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978-0-521-61741-3 - Introducing Semantics
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CHAPTER

1 Meaning in the empirical study of language

CHAPTER PREVIEW

In this chapter we will introduce some important concepts for the study of semantics. In 1.1 we place the notion of linguistic meaning in the wider context of human communication and behaviour. Section 1.2 then examines some of the vocabulary that English and other languages use for ordinary talk about meaning in language and related phenomena. A consideration of how this everyday non-technical vocabulary varies cross-linguistically can show some of the important different aspects of linguistic meaning. In section 1.3 the **semiotic triangle** of mind, world and language is discussed, followed in 1.4 by an introduction to five fundamental concepts:

- lexemes;
- sense and reference;
- denotation and connotation;
- compositionality; and
- levels of meaning.

Next (1.5), we introduce the concepts of **object language** and **metalanguage**, and distinguish a number of different possible relations between the language *in which* meanings are described (the 'metalanguage') and the language *whose* meanings are described (the 'object language'). We will then consider three different identifications of meaning: meanings as objects in the world (referents: 1.6.1), as objects in the mind (concepts: 1.6.2), and as brain states (1.6.3). An alternative identification is the notion of meanings as uses, discussed in 1.6.4. To end the chapter, we consider a view of meaning on which meanings are unobservable, hypothetical constructs posited to explain facts about language use (1.7).

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1.0 What is semantics?

Any attempt to understand the nature of language must try to describe and explain the ways in which linguistic expressions have meaning. This book introduces some of the aspects of meaning studied in linguistic semantics, the branch of linguistics which, along with pragmatics, has responsibility for this task. Semantics is one of the richest and most fascinating parts of linguistics. Among the kinds of questions semanticists ask are the following:

- What are meanings — definitions? ideas in our heads? sets of objects in the world?
- Can all meanings be precisely defined?
- What explains relations between meanings, like synonymy, antonymy (oppositeness), and so on?
- How do the meanings of words combine to create the meanings of sentences?
- What is the difference between literal and non-literal meaning?
- How do meanings relate to the minds of language users, and to the things words refer to?
- What is the connection between what a word means, and the contexts in which it is used?
- How do the meanings of words interact with syntactic rules and principles?
- Do all languages express the same meanings?
- How do meanings change?

Clearly, semantics is a vast subject, and in this book we will only be able to introduce the most important parts of it. 'Meaning', however, is a very vague term. In ordinary English, the word 'meaning' is used to refer to such different things as the *idea* or *intention* lying behind a piece of language, as in (1), the *thing referred to* by a piece of language (2), and the translations of words between languages (3).

(1) *'I don't quite understand what you're getting at by saying "meat is murder": do you mean that everyone should be a vegetarian?'*

(2) *'I meant the second street on the left, not the first one.'*

(3) 'Seiketsu *means "clean" in Japanese.*'

As we will see, an important initial task of linguistic semantics is to distinguish between these different types of meaning, and to make it clear exactly what place each of them has within a principled theory of language (see Sections 1.4 and 1.6).

Each of the chapters of this book introduces some essential concepts for understanding the ways in which meaning can be analysed in linguistics. This first chapter is an introduction to the issues and concepts studied in linguistic semantics. In Chapter 2 we consider the relation between

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meanings and definitions. When we think about word meanings, definitions in dictionaries quickly come to mind: we know that, if uncertain about a word's meaning, we can look it up in a dictionary. This means that it is important to be clear about the similarities and differences between the aspects of meaning that interest linguists, on the one hand, and lexicographers (dictionary-writers) on the other. In Chapters 3 and 4 we discuss the relation between word meaning and word use: how do we distinguish between what a word actually means, and the way in which it happens to be used on a given occasion? Chapter 5 looks at attempts to analyse the meanings of words into sets of basic components, and discusses the problem of determining just how many meanings a given word has. In Chapter 6 we introduce some concepts from formal logic which have been fruitfully applied to the analysis of natural language meanings, and in Chapters 7 and 8 we look at the ways research inspired by psychology has been used to illuminate linguistic semantic questions, and how the results of this research can be modelled on computers. Chapter 9 explores the semantics of the parts of speech and of tense and aspect. Chapter 10 discusses the relationship between semantics and syntax, a subject which raises many important questions. Chapter 11 emphasizes a somewhat different aspect of meaning, its changeability. Meaning is always changing, both synchronically (i.e. between different speakers at the same time) and diachronically (over time). No comprehensive study of meaning can neglect this variation and change.

