1 Basic ideas in semantics

UNIT 1 ABOUT SEMANTICS

Definition SEMANTICS is the study of MEANING in LANGUAGE.

Comment The rest of this book can be regarded as an example of how one goes about investigating and understanding semantics. It may seem to you that meaning is so vague, insubstantial, and elusive that it is impossible to come to any clear, concrete, or tangible conclusions about it. We hope to convince you that by careful thought about the language you speak and the way it is used, definite conclusions CAN be arrived at concerning meaning. In the first exercise below, we ask you to start to get yourself into the habit of careful thinking about your language and the way you use it, concentrating, naturally, on instances of such words as *mean*, *means*, and *meaning*.

Practice Reproduced below is a well-known passage from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. Pick out all the instances of the word *mean* (or *means*, or *meant*), noting which lines they occur in. (Some line numbers are given in the margin for convenience.) After the passage there are some questions for you to answer.

'. . . that shows that there are three hundred and sixty-four days when you might get un-birthday presents.'

'Certainly,' said Alice.

'And only one for birthday presents, you know. There's glory for you!'

'I don't know what you mean by "glory," ' Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. 'Of course you don't – till I tell you. I meant "there's a nice knockdown argument for you." '

'But "glory" doesn't mean 'a nice knockdown argument,' Alice objected.

'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'

'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master – that's all.'

(1) What word is the subject of the verb *mean* in line 6?

.....

(2) What is the subject of the verb *mean* in line 9?

.....

(3) What is understood as the subject of the verb *mean* in line 12?

.....

(4) List all the instances (by line number) where *mean*, *means*, or *meant* has a personal subject, e.g. *I* or *you*. (Include instances already listed in the questions above.)

.....

(5) List all the instances (by line number) in which *mean*, or *means*, or *meant* is understood as having as subject something linguistic, e.g. a word, or words. (Include instances mentioned in questions above.)

.....

Feedback (1) you (2) the word *glory* (3) it, or a word (4) lines 6, 8 (5) lines 9, 12, 12, 13

Comment Lewis Carroll had brilliant insights into the nature of meaning (and into the foibles of people who theorize about it). In the passage above, he is playfully suggesting that the meanings carried by words may be affected by a speaker's will. On the whole, we probably feel that Alice is right, that words mean what they mean independently of the will of their users, but on the other hand it would be foolish to dismiss entirely Humpty Dumpty's enigmatic final remark.

Lewis Carroll's aim was to amuse, and he could afford to be enigmatic and even nonsensical. The aim of serious semanticists is to explain and clarify the nature of meaning. For better or for worse, this puts us in a different literary genre from *Through the Looking Glass*. The time has come to talk seriously of meaning.

Practice (1) Do the following two English sentences mean (approximately) the same thing? *Yes / No*
I'll be back later and *I will return after some time*

(2) Is the answer to the previous question obvious to a normal speaker of English? *Yes / No*

(3) In the light of your reply to (2), if I ask 'What did John mean when he said he'd be back later?', would you be giving the helpful kind of answer that I probably want if you said 'He meant that he would return after some time'? *Yes / No*

(4) In asking 'What did John mean when he said he'd be back later?' is the questioner primarily asking

(a) what the SENTENCE *I'll be back later* means, or
(b) what JOHN meant in saying it? *(a) / (b)*

(5) A dictionary can be thought of as a list of the meanings of words, of what words mean. Could one make a list of what speakers (e.g. John, you, or I) mean? *Yes / No*

(6) Do you understand this question? *Yes / No*

Feedback (1) Yes (2) Yes (3) No, this would be a statement of the obvious, and therefore unhelpful. (4) asking what JOHN meant in saying it, most usually. (5) No, speakers may mean different things on different occasions, even when using the same words. (6) Assuming you are a competent English speaker, yes, you do understand the literal meaning of the interrogative sentence in question (6); but at the same time you may not clearly understand what we, the authors, mean in asking you this question. We mean to point out that understanding, like meaning, can be taken in (at least) two different ways.

