

## SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS

### Introduction

In this paper I am first going to outline the considerations and criteria that have guided the attempted distinction between semantics and pragmatics in language studies. The feasibility and validity of this distinction will then be discussed in the light of more recent theorising. On the basis of this there will be a tentative conclusion concerning how different types of meaning in natural verbal languages should be analytically and descriptively related to each other.

### 1. The complex nature of meaning in language and language use

If linguists are asked to give a term for the study of meaning, or meanings, in human verbal languages, most of them would probably say *semantics*. However, it will also be obvious to language experts that this is a very complex and comprehensive field that involves quite a few facets or possible analytical perspectives.

It appears for instance relevant to distinguish the meanings of language constructs representing factual or verifiable phenomena in the world from those that express subjective emotions, and also to acknowledge the pervasive but varying character of social – or interpersonal – meaning components in messages. Such analytically distinguishable meaning types have been described and exemplified as different types of language functions. In addition, it is clear that there is an intricate scale of concrete-to-abstract understandings, interwoven with various degrees of specificity versus generalisation in the contents of language items and constructions.

Yet another important question concerns what meanings are conventional parts of a language used by a speech community – that is what meanings are systematically integrated in it – as opposed to those that arise incidentally from extra-linguistic factors: the ambience of a communicative situation, including the relation of the people participating in it and their individual personalities and reactions. In other words: what meanings can be said to be generally shared by the users of a language simply as a result of them knowing the same language sys-

---

<sup>1</sup> Professor of English Linguistics at English Department, Stockholm University, SE106 91 Stockholm, Sweden. Christina.Alm-Arvius@English.su.se; <http://www.english.su.se/>

tem, and what meaning qualities are added in a specific situation of use? The former will be generally describable and predictable, while the latter can only be grasped and outlined in relation to some particular situation(s) of use. Actually, situational meaning factors may not be shared even by the people participating in a given language exchange. Interlocutors may interpret and react to what is said in at least partly distinct ways because of different experiences – personal or cultural – and conflicting expectations or attitudes.

In addition, the way an utterance is composed, grammatically and lexically, can influence its contents. Every instance of language use involves selection from the shared language system, and the information structure of a string will be meaningful. The constructions used in a longer stretch of oral discourse or in a written text will depend on its gradual build-up and the specific communicative disposition or intentions of the encoder(s). The directly physical and perceptible way something is said or written can also modulate a message considerably. Quite generally speaking, any meaningful extra-linguistic factors occurring together with an instance of language use can colour or mould its communicative value.

Moreover, anyone studying the meaning side of language needs to consider whether we can distinguish between, on the one hand, strictly linguistic knowledge and, on the other hand, general cognition and encyclopaedic experiences. Structuralism was – or is – focused on the characteristics of a language system and emphasises the importance of relations for the value and use of each specific element in it. In a similar way modular models of language and human mental faculties, notably in the Chomskyan paradigm, have postulated both that language is separate from other aspects of human cognition and that we can distinguish different analytical levels within a language. In particular, this type of theoretical approach has stressed the central role of syntax, claiming it to be separate not just from phonology but also independently constructed or autonomous in relation to semantics, the meaning side of language.

## **2. Are there two types of meaning in language and language use: semantics and pragmatics?**

The philosopher Charles Morris appears to have established the use of the term *pragmatics* in more modern language studies. According to him it is about “*the relations of signs to interpreters*”, and it is contrasted with the other two branches of semiotic(s): syntactics that studies “*the relations of signs to one another*”, and semantics that deals with “*the relations of signs to the objects to which the signs are applicable*”. (1938: 9; quoted in Levinson 1983: 1) The introductory section above outlined in broad details the kinds of considerations that have prompted attempts at developing theoretical frameworks for language uses that have been considered pragmatic rather than semantic. In short, language analysts

have tried to distinguish situational and personally grounded meaning aspects from systematic semantic contents. The latter have typically been identified as factually oriented and verifiable denotative or referential representations of phenomena out in the world. An important factor for seeing them as constituting semantics proper is that language users can agree on the character and application range of logico-factual meanings. By comparison, the former types of meanings – those that depend on more variable situational or individual factors – have commonly been considered pragmatic.