QUESTION How closely does the subject matter of semantics seem to correspond with what you would have thought are the main questions to ask about meaning in language?

1.1 Meaning, communication and significance

Informally, it is easy to agree that meaning is the heart of language. Meaning, we might say, is what language is *for*: to have a language without meaning would be like having lungs without air. Only when sequences of sounds or letters have (or are judged capable of having) a meaning do they qualify as language: infants' babbling and bird song, for example, use the same medium as human language – sound – but since they do not, and cannot, express meaning (except, perhaps, to the infants or the birds) we do not consider them as examples of language in the full sense of the word. Meaning is also central to the *experience* of using language, as anyone knows who has ever listened to people talking in an unknown language. Not only does such a language fail to express any meaning; it is also often hard to catch hold of individual words: without knowing the meaning of an utterance, it is hard to identify the separate words which constitute it.

Without a capacity to express meaning, then, language loses one of its essential aspects. We practically always speak or write in order to express a meaning of one kind or another. This is most obviously true for pieces

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of language which convey information: if someone suddenly says (4), then a meaning has been conveyed, and you are in possession of some information – whether true or false – which you may not have previously known.

(4) *Engels was two and a half years younger than Marx.*

But not only sentences have meanings. Even the shortest, most everyday words, which we would not normally consider as containing information, like *the*, *not, of,* or even *ouch!*, contribute something specific to the meanings of utterances in which they occur and can thus be legitimately considered as having meanings in their own right. (For some scholars, the study of the meanings of words like these belongs as much to pragmatics and syntax as it does to semantics; we will discuss the difference between semantics and pragmatics in 1.4.4.)

QUESTION Two apparent exceptions to the meaningfulness of language are T-shirts worn in Japan and elsewhere with 'nonsensical' English sentences on them, and people speaking in tongues at certain religious meetings. Are there other examples of this kind? Are instances of language use like this really non-meaningful? If so, what are some possible implications for semantics? If not, why not?

Although the study of meaning is extremely ancient, the name *semantics* was only coined in the late nineteenth century by the French linguist Michel Bréal. Like many other names of branches of linguistics, the word *semantics* reflects the origins of the Western tradition of linguistic analysis in the writings of Greek thinkers from the fifth century BC onwards. *Semantics* comes from the ancient Greek word *semantikos*, an adjective meaning 'relating to signs', based on the noun *sēmeion* 'sign'. In Ancient Greek, one of the original uses of *sēmeion* was as a medical term for the symptoms that were the *signs* of underlying diseases. This derivation highlights the close relation between the study of linguistic signs – words, phrases, sentences and utterances – and the study of signs in general: both artificial, conventional signs like road signs, clock faces, the symbols used in computer programs, or the 'signals' communicated by different choices of clothes; and natural signs like symptoms of disease, the level of the sun in the sky (a sign of the time of day) or tracks on the ground (the sign that an animal has passed). The study of signs in general is known as **semiotics** or **semiology** (both Greek words also deriving from *sēmeion*). In the twentieth century, the general study of signs became particularly important and the new discipline of semiotics was created, especially as the result of the work of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (pronounced 'purse'; 1839–1914) and of Bréal's student, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), often considered as the founder of modern linguistics.

The meanings we can express through language are infinitely more numerous, detailed and precise than those expressible through other semiotic media. Yet the type of meaning found in language can be seen as a subset of two broader categories of meaningfulness: the significance of

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human behaviour in general, and the meaningfulness of communication specifically. There are many meaningful ways of behaving which do *not* involve language. These are not limited to those types of behaviour involving structured sets of conventional, accepted symbols like the left-right indicator lights on cars, the use of flags at sea to convey various specific messages, or the many types of symbol involving body parts (bowing, waving, nodding and shaking the head, the thumbs up/thumbs down signals, the hand signs used in baseball, etc.). Many types of intentional human behaviour can be seen as having a significance, or a meaning, in the (broad) sense of the word, since they both express, and allow observers to draw conclusions about, the nature and intentions of the participants. Someone who has just got up from their seat on the bus is probably intending to get off. Someone who suddenly stops walking down the street to search frantically through their pockets may just have realized that they have forgotten their keys. Unlike the use of language, these types of behaviour do not involve any structured set of symbols or, necessarily, any **communicative intention** and are therefore non-semiotic. The person getting up from their seat is not wishing to communicate anything to anyone, and is not making use of any structured communicative symbols: they simply want to get off. The use of fully articulated language, which does involve a communicative intention, is thus only the fullest and most explicit way in which we derive information about our environment: as a result, the meaningfulness of language can be seen as a subset of the meaningfulness of human behaviour.

