

Introducing Semantics

Semantics is the study of meaning in language. This clear and comprehensive textbook is the most up-to-date introduction to the subject available for undergraduate students. It not only equips students with the concepts they need in order to understand the main aspects of semantics, it also introduces the styles of reasoning and argument which characterize the field. It contains more than 200 exercises and discussion questions designed to test and deepen readers' understanding. More inclusive than other textbooks, it clearly explains and contrasts different theoretical approaches, summarizes current debates, and provides helpful suggestions for further reading. Examples are drawn both from major world languages, such as Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Spanish and English, and from minority ones. The book also highlights the connections between semantics and the wider study of human language in psychology, anthropology and linguistics itself.

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to
P, P, T, F, G
you know who you are

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Note to the reader

This introduction is intended for anyone coming to linguistic semantics for the first time, whether as part of a linguistics degree or independently. The best way to approach the contents is to work through the chapters in the order in which they appear. This is not the only way, however: after the first chapter, the rest of the book has a modular structure and can be read in whatever sequence the reader prefers. Chapter 1 lays out the framework for what follows and explains some important preliminary ideas; once the reader has familiarized themselves with these, they have all they need in order to begin reading anywhere else. For someone adopting this approach to the book, the glossary explains the most important recurrent terms, and can be consulted whenever an unfamiliar concept is encountered. The exercises interspersed throughout the text and at the end of each chapter are designed to deepen the reader's engagement with the material, and contain a mixture of questions of different lengths and degrees of concreteness and difficulty.

A few comments about the spirit in which the book has been written may be useful. Semantics is surely distinctive among the staple components of the introductory linguistics curriculum in the lack of disciplinary agreement over the basic theoretical questions at its centre. Langacker's (1987: 32) complaint about 'the striking lack of consensus about the proper characterization of even the simplest or most fundamental linguistic phenomena' applies in questions of meaning even more than elsewhere in the discipline, and theoretical proliferation in the years that separate us from 1987 has only increased the diversity of approaches available. This diversity is, I believe, a major source of semantics' vitality and interest, but it creates a problem for the writer who wants to present a comprehensive and balanced introduction to the field. Such basic theoretical

questions as the relation between meaning and use, the relevance of referential and truth conditional factors to linguistic meaning, the nature of presupposition, the usefulness of theta-roles in the explanation of argument structure, the relative merits of definitional and non-definitional approaches to semantic content, the semantics of aspectual categories or parts of speech, and the implications of prototype effects for semantic modelling, among many others, are all the focus of continuing debate. In this situation, questions of the way the field is presented to beginners, and of the representation given to differing theoretical perspectives, become central.

Any introduction to a discipline calls for a certain degree of simplification with respect to the various messy and unclear currents of ongoing inquiry that constitute it. But the danger is that beginning students may, through an arbitrary selectivity of theoretical perspective, be misled into believing that complex matters of genuine and legitimate controversy are in fact the objects of settled consensus. This would be a serious misrepresentation of the state of the discipline, which an introduction has the obligation to avoid. As Chomsky has noted (1995: 50), 'to make very clear the limits of understanding is a serious responsibility in a culture in which alleged expertise is given often unwarranted prestige'. There is, needless to say, nothing to be gained from a stipulative approach to basic questions, whose only result would be to perpetuate the theoretical fragmentation which is already such a striking feature of contemporary semantic investigations.

Accordingly, this introduction is intended to represent as much as is possible of the variety of ways in which meaning is currently studied in linguistics, without any one approach being privileged. Thus, although the reader will find an exposition of the bases of, among other topics,

formal, cognitive, definitional, typological, structural, speech act and computational approaches, the book is not written from the unique point of view of any. No textbook, however, can fail to reflect the author's own conception of their field. But I have always tried to indicate the range of theoretical perspectives that inform linguistic semantic research, and to fairly and undogmatically indicate the attractions and disadvantages of each. In the same spirit, I have also included some discussion of recent important topics in the discipline, like semantic typology, computational semantics and corpus semantics, which are not always reflected in introductory contexts. Far from complicating things, the admission of alternative perspectives seems to me to be pedagogically desirable: beginning students find it useful to discover that the possibilities, questions and reservations which inevitably occur to them during their initial exposure to the field are often reflected in the range of differing theoretical approaches to the phenomena in question.

I have also tried not simply to present these various ideas, but to show where they come from and how they are relevant. This has been done by situating the ideas historically, by drawing out their connections with other questions confronting the empirical study of language in linguistics and elsewhere, or, simply, by making clear how they relate to each other. The aim in this has been to avoid the apparently arbitrary quality of the particular selection of topics which readers find in an introduction like this. The current state of a discipline like semantics does not reflect a unidirectional or homogeneous development, but is shaped in both outline and detail by many contingencies of different sorts. Where relevant, I have tried to comment on these, so that the reader can have some sense of the unfolding dynamics of semantic research. The further reading sections at the end of each chapter try to give some possible leads to follow in further exploration of the field.

An important part of the role of any introductory linguistics textbook, it seems to me, is to allow readers to appreciate the sheer variety of human language. The shock of confrontation

with languages radically different from one's own remains as one of the most valuable consequences of my own initial exposure to linguistics, and has an important role to play within the general goals of a liberal education. As a result, I have often included examples from minority indigenous languages, as well as from major world languages like Arabic, Japanese, Chinese or English. The languages of small indigenous communities are in the process of being squeezed off the map by the forces of globalization; a linguistics textbook has an obligation not to allow them to be lost from the view of the discipline, and this needs to happen from students' first exposure to the subject. Little known languages are identified genetically and geographically on their first occurrence; the language's family is given first, at the most informative level of genetic classification, followed by its general geographical location. Citations from the unpublished Warlpiri dictionary database are marked 'WlpD'; I am grateful to the Warlpiri lexicography group for making it available to me. I am also grateful to Georgetown University Press (www.press.georgetown.edu) for permission to reprint Figure 7.1.

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