

Review: Semantics (Palgrave Modern Linguistics) Second Edition

by Kate Kearns

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Introduction

Semantics is the study of meaning the meaning of words, the meaning of phrases and sentences, and the meaning in spoken and written discourse. Semantics is an account of meaning in a language system. Semantics is fundamental in understanding language. It cannot be disregarded because it is essential in helping us to understand linguistic meaning. Semantics and pragmatics are closely entwined, requiring many decisions as to the domain of each field. Semantics has evocative and reflective meaning; a word is evocative when it refers to the entity conceived by it, while it is reflective when the word refers to our concept of the entity. The relationship between words, conceptual meanings, and entities gives rise to the field of semantics. The term 'semantics' was invented in 1897 and was first introduced as a special branch of the system of *grammaire rationnelle* initiated in 1822. It appeared under the title of *sémantique* in 1897 and has since then spread all over the world. In Greek, 'semantics' means the science of the true.

The term *sémantique* is described as the study of linguistic meaning or meaning in language. However, it is the late American philosopher who is generally given credit for the initial use in the modern linguistic sense when he designated 'semantics' as one of three main branches of general or formal semiotics. Besides the Greek term *sémantique*, the Latin counterpart semantics was used by writers before the 19th century. The English terms 'semantics' and 'semiotic' were first used by biological linguists as research terms for language and animal communication studies. In general, semantics has been subject to the English language in the 19th century. Besides some other possible distinctions, semantics also includes syntax and formal semantics. Applying a basic meaning, it is possible to get consonant meaning in basic categories such as noun or singular noun.

Definition and Scope of Semantics

The meaning in human communication has intrigued scholars for millennia. In modern linguistics, semantics is the study of meaning in language. Though an integral component of most natural languages, defining semantics as an autonomous department of scientific enterprise has been a complex affair. Precisely, semantics investigates the components of meaning instrumental in the understanding of linguistic expressions occurring in a discourse. In undertaking this task, it takes into account a wide variety of dimensions of meaning. The most common distinction in this regard envisages a literal dimension, which is largely associated with the denotational value of an expression, and a demand to compute this value on the part of the speaker for the interpretation of the utterance. Meaning is extended by the exploitation of grammatical rules and phonology, all of which can be described in a theory of syntax, a theory of phonology, and a theory of the lexicon. At the same time, there is also an implied dimension of meaning which is processed by the hearer with or without making reference to the linguistic structure.

It is not by chance, therefore, that a multi-level parallel architecture in the mind has been posited by various proponents of active research areas of semantics. Finally, although semantics studies meaning, it extends far beyond the study of the forms and meanings of individual lexical items. Modern experts of semantics consolidate the methods of philosophical linguistics, linguistic philosophy, linguistic science, and philosophic logic in delineating language phenomena. These schools of thought have cast their perceptive eyes in various directions. Since its task cuts across other disciplines, it is germane at this juncture to stress that it cannot completely chart the aerial geography of language: semantics will always spill over into neighboring disciplines, particularly syntax, pragmatics, and the philosophy of language. A number of linguistic phenomena depend on semantics for their complete understanding. Indeed, there are several linguistic phenomena like ambiguity, reference, and vagueness, the complete delineation of which would be impossible without some employment of semantic theory. Despite its import to language, the independence of semantics is complex to express. This is no exaggeration; for semantics, in particular, meaning, is after all interwoven with other subdomains of linguistic phenomena.

Theories and Approaches in Semantics

Semantic research has been predominantly concerned with the investigation of meanings conveyed in human language and the contributions of various components of language to such meanings. The linguistic sub-component that has meaning as its main concern is called semantics. Since its inception, semantics has given rise to a number of important theories that have developed it into a very sophisticated field of linguistic investigation. Systems which are now considered to be standard in semantics include, among others, formal semantics, which is one of the most popular approaches among both

linguists and philosophers as its primary domain of investigation. Another especially important area of research that has made significant contributions to semantic theorizing is lexical semantics, along with other lexicology-related disciplines of investigation. In this overview, our primary aim is to shed light on some of the more exciting approaches and rather interesting theories and communicate them to our fellow students and scholars.

