

THE NATURE OF SEMANTICS

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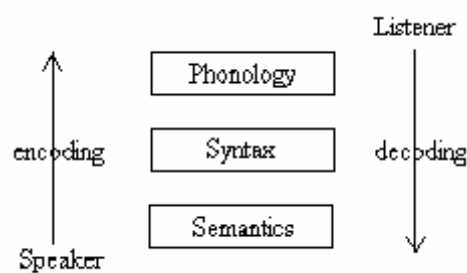
ABSTRACT

With regard to the teaching of semantics, many semantics teachers find difficulty in deciding what to teach in their semantics classes. They have the opinion that concepts such as connotative meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, collocative meaning, thematic meaning, meaning changes of words, synonymy, antonymy, polysemy, harmonymy, homophony, and homography are the primary materials of semantics classes. While those concepts are necessary materials of semantics and are usually taught, teachers of semantics must be well aware that they are not the primary materials of semantics. They are secondary materials. This paper describes the main materials of semantics which consist of word meaning, sentence meaning, and utterance meaning.

Key words: *cognitive meaning, referent, semantic features, predication, sense relations, and implicatures.*

1. Introduction

Human language is composed of three components: **phonology**, which concerns sounds, **syntax**, which concerns grammatical structures, and **semantics** which concerns meaning. As there are only three levels of language, analysis, pragmatics, which is the study of meaning in context or meaning in language use, or meaning in language interaction should be a part of semantics and included in semantics. Semantics must, accordingly, include sense, that is word meaning or sentence meaning without relation to the world outside (semantics) and reference that is word meaning or sentence meaning in relation to the world outside (pragmatics). It is not quite proper to view language as having four levels of language analysis: phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. The following is the picture of the



components of language.

It is necessary to underscore that semantics deals with word meaning, sentence meaning, and utterance meaning.

2. Word Meaning

Language is used for communication. In communicating, speakers or writers communicate meaning to listeners or readers. The nature of the meaning of a word is its **referent**.

The referent of a word can be an object, an event, a state, a process, or an action here in this world. For example, the referent of:

- hen is : [+ animate, + animal, + biped, + female, + avian]
 cow is : [+ animate, + animal, + quadruped, + vertebrate, + mammal, + bovine]
 boar is : [+ animate, + animal, + quadruped, + vertebrate, + mammal, + porcine, + male]
 hot is : [a state of having a high temperature]
 to sew is : [an action of working with a needle and thread]
 drizzling is : [the process of raining in small drops]
 a party is : [an event of the gathering of persons, by invitation, for pleasure]

The referent of a word consists of contrasting features. The contrasting or contrastive features are called semantic features, semantic elements, semantic components, or semantic primitives. This type of meaning of word is called the conceptual meaning, or the logical meaning, or the denotative meaning or the cognitive meaning (Luch, 1981: 10-12). Some other examples are:

- church : [+ inanimate]
 [+ building]
 [+ for public worship]
 [+ for Christians]
 teacher : [+ animate]
 [+ human]
 [+ male or female]
 [+ adult]
 [+ having the duty to each]
 priest : [+ animate]
 [+ human]
 [+ male]
 [+ adult]
 [+ a clergyman between a deacon and a bishop]

[+ in Church of England and Roman Catholic Church]

- president : [+ animate]
 [+ human]
 [+ male or female]
 [+ adult]
 [+ head of government]
 intelligence : [+ the power of seeing, learning, understanding and knowing]

Semantic features are of two kinds: defining semantic features and non-defining semantic features. The defining semantic features of a **chair** is : [+ inanimate, + a piece of furniture, + it has one or more legs, + it has a seat, + it has a back]. The non-defining semantic features are, among others, the size, and the material it is made of.

There are, however, words that do not have real entities in this world, like devil, demon, imp, fairy, satan, angel, god, goddess, goblin, winged horse, and unicorn. Still these words are considered to have referents or conceptual meaning. For example:

- devil is : [a wicked spirit]
 imp is : [the child of a devil]
 demon is : [an evil spirit]
 fairy is : [a small imaginary being with supernatural powers, able to help or harm human beings]
 unicorn is : [a horse - like animal with one long horn and a lion's tail]

Another concept that is important about word meaning is **componential analysis** (Kempson, 1977: 18). The concept of componential analysis is that the meaning of a word is viewed as a group or a bundle of semantic components.

