

Role and Importance of Semantics and Pragmatics in Linguistics

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ABSTRACT

Semantics and pragmatics are both concerned with meaning in language, but they approach it from different angles. Semantics focuses on the literal, dictionary-based meaning of words and sentences, while pragmatics examines how context, speaker intent, and other non-linguistic factors influence meaning. In essence, semantics deals with what words mean, and pragmatics deals with what speakers mean by those words in a specific situation. While distinct, semantics and pragmatics are interconnected. Pragmatics often builds upon the foundation of semantic meaning. Understanding the semantic meaning of a sentence is often the first step in figuring out its pragmatic meaning. Semantics, the study of meaning in language, is a crucial sub-discipline within linguistics. It explores how words, phrases, sentences, and larger units of discourse convey meaning and how this meaning is interpreted by speakers and listeners.

Keywords: Context, Influence, Language, Linguistics, Pragmatics, Semantics, Speakers

INTRODUCTION

Semantics play a large part in our daily communication, understanding, and language learning without us even realizing it (Betti and Mahdi, 2021: 51; and Palmer, 1997: 5-8). For example, in everyday use, a child might make use of semantics to understand a mom's directive to "do your chores" as, "do your chores whenever you feel like it." However, the mother was probably saying, "do your chores right now." (Betti and Al-Jubouri, 2009: 2). Semantics involves the deconstruction of words, signals, and sentence structure. It influences our reading comprehension as well as our comprehension of other people's words in everyday conversation.

IMPORTANCE OF SEMANTICS

Understanding human communication

Semantics helps us understand the nuances of meaning, including the literal interpretation of words and figurative language like metaphors, similes, and idioms. It clarifies how the meaning of words can change depending on context and usage. Semantics allows for the analysis of relationships between words, such as synonyms (words with similar meanings) and antonyms (words with opposite meanings), enriching our vocabulary and comprehension.

Foundation for language acquisition and learning

Understanding semantics is vital for learning new languages, as it helps learners grasp the meaning of unfamiliar words and phrases within different contexts. Semantic awareness can positively influence English learning anxiety by enhancing learners' comprehension and confidence in using the language. Semantic mapping, a technique used in language education, visually represents the connections between words and concepts, aiding vocabulary acquisition and retention.

Applications in technology and various fields

Semantics is fundamental to the development of Natural Language Processing (NLP) systems used in chatbots, translation tools, and voice assistants. It enables search engines to understand the intent behind user queries rather than just matching keywords, leading to more accurate and relevant results. In fields like law, semantics plays a critical role in the interpretation and application of legal terms and phrases. Semantic analysis can be used to gauge customer sentiment from reviews and feedback, providing valuable business insights.

Distinction from syntax and pragmatics

While semantics focuses on meaning, syntax deals with the rules governing the arrangement of words to form grammatically correct sentences. Pragmatics examines how context, speaker intent, and social factors influence the interpretation of meaning, building upon the literal meaning established by semantics. Semantics is therefore indispensable for a thorough understanding of language in all its forms and plays a vital role in both human communication and technological advancements involving

Definition of Semantics

Semantics is the study of meaning in language. It can be applied to entire texts or to single words. In linguistics, semantics is the subfield that studies meaning. Semantics can address meaning at the levels of words, phrases, sentences, or larger units of discourse.

One of the crucial questions which unites different approaches to linguistic semantics is that of the relationship between form and meaning. (Kroeger, 2019: 4; Betti, Igaab & Al-Ghizzi, 2018: 264).

Semantics is the study of meaning, but what do we mean by “meaning”? Meaning has been given different definitions in the past. Meaning equals connotation. The meaning is simply the set of associations that a word evokes, and it is the meaning of a word defined by the images that its users connect to it (Betti and AlFartoosy, 2019: 99; Igaab, 2015: 83). So “winter” might mean “snow”, “sledding” and “mulled wine”. But what about someone living in the amazon? Their “winter” is still wet and hot, so its original meaning is lost. Because the associations of a word don’t always apply, it was decided that this couldn’t be the whole story (Igaab, 2010b: 155).

It has also been suggested that the meaning of a word is simply the entity in the World which that word refers to. This makes perfect sense for proper nouns like “New York” and “the Eiffel Tower”, but there are lots of words like “sing” and “altruism” that don’t have a solid thing in the world that they are connected to. So meaning cannot be entirely denotation either (Betti, 2021c: 3). So meaning, in Semantics, is defined as being Extension: The thing in the world that the word/phrase refers to, plus Intension: The concepts/mental images that the word/phrase evokes (Betti, 2021d: 15).

