

## Semantics: Introduction

Semantics is at the centre of the study of communication. Semantics is also at the centre of the study of the human mind - thought processes, cognition, conceptualization. Semantics has been the meeting place of various cross-currents of thinking, and various disciplines of study. Philosophy, psychology, and linguistics all claim a deep interest in the subject. But their interests tend to differ because of their different starting points: psychology the understanding of the mind; linguistics the understanding of language and languages; philosophy the understanding of how we know what we know, of the rules of right thinking, and the evaluation of truth and falsehood.

Semantics is the technical term used to refer to the study of meaning. Unfortunately, 'meaning' covers a variety of aspects of language, and there is no very general agreement either about what meaning is or about the way in which it should be described.

As semantics is 'the study of meaning', the object of study is the meaning of human language (sometimes termed 'natural language'). It should not be forgotten, of course, that other structured systems (programming languages, diagrams, rituals, mathematical formulas) all have an appropriate concept of meaning, and hence their own semantics. 'Meaning', however, is a very vague term. In ordinary English, the word 'meaning' is used to refer to such different things as the *idea* or *intention* lying behind a piece of language.

But semantics is not about the use of a particular English word, or its correlates in other languages, though these may give us clues about the area under discussion. The Greek word (from which we get 'semantics') conveys the idea of importance (compare the English words 'meaningful' or 'significant'). The Chinese equivalent is also used to mean interest. This suggests that the subject touches on questions of why people bother to use language in the first place, and why we bother to listen to them. It is certainly a far cry from what people have in mind when they dismiss something as 'a matter of semantics'!

The term semantics is a recent addition to the English language. (For a detailed account of its history see Read 1948.) Although there is one occurrence of *semantick* in the phrase *semantick philosophy* to mean 'divination' in the seventeenth century, semantics does not occur until it was introduced in a paper read to the American Philological Association in 1894 entitled 'Reflected meanings: a point in semantics'. The French term *semantique* had been coined from the Greek in the previous year by M. Bréal. In both cases the term was not

used simply to refer to meaning, but to its development - with what we shall later call 'historical semantics'. In 1900, however, there appeared Bréal's book *Semantics: studies in the science of meaning*; the French original had appeared three years earlier. It is one of the earliest books on linguistics as we understand it today, in that, first, it treated semantics as the 'science' of meaning, and secondly, that it was not primarily concerned with the historical change of meaning.

Yet the term semantics did not catch on for some time. One of the most famous books on semantics is *The meaning of meaning* by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, first published in 1923. Yet semantics does not occur in the main body of the book itself. However, it appears in an appendix, which is itself a classic in the field, entitled *The problem of meaning in primitive languages*, written by the anthropologist, B. Malinowski.

Other terms besides semantics have been used. H. G. Wells in *The shape of things to come* speaks of the science of *significs*, but he says that it was lost sight of and not revived until the twenty-first century. Other names that have been used include *semasiology*, *semology*, *semiotics*, *sememics* and *semics*, though scholars have often used some of these terms to suit their own interests and orientation, and in both wider and narrower senses than our semantics will have here.

There is, unfortunately, a use of the terms *semantic* and *semantics* in popular language, especially in newspapers, that bears only a slight resemblance to our use. The terms are used to refer to the manipulation of language, mostly to mislead, by choosing the right word. Thus there were headlines in *The Guardian* in 1971: 'Semantic manoeuvres at the Pentagon' and 'Homelessness reduced to semantics'. The first of these headed an article in which it was suggested that the term *mobile manoeuvre* was being used to mean 'retreat', while in the second the point was rather that by using a very narrow definition of *homelessness* the authorities were able to suggest that the number of homeless was considerably reduced.

The term *meaning* is, of course, much more familiar to us all. But the dictionary will suggest a number of different meanings of *meaning*, or, more correctly, of the verb *mean*, and Ogden and Richards were able to list no less than sixteen different meanings that have been favoured by 'reputable scholars'. It is no part of a book of this kind to investigate all these popular and scientific definitions of the term, nor to ask if all the meanings of *mean* and *meaning* have something in common. But a brief look at some of the common uses may be illuminating, for we can ask which, if any, of these comes close to the use of the terms that we need in semantics.

To begin with, we should not see a close link between the sense we require and the sense of 'intend' that we find in *I mean to be there tomorrow*. It is significant, perhaps, that we cannot, in this context, talk about 'my meaning', to refer to

'what I mean to do'. Much nearer to the sense we need is that of *Those clouds mean thunder* or *A red light means "stop"*. For *mean* here (and *meaning* too) is used of signs, both natural and conventional, signs that indicate something that is happening or will happen, or something that has to be done. Such signs provide information or give instructions, and it is easy to assume that language consists of signs of a similar kind. When, however, we look at the use of the terms *mean* and *meaning* to refer to language we find that they seldom, if ever, suggest this notion of sign (though we shall soon see that many linguists have followed the analogy through).