QUESTION We have just given a number of examples of conventional symbols. What are some others?

Even when an intention to communicate does exist, however, the use of language is only one of a number of ways in which the intention can be fulfilled. Take the example of someone at the dinner table suddenly choking on some food. They start to gasp, they go red in the face, their eyes water, and all they can do is make a muffled, indistinct cry. To the other people at the table, this communicates something: they realize that there is something wrong and that help is needed. As a result, they could quickly help the sufferer by giving them a glass of water or a slap on the back. This, then, is an example of some information being made known without the help of language: the person choking has just cried out, perhaps involuntarily, and this is enough to attract the attention of others, to tell them something about the current state of that person, and to stimulate them to bring the required help. Now imagine that the person choking, instead of simply crying out, articulates three quick syllables consisting simply of three choking-sounding vowels, with the middle syllable louder than the others: '∗-∗-∗'. In this case, the other people at the table might conclude that the three cries were substitutes for the three syllables of the sentence 'I'm CHOking!', and would act on the basis of this (correct) assumption. Here, even though the speaker can only manage to articulate the syllable pattern of the intended phrase, communication

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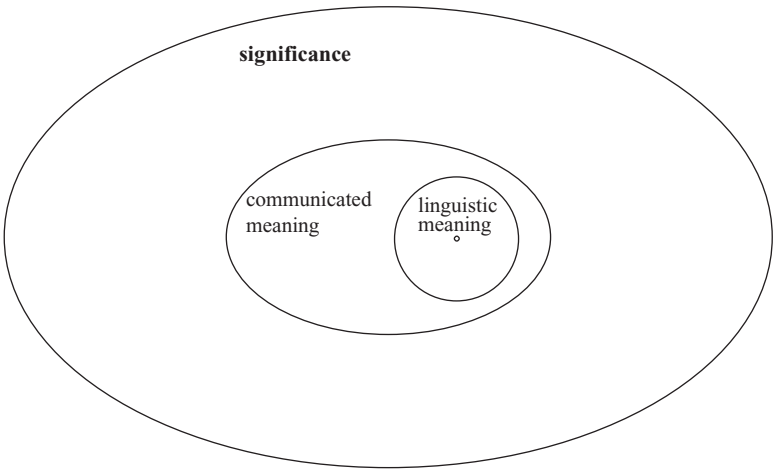

FIGURE 1.1
Significance, communicated meaning and linguistic meaning.

successfully takes place. Of course, if they had enough breath left, they could simply cry out 'I'm choking', and there would be no ambiguity. These cases show that a fully articulated sentence is not always necessary to communicate an intended meaning: the same meaning can be suggested in a variety of different ways, all of which rely on implicit conventions. The sentence expresses the intended meaning more precisely and unambiguously than the others: both the single cry and its three syllable variant are open to many interpretations, and are therefore much less reliable than the fully explicit sentence. But we can nevertheless remove the language from a communicative situation and retain much of the meaning. Situations are inherently meaningful. Meaning, we might say, is already there in the world: all we have to do is draw attention to it, and language is the most specific and unambiguous way of doing so. The different types of meaningfulness we have been discussing so far could be diagrammed as in Figure 1.1.

1.2 Talking about meaning in English and other languages

Semantics, then, is the study of meaning. But what actually *is* meaning? In Section 1.6 we will discuss some specific answers to this question. For the moment, we will make a start by looking at what place the notion of meaning has in our ordinary talk about language. The way we use the concept of meaning in ordinary language is important because it provides us with a *pretheoretical* starting point for theoretical semantic analysis, and gives us the initial vocabulary with which we can begin to identify and describe the phenomena which strike us. Informal talk about what pieces of language mean is a very common part of everyday life: we explain new words, give paraphrases of what people mean by a certain phrase or expression, sometimes translate words from one language to another in order to show their meaning. But even though we *use* the

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notion of meaning naturally and unproblematically, it is quite another thing to develop an explicit, rigorous *explanation* of it. In just the same way, it is one thing to talk about the movements of celestial bodies like the moon and stars – we do so, informally, all the time – but a different one entirely to have a scientific understanding of them. And since meanings cannot be seen, there is the initial question of how to pin down exactly what we are and are not supposed to be investigating. It will help us to accomplish this task if we examine the everyday vocabulary used to talk about meaning in English and other languages. This vocabulary varies considerably cross-linguistically; examining it can show some of the important different aspects of linguistic meaning, and can allow us to see how different languages impose different starting distinctions on what we, in English, call 'meaning'.

