Semantics and Pragmatics

Lecture No.14

Study Material

Semantics and Grammar: Formal Grammar

- Semantics is the study of literal, de-contextualized, grammatical meaning (Frawley, 1992).

- What is Formal Grammar?

- The study or the use of rules about how words change their form and combine with other words to express meaning (Cambridge Dictionary).

- This is a fact about English that sequence of sounds conveys meaning differently.

- *'Man'* /mæn/ is singular grammatically and *'Men'* /men/ is plural grammatically. For example, *'A **man** is behind you.' and 'Several **men** are behind you.'*

- Both the sentences create different meanings and situations.

- Most of the traditional grammarians assumed that grammatical categories were essentially semantic.

- Some linguists argued that grammar must be distinct from semantics and grammatical categories must be wholly defined in terms of the FORM of the language (Palmer, 1976).

- **Why Formal Grammar?**

- The meaning is often very vague and meaning categories are not easily delineated.

- Semantic categories are often defined in terms of the formal features of a language.

- E.g. 'River' is a noun in English grammar but in some languages it is used as a verb: *'It's revering'* rather than *'There's is a river.'* (Palmer,1976)

- In English, tense is not directly related to time since the past tense may be used for future, e.g. 'If he came tomorrow'.

- 'Hair' is used for singular and plural as well. Why have we skipped lexical rule 'adding –s' at the end?

- Therefore, basic grammatical categories may be established independently of their meaning.

- **How errors in grammar affect meaning?**

- John ran coming everyday.

- **Explanation**

- The above sentence is grammatically wrong because there are verbs such as 'Keep' which are followed by the *'-ing'* form e.g. John kept coming everyday. The same rule can't be applied on 'run'.

-    John hoped coming everyday.

-    John slept coming everyday.

- **Explanation**

- With *hope* the mistake is grammatical one – we can correct to 'John hoped to come everyday.

- In 2nd example, *'sleep'* equally does not occur with an *'-ing'* form.

-    John is seeming happy.

- **Explanation**

- The use of 'seeming' is ungrammatical because we don't use progressive with love, seem, like etc.

- In case of semantic reason, we can say John cannot be in continuous state of seeming or liking.   (End)

Grammatical Categories

- Grammar is not restricted to the study of form or function words. It is concerned, more widely, with categories such as tense, gender, number and with syntactic functions such as subject and object, e.g **'Ali'** (Noun/Subject, etc.).

- These categories can be on 'phrasal level' as well, e.g. *'Ali the son of John'* is a noun phrase.

-    According to Palmer, there are two familiar grammatical categories, 'Gender' and 'Number'.

- **Gender**

- English has strictly no grammatical gender at all. It has, of course pronouns *he, she, it* but, these are essentially the markers of sex.

- *He*, *she* are used for humans. '*it'* is used for animals.

- Sometimes we use *he* for a male dog and the pronoun *it* for a 'baby' as well.

- *'Is it a boy or a girl?'* is an example of a specific human whose sex is unknown.

- Gender class can also be expressed by using prefixes or suffixes in some languages. e.g. 'Actor' is used for male and 'Actress' is used for female.

- **Countability**

- Noun class of Countable and Uncountable, or Count and Mass.

- Examples of count nouns are a cat, a book, an apple, etc.

- Mass nouns may occur with no article or with some indefinite quantifiers. For example, some butter, some milk, little water etc.

- Count Nouns 'individuate' –indicate individual specimens while, mass nouns refer to a quantity that is not individuated in this way.

- Mass nouns can nevertheless function as count nouns. Two obvious functions are, first the use of expressions such as **'a butter'**, **'a patrol'** are used as 'a kind of butter' or 'a kind of patrol'.

- Similarly, count nouns that refer to creature may function as mass noun to indicate meat. E.g. Chinese eat dog. (dog refers to meat.)

- Semantically, mass nouns are nearer to plurals than to singular forms of count nouns.

- The term 'count' implies that most of the things can be counted, e.g. one book, two books, three books, etc.

- **Person and Deixis**

- The category of person (first person I, we, second person you, third person he, she, it, they) is often closely associated with number and with gender in the verbal forms of languages.

- First person relates to a speaker while, second person relates to hearer. (End)

Grammar and Lexicon

- As mentioned earlier, grammar is concerned more widely with categories such as tense, gender, number and with syntactic functions such as subject and object.

- Some of these may be marked in language by form words, but they may equally be marked by even order of the words.

- It is irrelevant for semantics whether a grammatical category is indicated by *a form of word*, by *a morpheme* or *the order of the words*.

- Example:

- Past tense is marked by the past tense morpheme (–ed) but there is no similar morpheme to indicate the future; future is marked by 'shall, will, or be going to'.