Furthermore, the development of the notion or field of pragmatics was inspired by observations concerning the limitations of certain dominant approaches to language meaning(s). The resulting pragmatic frameworks called attention to and helped to explain quite significant aspects of language exchanges that had hitherto been comparatively neglected in theories of language meanings. In doing this they also tended to constitute reactions against certain central tenets or pre-occupations in prevailing views on language meanings. The following list of distinctions outlines suggested differences between semantics and pragmatics:

- Meanings that could contribute to the truth of a proposition that is explicitly expressed in language have been seen as semantic, while emotive and interpersonal meaning aspects would be pragmatic.
- Meanings that are tied to specific expression sides or construction types in a language system are semantic, while meaning aspects depending on encyclopaedic knowledge and experience are pragmatic.
- Meanings that are formed by regular relations in a language system are semantic, while incidental meaning qualities resulting from particular circumstances or personal reactions are pragmatic.

### **3. Speech acts, implicatures, presuppositions, and the semantics of understanding**

When semantics was established as a scientific discipline at the end of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth century, the analysts that developed and practised it tended to be influenced by the kinds of ideas that have come to be known under the label of positivism. The following quotation is from Bertrand Russell's 'Introduction' to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*<sup>2</sup>. We can also note that it seems to assume that the meaning of language con-

---

<sup>2</sup> The first two sentences, or numbered paragraphs, in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* read as follows in the German original:

“1\* Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist.

1.1 Die Welt ist die Gesamtheit der Tatsachen, nicht der Dinge” (p. 30).

This was translated into English by C.K. Ogden in the following way:



structions is compositional, or assembled from separate meaningful elements. Such an analysis of language strings is atomic, as opposed to the holistic perspective in structuralism, where the character of every component is seen as dependent on its relations to other parts of the system it occurs in.

The essential business of language is to assert or deny facts. Given the syntax of a language, the meaning of a sentence is determinate as soon as the meaning of the component words is known. In order that a certain sentence should assert a certain fact there must, however the language may be constructed, be something in common between the structure of the sentence and the structure of the fact<sup>3</sup>.

Representations of factual situations out in the world called propositions and the principles for assigning a truth value to the meaning of a statement expressing a proposition were the subject matter of truth-conditional or verificational semantics, which did not deal with other types of language meanings. Speech act theory, which was initiated by Austin, was a reaction against this “*descriptive fallacy*”, the assumption that the chief function of language is to inform other people about facts (Austin 1975:2f). Instead this approach to language meanings pointed out that using language is a kind of acting, that we can influence other people or even change circumstances out in the world by uttering something. Given that the felicity – or appropriacy – conditions of a certain type of utterance are met, its illocutionary or pragmatic force will have a certain (perlocutionary) effect on the addressee(s). A judge in court can for instance pass a sentence on an accused that will decide how s/he is treated by the lawful authorities in, say, Britain, and an appointed teacher can decide what grade a student should be given in a course in school or at the university.

If we connect speech act theory with the outlines of different language functions given by Bühler (1982/1990), Jakobson (1996), Halliday (1996) and Lyons (1977), we see that it acknowledges the important role of personally oriented meaning and social conventions in language use. Indeed, also someone who utters a factual statement will intend to assert the truth or falsehood of its content, and thereby inform and influence the addressee(s).

H. P. Grice’s theory of conversational and conventional implicatures also developed central tenets in propositional semantics by analysing the nature of situational interaction and the assumptions of shared knowledge and communicative

---

“1     *The world is everything that is the case.*

1.1    *The world is the totality of facts, not of things*” (p. 31).

<sup>3</sup> Russell (1981: 8). This quotation is taken from Routledge’s edition of the book, which was published in 1922 with an English translation by C. K. Ogden together with the German original, which appeared in 1921.

intent in language users on particular occasions of verbal exchange. In his description and exemplification of conversational implicatures Grice pointed out that central parts of a language message are commonly not explicitly expressed, but simply assumed to be understood from the specific situation in which it occurs. We often mean more than we say, and such merely implicated meanings depend on the intentions of a speaker and the way in which these will be understood by someone else in a particular communicative situation. If someone comes into a room where a window is open and says "It's cold in here", this could be a request to shut the window. Similarly, a conventional interrogative construction such as "Can you pass me the butter" is not usually just a factual inquiry concerning whether or not the addressee can perform this action. Instead it will be a request that s/he sees that the speaker is handed the butter.