In essence, componential analysis is the same as the conceptual meaning of a word, that a word has defining and non-defining semantic components or semantic features. The

following examples illustrate the bundle or group of semantic components of words:

cat	: [+ animate] [+ animal] [+ quadruped] [+ vertebrate] [+ mammal] [+ feline]
girl	: [+ animate] [+ human] [+ female] [+ young]
teacher	: [+ animate] [+ human] [+ male or + female] [+ adult] [+ having the duty to teach]
cemetery	: [+ inanimate] [+ a piece of land] [+ to bury corpses]
mountain	: [+ inanimate] [+ a very high mound of land on earth] [+ either active or dormant]

The third important concept of word meaning is **semantic fields**. The concept of semantic field is that the semantic field of a word is divided into a class or a group of mutually exclusive words. For examples; for the word **walk**, there are a class of incompatible words that divide its semantic field, like:

walk	: to move forward, by putting each foot in turn
wade	: walk with an effort such as through water or mud
waddle	: walk with slow steps and a sideways roll, as a duck does
dash	: move forward violently
stroll	: walk quietly and unhurriedly
linger	: to walk slowly
tiptoe	: walk or move on tiptoe
hobble	: walk as when lame, or as when the feet or legs are impeded

saunter	: walk in a leisurely way
stagger	: walk or move unsteadily
toddle	: walk with short, uncertain steps as a baby does
trudge	: walk wearily or heavily
paddle	: walk with bare feet in shallow water
mince	: walk with light steps, trying to appear delicate or refined
stalk	: walk with slow, stiff strides
limp	: walk lamely or unevenly
slog	: walk hard and steadily

and some more verb words. Each of these words has its own meaning and cannot be used to replace another word in a sentence. Thus, the sentence **He waded along the flooded road** cannot be replaced by **He strolled along the flooded road**.

Another example is the verb **weep**. The semantic field of the verb **weep** is divided into a class of mutually exclusive words like:

weep	: cry, let tears fall from the eyes
cry	: weep, shed tears
bawl	: cry loudly
blubber	: weep noisily
howl	: utter a long, loud cry as when in pain
yowl	: utter a long, distressful cry
mewl	: cry as a baby does
pule	: cry feebly, as a baby does
snivel	: cry from pretended grief, sorrow, or fear
sob	: cry by drawing in the breath sharply and irregularly from sorrow or pain
squall	: cry loudly because of pain or fear
wail	: cry loudly in a shrill voice
whimper	: cry by uttering weak frightened or complaining sounds

These three areas of word meaning, conceptual meaning, semantic components, and

semantic field are very important for students of semantics to know. They are universal, in the sense that the three areas of meaning are the same everywhere in the world. In addition, they become the basis for universal communication. Semantics teachers must not fail to teach them. It is only after these three kinds of meaning have been taught that other concepts such as connotative meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, collocative meaning, reflected meaning, thematic meaning, synonymy, antonymy, homonymy, homophony, homography, etc. may be taught.

3. Sentence Meaning

According to Devitt and Sterenly (1999), the conceptual meaning of a sentence is studied through the principle of referent and principle of structure. The principle of referent refers to the conceptual meaning of the words that are contained in the sentence. The principle of structure refers to the organization of the words in the sentence according to the structural rules. The principle of structure states that a larger unit like phrases, clauses, and sentences are composed of smaller constituent units. The sentence **Tom is very tall**, consists of **Tom** with a referent of an individual with conceptual features of [+ animate], [+ human], [+ male], [+ adult], [+ potent], [+ unique] and with a functional category of **is very tall** is the predicate with **is** as a word that shows tense and concord, **very** as an adjunct, and **tall** as the verb that shows a state of more than average height. **Tom is very tall** consists of three lexical words with three referents. **Tom** is an individual with the above conceptual features, **very** is an adjunct with a referent of 'of high degree' and **tall** as the main verb with a referent of 'a state of more than average height'. The word 'is' does not have a lexical meaning. It is a word only to show inflection, tense and concord. The meaning of **Tom is very tall** is **Tom is very tall** or **Tom is not short**.

