Meaning in English

An Introduction

This lively, compact textbook introduces readers to semantics – the study of how we construct meaning in communication. Easy to follow, and with a clear structure, it explains formal terminology in a simple and understandable way, without using formal notation or logic, and draws on dozens of examples from up-to-date empirical research findings. Offering a tight integration of classic semantic issues with cognitive science, Javier Valenzuela provides a complete and coherent overview of the main topics in this area, including a review of the empirical methods used in semantic theorizing and discussions of both non-traditional and new topics such as how meaning is acquired by children and how meaning is constructed cross-linguistically. Featuring illustrations, exercises, activities, suggestions for further reading, highlighted key terms and a comprehensive glossary, this book is accessible to beginners and undergraduates, including those from non-linguistic backgrounds with no prior knowledge of linguistic analysis. It will be an essential resource for courses in English language, English studies, linguistics and the cognitive sciences.

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Meaning in English
An Introduction

Javier Valenzuela
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Preface

When I was commissioned by Cambridge University Press to write an introduction to semantics, I was elated; I knew I was in for a great ride. This is the case even if I was perfectly aware of an unavoidable fact: it’s impossible to write an introduction to semantics that will satisfy everybody. Many great scholars will feel you are ignoring them (or more probably, just plain wrong about your choices). While it’s evident that different traditions have very smart people in their camps who cannot be completely wrong, there’s really no way around it: in a book like this, you have to choose sides. And then face the music.

So, as expected, some level of disagreement can be found in almost any topic in semantics we choose: whether the tools of logic are useful or not; whether meaning is something embodied or symbolic, whether metaphor is useful or useless, whether semantics and pragmatics are to be distinguished or not, whether language influences thought significantly or not, and a very long etcetera. That’s why I said that writing a book on semantics (especially an introduction, where there’s not much space to give all possibilities their due), is probably a surefire way of creating enemies. Well, that’s life.

I am in complete agreement with the saying that ‘education is not the filling of a vessel, but the lighting of a fire’. This is the approach I’ve tried to take here: even more important than the facts themselves is the feeling of excitement and enthusiasm that emanates from all the work that is being carried out in the field right now. As I see it, the story of semantics is not a mere recollection of facts from the past, but something that is being written in these very moments. I firmly believe these are topics that are central to our understanding of language, our minds and ourselves, and in this sense, they should be interesting for just about anyone (especially for anyone interested in how language and our minds work).
Preface

A great deal of effort in this book has gone into two goals: first, aiming for an explanation of topics accessible to anyone, while trying to avoid oversimplification at the same time. This is really tricky, because most issues in semantics are notoriously complicated and each single point can be modified, qualified and nuanced *ad nauseam*. The second goal has been trying to provide an ‘organic’ feel to the whole book. As much as possible, I have tried to convey a coherent and homogenous view of how meaning is constructed and expressed, and how it structures our cognition. This is why there are a number of (intended) recurrences throughout the book: frames are mentioned in Chapters 4, 5, 8 and 9; intention-reading in Chapters 6 and 9; the distinction between symbolic and embodied approaches show up in Chapters 1, 2 and 3, 7 and 8; metaphor is mentioned in chapters 2, 5, 6 and 7, and so on. The objective is to let the reader perceive semantics as a single system, more than as a collection of unrelated phenomena.

On a more practical note, the book can be read by anyone on their own, or be taught by an experienced teacher. There are suggested answers to the exercises on the book’s website; for instructors, there are also some suggested activities that have worked wonderfully for me during the years. Oh, and I’m also thinking about starting a t-shirt company with some of the great illustrations that my friend Sergio has created for the book.

But the conclusion, again, is that I had a great time writing it, and I hope that all my readers will enjoy it as much as I did.
Acknowledgments

This book is the result of many years of teaching semantics, which means that I have a lot of people to thank: many friends and colleagues have helped shape my view of language throughout the years. First among them should be Joe Hilferty; but also Iraide Ibarretxe, Ana Rojo, Cristina Soriano, Julio Santiago, Paco Calvo and Cristóbal Pagán, who have informed me and often challenged my views (and continue to do so). Liz Murphy, Jose Antonio Mompeán (and Joe and Iraide again) have helped me sound a bit less foreign. Many people in Cambridge University Press have been really helpful and offered great collaboration; Helen Barton should be mentioned in the first place, but also three anonymous reviewers who provided many suggestions which I have been grateful to accept; many thanks also go to Valerie Appleby and Jennifer Miles Davis. On a more formal note, I gracefully acknowledge the help of the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness under Grants FFI2013-45553-C3-1-P & FFI2015-70876-P and the Fundación Séneca under grant 19482/PHCS/14.

And last but not least, thanks to my students, for their explicit feedback, for their blank stares informing me when the material was too hard or too boring, and for the twinkle in their eyes telling me I was on the right track.