

SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC COMPETENCES IN ENGLISH LINGUISTICS

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Among the principal linguistic terms and concepts we can set apart semantics and pragmatics which are of special interest because they refer to the study of meaning communicated through language.

Problems of meaning are among the most significant ones that people experience with each other in communication. These problems arise because of two things:

1. many words have a range of possible meanings;
2. contextual situations influence on how to give interpretations to word strings. We are well aware of how much factors of intonation, stress, and context can affect or change the interpretation of an utterance. The same word in different contexts acquires different meanings.

a) He didn't mean to hurt you.

b) Her life lost all meaning.

c) The red flag means it's dangerous to swim.

In each of them a different sense is conveyed. In a) **mean** has the sense of intend, in b) of **value**, and in c) of **is a signal that**. Such a slippery term as part of a linguistic vocabulary is understandably filled with difficulties. For instance, in order to understand c), we must know something about signs and how they work, or that objects can represent things and even concepts, such as **danger**.

The study of signs is called semiotics. Although some linguists give special attention to it, because they see meaning as an abundance of human capacity to make one thing stand for another, like words for concepts in addition to sign-making ability, however, people also need encyclopedic knowledge, that is, the knowledge about the world to interpret string of words. Suppose we come across the sentence:

"The house is made up of grass".

We realize we are in some imaginary world because in the real world the house cannot be made of grass. If we look up the word **house** in a dictionary,

it won't tell us what the object is made of. It is something we acquire as part of our general knowledge.

Therefore, the point that arises from the work of many linguists is that language underspecifies meaning. According to Nelson Francis, the famous American linguist,¹ "words do not have meaning, people have meanings for words".

That is a radical approach but it helps to explain the common sense that words are not fully adequate to express what we mean. For the students of semantics and pragmatics the first task is to limit the area of what is linguistic opposed to which is a "cognitive" sphere. This is not an easy question to answer and many books are an indication of these difficulties.

The simplest approach to linguistic meaning is that all we need to interpret linguistic expressions is to know the definitions of the meanings of the words. Therefore, we can assume that by combining words together into phrases and sentences the definitions can also be combined and in this way we are able to arrive at the overall meaning of the utterance. Several problems may generally arise with this **definitions theory**.

One, and most obvious, is that we need a certain amount of **encyclopedic knowledge**, as well as linguistic knowledge. For instance, to understand the sentence "Microsoft was one of the first software firms to write programs for foreign markets" you should first know the meanings of "Microsoft, software, programs, foreign markets", that is, you need to have general knowledge of the world.

The next problem deals with the **circularity** of definitions. That means that any definition of a word is expressed in words that are dependent on other words for their definitions, and so on, ad infinitum (endlessly). The question is, as Saeed says,² "can we ever step outside language in order to describe it, or are we forever involved in circular definitions?" Suppose we want to understand the term "marketing mix". As was already stated, definition of the term **marketing mix** depends on the definition of its components, that is, product, price, place and promotion. Next, we also need to understand the term "to market", because "marketing mix" is defined as a combination of

¹ Kučera H., Francis N. *Computational Analysis of Present-Day American English*, Brown University Press, 1967, p. 119.

² Saeed J. *Semantics*, 2nd edition, Oxford, 2003, p. 6.

different elements, called Four P's used to market a product or a service. Thus, we can say that definition depends on its component words to be interpreted for other definitions.

The third difficulty is that no attention is given to the significance of situational context in determination of meaning. If someone says "Is Zara a Brand?," and if said to a friend watching Zara products, it could be a request to switch to other brands, an expression of mistrust to this brand or even a dislike. The words themselves are not sufficient to determine meaning. We need access to **extra-linguistic information** about the participants and the precise context of an utterance to arrive at a correct interpretation. In some instances, it is a body language, the gestures, facial expressions, i.e. the **para-linguistic features**, which provide the clue to what is meant.