The following example illustrates clearly that the conceptual meaning of a sentence depends on the referents and structures of the words: **This is a large garden flower** and **This is a large flower garden**. The focus of the first sentence is **a flower** while the focus of the second sentence is **a garden**.

A sentence is basically a structure of predication. In terms of semantics, a simple sentence consists of a predicate and one or more arguments. The predicates of sentences are of several kinds. They are:

(1) **One-place predicates**. These are predicates with only one argument. Examples:

<u>My friend</u>	<u>is always happy.</u>
Argument	Predicate
	Adjunct Verb

<u>Her sister</u>	<u>is a teacher.</u>
Argument	Predicate

<u>The dictionary</u>	<u>is on the table.</u>
Argument	Predicate
	Verb

<u>Susan</u>	<u>smiles very often.</u>
Argument	Predicate
	Verb Adjunct

It is necessary to be aware that, in semantics, **prepositions are verbs**. Prepositions as verbs are followed by locative nouns.

(2) **Two-place predicates**. Two-place predicates are predicates with two arguments. Some examples are:

<u>That dog</u>	<u>is eating bones.</u>
Arguments 1	Predicate
	Verb Argument 2

Those people are building a house
Arguments 1 Predicate
Verb Argument 2

Her manager appreciated her work.
Arguments 1 Predicate
Verb Argument 2

It is raining.
Predicate

It is snowing.
Predicate

It is drizzling.
Predicate

(3) Three-place predicates. These are predicates with three arguments. Some examples are:

Mary gave Susan a birthday present.
Argument 1 Predicate
Verb Argument 2 Argument 3

His father bought him a new motorcycle.
Argument 1 Predicate
Verb Argument 2 Argument 3

My colleagues send me Christmas cards.
Argument 1 Predicate
Verb Argument 2 Argument 3

(4) Ambient predicates. Cook (1989: 73-75) identifies a fourth type of predicates which are called ambient predicates. Ambient predicates are predicates without nouns, without arguments. There are ambient predicates that show **states** like:

It is snowy.
Predicate

It is rainy.
Predicate

It is foggy.
Predicate

and ambient predicates showing **processes**, like:

The conceptual meaning of a sentence is also studied through sense relations. Sense relations are relations between sentences or propositions. The kinds of sense relations are:

(1) Synonym or paraphrase

For example: *The house is large* is the same as *The house is big*.

(2) Entailment

For example: *Mr. Smith lost his wife last Saturday* entails *Mr. Smith does not have a wife anymore*.

(3) Presupposition

For example: *Bob has had a hair cut* presupposes *Bob's hair is long*.

(4) Ambiguity

For example: *The shooting of the hunters was regretted* has two meanings or two readings.

(5) Tautology

For example: *My father is older than me*.

(6) Contradiction

For example: *The clever student is stupid*.

(7) Inconsistency

For example: *I am an orphan* is inconsistent with *I have a father*.

(8) Anomaly

For example: *The orphan's mother lives in America* or *My friend eats a lot of stones*.

4. Utterance Meaning

An utterance is a sentence which is spoken in a situational context, in a context of lan-

guage use, in interaction, or in communication. The elements of communication are the setting of time and place, participants, topic channel, language form, norms, key, and genre. In communication, language is used to carry out various kinds of language functions such as to greet, to condole, to praise, to give compliments, to assert, to soothe, to lull, to give information, to invite, to decline an invitation, to encourage, to discourage, to persuade, to provoke, to retaliate, to agree, to disagree, to argue, to debate, to request, to command, to exclaim, to pray, to plea, to plead, to state, to ridicule, to make fun of, to ask questions, to threaten, to promise, to name, to declare, to allude, to confirm, to advertise, to exaggerate and many more others. Some experts divide these micro-functions of language into macro-functions like emotive function, directive function, referential function, phatic function, poetic function, and metalinguistic function.

