



Introduction to Semantics



Defining *Semantics*

Linguistics – Semantics

scientific study of language –

scientific study

of meaning

implication of corpus and methodology

- no general agreement about the nature
of meaning

Formal vs functional approaches to meaning

- **FORMAL:** semantic logics, logic semantics, symbolic logics (Carnapp, Quine); truth as basic category; logics and mathematics associations
- **FUNCTIONAL:** analysis of meaning in natural languages



About the term 'semantics'

- First used in 1894 in 'Reflected meanings: a point in semantics'.
- M. Bréal: 'An Essay on Semantics' (1897)
- Most important usage of the term: Ogden and Richards: 'The Meaning of Meaning' (1923)
(Malinowski: 'The problem of meaning in primitive languages')




Areas of semantic analysis

1. Word meaning
2. Meaning in vocabulary organisation (paradigmatic level)
3. Meaning in linear sequence (in syntax) (syntagmatic level)

Historical semantics

- deals with the study of change of meaning in time
- Bloomfield lists a number of different changes:
- **Narrowing:** meat 'food'
- **Widening:** bird
'nestling'
- **Metonymy:** (nearness in space or time): jaw 'cheek'
- **Synecdoche:** (whole/part relation): stove
'heated
room'
- **Degeneration:** knave 'boy'
- **Elevation:** knight 'boy'

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- Reasons for these changes:
 - Accidental: tanks are called as they are because of a security decision in First World War to deceive the Germans into thinking that water-tanks were being dispatched
 - Due to needs: the word *car* was an obsolete poetic word for 'chariot' until the motor-car was invented. Most scientific words have acquired specialised meanings that have no close relationship to the non-scientific use (mass, energy)
 - Taboo: privy-lavatory-toilet-bathroom-loo.



Semantics and other linguistic disciplines


1. ETYMOLOGY-discovery of the earlier meanings of words, the 'true' meaning of words (first serious discussion is in Plato's *Cratylus*)
 - Chief difficulty: there can be no 'true' or 'original' meaning since human l. stretches back too far. (*nice* once meant 'silly'. Lat. *nescius*-*'ignorant'*).




2. LEXICOLOGY- study of lexemes

Lexicography- art of dictionary-
making

Roget's Thesaurus – conceptual
dictionary




3. STYLISTICS – stylistic variation in
speech and writing
achieving style: choice of words, use of
metaphor
entered linguistics in 40s and 50s of
the
previous ct.

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4. DISCOURSE ANALYSIS
(PRAGMATICS) – analysis of all
kinds of written and spoken texts
- great development in 1970s (Austin,
Searle)



Semantics in other disciplines


- Semantics has been of concern to philosophers, anthropologists and psychologists
- Philosophy: Some thought that many philosophical problems can be solved by the study of 'ordinary l.'. They argue that the nature of good and evil in moral philosophy can be dealt with by seeing the way in which words as *good* are used.
- Anthropology: They are concerned with language as an essential part of cultural and behavioural patterns. One specific area of anthropological research that is particularly interesting in connection to semantics is that of kinship (complex kinship relations of many societies are revealed in equally complex semantic patterns of the kinship terminology)

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- Psychology: They try to understand how we process l. in production and reception. There are problems with understanding sentences with 'self-embedding': The boy the man the woman loved saw ran away.-rely on the meaning to help us with the interpretation.
 - Communication theory: comm.system carries information; it should have minimum redundancy (parts of the message that can be removed without removing any information) and minimum noise (anything that interferes with transmission). The human speaker, unlike the comm. system, doesn't merely transmit the message; he also creates it.



Exact beginning of semantics?


- REISIG (philologist, 1839), forerunner of serious semantic analysis
- Future of linguistics: analysis of **ALL** natural languages
- Importance of the study of meaning

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- BRÉAL ('An essay on semantics', 1897) – considered father of semantics, first to popularize the term SÉMANTIQUE
 - no serious linguistic analysis without touching on meaning
 - semantics has to be an integral part of linguistics
 - need for syntactic semantics



Development of semantics

- Structural semantics (beginning of the 20th ct.): discovery of the general principles of semantic change
- Lexeme meaning: COMPONENTIAL ANALYSIS
- MEYER (1910): "semantic system" - grouping of words by meaning in coordinated whole (military ranks)

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- TRIER (1931): elaboration of SEMANTIC (LEXICAL) FIELDS
 - End of 1960s: establishment of TG (focus on syntax)

1963. Katz and Fodor's generative theory of semantics

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- 1980s: major overturn in general linguistics:

COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS >
COGNITIVE SEMANTICS