Because of the dependence of linguistic meaning on other types of meaning, linguists see two broad approaches to this area. The first is concerned with **sentence meaning** and is in the sphere of semantics, while the second is concerned with **utterance meaning** and belongs to the field of pragmatics. The difference is illustrated by two usages of the word "mean". The thing is that if we don't understand what someone has said, we logically say either:

What does it mean? or

What do you mean?

In the first instance, our request is for information that is independent of the speakers, whereas in the second it is for information directly dependent on the speaker's intention. These are potentially two types of meaning. The first emphasizes the objective statement of the meaning, the second is more subjective in its interpretation. Let's see another example:

What is the meaning of the word brand? and

How do you understand the word brand?

The first sentence reflects the real statement of the word **brand**, the second has quite a subjective implication. The addressee is asked to give his own understanding of "brand".

To understand the difference it is important to grasp the relationship between sentences and utterances. An utterance is a concrete use of a linguistic expression in a context. The context includes information about the speaker of the utterance, the addressee, the location, the time, i.e., it conveys its content or literal meaning. The utterance also conveys additional contextual meanings.

Sentences, on the other hand, are abstract grammatical elements underlying utterances and can be specified as an arrangement of words in a syntactic order. The teacher asks the class: “Is Andy absent?”. It’s a neutral objective statement of the fact, while if “Andy” is under stress and we see the change of the mimics on the teacher’s face, then an additional and subjective meaning is conveyed, such as **again** Andy is absent, **again** he broke his promise and many other situational implications.

Imagine two people saying “Washington is the capital of America”, where we have two utterances but only one sentence. Two utterances introduce a string of words or a combination of words expressing certain meaning. As a sentence, it is a combination of grammatical elements, such as subject, predicate, etc. In this case we can say that part of the meaning of this word string relates to its sentence value (words in a certain order), e.g. Is your boy at college? and part to its utterance value (intonation, situational context etc.) e. g. Is he at Swiss college? (surprise, or a sense of incredibility). In practice, it is not easy to illustrate the difference between the two levels of meaning, and there is an ongoing debate between semanticists and pragmatists as to where to draw the line of separation.

Nonetheless, it is a useful distinction to work with and one that is productive in linguistic criticism.

Semantics is concerned with meaning as a product in the linguistic system, and as such, is part of our grammatical competence... It focuses on meaning out of context, or **decontextualized meaning** and is opposed to pragmatics which focuses on **contextualised meaning**.

Let’s consider an example by Jeoffrey Finch³. In the declaration “I love you” we can give it a certain meaning based simply on what we know of the grammar of the language. We know that **I** specifies the speaker, **you** the person being addressed, and that **love** is a verb indicating a range of feeling, stronger than like, but weaker than adore. But for a full interpretation we should consider who is talking to whom, and the situation in which the utterance takes place. These all will affect on how the sentence is understood.

Looking at the semantic side of language it operates at two levels or ranks: word level and sentence level. At the word level semanticists study relationships between words in the language. This constitutes their sense, the

³ Finch G. *How to study Linguistics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997.

meaning that a word has by virtue of its place in the linguistic system. A number of items deal with aspects of “sense” such as synonymy, antonymy, polysemy, homonymy. A key idea here is taken from the linguist Saussure⁴, that words are signs. Their relationship to the world is symbolic, rather than being labels for things they are labels for concepts. The essence of this is that any word or sign derives its meaning not from the world, but it exists within a network, or semantic field, of related signs.

The study of “sense” was the interest within semantics of *componential theory*. Componential analysts break down or “decompose” the sense of the word into its atomic components. For instance, “man” consists of the components: human+adult+male, “woman” consists of human+adult+female. Using atomic components, semanticists construct grids that relate words in terms of presence or absence of a particular component. Componential analysis is a principal element of semantic approaches, but it has been subject to much criticism. The thing is that it works better for some items than for others. Auxiliary words, such as “and, to, that, so, for” are not suitable for such analysis.

