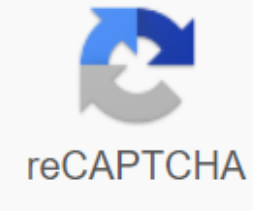




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An introduction to semantics and pragmatics pdf

So far in this series based on linguistics, we have reviewed how words are constructed from morphemes, and how words are classified, and form groups known as phrases. We also looked at how language is created through the human vocal apparatus. We explored how phonemes are created through place and manner of articulation. However, we have not yet addressed the complex question of meaning, and the meaning is the competence of semantics together with other pragmatics. This is a huge, complex and multi-layered area, and for that reason we will not explore it at great depth. Our goal is to understand more what semantics means, and what are some of the problems associated with meaning in language? What is semantics and pragmatics? Semantics is the study of the meaning of linguistic expressions. William Ladusó writes: Semantics are an important part of studying linguistic structure. They cover several different studies: how each language provides words and idioms for fundamental concepts and ideas (lexical semantics), how parts of the sentence are integrated into the basis for understanding its meaning (compositional semantics), and how our assessment of what someone is referring to on a particular case depends not only on what is actually said, but also on the context of its utterance and assessment of information and beliefs that we share with the speaker (n.d.). To sum up, semantics involves learning: How language creates words and how words create meaning (lexical semantics); How meaning is created through sentence structure and grammar (compositional semantics); How meaning is defined by the context in which language (pragmatics) is used. Ferdinand de Saussure was one of the first - and perhaps most significant - thinkers to begin to form a specifically modernist view of the language function. Traditionally (and this view is still probably the most common recognition of how language actually functions) language is considered a simple relationship between an object and a word that is used to identify it. For example, we have a small, cute fluffy object: CAT But actually, Saussure noted, it's not that simple. Words, we know, consist of phonemes that go to compose the sound elements of the word. But these sound elements refer to the physical movements of the mouth, tongue and throat as these words are formed orally. They do not explain that the word itself has distinctive associations for specific groups of people. Thus, linguistics only goes so far as to describe the word-sound - but that doesn't explain how the word works in communicating meaning. Sound elements such as phonemes are not present in these words that are not formulated: words that are recorded (more importantly) words that are mentally and not verbally framed. Similarly, such a word can only communicate meaning if there are common sets of assumptions from the community of people who use it. In other words, the word cat can only mean a small furry feline, if a group of people have already agreed that this is what the word means. If I had pointed to a small fluffy feline and started exclaiming woogerdongo!, it would have made sense to anyone. I may have decided myself that woogerdongo was a new word meaning a small furry feline - but if everyone else doesn't know about it either, it doesn't make any sense. Thus, for Saussure, words themselves are more useful to consider not as isolated systems, but as signs that communicate meaning, pointing to it through interaction and general assumptions between groups of people. These signs consist of two parts: the sign and the marked. A sign is a means of a sign - the word itself. The concept to which the sign indicates is indicated. Using the above example, the cat acts as a symbol. He points to the concept - a small fluffy feline: a linguistic sign, then, contains both the word itself and the concept that the word points to. When someone gives instructions and they say: take the left on the cat as a person, give instructions and the person receiving instructions share an understanding of what the cat sign means. Both have a mental image of a small feline, which is automatically associated with the symbol cat. The sign works because the sign and the label work together. We as a group share associations and this makes the sign effective. If none of you spoke English, or knew what a cat is, you can certainly define a word in terms of its sound patterns - but the word itself will communicate no sense. Language conveys meaning through signs. Therefore, semantics - or, as Saussure preferred to call it, semiology - from the Greek semeion, meaning sign. For example, take a look at these three signs: Now answer this question: You'll probably find that your answers aren't much different from anyone else's, because the idea of what currently means is what you all share. In each of these three examples, then, we can see that the symbol works the same way, and the word can act as signs. Indeed, many languages are written in symbols rather than words (characters): Words can create meaning because they denote external objects, ideas, or realities that we have learned to associate with them. However, this is not the only way to create