

# Semantics and Pragmatics:

## Defining the Terrain

Linguistics 5430

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### Part I. Semantics: The study of meaning construction

#### I. *What semantics is not (necessarily).*

- A. **Semiotics.** Interpretation of symbology found in literature, popular culture, advertising, folklore.
- B. **Psychoanalysis.** Interpretation of, e.g., language used by a patient in a psychotherapeutic setting with regard to unconscious thoughts, desires.
- C. **Sociology.** Interpretation of usage in a sociopolitical framework. E.g., Deborah Tannen's 'doublebind'.
- D. **Language criticism.** Linguistic controversies may reflect social conflicts.

#### II. *What it is.*

- A. **As traditionally defined.** The study of that level of representation which one can construct based upon the conventional meanings of words (nouns, verbs, prepositions, articles) and the grammatical constructions in which those words appear.

*She put the beer in the fridge.*

*She was putting the beer in the fridge.*

*Stupidly, she put the beer in the fridge.*

*She put the beer in the fridge stupidly.*

*She must have put the beer in the fridge.*

*The beer, she put in the fridge.*

*If she put the beer in the fridge, there wouldn't be room for the turkey.*

- B. **Assumptions made by most semanticists:**

- **Verbs denote scenes, which involve participant roles.**

- **Words provide a way of construing the world.**

*Sven bought the Volvo from me for \$1500.  
I sold the Volvo to Sven for \$1500.  
I charged Sven \$1500 for the Volvo.*

*We touched ground at 2 PM.  
We touched land at 2 PM.*

*shiv  
hospitable past  
croc demo  
fighter escort*

- **Verb meaning determines sentence meaning (lexical projection).**

*give* <agent, theme, recipient>

*We gave her the account.*

- **Components of meaning inside words can influence the word's combinatory possibilities**

*She drained the pool **for a day**.  
She dug up the clam and buried it **again**.  
I **almost** fixed my hot water heater.  
He bled **onto the carpet**.*

- **Words have multiple meanings.**

*She ran along freeway.  
The road runs along the freeway.*

*The bird flew over the valley.  
The wire hangs over the yard.*

*The hose is long.  
The test was long.*

*She opened the can.  
She opened the door.*

- **Constructions have meanings.**

*They shamed him into action.  
She cried her eyes red.  
It's GARDENIAS I can't stand!*

- **Languages differ in the way they encode scenes.**

Passage from *The Hobbit*. He still wandered on, out of the little high valley, over its edge, and down the slopes beyond.

French translation: *Il continua d'avancer au hasard, sortit du haut vallon, en franchit le bord et descendit la pente au-delà.*

“He continued to advance haphazardly, exited from the high small valley, crossed the edge of it, and descended the slope beyond...”

- **Words change their designations from literal meanings to more expressive meanings, in the course of use (grammaticalization).**

*Is that a real Rolex?*  
*He's a real fool.* (intensifier)

*If she goes, we'll find it hard to replace her.*  
*If you need anything, my name is Maggie.* (speech act)

*While I was there, I saw two people I knew.*  
*While she is a reasonable person, she is not someone I'd want as a committee member.* (concessive)

- **There is no one-to-one relationship between principles of syntactic and semantic combination (Jackendoff 1997: 31-38).**

- (1) Nouns need not be things.
- (2) “Other than argument structure, most of the conceptual material bundled up inside a lexical item is invisible to syntax” (p. 34).
- (3) Grammatical gender is related only ‘sporadically’ to conceptual distinctions.
- (4) Grammatical roles like direct object do not correlate directly with thematic roles like patient.
- (5) Aspectual distinctions like the telic-atelic distinction can be expressed by verb choice, choice of object, choice of subject, choice of adverbial.
- (6) The syntax may not reflect the semantics:

*An occasional sailor walked by.*  
*I don't believe he's going to show up.*  
*She put the wine in the freezer for a minute.*

- **The categories that word refer to are prototype-based.**  
Speakers report that there are both ‘good’ and ‘marginal’ exemplars of a given category, e.g., LIE. What cognitive models of the world account for these judgments?
- **Speakers activate multiple worlds when speaking and a single expression can refer to distinct ‘counterpart’ entities in each of these worlds.**  
Each of the following sentences has a ‘silly’ reading and a ‘sensible’ reading. Why?  
*Oedipus was eager to marry his mother.* (Note: For Oedipus, Mom = Merope)  
*In 1950, the President was a baby.*

## ***II. Some major issues in semantic theory.***

### **A. Word meaning and constructional meaning. Which is more basic?**

*I gave him a book.*  
*I painted him a picture.*

*I believe your story.*  
 ??*I am believing your story.*  
*This guy is telling the biggest lies and your sister is believing every word.*

*Give me a pillow.*  
*Give me some more pillow.*

*I painted the wall red.*  
*I cried my eyes red.*  
 \**I cried my eyes.*

*She pushed the dish off the table.*  
*She sneezed the foam off the beer.*  
 \**She sneezed the foam.*

- B. Is there a clear difference between literal and figurative meaning?** If metaphor (analogy) is central to the way in which we think and reason, then metaphorical language can be literal in the sense that it is used to make truthful statements about the world.

TIME IS A MOVING OBJECT; TIME IS MOVEMENT ALONG A PATH

*We're coming up on winter break.*  
*Spring break is coming toward us.*  
*In the weeks ahead, we'll learn about meaning.*  
*In the following weeks, we'll learn about meaning.*

AN ARGUMENT IS A JOURNEY

*Now we're coming to the main point.*  
*You just jumped several steps there.*  
*We're just going around and around on this.*  
*How did you get from your premise to your conclusion?*  
*Are you following me?*

- C. Where can we draw the line between conventional meaning and inferred meaning?**

1. Think of the assertion: *I have four dollars.*
2. What if this speaker in fact has five dollars? Is s/he lying? Being uncooperative?