Moreover, components such as “human, adult, male” can themselves be broken down into smaller components, and so endlessly, to the point at which it becomes difficult to distinguish them in any meaningful way. At the sentence level semantics is concerned with the true value of linguistic expressions, with how we establish the real correspondence of statements or commands and their internal consistency as linguistic expressions. For instance, *Scientists think there can be life on the moon, because water was found there*.

Semanticists frequently distinguish between analytic and synthetic truth. A synthetic true statement is the one that reflects an accurate reality. If we read “dogs mew”, the sentence is synthetically false because it does not correspond to the reality. On the other hand, an analytically true statement is true when it follows from the meaning relations of the words in a sentence, never mind what is the situation in the world. saying, “dogs are animals” is analytically true because the sense of dogs does not exclude that of animals, but cats are dogs is false because the sense of cats excludes that of dogs.

⁴ **Saussure, F. de.** *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. C. Bally and A. Sechehay, New York-Toronto-London, 1992.

Both analytic and synthetic kinds of truth are important because at some point they will connect each other, since an interpretation of the sense of “dog” will eventually include the information “does not mew”. It is on the basis of both types of knowledge that we are able to construct meaningful sentences of English. At the sentence level, semantic theory reflects the speaker’s knowledge, presented in the following examples:

1. That *a* and *b* are synonymous
 - a) My sister is a spinster.
 - b) My sister is not married.
2. That *a* below entails *b*
 - a) The firing killed the soldier.
 - b) The soldier is dead.
3. That *a* contradicts *b*
 - a) I live in Manchester.
 - b) I have never been to Manchester.
4. That *a* presupposes *b*
 - a) The Prime Minister visited Dublin.
 - b) There is a Prime Minister.
5. That *a* and *b* are tautologies
 - a) Money is money.
 - b) When you are sick you are sick.

To represent the truth value of these sentences linguists turn to the tools of logic and logical semantics using largely *propositional logic*. A proposition is more abstract than a sentence. It is a logical expression, not a linguistic one; it describes a proposed state of affairs in the world that may be true or false. If we go to a sample sentence *Washington is the capital of America*, we can see that it is possible to produce several different sentences, yet preserve the underlying proposition. *The capital of America is Washington, it is Washington that is the capital of America, the teacher said that Washington is the capital of America.*

Semanticists use the symbols of *formal logic* to analyze sentences. They are particularly interested in the logical connectives of the language, words such as *and, if, or, so, then, not*. They are the logical hinges that link propositions together. In a statement *John is happy and Mary is sad* we see that two propositions are linked by the logical connective *and*.

Logical semanticists are thought of as correspondence theorists because they are interested in the way how language corresponds to a correct description of the world as it is. e. g. *Butter is made of milk*.

There is a fundamentally different approach termed **cognitive semantics**, that sees no separation between linguistic knowledge and general thinking or cognition. Cognitive linguists tend to adopt a functional view of a language opposed to more formal accounts favoured by Chomsky⁵ and similar linguists. Semanticists of this school pay special attention to *metaphor*, *figurative use of language*⁶, in other words, metaphor is characterized as a process in which one semantic field of reference is transferred to another. So, in the sentence, *The shipploughed the water*, the language of farming is transferred to the activity of sailing, or *his hands are itching to break the relationships*, itching arises from the awareness of how our body parts are functioning. The same is true with an example *His spirits rose up*, where up is connected with things that are pleasant and good. Many scholars of this school agree that metaphor is an essential element in the categorization of the world and our thinking processes.

Pragmatics is a relatively new area of linguistics, and as such it suffers from the lack of coherent level of theory. Instead, there is a large cluster of approaches with contextual constraints on meaning. It owes much to the shortcomings of formal logic. As was already mentioned logical semantics gives much importance to logical connectives. But pragmatics argue that those connectives often work so that formal logic is unable to cope with. For example, statements *John is happy* and *John is not happy* are mutually exclusive. However, in natural language, if we deny, that John is happy does not necessarily mean that he is unhappy. We recognize possible states that exist between these two.

