learning about language

REALMS OF MEANING

An Introduction to Semantics

Th. R. HOFMANN

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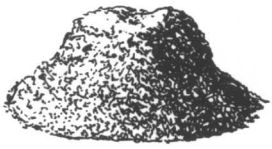
Preface



Because mathematics and science have dominated the realm of intellect this past century, they have influenced our expectations about everything, including language. Thus a word of warning: the meaning of a mathematical symbol is in many respects like a stool – rigid, strictly limited and resting on overt definition(s), with a general understanding that a stool should hold only one body. A natural language word is different in each of these respects, rather more like a mound of earth with no precise edge, no rigidity and no clear definition (a dictionary reports and catalogues the ways a word has been used, more or less accurately). And like a mound, its shape and size are always changing imperceptibly and, depending on circumstances, it may seat varying numbers of bodies. As we shall be treating natural language meaning with a largely scientific approach, we will use the tools of science to explain how natural language manages to have the precision to define the symbols used in science, yet have much greater power in depth and range of things that can be expressed.

Value

I hope that the material in this book will prove to be of practical value to you, whether or not English is your native language, especially if you expect to be teaching or learning a language. But foreign languages are not the only application, for there are many

advantages in being able to use your own language better. Whether in questions of law, where niceties of meaning can break fortunes, or in engineering and the sciences, where the communicative power of a natural language is needed to make discoveries known and to defend one's ideas, a better understanding of what words mean and how they can be used to mean something else will stand nearly all in good stead.

It goes without saying that the principles of meaning are valuable, but theories without practical application tend to be castles made of clouds, and not easily learned by ordinary people. So let me first point out a few aspects of language learning where anyone may expect practical benefit. If you keep these in mind as you read, the benefits will be greater.

One practical use is to help learn a language better and more quickly by picking up meaning accurately from text or conversation, as a child does, without wasting time turning dictionary pages. This can happen because you will learn how to make good guesses, knowing how meaning works and expecting certain common elements of meaning.

Also, in seeing the logic of human language you will be far better prepared to accept the true facts of other languages, instead of trying to squeeze them into the shape of English or into the logic of science and argumentation. Thus, knowing how languages can differ, as well as how meaning works, you will not waste your effort in the impossible goal of understanding one language in terms of another, but can learn only what is useful to learn.

In fact, we will find a few (less than fifty) basic elements of meaning by which a small vocabulary can be multiplied immensely. If you learn ways to express these basic concepts in a foreign language, you can bypass much of the agony of trying to learn all the common words – at least for saying what you want to say. Those other, less necessary words can be learned passively only (much easier!), and upon hearing them repeatedly you will naturally come to use them in speech too.

To be sure, a three- or four-year-old child knows much of this method of learning a language, in the sense that he does it naturally and learns many more words in a year than many language students do. School methods of language teaching often kill this ability or drive it underground. I will be satisfied if this course does nothing more than reawaken the ability you had fifteen or so years ago, when you learned the common words of

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your native language – with very little work, help or dictionaries.

It is my firm belief that abstract theories with little connection to the real world are like the barren sands of a desert, always shifting, supporting little life. Thus I am pleased to contribute to a link between theory and life – in some respects the ultimate test of a theory. As the abstract theories of nuclear physics became real when applied to building X-ray machines and nuclear reactors (and bombs), so also does linguistics become real if, and only if, it can contribute to some aspects of ordinary life such as the learning of foreign languages, though one hopes, and most likely, in no such dangerous manner. Although the primary subject is English, with some examples from other languages, the lessons learned will contribute greatly to the learning of any language. I have been horrified by the great amount of effort wasted, especially by Japanese students of English, in trying to learn unimportant things, and particularly in their over-use of dictionaries.