It is well known that context plays a crucial role in the determination of meanings. This fact is established by many scholars of diverse methodologies and approaches. Theorizing semantics is not an easy thing indeed because of many opposite standpoints and points of view. Oppositions can be observed at every step of general semantic theorizing as regards linguistic topics analyzed, favorite methodologies, and finally, preferred data for analysis. Some of the submitted approaches espouse what is considered to be leading and dominant ones, drawing on their theoretical and methodological inheritance. The aforementioned statement makes a number of researchers investigate semantics, taking into account methods and theoretical grounding from which they visually and apparently differ as regards other theoretical issues but which have an impact on their semantic standpoint. This eclectic approach, although mixed in an unconventional way, constitutes what is best in present-day semantic speculation and gives rise to interesting views and hypotheses.

Truth-Conditional Semantics

Truth-conditional semantics is perhaps the centerpiece of modern semantic theory in linguistics. It takes as its starting point an assertion that the meaning of a sentence is the conditions under which it would be true. This approach has its roots in certain influential philosophical traditions, but it is highly practiced in the field of formal logic, which became highly influential in semantics in the mid-20th century. This approach sees meaning as compositional; that is, the meaning of an entire sentence is built from the meanings of the individual words. Natural language, however, does not present its structure in as neat a way as formal systems do. For this reason, semantic theories can often look highly abstract and unrelated to the real meanings of sentences. Truth-conditional semantics allows one to be concrete about meaning by giving the theory a method of analysis that looks at what the truth conditions of a sentence are and how to go about logically manipulating those conditions to demonstrate meaning.

A simple illustration of this approach can be found with connecting words like 'and' and 'or.' The word 'and' operates with a truth condition such that to calculate whether a connected part is collectively true, the entire conjunction is true; the truth conditions for each part connected must be accounted for. Meanwhile, 'or' operates such that at least one of the connected disjunctions is true; the entire disjunction is true. But like 'and,' 'or' operates by calculating the truth based on a single analytic statement made regarding each

part connected in terms of the truth of each disjunction. Note that the meanings of 'and' and 'or' go beyond this mere mechanical calculation but involve some consideration of the objects discussed. Despite this extra consideration, a truth-conditional approach would say that the meanings of 'and' and 'or' are in some sense explainable through the truth conditions defined as such. To illustrate this point, try to come up with two disjunctions that have the same meaning based on a truth-functional definition of 'or' but where both disjunctions are false. Critics of truth conditions may offer this as fodder for their own arguments. Like all semantic and grammatical theories, truth-conditional semantic theory is not perfect and does not make clear accurate predictions for every possible sentence. Any true and perfect theory of grammar would be a remarkable discovery. To some, as also with logic truths, 'sometimes it is very difficult to say what truth is.' If a semantic theory is defined to minimize the difficulty of reflecting on meaning it is, after all, an analysis and not a drug that makes one wise it can be difficult for that analysis to define a term that has the same level of abstractness. Semantics in linguistics is related to broader themes such as pragmatics which can be recursive and syntax which makes use of semantics, and the reverse, too are ancillary issues to truth-conditional meaning. However, it is unlikely that much exploration of those fields can be done if we do not also have recourse to some semantic analysis. Thus, it is not incorrect to state that truth-conditional semantics is the focus of semantics.

Pragmatics vs. Semantics

Semantics seeks meaning while pragmatics is generally concerned with the use of meaning in context. A program towards segregating the two initially was formal context with help from a distinction between entailment and presupposition. Truth-conditional semantics focuses on defining the meaning of sentences entirely through semantics. It is known that meaning is to be derived from context. Philosophers agree. It has been said, "It is all one; meaning isn't separate from its use." Philosophers have used pragmatic analysis in building a theory of rationality. It seems semantics and pragmatics are not separate fields.

Ironically enough, discussing pragmatics necessitates the examination of meaning. Examining the relationship between the proposition and the context which makes the proposition into a statement is a fruitless task. Context and meaning collude in a self-explanation. However, this does not mean that meaning and context are indistinct. Rather, the examination of their co-joined venture in creating a statement has enabled linguistics to describe the nuance of language. Semantics deals with truth relations. Syntactic relationships carry truth values through logical definition. But truth relations depend, to a great degree, on the given situation. Interpreters have access to or knowledge of truth within a given assumption. Both semantics and pragmatics are interested in the "situation"

of what is said. Pragmatics is concerned with the context as a participant for truth sentences. Pragmatics examines the normal mechanism of implicature and presupposition.