Comment The word *mean*, then, can be applied to people who use language, i.e. to speakers (and authors), in roughly the sense of 'intend'. And it can be applied to words and sentences in a different sense, roughly expressed as 'be equivalent to'. The first step in working out a theory of what meaning is, is to recognize this distinction clearly and always to keep in mind whether we are talking about what speakers mean or what words (or sentences) mean. The following two definitions encapsulate this essential distinction.

Definition SPEAKER MEANING is what a speaker means (i.e. intends to convey) when he uses a piece of language.

SENTENCE MEANING (or WORD MEANING) is what a sentence (or word) means, i.e. what it counts as the equivalent of in the language concerned.

Comment The distinction is useful in analysing the various kinds of communication between people made possible by language.

Practice Read the following conversation between two people, A and B, at a bus stop one morning. (The lines are numbered for reference.) Then answer the questions (1)–(8).

1 A: 'Nice day'
2 B: 'Yes, a bit warmer than yesterday, isn't it?'
3 A: 'That's right – one day fine, the next cooler'
4 B: 'I expect it might get cooler again tomorrow'
5 A: 'Maybe – you never know what to expect, do you?'
6 B: 'No. Have you been away on holiday?'
7 A: 'Yes, we went to Spain'
8 B: 'Did you? We're going to France next month'

9 A: 'Oh. Are you? That'll be nice for the family. Do they speak French?'
10 B: 'Sheila's quite good at it, and we're hoping Martin will improve'
11 A: 'I expect he will. I do hope you have a good time'
12 B: 'Thank you. By the way, has the 42 bus gone by yet? It seems to be late'
13 A: 'No. I've been here since eight o'clock and I haven't seen it'
14 B: 'Good. I don't want to be late for work. What time is it now?'
15 A: 'Twenty-five past eight'

(1) Does speaker A tell speaker B anything he doesn't already know in lines 1, 3, and 5? *Yes / No*
(2) Does A's statement in line 7 give B any new information? *Yes / No*
(3) When B says 'Did you?' in line 8, is he really asking A to tell him whether he (A) went to Spain? *Yes / No*
(4) Is there any indication that A needs to know the information that B gives him about travelling to France? *Yes / No*
(5) Does A's 'That'll be nice for the family' in line 9 give B any information? *Yes / No*
(6) Do A's statements in lines 13 and 15 give B any information that he (B) needs? *Yes / No*
(7) At what point does this conversation switch from an exchange of uninformative statements to an exchange of informative statements?

.....

(8) At what point does the information exchanged begin to be of a sort that one of the speakers actually needs for some purpose in going about his everyday business?

.....

Feedback (1) probably not (2) Yes, probably (3) No (4) No (5) probably not (6) Yes (7) with B's enquiry in line 6 (8) with B's question in line 12

Comment All the things said in this conversation are meaningful in one way or another. But one must not equate meaningfulness with informativeness in a narrow sense. While it is true that many sentences do carry information in a straightforward way, it is also true that many sentences are used by speakers not to give information at all, but to keep the social wheels turning smoothly. Thus A and B's uninformative exchange about the weather serves to reassure them both that a friendly courteous relationship exists between them. Even when the sentences produced are in fact informative, as when B tells A about his forthcoming trip to France, the hearer often has no specific need for the information given. The giving of information is itself an act of courtesy, performed to strengthen social relationships. This is also part of communication.

The social relationships formed and maintained by the use of language are not all courteous and amicable. Speaker meaning can include both courtesy and hostility, praise and insult, endearment and taunt.

Practice Consider the following strained exchange between husband and wife. Then answer the questions (1)–(8).