Theories

There is as yet no generally accepted theory of meaning for human language, though there are some popular assumptions that are easily seen to be wrong. Most well-known semantic theories in linguistics are paste-ons to some theory of syntax – how words are arranged into sentences – which are too often adhered to for irrational reasons. Given this state of affairs, we will avoid nearly all theoretical questions and stick to facts that you can observe yourself. If you cannot find what I say is there, you need not accept it on my authority, as I am no angel with a direct pipeline to the truth. In fact, if you find something not convincing, I will appreciate knowing what it is and will send you an answer, if you will send it to me on a postcard, via Longmans, or direct to the address given at the end of this section.

Instead of general theories, we will restrict ourselves here to systems of elements, and explanations of some facts in terms of other facts – things that ought to be included in any general theory of meaning. You can expect that most other books, and many teachers, will have general theories, and may have alternative explanations. If they work, that will simplify your learning, and if they don't, you had better have your argument

solid before you disagree with a teacher – and if you write it down (the only way I have found to have confidence in an argument), most teachers will be impressed whether you are right or wrong.

It has been a technique of physics, my intellectual origin if not that of all of science, to avoid philosophical questions and general theories until there is a good understanding (i.e. adequate theories) of specialized areas. Although this can make learning a little harder, still it does provide for learning the facts without preconceptions about the nature of the universe, and will fit in with any theory you or your professors espouse, if that theory is adequate to the breadth and depth of the task. I don't know of any that are, but if you are interested in my conceptions you can take an advance peek at the last part of the last chapter, 'Afterwords'.

Your second language

I assume that you can speak a second language, or at least have studied one. The more different it is from English, the more you have (or should have) already learned of what we shall see here. The material in this course may not have been learned and is less useful in learning languages that are quite similar, like French or Dutch are with English. The real benefits appear when you face a really different language, like Arabic or Hebrew, Chinese, Indonesian (Malay), Japanese, Hungarian, Turkish, Swahili and so on. As all these languages are becoming more important, you may some day find yourself wanting to know one of them.

If English is a second language for you, do not feel that this book holds little of interest. Most of the facts of English presented here derive directly or indirectly from teaching English to non-natives, from seeing mistakes commonly made and noting how to avoid them. Moreover, it is written in a simple and clear English, a better model for nearly all writing (e.g. reports, essays, news reporting, business letters) than is provided by conversation textbooks or literary works.

Note, however, that the examples are spoken English. This is why they do not begin with capital letters and do make liberal use of contractions. When stress and rhythm are important, as they often are in spoken English, an underline is used to indicate the syllable(s) that receive stress and form the rhythm.

In-text questions and notes

Questions at the end of each chapter are intended for your practice, though with some modification they could be used for testing. The other questions, in the text, are meant as a check for understanding, and to keep you awake if my story gets boring. They may be skipped, but I think you will find them interesting and fun in their own right, as well as a valuable exercise.

Not all of these in-text questions have cut-and-dried answers, but the basis for answering them should be in the immediately preceding paragraphs. If necessary, their answers will be found among the notes at the end, directly before the exercises.

The notes interspersed with these answers are to provide more detail on points that may be of interest to some of you but (in my opinion) are not important to the general principles. I imagine that good students will read them all, poor students none, but your teachers may point out those they consider valuable.

Organization

In the absence of any unquestionable theory, the chapters have been written to be read independently of each other, though connections to other chapters are mentioned. This will allow for reading chapters selected on the basis of personal interest, often the best way of learning something well. It also allows the instructors to follow a different sequence, to skip chapters they think less important, to supplement selected ones with materials of their own choosing, and even to substitute some chapters with material they find more appropriate. Nevertheless, unless they advise against it, you may find that reading skipped chapters is useful, and even entertaining.

Nevertheless, I have arranged the chapters in an order that builds up to an interlocking knowledge of semantic structure. The selection of materials reflects, unavoidably, the author's perceptions of what is important and solidly known, but, having been built up over some years, with other well-known linguists (T. Kageyama and G. Leech) involved in the selection, provides a guarantee that no modern directions have been completely ignored.

In essence, then, this text provides a light description of much of the most modern work in semantics. The substantive work – knowledge about the structure of English and other languages – has been emphasized at the cost of theories, which are always changing (whatever abstract theory is believed today it surely will not be acceptable in ten years' time), and which are in any case hardly relevant to the student of English. For much the same reasons, technical details and terminology are avoided, so students of English literature and of other languages can profit nearly as much as students of linguistics.