- D. Where can we draw the line between idioms and compositional expressions?**

1. An idiom is defined as a fixed expression that means something other than the sum of its parts. But idioms have lots of parts that aren't fixed.
2. Classic idioms are entirely fixed verb phrases like *kick the bucket*, but many idioms contain a 'variable'.
3. And some idioms are flexible in the sense of allowing modification, passive, number-tense inflection permutations but some are quite flexible.

*She read him the riot act.* (variable in the direct-object position)  
*I can't put a finger on it.* (variable in oblique position)

??*I can't put a well manicured finger on it.* (inflexible )  
 ??*She read him a very long riot act.* (inflexible)  
*She spilled some very disturbing beans to me.* (flexible)

4. Idioms may also be sentence patterns:

*What's that statue doing on the lawn?*  
*Now watch me drop it!*  
*The bigger they come, the harder they fall.*

**E. What does it mean for semantics to be compositional?**

1. One model of composition is based on **lexical licensing**.
2. Another model of composition associates syntactic constituents with types.

**IV. The data used in semantic analysis.**

- A. The primary data for semantic analysis are typically sentences, often in isolation.** Nonsentences (permutations) are crucial; they are generally marked with a ? or \*:

*Look! Harry is running by the house!*  
 \**Look! Harry runs by the house!*

*There stood a cow.*  
 ??*There mooed a cow.*

*She skipped down the street.*  
 ??*She giggled down the street.*

- B. Sometimes it's not clear why a sentence is peculiar: is it a semantic problem or a pragmatic one?**

?*A car is a Volvo.*  
 ?*Someone is a nice person.*

*I see how competent the janitor is.*  
 ?*I smell how competent the janitor is.*

- C. Sometimes semanticists are guilty of constructing examples that no one would ever use:**

*A farmer kills a duckling.*  
*A man walks.*

- D. Ambiguity is a strong source of evidence for semantic representation.**

- 1) Constructional ambiguity: *She ran the dog tired. She shmoozed her way down the receiving line.*
- 2) Lexical ambiguity: *The bill was huge.*
- 3) Scope ambiguity. *She didn't invite many people.*
- 4) Priming: *The astronomer kissed a star. The rabbi got hit on the temple. The plumber lit his pipe.*

## **Part 2. Pragmatics: The study of the relationship among form, inference and context.**

### ***I. Does interpretation rely on context or do linguistic forms call forth contexts?***

*I'll be back in ten minutes.* (deixis)  
*Kilroy was here.* (deictic 'transfer')  
*It couldn't have happened to a nicer guy.* (irony)  
*THAT I'm not so SURE about.* (pragmatically specialized syntax)  
*What IS your name?* (prosody)

### ***II. Language in Use: A Unified Body of Phenomena?***

- A. **Deixis.**
- B. **Anaphora**
- C. **Inference.**
- D. **Use conditions vs. truth conditions** (e.g., *bachelor*).
- E. **Contrasts in grammar.**
- F. **Information packaging.**
- G. **Conversational practice.**
- H. **Stance encoding.**
- I. **Language change.**

### III. Functional Grammar and Theory

A. **Functional analyses (FAs)** have one commonality: all describe language by appeal to conversation as a joint activity involving established conventions. Speakers seek and provide confirmation, establish/shift topics, refer back to established referents, reformulate, signal stance toward content, etc.

#### B. Two types of FA

1. **Conversation analysis.** What practices do speakers follow in conversation? What is the structure of conversation? In what way are forms adapted to conversational structure?
2. **Functional grammar.** How do the forms in the grammar reflect discourse pressures?

#### C. Objects of inquiry in functional grammar

1. Functional models of **language acquisition** (Slobin, Tomasello, Eve Clark). Many errors that children make can be explained on the basis of their learning strategies, which are largely imitative: *Pick you up! Does it fits there?*
2. Functional models of **language evolution** (Givon 1979, Hopper & Traugott 1993, Hopper 1987, Horn 1984, Sweetser 1990). Principles invoked in the description of grammar change are observable in discourse.

EXAMPLE 1. Word and constructions mean more than they literally mean, as a result of classic inference patterns.

*She drew a rectangle.* (not a square)  
*She has a temperature.* (not the normal one)  
*She had the Tortellini or the Penne.* (not both)  
*I walked into the room and she walked out.* (causal relationship)  
*They caused his death.* (not direct causation)

EXAMPLE 2. **The Principle of Separation of Reference and Role** (Lambrecht 1994). Hybrid syntactic structure performs a hybrid function: *There's a guy on the phone wants to talk to you*, French: *Il y a mon train qui part.*

3. Functional models of **competence** (Lambrecht 1994, Birner & Ward 1998). The grammar provides conventional solutions to communicative needs:

**Hypotactic Apposition:** *That's the problem is that they just hate us so much and I never re- I never really realized.*

**ISIS:** *Okay, Nineteen Eighty Four there are like three big continents and uh there's just this area like around Egypt and stuff that everybody's fighting over. Now the problem is is that nobody's going to invade anybody else's boundaries.*

4. Functional models of **production** (Bybee 1995, 2001). Patterns with high TYPE FREQUENCY are most productive, and are most likely to be extended in innovative ways. E.g., irregular verbs.

They **sung** as a family for twelve years fulltime up until Conrad, the leader of the group, went home to be with the Lord.

Horrified onlookers **sbrunk** back to the shadow of shop fronts and awnings.

Here's an article in Reason magazine about the various myths that almost immediately **sprung** up around Katrina.

My head **sunk** into the pillows and I snuggled under the duvet.