Husband: 'When I go away next week, I'm taking the car'
Wife: 'Oh. Are you? I need the car here to take the kids to school'
Husband: 'I'm sorry, but I must have it. You'll have to send them on the bus'
Wife: 'That'll be nice for the family. Up at the crack of dawn, (ironically) and not home till mid-evening! Sometimes you're very inconsiderate'
Husband: 'Nice day'

(1) This conversation includes three utterances which were also used in the polite bus stop conversation between A and B. Identify these three utterances.

.....

(2) When the wife in the above exchange says 'Are you?' is she thereby in some sense taking up a position opposed to that of her husband? *Yes / No*

(3) In the bus stop conversation, when A says 'Are you?' (line 9), is he in any sense taking up a position opposed to B's position? *Yes / No*

(4) When the wife, above, says 'That'll be nice for the family', is she expressing the belief that her husband's absence with the car will be nice for the family? *Yes / No*

(5) When A says to B at the bus stop 'That'll be nice for the family', is he expressing the belief that going to France will be nice for the family? *Yes / No*

(6) Is A's remark at the bus stop 'Nice day' a pointed change of subject for the purpose of ending a conversation? *Yes / No*

(7) What is the function of this remark of A's?

.....

(8) When the husband uses these same words about the weather, above, what does he mean by it?

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Feedback (1) 'Are you?', 'That'll be nice for the family', and 'Nice day' (2) Yes (3) No (4) No, she is probably being sarcastic (5) Yes (6) No (7) part of a polite prelude to more interesting conversation (8) In the husband's case, the remark is used to end a conversation, rather than initiate one.

Comment The same sentences are used by different speakers on different occasions to mean (speaker meaning) different things. Once a person has mastered the stable meanings of words and sentences as defined by the language system, he can quickly grasp the different conversational and social uses that they can be put to. Sentence meaning and speaker meaning are both important, but systematic study proceeds more easily if one carefully distinguishes the two, and, for the most part, gives prior consideration to sentence meaning and those aspects of meaning generally which are determined by the language system, rather than those which reflect the will of individual speakers and the circumstances of use on particular occasions.

The gap between speaker meaning and sentence meaning is such that it is even possible for a speaker to convey a quite intelligible intention by using a sentence whose literal meaning is contradictory or nonsensical.

Practice Look at the following utterances and state whether they are intended to be taken literally (*Yes*) or not (*No*).

(1) Tired traveller: 'This suitcase is killing me' *Yes / No*

(2) Assistant in a shop: 'We regularly do the impossible; miracles take a little longer' *Yes / No*

(3) During a business meeting: 'It's a dog-eat-dog situation' *Yes / No*

(4) During a heated argument: 'Don't bite my head off!' *Yes / No*

(5) Hungry person at the dinner table: 'I could eat a horse!' *Yes / No*

Feedback (1) No (2) No (3) No (4) No (5) No

Comment Examples such as these show that speakers can convey meaning quite vividly by using sentences whose meanings are in some sense problematical. To account for this, it is necessary to analyse at two levels: firstly, to show what is 'wrong' with such sentences, i.e. why they can't be literally true, and secondly, how speakers nevertheless manage to communicate something by means of them. Sections of this book are devoted to both kinds of meaning, but rather more attention is given to sentence and word meaning.

We will now leave this topic and give some attention to the question of how one studies meaning – to the methods of semantics.

Practice (1) Can two people hold an ordinary conversation without knowing the meanings of the words they are using? *Yes / No*

(2) Is it reasonable to say, if I use such English words as *table* and *chair* in the normal way in my conversation, communicating the usual messages that one does with these and other words, that I know the meanings of the words *table* and *chair*? *Yes / No*

(3) If one knows the meaning of a word, is one therefore necessarily able to produce a clear and precise definition of its meaning? *Yes / No*

(4) Conversely, if several speakers can agree on the correct definition of a word, do they know its meaning? *Yes / No*

(5) Do you happen to know the meaning of the word *ndoho* in the Sar language of Chad, Central Africa? *Yes / No*

(6) Would a sensible way to find out the meaning of *ndoho* be to ask a speaker of Sar (assuming you could find one)? *Yes / No*

(7) The word *ndoho* in Sar means *nine*, so it is not a particularly rare or technical word. Would any normal adult speaker of Sar be an appropriate person to approach to ask the meaning of the word? *Yes / No*

(8) If a native speaker of Sar insists that *ndoho* means *nine* (or the number of digits on two hands, less one, or however he expresses it), while a distinguished European professor of semantics who does not speak Sar insists that *ndoho* means *ten* (or *dix*, or *zehn*, however he translates it), who do you believe, the Sar-speaker or the professor?