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And perhaps the most vital contribution of all, the various families to which I belong, for tolerating my preoccupation(s) as well as for their comments (especially Anne) and for providing examples of semantics in action.

List of Semantic Elements and Other Symbols

Throughout the various chapters we will use some very common semantic elements; this is done consistently as far as possible. This list is primarily to provide you with a reference to where they are best defined or explained, and, more usefully, to jog your memory as to what each one means.

You will find it useful, however, to remember and use them in dealing with any foreign language. Firstly, they are fairly universal, being found in nearly every language with apparently identical meanings. Translation between languages is relatively safe at this level; it avoids the pitfalls of translating between words of one language and words of another.*

Secondly, when learning a language, learn as soon as possible how to say and use these elements in that language. Then you will be able to say nearly anything you want to, even if it is in a roundabout way.

More importantly, when you learn a new word in that language, you can learn its meaning in terms of that language, with words that express these elements in that language. Just as translation between two words of two languages leads to many errors, so if you learn the words of a foreign language in terms of your own language you can be fairly confident that you will use them incorrectly. As far as possible, always learn the words of a language in terms of that language; not only will you learn their meanings faster and better, but you will learn to 'think in that language'. Moreover, you can check the meanings that you thereby devise with a native, for accurate responses.

Last and most important, though you will not notice it straight away, is that once you make a habit of using these

* Languages differ mostly in other ways, e.g. in how they combine these elements, and in how they classify things in the world like plants, animals, foods, and especially abstract ideas.

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elements in thinking about meaning, when you hear (or see) a new word a few times you will often be able to guess its meaning accurately, with no need to look it up in a dictionary. This is what you must eventually learn to do to become good at a language, for this is what everyone can do in their own language. What children under six years old look up words in a dictionary (assuming they can read it)? Yet they learn ten or twenty words every day; they learn much of a language in only a few years. Once you discover how to learn new words this way, you will learn faster and with less effort.

For these reasons, then, you will find it useful to learn these concepts, though the symbols used here are not important. In fact, symbols for semantic elements have not yet been standardized as the chemical elements were standardized a century ago. We have tried to keep to three-letter symbols, capitalizing the first one. In other works, English words in capital letters are commonly used to stand for semantic elements.

Page references before semi-colon are definitional or explanatory, those after the colon are mentions or uses.

ELEMENT	ROUGH MEANING		TEXT REFERENCE (*Page numbers*)	NOTES
Abl	from, SOURCE, ablative		63; 161ff, 205	
(Adr	the addressee		66, 64; 98, 125	= Neg-Spk, Neg-Awa)
Adt	adult, mature		245f; 227	
(Agnt	agent		; 204	first actant of [Coz])
Aid	help, aid		256f	
Ami	friend(ship), love		237; 257	
Ani	animate		232, 306	moves, eats
Apx	near, approximate(ly)		105ff, 164ff;	
Awa	not close to Spk, Adr		62ff; 125, 226	Dst (Distal)
Bcm	become, get	INCHOATIVE	238; 45, 218, 241, 257	
Cnt	in(side(s)), contents		161ff; 85f, 174	
Coz	cause, make	CAUSATIVE	240; 45, 111, 218	
(Dat	goal	DATIVE		old name for [Dir])
Dir	direction, goal	(DATIVE)	161ff; 62ff, 68, 205, 211, 226	
(Dog	canine, dog		193	ad-hoc)
(Dst	distal, -ance			alternative for [Awa])
(Expr	experiencer		83	a role, see [Stms])
Fct	fact, true		99	
Fem	female, (feminine)		28; 40, 193, 227ff, 257	
Fut	future		126ff; 111	S<R
(Gse	goose, geese		29	ad-hoc)
Hav	have, with	ACCOMPANIMENT	238ff	
(Hrs	horse, equine		59, 247	ad-hoc)
Hum	person, human		40; 73, 232, 257	
Imp	impossible, can't		98ff	
(Inst	instrument, with	INSTRUMENTAL	204f	a role)