The most relevant use of the terms for our purposes is found in such sentences as *What does 'calligraphy' mean? 'Calligraphy' is beautiful handwriting*. The reply to such questions is in terms of other words that the speaker thinks the hearer can understand. This is, of course, characteristic of dictionaries. They provide definitions by suggesting words or phrases which, we are given to understand, have the 'same' meaning, though what is sameness is a problem that we shall not be able to escape. The extent to which meaning is dealt with in terms of the equivalence of terms is even more clearly brought out when we deal with foreign languages. For if we are asked what *chat* means in French we shall almost certainly reply 'cat'. It is interesting to notice that we would not ask what cat means in French, expecting the reply *chat*. Instead, we have to say What is the French for 'cat'? In stating meaning, then, we are obliged to produce a term that is more familiar than the one whose meaning is being questioned. We translate from obscure terms, technical terms, or a foreign language into words that can be easily understood. It is obvious, however, that this will not get us very far in our study of meaning, for, though the principles of dictionary making may be relevant to our enquiries, we are not solely, or chiefly, concerned with writing dictionaries.

A different use of meaning is found in such sentences as 'It wasn't what he said, but what he meant.' Lewis Carroll made play with the difference between saying and meaning in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*:

'Then you should say what you mean', the March Hare went on.

'I do', Alice hastily replied; 'at least - at least I mean what I say - that's the same thing, you know'.

'Not the same thing a bit', said the Hatter.

This is a curious use for, if our words have a meaning, how can we fail to say what we mean, or, rather, how can the words fail to mean what they mean? The answer is, of course, that we wish to suggest that the words do not mean what they might most obviously be thought to mean, that there is some other meaning besides the 'literal' meaning of the words. There are a number of quite different ways of achieving this. We can quite simply use such features as intonation or even perhaps non-linguistic signs such as a wink to indicate that the words must

not be taken literally. In this respect there is one intonation tune in English that is particularly interesting - the fall-rise, in which the intonation falls and rises on the 'accented' word in a sentence. For this tune expresses reservations; it says 'but...'. For instance, with *She's very clever* it may well 'say' (i.e. imply) that she is not very honest, or not very attractive, while with *I think so* it would suggest that I do not really know (whereas a different intonation would express confidence in my belief). Similarly I can say, with sarcasm, *That's very clever* to mean 'That's very stupid', and if I wink when I say 'That's mine', I probably intend to suggest that it is not. Secondly, much of what we say 'presupposes' a great deal. The classic example is *When did you stop beating your wife?* which presupposes that you beat her at one time without actually saying it. This, too, we shall have to discuss in detail later.

All in all, it seems that we shall not make much progress in the study of meaning by simply looking at common or even scholarly uses of the relevant terms. Rather we must attempt to see what meaning is, or should be, within the framework of an 'academic' or 'scientific' discipline. Semantics is a part of linguistics, the scientific study of language.

## **FORM AND CONTENT**

Take a simple word like 'book'. It can be analysed at many different levels. First of all we know how it is pronounced and spelt (or spelled?); this is one kind of information. And when we encounter it, we associate it in some way with books—either some mental concept of them, or objects in the real world instantiating the concept (never mind which for the moment). The first thing is to distinguish systematically between the first kind of information, which concerns 'book' as an expression in a language, and the second kind, which we can call (very provisionally) the concept of book. Typographically, this distinction will be reinforced by using quotation marks for the former and italics for the latter, as in the previous sentence. (A word of warning: many linguistics books use different conventions.)

It may help to think of situations where words in different languages are said to 'mean the same thing'. For example, 'book', 'livre', 'carte' 'kniga' and 'hon' are expressions in different languages, but are associated with the same concept, book. Note that although I have used an English word to label the concept, this is just a matter of convenience. One could have used anything—a word in another language, a number, or a little picture of a book. Equally, one is not implying that speakers of all languages have exactly the same stock of concepts. Conversely a single word may have more than one meaning. For example the English word 'table' can mean an item of furniture or a kind of chart. To avoid confusing the two meanings (not likely in this case, but it is not always so simple), we should use different labels for the two concepts. Since these labels are arbitrary anyway, one way of doing it is to use table1 and table2 respectively

(rather like in a dictionary). These may be termed word senses, as opposed to word forms.

There is no guarantee that a single word form in another language will cover the same group of word senses. For example in Greek ‘trapezi’ means what I have called table1, while to express table2 you would have to use a different word form, like ‘pinakas’. However, certain clusters of word senses often go together in many languages.

Semantics is one of the richest and most fascinating parts of linguistics. Among the kinds of questions semanticists ask are the following:

- What are meanings — definitions? ideas in our heads? sets of objects in the world?
- Can all meanings be precisely defined?
- What explains relations between meanings, like synonymy, antonymy (oppositeness), and so on?
- How do the meanings of words combine to create the meanings of sentences?
- What is the difference between literal and non-literal meaning?
- How do meanings relate to the minds of language users, and to the things words refer to?
- What is the connection between what a word means, and the contexts in which it is used?
- How do the meanings of words interact with syntactic rules and principles?
- Do all languages express the same meanings?
- How do meanings change?

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