Thus, semantics is interested in how meaning works in language: The study of semantics looks at how meaning works in language, and because of this it often uses native speaker intuitions about the meaning of words and phrases to base research on. We all understand semantics already on a subconscious level, it’s how we understand each other when we speak (Palmer, 1997: 85-6; and Betti and Ulaiwi, 2018: 82).

How the way in which words are put together creates meaning is one of the things that semantics looks at, and is based on, how the meaning of speech is not just derived from the meanings of the individual words all put together (Lyons, 1979: 293; and Betti, 2020a: 11). The principle of compositionality says that the meaning of speech is the sum of the meanings of the individual words plus the way in which they are arranged into a structure. Likewise, semantics also looks at the ways in which the meanings of words can be related to each other.

Semantics in the Field of Linguistics

Semantics looks at these relationships in language and looks at how these meanings are created, which is an important part of understanding how language works as a whole. Understanding how meaning occurs in language can inform other sub-disciplines, such as Language Acquisition, to help us to understand how speakers acquire a sense of meaning, and Sociolinguistics, as the achievement of meaning in language is important in language in a social situation (Betti, 2013: 8). Semantics is also informed by other sub-disciplines of linguistics, such as Morphology, as understanding the words themselves is integral to the study of their meaning, and Syntax, which researchers in semantics use extensively to reveal how meaning is created in language, as how language is structured is central to meaning (Betti, 2003: 3).

Situational Semantics

Remember the different connotations of the phrase, “I care for you?” Let’s revisit the idea that a single line of text can be interpreted in ; different ways. Suppose a college grad was just hired to a new job. She was excited to start this new chapter; everything seemed glossy and right. On the first day, her boss mentions she’ll have to travel to the new Miami office to help the office hit the ground running. In reality, she’ll be going there to do very mundane chores like order office supplies and clean the cubicles (something that nobody else wants to do). So, as the new employee exclaims, “You chose me? Thank you!” and the supervisor says, “Yup, I chose you all right,” we’ll know that, given the context of the situation, the supervisor isn’t saying this in a positive light. However, the new employee will interpret it to mean something very positive. Or, what if a husband comes home with what he labels a “brand new” coffee table. He might tell his wife it was a steal and a gorgeous new piece for their home. The wife might take one look at it and say, “This isn’t new. I saw this at the local consignment shop the other day.” The husband might retort, “Semantics. It’s new to

us!” Indeed, two people can take one word or expression and take it to mean entirely different things (Betti, and Igaab , 2019: 242).

Semantics is studied for a number of different reasons but perhaps one of the main reasons could be: “If we view Semantics as the study of meaning then it becomes central to the study of communication which in turn is an important factor in how society is organised.”

The aim of semantics is to discover why meaning is more complex than simply the words formed in a sentence. Semantics will ask questions such as:

“Why is the structure of a sentence important to the meaning of the sentence?
“What are the semantic relationships between words and sentences?”

For Example, Consider The Following Sentences:

- (1) a) Regina is an only child.
- b) Regina’s sister is called Martha.

Without any knowledge about semantics intuitively we know that only one of these sentences can be correct, despite the fact grammatically they both make perfect sense.

Studying semantics will allow us to explain why only one of these sentences can be true.

Further Semantic Examples

Structural ambiguity can also give reason for the importance of Semantic research.

For Example:

‘The chicken is ready to eat’

This sentence can be an example of structural ambiguity as there are a range of interpretation on what this sentence means.

It could mean the chicken (itself) is hungry and so is ready to eat

The chicken is ready to be served and ate by something else.

Studying semantics will allow us to explain what it is exactly about the headline which is confusing and why readers could be led to believe there are two possible meanings.

Importance of Semantics

Understanding semantics in linguistics enables better comprehension and expression in any language. It's the key to effective communication, helping us understand the nuances of meaning, context, tone and intent behind words or phrases.

Evolution of Semantics

Like any aspect of language, semantics in linguistics has evolved over time. From classical semantics to the advanced computational semantics in programming of today's digital era, this progression mirrors the development of human communication itself.

Branches of Semantics

Semantics is not a monolithic construct but rather a field with many branches. From formal semantics, which focuses on meaning in the context of logical expressions, to lexical semantics, delving into word meanings and relationships, the diverse areas of study within semantics provide a rich field of exploration.

Semantic Theory

Semantic theory is the intellectual framework that guides semantic analysis and interpretation. Different theories provide different methods and perspectives for comprehending meaning in language.

History of Semantics

As Semantics is a long-standing topic of discussion, there has been a constant change of the meanings and interpretations words hold over time. There are various circumstances for how a lexical item can change in meaning.

Amelioration: The upgrading or elevation of a word's meaning, as when a word with a negative sense develops a positive one. Contrast with pejoration.

Example: 'nice' was seen as foolish in the 1300s. But in modern society is seen as a positive adjective.