1.2.1 'Meaning' in English

English uses the verb *to mean* to refer to a relationship involving at least one of three different types of thing: language, the world (including people, objects, and everything outside of ourselves) and our own minds or intentions. Here are five typical examples of *mean* in English which exemplify some of these relationships:

(5) *When I said 'Dublin has lots of attractions' I meant Dublin, Ireland, not Dublin, Virginia.*

(6) *In Sydney, 'the bridge' means the Harbour Bridge.*

(7) *'Stout' means 'short and fat'.*

(8) *By turning off the music I didn't mean that you should go.*

(9) *Trees mean water.*

Sentence (5) distinguishes two possible places that the speaker could have been referring to by the name 'Dublin', and specifies that only one of them was intended. This, then, is a three-way relation between a piece of language, a mind and the world: the world is represented by the two places called Dublin, language by the sentence 'Dublin has lots of attractions', and mind by the speaker's *intention* to refer to Dublin, Ireland. The second sentence is a relation between language and world, without any specific reference to people's intentions. It says that the expression 'the bridge' refers to one particular structure – the Sydney Harbour Bridge – rather than any of the other bridges in Sydney. Even though it is obviously only through the action of speakers' minds that *bridge* has this reference, there is no explicit mention of speakers' minds in (6). In (7), there is no explicit reference to either people's minds or to the world: the sentence reports an equivalence between two linguistic items, the word 'stout', according to (7), is simply equivalent in some way to the words 'short and fat'. Sentence (8) refers to a mind–world relation: it is thus like sentence (5), except that there is no language: the speaker denies that the action of turning the music off was the result of any *intention* for the guests to leave.

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Sentence (9) names a world–world relationship: the presence of one type of object in the world (trees) reveals the presence of another (water).

The fact that the same verb is used in English for these non-linguistic situations as well as the linguistic ones is noteworthy if we consider the discussion in 1.1. Thus, while sentences (5)–(7) refer to linguistic meaning, sentence (8) refers to communicated meaning, and sentence (9) refers to what we have called significance. In sentence (8) (spoken, say, at a party where it has got late and there are only a few guests left), the act of turning off the music could be interpreted as a sign of the end of the party: sentence (8) is a way of saying that the speaker did not intend this. And to say that 'Trees mean water' is to say that the presence of trees allows us to conclude that there must be water nearby (compare the examples of significance in the previous section). This is a conclusion we reach simply by virtue of what we know about trees and water, and without there being any communication as such.

In ordinary English, then, we use the same verb to refer both to the meanings expressed by language and to those which are communicated non-linguistically, as well as to those which emerge, without any communication, as a result of the inherent significance of the world and human behaviour. In a number of these situations, the idea of the intention of the communicator seems to be an important part of what is being talked about through the use of the verb *mean*. But meaning is not the only way in which situations like those in (5)–(6) can be described in English: a number of other possible modes of description are also available. To see this, let's narrow the discussion down to one particular example of language – a piece which many people would think of as, simply, a mistake. Consider the following situation: Judy and Alastair are having a dinner party, and Alastair has gone out to buy a few extra plates and cups for the guests. Coming home, he says:

(10) *I've got some more cutlery for the party.*

For most speakers of English, this would count as a mistake, since 'cutlery' refers not to cups and plates, but to knives, forks and spoons. But the fact that this is a mistake in no way diminishes the need for a principled, linguistic account of it: like other branches of linguistics, semantics describes language as it is actually used and the use of a mistake as our example here will allow the relevant issues to emerge particularly clearly.

How then can we describe what is happening in (10)? In context, we can imagine three replies which Judy might make, each of which considers Alastair's 'mistake' from a different point of view:

(11) a. Judy: *Cutlery?! We've got lots of cutlery! You mean you got more* crockery*!*
Alastair: *Oh yeah, crockery.*

b. Judy: *Cutlery?! Why did you say* cutlery *instead of* crockery*?*
Alastair: *Oh yeah, crockery.*

c. Judy: *Cutlery?! You did not! You got more crockery!*
Alastair: *Oh yeah, crockery.*

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In (11a) Judy uses the category of meaning to describe Alastair's language, and says that Alastair did not actually *mean* 'cutlery': what he meant was 'crockery'. In (11b) she talks about what Alastair 'says'. Here, she could be described as talking not about language meaning, but language *use*: she notes that Alastair has used the term *cutlery* when the term *crockery* would be expected. In (11c), Judy simply denies what Alastair has said. In so doing, she can be described as applying the categories of truth and falsity to Alastair's utterance: according to her, it is simply not true that Alastair bought cutlery, a fact which Alastair then admits.

