Semantics and Pragmatics

Lecture No.15

Study Material

Formal Semantics Today: Diversity within Formal Semantics

- According to Portner (2005), it does not imply that the nature of our concepts is irrelevant to formal semantics, or that the things in the world are independent of our conceptualization of them.

- Portner has used *'Possible Worlds'* one of the most popular tools for representing diversity within semantics.

1. Model-Theoretic Semantics

- This model is based on 'what reality is like which is useful for semantic purposes' i.e. truth, falsity or inadmissible.

- We might also think of sets of possible worlds within a model-theoretic approach as representing propositions.

- While, remaining agnostic about whether propositions are actually sets of possible worlds.

- Perhaps we don't believe that the true nature of reality is relevant to doing semantics.

- E.g. Astronomy and physics tell us that sunsets are not ''real'' in the sense of the world.

- The noun sunsets may denote a set of things (more accurately, it expresses a function from possible worlds)

- Truth-conditions of sentences are defined in terms of a model of reality appropriate to how language works, with it being a further issue how that model relates to reality itself.

- "intended model'' and the "intended interpretation''.

- The model which is an accurate portrayal of reality and the interpretation which links pieces of language to the intended model in the way that language is actually linked to reality (Portner, 2005).

- **Davidsonian Semantics**

- Argues that we can do semantics without possible worlds.

- Davidsonian Semanticists agree with other formal semanticists that the meaning of a sentence consists in its truth-conditions, but think that possible worlds and the like are not the right way to think about truth –conditions.

- Rather, they say that it's better to simply and directly express truth-conditions with statements like: *Snow is white is true if, and only if, snow is white*.

- This is not an atomic theory rather an abstracting one which informs us about the little parts on the basis of what they contribute to the whole (Portner, 2005).

- **Situation Semantics**

- Many formal semanticists have used the concept of a "situation" in their work - the idea that we want to have something less than a complete possible world to base our notion of meaning on.

- A semanticist talking about situations has in mind a partial reality (or partial model of reality)

- The role of a sentence is to classify situations according to some more general features of reality.

- There are constraints which relate situations of one kind to situations of another kind.

- For example: someone says 'smoke is coming out of a house'; the situation is 'something is burning inside'. (End)

Relationship with other Varieties of Semantics

- Formal semantics relates with other varieties such as semiotics, reference, lexicology, etc.

- Not all semanticists are formal semanticists. There are perspectives on semantics within linguistics which don't accept the formal semantic-commitment to truth-conditional meaning (Portner, 2005).

- Overall, the relationship between formal semantics as a scholarly endeavor and the other linguistic theories is a cold one.

- Theories especially the idea theories, as well as social-practice theories.

- The fields mostly ignore one another's existence, and often criticize each other with dismissive comments (Portner, 2005).

- Perhaps the job of each approach is to argue as strongly as it can that the others are wrong, so that whichever theory is actually right (it's formal semantics!) will eventually be proven so.

- On the other hand, no approach yet invented is right, and so at some points we should be ready to synthesize apparently incompatible ideas.

- There should be more sharing of ideas at the level of individual linguistic topics.

- Often, advocates of one approach simply ignore the results of research in others, and this leads to the duplication of effort and to avoidable mistakes (Portner, 2005).

- For example, to suggest a case which highlights some of the most fruitful work in formal semantics, It would be wise for any semanticist, of whatever persuasion, to keep track of the rich literature on tense, aspect, and modality which has been developed within the formal semantics perspective.

- In contrast, to suggest a case which highlights an area of relative weakness in formal semantics, it is wise for formal semanticists to remain attuned to the mass of work on lexical meaning developed within other perspectives (Portner 2005).   (End)

Relationship with other Fields

- Syntax, pragmatics, and the philosophy of language are intellectual areas with which formal semantics makes the closest relation.

- New ideas in any of these fields can have a direct impact on how semanticists think about language, both in a general way and in studying a particular feature of the language (Portner, 2005).

- There's a possibility that some semanticists may have much interest in syntactically oriented semantics and some others can have in philosophically oriented semantics.

- Formal semantics has also connections to other three areas of intellectual inquiry. i.e Logic, computer science and cognitive science.