- **Distinction between Grammar and Lexicon**

- The distinction between 'Grammar and Lexicon' can be posed in terms of the distinction between 'grammatically unacceptable sentence' and 'those that are excluded on lexical grounds'.

- *The boys is in the room.* is incorrect but the meaning is not vague.

- Chomsky invented the sentence ***Colorless green ideas sleep furiously***, which seems faultless grammatically, yet is completely unacceptable lexically.

- Therefore, if a sentence conforms to grammar, but be completely deviant lexically, it would seem that grammar and lexicon are distinct.

- *'John drank fish.'* is ungrammatical in the same sense as *'The boys is in room'.

- So, if a grammatical rule is broken we will correct it as 'The boys are in the room'.

- If there's a lexical error we will correct it to create some sense, e.g 'John drank fish-soup

- According to Palmer (1996), there is no clear line between grammatical and lexical deviance.

- Some sentences are clearly ungrammatical and can be corrected easily according to the rules.

- While others are odd only in lexical way and can be corrected with some imagination and context/situation.   (End)

Grammatical Relations

- Grammatical categories of the verb, tense, aspect, phase and voice are linked with each other and a small alteration in the order of these categories completely change the meaning of a sentence.

- Example

- 'John plays the piano' can be transformed into 'the piano is played by John'.

- **Transitivity**

- Transitivity is a relation between subject and object, that relation is reversed in the passive.

- Transformation is, where the grammatical categories not only affect one element (verb), but also affect the whole sentence. For example, 'He ate food' is changed into 'Food was eaten by him.' (Passive)

- **Subject and Object**

- Subject and objects are marked by position, the subject precedes the verb e.g. '*She laughed.*' and the object follows the verb e.g '*She –killed a snake.*'

- **Direct and Indirect Objects**

- How many objects do you see in this sentence? 'John gave David a book.'

- In this example, 'a book' is direct object and 'David' is indirect object.

- The indirect object 'David' may be subject of a passive, 'David was given a book by John'.

- It can also be direct object, as '*A book was given to David by John'*. It can be considered passive of *'John gave a book to David'* as well.

- **Transitive and Intransitive Verbs**

- Verbs that have objects are called transitive verbs and those without objects are called intransitive verbs, e.g.

- He ate food. (Transitive)

- He laughed. (Intransitive)

- Therefore, it is clear with the previous examples that voice is closely related to grammatical transitivity.

- There are some verbs used as both transitive and intransitive, e.g. ring, open, close, stop, break, etc.

- *'John rang the bell'* or *'The bell rang'*.

- *'I stopped the car'* or *'The car stopped.'*

- **Causativity**

- This term is closely related to transitivity. When an actor becomes the reason of doing an action, we call it causativity.

- For example:

- *'John rang the bell is to be interpreted'* as *'John caused the bell to ring'*

- *'John killed Bill'* as *'John caused Bill to die'.*

- **Find Causal Relations:**

- I made him prepare the lesson.

- I cased him to__?

- I taught him English.

- I caused him to __?

- I let the chicken burn in the stove.

- I caused the chicken to__?

- Answers: pass the exam, learn, cook (End)

Case Grammar

- **What is Case Grammar?**

- A system of grammatical description based on the functional relations that noun groups have to the main verb of a sentence. (Collins Dictionary Online)

- A form of grammar in which the structure of sentences is analyzed in terms of semantic case relationships. (Oxford Dictionary Online)

- **Types of Cases**

- Palmer has given three cases 'Agentive, Instrumental and Object'.

- Fillmore has suggested six cases, 'Agentive, Instrumental, Dative, Factitive, Locative, Objective.

- Agentive: Typically animate perceived instigator.

- Instrumental: Inanimate force or object causally involved.

- Dative: Animate being affected.

- Factitive: Object resulting from the action or state.

- Locative: Location or spatial orientation.

- Objective: Semantically most neutral case.

- Consider these three sentences:

- John opened the door with a key.

- The key opened the door.

- The door opened.

- **Explanation**

- There is a same verb 'open' in all three.

- Subjects are John, the key and the door respectively.

- But in terms of 'case relations' we see the case of each noun remained the same in all three sentences. i.e. John is Agentive(=actor) throughout, the key is instrumental and the door is objective.

- The cases keep on changing within the text. For example - If the agentive is present (John), it will always perform as a 'subject'.

- i.e. *'John (sub) opened the door with a key'.*

- Similarly, if there is an instrumental but no agentive, the instrumental will be the subject- *The key (sub) opened the door.*

- Only if the objective is alone, it can be subject. i.e. *'The door (sub) opened'.*