Ordinary English, then, makes available at least three different ways of talking about language: meaning, use and truth. Each of these three categories of ordinary language description highlights a particular aspect of the occurrence. Description in terms of truth places the emphasis on the objective facts of the situation by concentrating on the relation between language and reality: does the language used correspond to the actual state of affairs? Description in terms of use makes no explicit reference to the facts, but limits itself to a consideration of equivalences between the piece of language in question and an assumed norm: Alastair said *cutlery* when, in the same circumstances, most people would have said *crockery*. Lastly, description in terms of meaning places the emphasis on the speaker's intentions: for Judy to say that Alastair meant crockery is, in this context, the equivalent of saying that he *intended* to say *crockery*, and to note a discrepancy between this assumed intention and the actual words used.

As we will see in Section 1.6, each of these ordinary language modes of description has its own developed, theoretical analogue.

1.2.2 'Meaning' in Warlpiri

In English, then, the one verb 'mean' is used to describe reference, linguistic meaning, intention, and general significance. Given the frequency with which, in English, we use this verb to talk about the relations between language, intention and the world, it may be surprising to discover that there are languages which do not make use of any similar notion in order to talk about situations like those in (5)–(6) above. One such language is Warlpiri, a Pama-Nyungan language spoken in central Australia. In a sense, Warlpiri has no equivalent for the verb *mean*, and the links between reference, linguistic equivalence, intention, and general significance are quite differently constituted.

In Warlpiri, the most common way of asking about the 'meaning' of a word does not involve any verb. For example, to ask about the meaning of the word *karnta* ('woman'), one would simply say (12):

(12) *Nyiya* *karnta-ju?*
what *karnta*-TOPIC
'What is a *karnta?*'/'What does "*karnta*" mean?'

This could be translated as either 'what does *karnta* mean?' or as 'what is a *karnta*?'. And when the meaning of a word is explained or defined, once

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again no separate verb meaning 'mean' is involved. In the following example, for instance, the speaker is explaining the meaning of the word *ngalyarra*:

(13) *Ngalyarra* *ngula-ju* *yanjilypiri* *panu.*
Ngalyarra that-TOPIC stars many
'*Ngalyarra* – that is many stars'/'*Ngalyarra* means "many stars".'
(WlpD: *ngalyarra*)

The absence of the specific verb 'mean' is characteristic of a wider set of contexts in Warlpiri; there is also very often no separate verb that would be the equivalent of 'is' in English, as the following examples show:

(14) *Ngamirliri,* *ngula-ji* *kirrirdipardu.*
curlew that-TOPIC tall
'The curlew is tall.' (WlpD: *ngamirliri*)

(15) *Jajirdi* *kuyu* *wita.*
native cat animal small
'The native cat is a small animal.' (WlpD: *jajirdi*)

The result of this is that Warlpiri makes less of a distinction than English between what a *word* means, and what its *referent* actually *is*. To say what a word means is simply to describe the object or situation it refers to. Language–world relations are described in the same way as world–world ones.

Warlpiri does, however, have a way of explicitly mentioning the language-user, as can be seen in the following example:

(16) *Mirni-nya* *karnalu* *wurnturu* *ngarri-rni.* *Kala* *mirnimpa,*
mirni-FOCUS 1PL.SUBJ far call-NONPAST but *mirnimpa*
ngula-ju *kutu-pardu* *karnalu* *ngarri-rni.*
that-TOPIC close-rather 1PL.SUBJ call-NONPAST
'We use *mirni* to mean far, whereas by *mirnimpa* we mean rather close.' (WlpD: *mirnimpa*)

But the verb used here, *ngarri-rni*, which simply means 'call', does not make any reference to the speaker's intentions, an important component of the notion of 'meaning' in English. The literal meaning of (16) is something like 'we call far things *mirni*, whereas we call close things *mirnimpa*.' This is simply a fact about language use: *ngarrirni* 'call' makes no reference to any intention of the speaker, and the verb *manngi-nyanyi* 'think, intend', is not typically used to refer to the meaning of words.

1.2.3 'Meaning' in French

Whereas, in Warlpiri, the meanings of words are not discussed in the same terms as the intentions of speakers, in French there is a close link between these two domains. The most common way of expressing 'mean'

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