Similarly, in formal logic the quantifier *some* does not exclude the possibility of *all*.

Some students passed the exam does not conflict with *All students pass the exam*. Nevertheless, if you asked a friend how many students passed the exam and the answer was *some*, you would logically conclude that not everyone passed. These examples propose the idea that language has its own natural

⁵ Chomsky N. *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge), 1965.

⁶ Finch J. *Key Concepts in Language and Linguistics*, New York, 2005, p. 142.

logic, in addition to formal kind proposed by semanticists. Natural logic allows certain things to be implied under obvious statements. These are named implicatures. The study of implicatures makes the cornerstone of most pragmatic approaches.

Equally important in the development of pragmatics is the rise of *speech act theory*. Traditionally, people distinguished between “doing” and “saying”, that is between taking action and simply talking about it. But this separation is false in many ways. If we look from another angle, it is possible to see all utterances as kinds of action. The kinds of acts vary from direct ones to most slippery indirect speech acts. These acts are performed under cover of another act, e.g. giving a command by asking a question, *Can you come here, please?* In these cases we rely on para-linguistic features such as intonation and stress, as well as extra-linguistic information from the context, to provide a full interpretation.

Pragmatics is a relatively recent area with a great diversity of approaches but one opinion is common for all; Pragmatics is communicative in nature rather than grammatical. Its focus is on what is not obviously stated and on how we interpret utterances in situational contexts.

To summarize the work, we can say that natural language is used to communicate information through linguistic expressions. These expressions have not only grammatical forms but content. Syntax and morphology deal with forms of linguistic expressions. From an illustration of the sentence from Chomsky⁷ *Colorless green ideas sleep furiously* we see that it is grammatically correct but meaningless.

Semantics is the study of content, the meaning expressed by elements of the language and its combinations.

Pragmatics is the study of the meaning in a context, which can convey additional meanings and other extra-linguistic factors. The distinction between semantics and pragmatics is often viewed as literal versus non-literal meaning, or as a distinction between linguistic competence and performance of the utterance.

⁷ Chomsky N. *Knowledge of Language: its Nature, Origin and Use*, New York, 1985.

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ԽՈՍՏԻԿՅԱՆ Ռ.Վ.

Ամփոփում

Լեզվաբանության երկու կարևոր ուղղությունները՝ իմաստաբանությունը և գործաբանությունը, առնչվում են նախադասության կամ ասույթի նշանակությանը և դրանց մեկնաբանությանը: Նշանակության խնդիրը կարևորագույններից մեկն է, և այն մեկնաբանելու համար ոչ միայն լեզվաբանական, այլև արտալեզվաբանական և վերլեզվաբանական գիտելիքի անհրաժեշտություն է պահանջվում: Կարելի է եզրակացնել, որ իմաստաբանությունը նշանակությունն ուսումնասիրում է լեզվաբանական մակարդակով, մինչդեռ գործաբանությունը այն քննում է իրավիճակային համատեքստից ելնելով, հաշվի առնելով արտալեզվաբանական և վերլեզվաբանական առանձնահատկությունները:

СЕМАНТИЧЕСКИЕ И ПРАГМАТИЧЕСКИЕ ВОЗМОЖНОСТИ В ЛИНГВИСТИКЕ АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА

ХОСТИКЯН Р.В.

Резюме

Семантика и прагматика—два основополагающих направления лингвистики, относящихся к значению предложения или высказывания и к его интерпретации. Проблемы, связанные с интерпретацией значения, являются одними из самых сложных и требующих как лингвистических знаний, так и знание экстралингвистических и паралингвистических реалий. Можно заключить, что семантика изучает значение посредством лингвистических форм и элементов (синтаксис, морфология), а прагматика изучает значение в контексте ситуации, с учетом экстра—и паралингвистических особенностей.