In addition, there are conventional implicatures that are regularly part of the meanings of certain elements although they are not truth functional. Adverbial links between utterances like "thus" and "however" and stance adverbials like "honestly" function communicatively in this way. Backgrounded or not directly expressed presuppositions will also be included in the interpretation of an utterance as a matter of course, unless something specific in the language context or the extra-linguistic circumstances indicates that they should be cancelled. The statement "John has stopped beating his wife" will for instance seem relevant only if the man called John used to beat his wife. Similarly, as we will further exemplify in the next section, this assertion and other utterances with referring expressions will presuppose the existence of referents.

Speech act theory and the theory of especially conversational implicatures were important for establishing pragmatics as a special branch of linguistics. All the same, there have been critical reactions against both theories. Here we shall focus on the role of general cognition in the interpretation of language messages, or on the question whether it is possible to distinguish between language semantics – that is meanings that are conventionally parts of a language system – and other types of thinking and knowledge of the world we live in.

Fillmore (1985) has also criticised the limitations of truth-conditional semantics, claiming that a "*semantics of understanding*" that acknowledges the role of experiential information and conceptual capacities constitutes a more valid view of natural language meanings. He also questions the explanatory value of "*Gricean considerations*", calling them "*a smokescreen*" (p. 239). Instead he and other cognitive linguists insist that we cannot clearly distinguish between meanings that are, on the one hand, part of a language system and, on the other hand, the result of non-linguistic cognition, encyclopaedic experience or pragmatic inferences. It rather seems to be the case that language messages and their interpretations regularly connect to psychological structures of various kinds, including culturally inherited knowledge and traditions.

#### **4. Deixis and reference: situationally specific meanings**

All languages have deictic elements, for instance demonstrative, personal and possessive pronouns, grammatical adverbs such as *now*, *then*, *here* and *there*, imperatives, tenses, and lexical items like *tomorrow*, *today* and *yesterday*. Such words or construction types have very general meanings in themselves, but the objects, individuals, events, states, qualities, places or times they point to on particular occasions of language use or in specific language contexts will invest them with specific, varying and often rich contents. The string "they are here now" can thus be meaningful in many different ways depending on when and where it is said, by whom, and what it is used to refer to.

And if we consider the function of referring expressions in general, we see that distinguishing between factual semantic meanings and pragmatic personal and emotive communicative aspects is problematic. Propositional representations can be quite specific and dependent on particular situations or universes of discourse rather than parts of the regular and stable inventory of meanings in a language. Moreover, it is true that many emotive and interpersonal meanings are conventionally shared by the users of a language. So these different suggested criteria for recognising meanings that should be considered pragmatic rather than semantic can even appear contradictory in many cases.

#### **Conclusion**

Establishing clear descriptive boundaries between semantic and pragmatic meanings in the internal structure as well as in the incidental use of a language does thus not appear to be feasible. Even if it is true that emotive meanings can be more variable or difficult to agree on than typical factual contents, both the relations between them and their status in terms of systematic integration versus incidental occurrence can be quite complex. Similarly, there is a continuum from meaning qualities that are clearly systematic and strictly entailed by language elements over those that merely tend to be presupposed to many just incidental meaning additions. The best solution may then be to include any possible meanings of a language, or its use, in the notion of semantics, and also to recognise that the more unstable or incidental character of some occurring meanings makes it reasonable to speak of them as pragmatic. In other words, semantics is the wider or superordinate category, encompassing all and any language meanings, while pragmatics is a smaller, subordinate category, including only situationally induced or personally variable meaning aspects.