Kno	know(ledge)		142; 241, 257	
Lng	language		257	
Loc	location	LOCATIVE	61ff, 161ff; 205, 211, 226	
Mnr	manner		62ff	
Mov	movement, go		75	
Msc	male, (masculine)		28; 40, 192, 217	
(Mtf	meat-of		30	doubtful)
Much	*big, much, a lot*		257	
Nec	necessary, unavoidable, have to		99ff; 239	= Imp-Neg
Neg	not	NEGATIVE	42; 29, 64f, 68, 114, 161ff, 232, 239, 306	
Par	parent of		40; 218, 228	
(Patient		PATIENT, THEME	204	a general role)
Pls	pleasant, not harsh		82f; 42, 44	
(Pres	present tense		220	*English form)*
(Prt	preterite tense		126f; 111	R<S, English tense)
Psb	possible, optional		98ff	= Neg-Imp
Pst	past time		99; 110f	E<S
Qst	questioning element		63; 226	
(Shp	sheep		29	ad-hoc)
Sng	single, -ular, unity		244; 63f	
Spk	(speaker), act of speaking		64, 62ff; 70, 97f, 125, 231, 239	
Sps	spouse, married		231, 239	
Srf	surface, boundary		161ff	
(Stms	stimulus		83	a role, see [Expr])
Try	try, attempt		257	
Via	by way of		164ff	
Viv	*vivant*, living		232, 306	
Voj	visible object		243; 226, 239	
Yng	young		28ff, 227f; 217, 257	

One-letter symbols for other elements

for temporal and aspectual points in time in tense and aspect

S	time of Speaking	122ff	Spk
R	time of Reference, viewpoint	122ff, 140	
(E	time of Event	122ff	for punctive events)
B	time of Beginning of event	140; 127ff	Bcm
F	time of Finish of event	140ff; 127ff, 280	Abl, Bcm-Neg
x=y	time X is same as Y	123ff, 144, 152	
x<y	time X is before time Y	123ff, 145ff	

for elements of integrative model

C	comtent or comprehension of prior context
K	background;encyclopaedicbtsharedknowledge

for types of modal usages

C	capacity (dynamic): ability and capability
D	deontic: personal (authoritative) and social
E	epistemic

for (informal) linear representation of meaning		*example*
a.b	A and B both describe same thing	Mas.Hum. Yng
a-b	A 'dominates' B	Neg-happy
a:b	A and B share referent, second actant of A	Dir:Spk
a\b	A and B share referent, first actant of B	

variables

x y z referents of nominal phrases X, Y and Z

Items in parentheses are not believed to be real universal semantic elements, for some reason or other. For example, [Adr] is excluded because it is simply [Neg-Spk.Neg-Awa], [Agnt] because it is simply the first actant of [Coz], [Dog] because it classifies what may well not be a universally recognized object, and [Dat] because it is an old name for [Dir].

Examples from given language, and in parentheses discussion about the language.

French: 4, 24, 48ff, 64f, 81f, 89, 124, (130), 139, 145, 165, (181), 219, 231, 280, 283
German: 49, 160, (181)
Dutch: 54
Russian: (130), 144f, 147, (160), (214), 294
Spanish: 62, 71, 75
Japanese: 4, (48), 61ff, 67ff, 74, 80f, (122), 139, 149, 171, (203, 206, 214, 216), 204f, (214, 216), 226ff, 260, 272, 282, (288), 294
Chinese: 4, (49, 122, 159, 214, 231, 288)
Eskimo: 4, (75), (130), (160), (165), 214
Tagalog: (130)
Latin: (160)
Finnish: (160), (165)
Hungarian: (160)
Turkish: (160)
kanji* (characters used in writing Chinese and in part Japanese, Korean) 166, 272, 293

* This word comes from Japanese, where it means [character(s) from China] and is thus an appropriate term for the international system.

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