In communication, the meaning of an utterance is not only determined by the conceptual meaning of the sentence but also by paralinguistic features such as stress, pitch, intonation, juncture, body movements, head movements, hand gestures, eye-contact, and the distance between the interlocutors.

Utterances can be of several kinds: statements or constatives or indicatives, questions, commands, requests, and exclamations. But there are utterances which constitute speech acts. There are two kinds of utterances that constitute speech acts: **declaratives** or **declarations**, and **performatives**. In declarations, the acts are expressed by the verbs. The saying is the same as the doing. Examples of declaratives are:

- I name
- I declare
- I promise
- I baptize
- I sentence
- I arrest
- I bet

In performatives the acts are not really expressed by the verbs, but the utterance still constitutes an act. For example, an utterance “**Be careful when you speak**” may be interpreted as an act of threat. An utterance “**Sir, it’s now one p.m.**” may be interpreted as an act of requesting the teacher to stop teaching.

According to Austin (in Palmer, 1982), there are three levels of speech acts. They are:

- (1) **Locutionary act**: an act of uttering a sentence with meaning. For example: “Sir, the examination questions are difficult”
- (2) **Illocutionary act**: the underlying force of the locutionary act. Referring to the above locutionary act, the underlying force is to request the teacher to prolong the examination time.
- (3) **Perlocutionary act**: the consequent effect of the locutionary act or the hearer. In the above case, the teacher prolongs the examination time.

In communication, participants or interlocutors are guided and expected to obey what Paul Grice calls **Cooperative Principle** (Mey, 2001: 65-67). Cooperative Principle consists of conversational maxims or conversational rules, or conversational conventions. They are:

- (1) Maxim of quality : be true
- (2) Maxim of quantity : be brief
- (3) Maxim of relevance : be relevant
- (4) Maxim of manner : be clear

Once in a while, however, these maxims may be flouted on purpose for a particular purpose such as to exaggerate, to be polite, to be rude, to be forthright, or to be a sarcastic.

In conversations, very often the speaker does not express the meaning explicitly. The meaning is left implicit and the hearer has to unfold the meaning of the basis of the linguistic input and knowledge of the world. This type of meaning is called a conversational **implicature**. Some examples of conversational implicatures are:

(1) Teacher : “Could anyone of you assist me tomorrow at nine o’clock?”

Student : “Tomorrow is Sunday.”

In this conversation, the meaning is left implicit. It is unfolded by knowledge of the world that Sunday is a holiday and nobody goes to the campus. The meaning is that the students cannot help the teacher on the next day.

(2) Ambrose: “How did you get to this hotel?”

Albert : “I parked my vehicle on the sixth floor, over there.”

As motorcycles are usually parked on the ground floor and that the higher floors are for cars, Albert wanted to inform Ambrose that he came to the hotel by car.

Conversational implicatures are different from logical implications. A logical implication is a relationship between propositions. Some examples of logical implications are:

(1) “*If you submit all your assignments, I will give you a high grade.*” The logical implication of the above propositions is that if the student fails to submit all his assignments, he will not obtain a high grade.

(2) “*If you start saving now, someday you can own a house.*” The logical implication of these propositions is that if he remains to be extravagant, he will not be able to buy a house in the future.

Both conversational implicatures and logical implications are very frequently produced in language use in context.

5. Conclusion

Semantics is a very broad field to teach and learn. It is, therefore, of great importance to pinpoint the basic materials that students must learn. With reference to word meaning, the conceptual meaning, semantic components, and semantic fields of words are essential. In terms of sentence meaning, the principle of referent and principle of structure, kinds of predicates, and sense relations are important to understand the meaning of sentence. As for utterance meaning, kinds of utterances, utterances as speech acts, cooperative principle and conversational implicatures and logical implications are necessary to understand the meaning of utterances. If semantics teachers always give a top-priority to these areas of meaning in their semantics teaching, they may be happy because they are doing the right thing.

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