## REFERENCES

- Allwood, J., L-G. Andersson and Ö. Dahl. 1977. *Logic in Linguistics*. Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics. Cambridge etc: Cambridge University Press.
- Alm-Arvius, C. 1993. (Photocopy version 1991) *The English Verb See: A study in Multiple Meaning*. Gothenburg studies in English 64. Göteborg, Sweden: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis.
- Austin, J. L. 1975. *How to Do Things with Words*. 2nd ed. The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955. Eds. J. O. Urmson & M. Sbisà. Oxford, New York etc.: Oxford University Press.
- Bühler, K. 1982. *Sprachtheorie. Die Darstellungsfunktion der Sprache*. Stuttgart, New York: Gustav Fischer Verlag (First published 1934).
- Bühler, K. 1990. *Theory of Language. The representational function of language*. Translation of *Sprachtheorie*; translated by D. F. Goodwin. Foundations of semiotics. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Co.
- Carnap, R. 1988. *Meaning and Necessity. A Study in Semantics and Modal Logic*. 2nd ed. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press (First published 1956).
- Croft, W. and D. A. Cruse. 2004. *Cognitive Linguistics*. Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics. Cambridge, New York etc: Cambridge University Press.
- Donnellan, K. S. 1971. Reference and Definite Descriptions. In: D. D. Steinberg and L. A. Jakobovits (eds). 1971. *Semantics: An interdisciplinary reader in philosophy, linguistics and psychology*. Cambridge, London, New York: Cambridge University Press, 100-114.
- Fauconnier, G. 1997. *Mappings in Thought and Language*. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
- Fillmore, C. J. 1985. Frames and the Semantics of Understanding. *Quaderni Di Semantica*. Vol. VI, No. 2, 222-254.
- Firth, J. R. 1957. Modes of Meaning. *Papers in Linguistics 1934-1951*. London etc.: Oxford University Press, 190-215.
- Green, G. M. 1989. *Pragmatics and Natural Language Understanding*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers.
- Grice, H. P. 1975. Logic and Conversation. *Syntax and Semantics*, Vol. 3: *Speech Acts*. Eds. P. Cole and J. L. Morgan. New York etc.: Academic Press, 41-58.
- Griffiths, P. 2006. *An Introduction to English Semantics and Pragmatics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Halliday, M. A. K. 1996. Linguistic function and literary style: An inquiry into the language of William Golding's *The Inheritors*. *The Stylistics Reader. From Roman Jakobson to the Present*. Ed. Jean Jacques Weber. London, New York etc.: Arnold, 56-86.
- Jakobson, R. 1996. Closing statement: Linguistics and poetics. *The Stylistics Reader. From Roman Jakobson to the Present*. Ed. Jean Jacques Weber. London, New York etc.: Arnold, 10-35.
- Jackendoff, R. 2002. *Foundations of Language: Brain, Meaning, Grammar, Evolution*. Oxford, New York etc.: Oxford University Press.
- Lakoff, G. and M. Johnson. 1999. *Philosophy in the Flesh. The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic Books.
- Langacker, R. W. 2002. *Concept, Image, and Symbol. The Cognitive Basis of Grammar*. 2nd ed. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Langacker, R. W. 2000. *Grammar and Conceptualization*. Cognitive Linguistics Research 14. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Langacker, R. W. 1990. Subjectification. *Cognitive Linguistics*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 5-38.

- Leech, G. N. 1983. *Principles of Pragmatics*. London, New York: Longman.
- Levinson, S. C. 1983. *Pragmatics*. Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics. Cambridge etc: Cambridge University Press.
- Lyons, J. 1995. *Linguistic Semantics: An Introduction*. Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press.
- Lyons, J. 1977. *Semantics*. Vols. 1 and 2. Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press.
- Saeed, J. I. 2003. *Semantics*. 2nd ed. Malden, MA, Oxford, UK etc: Blackwell Publishing.
- Searle, J. R. 1969. *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1981. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London, New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd (First published 1922).
- Wittgenstein, L. 1968. *Philosophical Investigations*. 3rd ed. English text only, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell (First published 1953).

### ABSTRACT

Meanings in natural language use can be either systematic or incidental, but all the same it does not appear possible to identify a set of consistent and non-contradictory criteria for distinguishing two general contrasting meaning categories termed semantics and pragmatics respectively. Instead the most valid theoretical description seems to be to include any possible meanings of a language, or its use, in the qualitative notion of semantics, and, in addition, recognise the occurrence of incidental pragmatic meaning variations and additions. In other words, semantics is the wider or superordinate category, encompassing all and any language meanings, while pragmatics is a smaller, subordinate category, including only situationally induced or personally variable meaning aspects.