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Feedback (1) No (2) Yes (3) No, being able to give the definition of the meaning of a word is not a skill that everyone possesses. (Studying semantics should considerably sharpen this skill.) (4) Yes, it would seem reasonable to say so. (5) Probably you don't. (6) Yes (7) Yes, although some speakers, possibly through shyness or embarrassment, might not be able to give you a perfectly clear answer. (8) the Sar-speaker

Comment The meanings of words and sentences in a language can safely be taken as known to competent speakers of the language. Native speakers of languages are the primary source of information about meaning. The student (or the professor) of semantics may well be good at describing meanings, or theorizing about meaning in general, but he has no advantage over any normal speaker of a language in the matter of access to the basic data concerning meaning.

English, like most languages, has a number of different dialects. Just as the pronunciation of English varies from one dialect to another, so there are also differences in the basic semantic facts from one dialect of English to another. Note that we are using 'dialect' in the way normal in Linguistics, i.e. to indicate any variety of a language, regardless of whether it has prestige or not. In this sense, every speaker, from the London stockbroker to the Californian surfer speaks some dialect.

It is not the business of semantics to lay down standards of semantic correctness, to prescribe what meanings words shall have, or what they may be used for. Semantics, like the rest of Linguistics, describes. If some of the basic semantic facts mentioned in this book don't apply to your dialect, this doesn't mean that your dialect is in any sense wrong. Try to see the point of such examples on the assumption that they are factual for some dialect of English other than your own.

Almost all of the examples in this book will be from standard English. We assume that most readers are native speakers of English and hence know the meanings of English expressions. This may seem paradoxical: if semantics is the study of meaning, and speakers already know the meanings of all the expressions in their language, surely they cannot learn anything from semantics! What can a book written for English speakers, using English examples, tell its readers? The answer is that semantics is an attempt to set up a theory of meaning.

Definition A THEORY is a precisely specified, coherent, and economical frame-work of interdependent statements and definitions, constructed so that as large a number as possible of particular basic facts can either be seen to follow from it or be describable in terms of it.

Example Chemical theory, with its definitions of the elements in terms of the periodic table, specifying the structure of atoms, and defining various types of reactions that can take place between elements, is a theory fitting the above definition. Examples of some basic facts which either follow from chemical theory itself or are describable in terms of it are: iron rusts in water; salt dissolves in water; nothing can burn if completely immersed in water; lead is heavier than aluminium; neither aluminium nor lead float in water. Chemical theory, by defining the elements iron, lead, etc., and the reactions commonly known as rusting, burning, dissolving, etc., in terms of atomic structure, makes sense of what would otherwise simply be an unstructured list of apparently unrelated facts.

In the practice section below we illustrate some particular basic facts about meaning, the kind of facts that a complete semantic theory must make sense of.

Practice Mark each of the following statements true (*T*) or false (*F*).

