas relevant to the rich linguistic communication. Gratitude also goes to my family, each of whom has selflessly supported me through my education and research. I am also grateful to many students over the years who have shown a keenness in their pursuing of modern linguistics and have raised a lot of interesting questions for me to investigate into.



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## Chapter One

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Meaning: From Semantics to Pragmatics

What is meaning? How people mean via language? There have been several views put forward in the history of linguistics and philosophy. For example, the referential theory of meaning holds that the meaning of an expression is what the expression refers to or denotes. That is to say, “Mary” means the individual called “Mary” and “cat” means the property of cat-hood or the class of all the cats in the world. The mentalist theory claims that meaning is a concept in the speaker’s mind. The truth-conditional theory of meaning says that the meaning of an expression is its truth conditions, where the world has to fulfill the truth conditions for the sentence to be true. The use theory represented by the ordinary language philosophers says that the meaning of an expression is its use in language activities or language “games”. In

practice, all the theories are interconnected and each contributes a due part in communication. As will be seen, various analysis may be needed in order to account for meaning by an utterance or a discourse. That's why both semantics and pragmatics have drawn great attention for their discovery of meaning.

In its broadest sense, "semantics is the study of meaning as expressed by the words, phrases and sentences of human languages." (Ronnie Cann; Formal Semantics: An introduction) Accordingly, a general semantic on natural language must

- (1) capture for any language the nature of the meaning of words, phrases and sentences and explain the nature of the relation between them;
- (2) be able to predict the ambiguities in the expressions of a language;
- (3) characterize and explain the systematic meaning relations between the words, the phrases and the sentences;
- (4) provide an account of the relation between linguistic expressions and the things that they can be used to talk about.

Linguists, however, usually interprets the term more narrowly as concerning those aspects of meaning encoded in linguistic expressions or forms that are independent from its use in particular occasions by individual speakers. In semantics of formal languages (formal semantics), people are interested in meaning abstracted from the context of intensions of speakers, social-culture context, as well as their psychological states. Mainly, it studies the relation between linguistic units, for example, words and sentences, and the world. In other words, the interest is in how words and sentences of natural language, such as English, reflect reality, be it objects, people, states, events, proces-

ses, or, in slightly different terms, how sentences are our mental representations of reality.

Semantics answers the question "What does X mean". On the other hand, pragmatics is a study of how hearers add contextual information to the semantic structure and how they draw inferences from what is said. Pragmatics answers the question "What did Y mean by X". Although it's difficult to define exactly, the distinction between semantic meaning and pragmatic meaning has been founded on their reliance of the context of discourses: pragmatics engages itself in explaining the contribution of the co-text and context (or linguistic and situational context) to the linguistic meaning. But semantics also has to make use of contextual clues to pin down and enrich the information provided by words and grammatical constructions. Hence, semantics and pragmatics make use of context to a smaller or greater degree. The two fields are not totally disjointed.

The units of analysis in semantics are proposition, while in pragmatics, utterances. The terms proposition, sentence and utterance show distinct aspects of linguistic products. Utterances are concrete products of speech and writing. They come with information as to who the speaker is as well as information about the time, place and other circumstances of the performed act of speaking. Sentences are abstract grammatical units and can be extracted out of utterances. The abstract meaning of a sentence is a proposition. Propositions are descriptions of states of affairs, for example, (1) and (2) can express the same proposition of somebody's being happy. Similarly, (3) and (4) express the same proposition.

(1) I am happy.

(2) You are happy.



(3) The government built new schools.

(4) New schools were built by the government.

This is so in spite of the fact that a sentence in the active voice and its passive equivalent are not identical in rhetoric or modal meaning. The proposition, although it constitutes the core, does not include all the meaning of a sentence. In the words of Hurford and Heasley (1983:19): a proposition is that part of the meaning of the utterance of a declarative sentence which describes some state of affairs.

However, a competent study on meaning must explain what proposition or thought, in addition to meaning as an output of grammar, has been conveyed by the speaker's utterance of a sentence. For example, when the speaker says (5), linguistic semantics will not produce a full interpretation. We have to resort to philosophical or pragmatic semantics who "the boy" refers to and what it is that he is not old enough for.

(5) The boy is not old enough.

By doing the latter we relate the sentence to the world, establishing what it says about a real situation in the world. Both linguistic and philosophical semantics are needed to study meaning. There is no unanimity in defining the scope of semantics. Roughly speaking, semantics is the study of sentences and pragmatics the study of utterances of the sentences, and the two areas naturally overlap as investigation in either area deepens. In order to study the meaning during everyday conversation or texts, a complementary view of meaning theory is needed:

Meaning = Semantics + Pragmatics

Through out the history, formal semantics, functional semantics and pragmatic semantics can be distinguished. And a study of meaning