meaning. As Geoffrey Finch writes, the words mean in relation to each other, as well as to the external reality (2003, p. 147), and it is this compositional semantics The next one. Compositional Semantics: Value through the sentence structure To begin with consider the following sentence: Colorful red umbrellas moved playfully We can certainly analyze this sentence in terms of phraseology. It contains two separate phrases - a noun with a pre-changeable adjective and a verb phrase with a post-changeable adverb: in a noun phrase, the words red and color are adjectives, but red functions as a determiner as defined and color as preprehensible. Thus, the structure of the sentence phrase can be written: the verb phrase, in the context of the sentence, changes the noun phrase, and as such we have a pretty good sentence with both descriptive and figurative (the umbrella cannot be literally playful. In many ways, this sentence is good English. It is descriptive and creative, at the same time grammatical sound. Now, however, let's consider another sentence that demonstrates exactly the same sentence structure: Colorless green ideas sleep furiously in terms of its phrase structure and its grammar, this sentence works just like the previous example. Again, there is a noun phrase and verb phrase, each of which is changed by adjectives and adverbs accordingly: If we think grammatically, the answer to the question above is probably yes. It works like a suggestion, and a truly grammatical force of suggestion can actually make you feel like the sentence makes as much sense as the colored red umbrellas moved playfully. But there's a difference. Offering colored red umbrellas moved playfully can be quirky, but it makes sense and it contains notable meaning. Offering colorless green ideas to sleep furiously, though, makes no sense at all. How can something be described as colorless and green? Surely that's a paradox? How can ideas have color? How can ideas sleep? Finally, sleep violently as a paradoxical oxymoron (a phrase that contains two contradictory terms). The proposal colorless green ideas sleep violently was first coined by linguist Noam Chomsky in his book Syntax Structure (first published in 1957). He tried to make that there was a complex relationship between grammar and meaning that can often be deceptive (2002, p.15). Since the sentence contains the grammatical meaning of generative grammar, Nigel Fabb of the University of Strathclyde writes that generative grammar can be seen as a collection of generalizations that can be used to decide whether a particular sentence is grammatical (1994, p. 113). Fabb illustrates this with a simple example. Let's imagine for a moment what we invented. a very simple language in which there are only four four Offers. Each sentence consists of a variation of three components (just as English sentences consist of an object, noun, verb, etc.). We'll call these components X, Y and Z. Recognizing the components of the sentences, we can now describe the four sentences in our language as:1. Y Z. XY Z. Out of four. From these patterns, we can define certain rules. Let's cull them: Observation: We see that Y is a component of each sentence. Rule: Therefore the offer should include Y. Offer with 'X' is non-grammatical. Observation: We see that while Y is permanent, offers may include or exclude the X and Z. Rule: X and Z are optional components in the sentence. Observation: We can also see that while X may appear before Y, only ever appears after the Y. Rule: Suggestions that include Y or YX are non-grammatical. In fact, we can now summarize these rules as follows: Each sentence in the language fits into the following pattern: (X) Y (Z) Letter in brackets is optional Generative Grammar refer to different theories that try to define a similar set of rules for the structure of the English language. As you can imagine, this is a much more difficult task for the English language than for our four-sentence imaginary language above, and involves such dizzying observations as the noun that is chosen as the subject's head in a paragraph can often perform the actions of the predictor, and influence the subject's reference in some way (Jeffries, 2006, p. 156). Indeed, this task is so extremely complex that it can only remain theoretical. Many different types of generative grammars were proposed, such as government binding theory, generalized grammar of phrase structure, relational grammar and lexicon-functional grammar (Fabb, 1994, p. 113). Indeed, the syntactic structure of Chomsky, since 1957, was the first formal attempt to create generative grammar - and this achievement is one of the things that Made Chomsky, whom many consider perhaps the most important intellectual in life (New York Times Book Review, February 25, 1979). Is grammar more important than words? Because language is in constant motion, theories of generative grammar are constantly in need of change and re-invention. After all, the connection of words with objects in any language is largely arbitrary: The fact that sounds /tri:/ ('tree') used to refer to an object growing in the ground, simply because it's a way out of the language works, but there's no reason why any other string of sounds wouldn't do, provided that other people could understand us (Finch, 2003, p. 132). Words make sense because