- **Logic**

- The fundamental goal of logic is to characterize valid patterns of reasoning, steps of inference which will lead from true premises to true conclusion.

- As human language is ambiguous and vague so, logicians have developed artificial, ''logical'' language.

- These artificial languages are not much like any human language, but with a little practice one can learn to take a variety of sentences and can translate them into convenient logical language.

- The most popular logical languages are known as propositional calculus and predicate calculus.

- The whole point of logic is to be precise, not ambiguous and vague.

- **Computer Science**

- Formal semantics is linked with computer science for both intellectual and practical reasons.

- On the intellectual side, computer languages are formal languages very much like the languages of logic.

- On the practical side, we have the need to make computers deal with human language and the products of human civilization in a reasonable way.

- Beyond translating the content, computers can save our time if they rephrase paragraphs, give short summaries and find errors in ideas etc.

- **Cognitive Science**

- focuses on the understanding of human mind.

- The most important component disciplines of cognitive science are linguistics, psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, and computer science. (Potner, 2005)

- There are three major approaches (i) study human brain; what goes in the brain as people understand language?

- (ii) study human behavior; what aspects of language people find it easy or difficult to understand?

- (iii) create models of things human can do; model can be created either on a paper or a computer sheet.   (End)

Semantics and Society - I

- Language takes a major part in the way these interactions are played out (Leech, 1981).

- Leech has given five functions of a language which play a major role in human society.

- **Informational Function**: is linked with the subject matter.

- E.g. A news can only be understood if it has complete information about *'what, where, when, why* and how did the incident happen; and *who* actually did it.

- *'School is off on July 7, 2018,'* is an informational sentence.

- **Expressive Function:** it can be used to express its originator's feelings and attitudes.

- **E.g.** swear words and exclamations.

- *'I'm never going to talk to her again.'* expresses anger of the speaker with someone (Leech, 1981).

- **Directive Function:** we aim to influence the behavior or attitudes of others, e.g. commands and requests.

- **Aesthetic Function:** for poetic expressions - the use of language for the sake of the linguistic artefact itself, and for no ulterior purpose, e.g. the message is often conceptual as with effective meaning.

- In aesthetic function, both the poet and the reader bring a heightened sensitivity to bear on the act of communication.

- **Phatic Function:** it is a function which keeps communication lines open, and keeps social relationships in good repair, e.g. 'to show that intentions in communication are sincere and friendly, e.g. greetings, farewells, and routine polite questions.

- Activity: Write 10 examples which should contain all these functions. (End)

- **Semantics and Society - II**

- **Conceptual versus Affective Meaning**

- According to Leech, the **associative meaning** of an expression has to do with individual mental understandings of the speaker.

- Conceptual meanings are based on the idea that speaker wants to deliver.

- Two dangers can arise if attitudes and emotions are conveyed by the associative meanings of words. (Leech, 1981)

- One is '*misconception* and *misunderstanding'* because associative meanings tend to vary from person to person.

- Second danger is that if the affective meaning of the message predominates over the conceptual meaning, the listener or reader will not be able to understand what is being said.

- Certain feelings may be difficult to put into words, e.g. '*I love my mother' or 'my mother is my love'.* Both give different emotions.

- Associative Engineering: Euphemism and Image-Building

- Euphemism (Greek: 'well-speaking') is the practice of referring to something offensive or indelicate in terms that make it sound more pleasant or becoming than it really is.

- Image-building is a modern term used for image-building of brands.

- Associative engineering is also used as a positive term in advertising.

- E.g. Manufacturers of men's cosmetics overcome the potential effeminate image of their product with aggressively masculine associations, in which the choice of product names play an important role.

- **Conceptual Engineering**

- When different words are used which have same conceptual meanings, for example.

- One might call someone a lady rather than a woman.

- 'violence' vs. 'force' - can deliver the same conceptual meanings.

- But violence is seen as 'an extreme degree of force', etc.

- **Language as a Substitute for Action**

- Words are stronger than actions. A verbal insult is like the shaking of a fist, in that it stands for (or is a ritual symbol for) physical assault.

- For example: in military, fight, struggle, never surrender, campaign, crusade, close our ranks, defend our rights, die for nation are considered very strong words.