Pejoration: The downgrading or depreciation of a word's meaning, as when a word with a positive sense develops a negative one.

Example: 'Silly' was seen as 'happy' in the 1200s. However, in the 1500's the meaning shifted to refer to a person who is 'empty-headed' or lacking in common sense.

Broadening: Where a lexical item expands in meaning.

Example: 'bird' used to be referenced to a baby bird but today it is a reference to a whole animal species.

Semantic Narrowing: When a word becomes less general than its earlier meaning. Example: 'deer' used to be a reference to animals but now means specifically one species.

Semantic Bleaching: Is the reduction in the meaning of a word as a result of semantic change.

Example: 'thing' used to refer to an assembly/council. Today 'thing' is a vague reference to anything.

Relationship between Semantics and Pragmatics

A comparison of semantics and pragmatics is a very large undertaking and a simple essay does not provide a sufficient venue for discussing all of the ideas and notions related to the many different views of semantics and pragmatics. The study presents the comparison of semantics and pragmatics from a linguist's point of view. The two branches of linguistics, i.e. semantics and pragmatics, deal with the meaning of language and link language to the world. Each branch deals with meaning differently; yet, many students of linguistics confuse the two terms. The only obvious similarity between the two branches is that they both deal with the meanings of words and sentences but in different ways. Semantics and Pragmatics are branches of Linguistics. Both of them deal with the study of meaning. Semantics deals with the study of meaning of word without the context. On the other hand, Pragmatics understands the language meaning but keeping the context in mind. Pragmatics is the study of the ability of natural language speakers to communicate more than that which is explicitly stated. The ability to understand another speaker's intended meaning is called pragmatic competence. An utterance describing pragmatic function is described as metapragmatics. Another perspective is that pragmatics deals with the ways we reach our goal in communication. Suppose, a person wanted to ask someone else to stop smoking. This can be achieved by using several utterances. The person could simply say, 'Stop smoking, please!' which is direct and with clear semantic meaning; alternatively, the person could say, 'Whew, this room could use an air purifier' which implies a similar meaning but is indirect and therefore requires pragmatic inference to derive the intended meaning.

While Semantics concentrates on the meaning that comes from linguistic knowledge, Pragmatics concentrates on those aspects of meaning that cannot be predicted by Linguistic knowledge alone and takes into account our knowledge about the physical and the social world. The focus of pragmatic analysis is on the meaning of speakers' utterances rather than on the meaning of words or sentences. Utterances need not consist of complete focus of pragmatic analysis is on the meaning of speakers' utterances rather than on the meaning of words or sentences. Utterances need not consist of complete sentences. Each utterance is a unique physical event created at a particular point in time for a particular communicative purpose. In our point of view, pragmatics helps the translator or the interpreter in finding clues in the utterances the speakers make which leads him to find the appropriate equivalent in the target language.

Key Differences Summarized:

Feature	Semantics	Pragmatics
Focus	Literal meaning	Contextual meaning
Context	Independent	Dependent
Knowledge	Linguistic	Non-linguistic and social
Example	Dictionary definition	Implied meaning

Relationship:

While distinct, semantics and pragmatics are interconnected. Pragmatics often builds upon the foundation of semantic meaning. Understanding the semantic meaning of a sentence is often the first step in figuring out its pragmatic meaning. Semantics covers what expressions mean, while pragmatics covers what speakers mean in using the expressions.

Pragmatics involves how speakers use language in contextualized social interactions, how they do things with words. Semantics invites a focus on meaning and truth conditions without regard to communication and context.

The word Semantics is derived from the Greek word *semantikos* meaning to show or give signs. Semantics is the study of meaning. It covers a lot of study areas related to language. Semantics help in getting a sense of meaning in context to speakers, writers, readers of learners. It also helps in known that how the meanings got change over a period of time.

Semantics is all about question of meaning, whereas Pragmatics is all about questions of use. It deals with that aspect of meaning which is dependent on the context. Semantics deals with the study of what signs denote. On the other hand, Pragmatics deals with the relation of signs to their users and interpreters. Semantics is limited to the relation of words to which they refer, whereas pragmatics covers the study of relationships between words, the interlocutors and also the context.

CONCLUSION

Semantics is a sub-discipline of Linguistics which focuses on the study of meaning. Semantics tries to understand what meaning is as an element of language and how it is constructed by language as well as interpreted, obscured and negotiated by speakers and listeners of language. Semantics is closely linked with another sub-discipline of linguistics, Pragmatics, which is the study of meaning in context. However, unlike Pragmatics, Semantics is a highly theoretical research perspective, and looks at meaning in language in isolation, in the language itself, whereas Pragmatics is a more practical subject and is interested in meaning in language in use.

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