we learn to associate meaning with them. However, words can also carry meaning because the grammatical structure that surrounds them generate this value. Words mean through through a network of relationships through which they create their own individual semantic space (Finch, 2003, p. 147). As Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote, the meaning of the word lies in its use in language (1957). For example, consider the following poem by Lewis Carroll. Although the words included in it literally do not make sense, it is impossible to somehow feel that there is meaning, because although the words are invented, the grammatical structures in which they sit are established. An example of meaning through grammar Try to read this poem, and whenever you come to the word you don't recognize ask yourself if you can classify it as a noun, verb, adjective, etc. 'Twas brillig, and slithy toves Lee gyre and gimble in wabe; All mimsy were borogoves, and mome raths outgrabe. Beware jabberwock, my son. Jaws that bite, claws that catch! Beware of the jubjub bird, and avoid the frumious Bandersnatch! He took his wusy sword in his hands: For a long time the enemy manxome he was looking for - So rested he near the tree Tumtum, and stood for a while in thought. And as the uffish word he was standing, jabberwock, with the eyes of the flame, came a whiff through the tulle of wood, and burbled as he came! One two! One two! And through and through the vorpal blade went snicker-snack! He left him dead, and with his head he went galumphing back. And you killed jabberwock? Come to my arms, my radiant boy! Oh frabjous day! Callul! Calley! He chortled in his joy. 'Twas brillig, and slithy toves lee gyre and gimble in wabe; All the mimsy were borogoves, and mome raths outgrabe Lewis Carroll You have (hopefully) discovered from this poem that while it doesn't make sense in terms of rational and know meaning (or truth value), it makes grammatically meaning. You can quite easily distinguish nouns from verbs simply in terms of their relationship with each other and the grammatical identifiers around them. Pragmatists: The Importance of Context Here's an illustration from linguist William Ladusó (n.d.). Consider two people, Pat and Chris, who get to know each other on a first date. If Chris tells Pat at the end of the evening, I love you a lot, Pat is likely to feel good about the situation. But imagine that Pat and Chris have been dating for weeks, and Pat asks: Do you love me? Now, if Chris says, I really like you, the reaction is likely to be very different, since Chris's statement is taken as a negative response! The difference lies not in the content of what is being said, but in the functioning of a common pragmatic principle... fundamental pragmatic distinction between what is actually said and what is implied by his statement. In this example, the value is determined by the contexts in which the language is used. This is a value that is completely separate from the sign (or and the grammar of the language used. This value is shaped by pragmatic use of language - hence pragmatism (Saussure referred to this function as parole). Words can have multiple meanings. The word cat may have a simple signage, but depending on its context it can mean: Look, there is a cat! Oh! Look at that beautiful cat! You're like a cat! Most of the time, we make unconscious decisions about how to determine which of the many different possible meanings we attribute to a particular word. Sometimes, however, we recall problems that may arise through misinterpretation of the context of language. Such problems are a common source of humor. Consider, for example, the following passage from Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy: Ford: You have to prepare yourself for a jump into hyperspace; it's frustrating how to be drunk. Arthur: What's so unpleasant about being drunk? Ford: Ask for a glass of water. Again, Ladusaw provides a useful analysis: the passage includes the ambiguity of the word drunk, which can be an adjective, which means affects alcohol, or the passive form of verb drinking. Arthur accepts Ford as intending the first feeling drunk - with good reason: it hardly means that someone will drink it. But Ford shows that the strange interpretation is what he intends. The art of imagery is a metaphorical attitude to a person as a liquid; The joke involves sleight of hand, making our semantic translator lean in one direction before pulling us back in an unexpected way with disambiguation. These examples illustrate our semantic and pragmatic abilities in action. The purpose of linguistic research is to highlight the processes and knowledge involved. Finch bibliography, G. (2003). How to study linguistics, 2nd edn. Basingstoke: Palgrave. Jeffries, L. (2006). Opening of the language: The structure of modern English. Basingstoke: Palgrave. Fabb, N. (1994). The structure of the proposal. London: Routledge. Carroll, L. (1872). Through zasteh and what Alice found there (internet). University of Virginia Library. Available from: Access: March 14, 2010. Chomsky, N. (2002). Syntax structure, 2nd edn. Berlin: Mouton de Gruiter. Ladusó, W. (n.d.). The meaning of the Internet. Linguistic Society of America. Available from: Access: March 14, 2010. 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