(1) *Alive* means the opposite of *dead*. *T* / *F*

(2) *Buy* has an opposite meaning from *sell*. *T* / *F*

(3) *Caesar is and* is not a meaningful English sentence. *T* / *F*

(4) *Caesar is a prime number* is nonsensical. *T* / *F*

(5) *Caesar is a man* is nonsensical. *T* / *F*

(6) *Both of John's parents are married to aunts of mine* is in a sense contradictory, describing an impossible situation. *T / F*

(7) If the sentence *John killed Bill* is true of any situation, then so is the sentence *Bill is alive.* *T / F*

(8) If someone says, 'Can you pass the salt?', he is normally not asking about his hearer's ability to pass the salt, but requesting the hearer to pass the salt. *T / F*

(9) If someone says, 'I tried to buy some rice', his hearer would normally infer that he had actually failed to buy rice. *T / F*

Feedback (1)T (2)T (3)T (4)T (5)F (6)T (7)F (8)T (9)T

Comment Each of the true statements here (and the negation of the false ones) is a statement of some particular basic fact falling within the scope of semantics. (We take a rather broad view of the scope of semantics, incidentally.) Obviously, one could not expect chemical theory, for example, to illuminate any of these facts. Chemical theory deals with chemical facts, such as the fact that iron rusts in water. Semantic theory deals with semantic facts, facts about meaning, such as those stated in the true statements above.

In aiming to discover some system and pattern in an assortment of particular facts about the meanings of individual words, sentences, and utterances, it is obviously necessary to try to move from particular facts, such as those mentioned above, to generalizations, i.e. statements about whole classes of items.

Practice Think carefully about each of the following general statements, and try to say whether it is true (*T*) or false (*F*).

(1) Proper names (like English *John* or German *Hans* or French *Jean*) have a different kind of meaning from common nouns (like English *man*, or German *Mann* or French *homme*). *T / F*

(2) Prepositions (like English *under*, or German *unter*, or French *sous*) have a different kind of meaning from both proper names and common nouns. *T / F*

(3) Conjunctions (like English *and* or German *und*, or French *et*) have yet a further kind of meaning from both proper names and common nouns, and prepositions. *T / F*

(4) Articles (e.g. English *the*, German *der*, or French *le*) have a different kind of meaning from proper names, common nouns, prepositions, and conjunctions. *T / F*

Feedback (1)T (2)T (3)T (4)T

Comment The statements just considered are general in several ways. Firstly, they deal with whole classes of words, e.g. the whole class of prepositions, and not just with the individual examples actually mentioned. Secondly, they apply not just to English, but to human languages in general – to Arabic and Russian no less than to German and French.

We take up this point about semantic theory being applicable to all languages below. Notice that many of the particular basic facts about meaning in English mentioned in the last practice but one have clear counterparts in other languages, e.g. German and French.

Practice This practice assumes a knowledge of French and German: do as much as you can. Mark each of the following statements true (*T*) or false (*F*).

(1) In German, *lebendig* means the opposite of *tot*. *T / F*

(2) In French, *acheter* has an opposite meaning from *vendre*. *T / F*

(3) *César est et* is not a meaningful French sentence. *T / F*

(4) In German, *Caesar ist Primzahl* is nonsensical. *T / F*

(5) In French, *Et la mère et le père de Jean sont mariés à mes tantes* is in a sense contradictory, describing an impossible situation. *T / F*

(6) In German, if the sentence *Hans hat Willi getötet* is true of any situation, then so is the sentence *Willi ist tot*. *T / F*

(7) If a German speaker says, 'Können Sie mir das Salz reichen?', he is normally not asking about his hearer's ability to pass the salt, but requesting the hearer to pass the salt. *T / F*

(8) If a French speaker says, 'J'ai essayé d'acheter du riz', his hearer would normally infer that he had failed to buy rice. *T / F*

Feedback (1)–(8) T

Comment Many basic facts about English have exact parallels in other languages. The examples above illustrate some such parallels between English and German and French. Very pervasive similarities, such as these, between languages encourage semanticists to believe that it is possible to make some very general statements about all languages, especially about the most fundamental and central areas of meaning. The fact that it is possible to translate any sentence of one language (at least roughly) into any other language (however clumsily) also reinforces the conclusion that the basic facts about meaning in all languages are, by and large, parallel. This is not to deny, of course, that there are interesting differences between languages.

Practice (1) Is there an exact equivalent in French for the English word *parent*? *Yes / No*