

semantics

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Quotation

- “Semantics is about the relation of words to reality - the way that speakers commit themselves to a shared understanding of the truth, and the way their thoughts are anchored to things and situations in the world.”

Steven Pinker

Definition

Semantics is the study of the meaning of language. It has to do with considering the meanings of words. Scholars (Boas and his most notable pupil Sapir) have frequently added to their grammatical analyses of languages some discussion of the meaning of the grammatical categories and of the correlations between the structure of the vocabularies and the cultures in which the languages operated.

Why is it important to study semantics

- Semantics is studied for a number of different reasons:
 - It is central to the study of communication
 - The meaning is more complex than simply the words formed in a sentence.

Major concerns of semantics

- Study of meaning is one of the major areas of linguistic study. Linguists have approached it in a variety of ways. Semantics is associated with different issues related to meaning including naming, concept, sense and reference

Naming

- **Naming** as a semantic process derives from the understanding that words are names or labels for things. The major problem with this naming view of semantics is that it is only nouns and nominal expressions that can be analysed semantically. In addition, abstract nouns like love, hatred, truth will be difficult to explain since they are not living things

Concepts

- Concepts mediate between the mind constructs and objects in the real world. Saussure's sign theory
- The approach emphasizes the power of the mind to make images and to associate these images to objects and ideas.
- This ability of association may not yield universal understanding. That explains why language experts develop dictionaries to aggregate meaning on a universal basis.

Reference

- Reference relates to things, people and events in the world. It is the object or entity to which a linguistic expression relates. Thus, the referent of the word boy is a human being called boy.
- If meaning were restricted to reference, many words without obvious referents will be left out.

Approaches to the study of semantics

- Traditional semantics
- Structural semantics
- Behavioural semantics
- Generative semantics

Traditional semantics

- Traditional semantics is associated with the works of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle as well as many others who came after them.
- Their main focus was on the nature of human language itself. Based on their views of the nature of human language, these early philosophers were divided into two: the naturalists and the nurturists.

- To the naturalists, language was God-given such that there was hardly anything anybody could do to understand language.
- The nurturists, on the other hand, viewed language as a social property common to a speech community. Language was therefore perceived to be man's creation for the convenience of communication. Thus, in spite of difference in languages, the uniting point is that they are all for communication.

Behavioural semantics

- The external environment is perceived to be the major stimulus to all human utterances.
- Those who favour the behavioural approach to semantics have argued that by reducing meaning to observable entities, language, as an aspect of human favour can lend itself to examination.(the physical environment is perceived to contribute to meaning rather than the internal thought processes.)

Structural semantics

- The father of structuralism is Ferdinand de Saussure. Structuralism as a linguistic theory considers the structures and systems in language.
- Under structuralism, emphasis is on the analysis of sense relations that connect words and meaning.

Generative semantics

- A language user has a finite set of rules from which he can generate an infinite number of sentences.
- forms via transformations. At the beginning of Chomsky's generative grammar, there was the assertion that syntax was autonomous and independent of semantics. It was only later in *Aspects of the theory of Syntax* (1965) that Chomsky pointed out that the semantic component specifies the rules necessary for the interpretation of deep structures. This will require the interpretation of functional roles in sentences.

Branches of semantics

- Cruse (2000:15) lists the following as the main broadly distinguishable areas of interest in the study of meaning: lexical semantics, grammatical semantics, logical semantics, and linguistic pragmatics. They may overlap with one another:
 - Lexical semantics
 - Grammatical semantics
 - Logical semantics

We will focus in this presentation on the first and second branch.

Lexical semantics

- Lexical semantics studies the meanings of words; the focus is on 'content' words like lion, jasmine, selfish and persuade, rather than form/grammatical words like the, of, than, and so on.
- We consider dictionary as the one which deals about words. The branch of semantics which systematically study the meaning words is lexical semantics.

Grammatical semantics

- Grammatical semantics studies aspects of meaning which have direct relevance to syntax.
- For instance, assigning category to the word yellow. It can be given the category such as adjective, noun and verb
- Example: She wears a yellow skirt. (adjective)
He painted the room with a glowing yellow.
(noun) The leaves yellows rapidly in the winter

Semantic ambiguity

- *ambiguity* (also called *structural ambiguity* or *grammatical ambiguity*) is the presence of two or more possible meanings within a single sentence or sequence of words. Syntactic ambiguity generally results from poor word choice. The results can often be confusing for readers or listeners. Here are some examples:

Semantic ambiguity suite

Example

The professor said on Monday he would give an exam. This sentence means either that it was on Monday that the professor told the class about the exam or that the exam would be given on Monday.

Semantic rules

Semantic rules make communication possible.
They are rules that people have agreed on to give meaning to certain symbols and words.

Abstraction

- Abstraction: general or vague language that represents concepts or ideas that have no physical references
- Example: thanks for washing the dishes vs thanks for cleaning up.
(Cleaning up the mess vs cleaning the bed rooms only)

Relative language

- Relative language: words that gain meaning by comparison; they don't have an exact definition. Relative words change depending on the context and they are very subjective
- Example: big, stupid, free, hard, heavy, happy.
- Example: an elephant is big if it is compared to a human, but an elephant is small if compared to a planet

Semantic features

- We as speakers of a language have an implicit knowledge about what is meaningful in our language. In our account of what that knowledge is, there are at least twelve technical terms used as aspects of our semantic knowledge: *polysemy*, *homonymy*, *anomaly*; paraphrase; *synonymy*; semantic feature; *antonymy*; contradiction; ambiguity; adjacency pairs; entailment and presupposition.

in this presentation, we will review some of them.

Polysemy

- A word is polysemous when it has two or more related meanings. In this case the word takes one form but can be used to mean two different things.
- Example: bright (shining) and bright (intelligent).
- Note: these two meanings must be related in some way.

Homophony

- Homophony is similar to polysemy in that it refers to a single form of word with two meanings.
- *Example: Bat (flying mammal) and bat (sports equipment).*

Note: the two meanings are entirely unrelated.

Anomaly

- We can know whether something is or is not meaningful in our language and we can tell which of the following are meaningful in English.
- Example:
- *Grace wrote a letter. Henry smiled. Correct.*
- *The grass laughed. a Wall Harry painted. Anomalous.*

Synonymy

- When two words have essentially the same meaning-in a given context.
- Example: *Where did you purchase (or buy) these tools?*

Paraphrases

- Sentences that make equivalent statements about the same entities.
- Example :*Ruth arrived before Agnes and Agnes came home after Ruth are paraphrases.*

References

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