Distinguishing Between Pragmatics and Semantics

In line with other observations, we now aim to distinguish between pragmatics as the study of the use of language and semantics as the study of meaning. Of course, the two subjects are linked, since the meaning of an expression partly determines its uses, and vice versa. However, it is fairly straightforward to give examples in which the semantics of an expression differs from its use. It is clear that the truth conditions of a sentence do not completely capture its meaning. Actual situations in which people use the word accordingly—as opposed to embroidered, fabricate, fake, falsify, forge, puppet show, and so forth—are somewhat complex and depend, for one thing, on a context of conversation and meetings, on speaker intention and the listener's interpretation. Therefore, we are aware of something further that contrasts with, but is embedded in, truth-conditional semantics, since we clearly cannot use the truth conditions of the English word accordingly—without further ado—as a possible model state; instead, interpretations are required.

When comparing former examples with latter examples, it shows that on the one hand we can see the semantic dimension of language, as interpreted by speaker-oriented listeners—the basis of truth; and yet on the other, the use of a language that is seen through the dimension of speaker-oriented, listener-inspired, and is imposed and laid down as if still determined by truth. It must be seen that these are two salient differences that are often intertwined, and are indeed political in the field of semantics and pragmatics. Students of the two cannot even be ignored. However, it is better to preserve the two distinctive values from which they have been separated. For the next, we will see how these two dimensions have been historically distinguished by linguists concerned with the study of meaning, so we are not stuck and lost in knowledge and language procedures that were always involved, once by procedural knowledge of the organizational and communicative activities regarding knowledge.

Applications of Semantics in Linguistics

The relevance of semantic analysis is evident in the various domains of language-related sciences. At the most abstract level, postulating complex semantic structures allows for a better understanding of language structure and function. Distinctions of meaning can be supported by evidence from other linguistic studies. For word formation, an appropriate allocation of meaning helps to demarcate morphologically related from partially synsemantic formations. For syntax and, in particular, the sentence, semantics is relevant in a number of ways: preverbal negation influences scope and the syntax-semantic split pattern in verb-second languages through its sentential projection.

Semantics is also instrumental in word-order-related issues in languages like Czech. At the level of the proposition and the utterance, semantic aspects come into play in relation to focus, clefting, topicalization, ellipses, and anaphoric binding. In historical linguistics, semantic analysis of new formations or shifted meanings of words can help to understand old texts, since under the influence of cultural change or societal contacts, word meanings change, often in the form of metaphorization. Semantics plays a decisive role in the understanding of texts and discourse as well, at all levels. Moreover, at a more applied level, such as in language pedagogy or sociolinguistics, the relevance of semantic studies has clearly been recognized; while integrating syntax, morphology, phonetics, phonology, etc. into the linguistic analysis of a text can put the indigenous speaker in a more or less direct relation to the writer, it is the relevance of semantics that attracts the greatest interest on the part of the performer of the act of communication. Semantics often paves the way for the comparative consideration of language and other relevant systems, offering valuable use in interdisciplinary studies connecting with sociology and psychology. Ultimately, linguistic research of many types leads back to the theoretical propositions of semantics when it consciously applies linguistic theories to wider fields of knowledge.

Semantics in Computational Linguistics

Introduction Everything in linguistics is influenced by semantic theory. These influence the way word meanings are entered into lexicons of grammar formalism, the way feature structures connect sublanguage and the world, and the underlying logic we use to formally specify relations of meaning in a variety of linguistic sub-disciplines. Theories of semantics also influence the architectures of NLP systems and can serve as verification tools to help ensure the accuracy of information extraction systems.

Semantics and NLP We currently do not have a clear definition of the meanings of the words we can use in a variety of different linguistic contexts. Thus, although we have made many advances, we are still unable to fully automate the semantic understanding of natural language. We are also not able to fully automate the semantic representations that are needed to support activities typically taught in the semantics classroom, such as inference, presupposition, anaphoric resolution, and pragmatic enrichment. Received wisdom in this area suggests that any results in NLP regarding semantic interpretation and reasoning that do not rely on a strong semantic theory will not scale meaningfully to cope with the vast and rapidly evolving linguistic demands of large NLP applications. However, as we continue to investigate reasoning, we have found some strengths in machine learning, which may point us in a new direction.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is my hope that this essay has shown the enduring relevance of semantics. While the application of semantics has shifted, even critics of earlier theories acknowledge the importance of understanding the relationship between language and its communicative function. Semantics pervades our understanding of language, and because human thought, feeling, and action are mediated through language, understanding these variations should be of transdisciplinary importance. Recent years have seen new claims to semantic innovation, and the trend of diversification that has always characterized the field is sure to continue. In the last two hundred years, semantics went from filling in the gaps left by other theories to developing entire linguistic systems.

Reference

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