Semantics and Pragmatics

**Lecture No.2**

Study Material

Semantics in Linguistics

- Semantics is a technical term used to refer to the study of meanings.

- The meaning covers a variety of aspects of the language but unfortunately there is no general consideration to describe it (Palmer, 1997).

- Semantics is the study of meanings communicated through language.

- Modern linguistics include various meditations regarding the knowledge of linguistics, i.e. how to pronounce the words, construct sentences and meanings (Saeed, 2004).

- Since linguistic description is an attempt to show a speaker's knowledge, semantics is ascribed to elaborate semantic knowledge.

- In this module, both what topics are included in Semantics and a few ways through which they can be handled in a better way, will be highlighted and elaborated.

- As per the nature of the subject and its varieties, we may have only its introduction and an overt survey of this subject.

- Semantics is a very diverse field within linguistics and the researchers and the scholars are writing on diverse topics and using various methods to investigate them.

- Semantics have to have an association with the other fields of studies i.e. philosophy and psychology, as they also investigate the creation and transmission of the meanings (Saeed, 2004).

- Furthermore, if linguistics is scientific, it must be concerned not with specific instances, but with generalizations (Palmer, 1997).

- What is meant by scientific and empirical in the context of semantics is still debatable.

- It is not at all clear what constitutes evidence for a statement about meaning.

- Another difficulty with semantics is that meaning do not seem to be stable but to depend upon speakers, hearers and context.

- This point may be explained using the conceptual framework of de Saussure related to his distinction between Language (langue) and Speaking (parole).

- A similar distinction is valid within Semantics. (Palmer, 1997)

- An individual's meaning is not a part of the general study of semantics.

- Need to make a distinction between the usual 'meaning' and 'use'. (Palmer, 1997)

Semantics in a Model of Grammar

- To take the initiative, we can consider that semantics is a part/level of linguistics the same way as phonetics or grammar are.

- Further, almost all the linguists, overtly or covertly, admit that in a linguistic model, semantics is on one end and phonetics on the other, while grammar is at somewhere in the middle. (Palmer, 1997)

- Many linguists argue that the aim of doing semantics is to set up a component of the grammar which is parallel to the other ones, e.g. syntax or phonology.

- Linguists like to draw the flowchart-style diagrams of grammatical models, and in many of them there is a box labeled as semantics. We can see in the figure:

Sound ↔ Phonology ↔ Syntax ↔ Semantics ↔ Thought
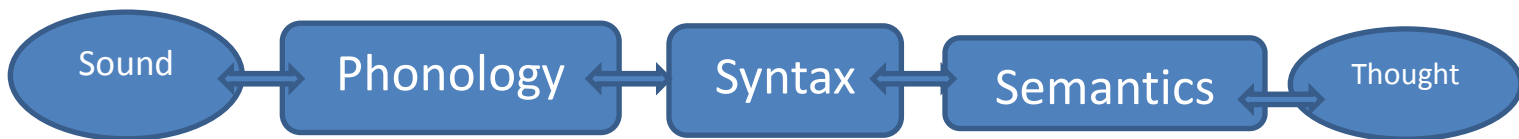
- In other words, linguistic knowledge constructs prominent modules or this knowledge is modularized. As a consequence, many linguistic theories themselves are modularized, having something as shown in the figure. (Saeed, 2004)

- If an independent component of semantics is identified, one central issue is the word meaning and the sentence meaning.

- Phrases and sentences also have the meanings, of course, but an important difference between word meaning on one hand, and the phrase and sentence meanings on the other, concerns productivity. (Saeed, 2004)

- There is always a possibility to create the new words, but relatively it is not much frequent to occur.

- On the other hand, the speakers regularly create the infinite number of sentences, even those which never have been said or heard before.

- Audience's understanding is a key factor in the production of new sentences.

- Noam Chomsky, in particular, has commented on the creativity of the sentence formation.

- It is one of generative grammar's most important insights that relatively a small number of combination rules allow the speakers to use a finite set of words to create a very large and infinite number of sentences (Saeed, 2004).

- To allow this, the rules for sentence formation must be recursive, allowing the repetitive embedding or coordination of syntactic categories (Saeed, 2004).

Historical Semantics

- The study of the change of meanings in time.

- In particular, the change of the meaning of words.

- A great deal of work done on semantics is of historical nature.

- The term 'semantics' was first used to refer to the development and change of meaning (Palmer, 1997).

Kinds of Changes in meaning

- Narrowing   meat   food
- Widening   bird   nestling
- Metaphor   bitter   biting
- Metonomy (nearness in space and time)
    - Jaw   cheek
- Synechdoche (Whole/part relation)
    - Town   fence
- Hyberbole (stronger to weaker meaning)
    - astound   strike with thunder
- Litotes (weaker to stronger meaning)
    - kill   torment
- Degeneration   knave   boy
- Elevation   knight   boy

(Bloomfield, 1933 cited in Palmer, 1997, p. 9)

- *Reasons for semantic changes*
- Generalization of meaning For example, '*arrive*' originates in Latin '*arripare*' - 'movement that ends at the banks of a river'.

- Specialization of meaning For example, '*girl*' originally referred to 'children in general' and was later restricted to 'female children' only (Krifka).

- Some changes are merely fortuitous – e.g. 'money' is related to Latin 'moneo' (warn) because money was made in the temple of the goddess Juno Moneta (Rome).

- Some changes arise from new needs – e.g. 'car' was an obsolete word for 'chariot', until the motor-car was invented.

- One powerful source for meaning change is taboo (Palmer, 1997).

- A word that is used for something unpleasant is replaced by another time and again.

- E.g. English has had the terms privy, lavatory, toilet, bathroom, loo, etc.

- Historical linguistics, or Comparative Philology, attempts both to reconstruct the history of Languages and to relate languages apparently coming from a common source (Palmer, 1997).

- One of the aims of the subject is to establish 'sound laws' to show, for instance, the correlation of '*p*' in Romance Language with 'f' in Germanic languages.

- This depends on knowing that the words we compare have a common origin, and can only be done on the basis of their meaning.

- We can relate *ewe* to Latin *ovis* 'sheep'.

- English *ovine*, or *acre* to Latin *ager* 'field and agriculture'.

- The study of the origin and uses of particular words is called etymology; includes observations about previous meanings of a word or its precursors.

- Etymological dictionaries attempt to quote at least the most recent origin of each word.

- Major difficulty is that there can be no 'true' or 'original' meaning since human language stretches back too far.

- E.g. 'nice' means 'precise' in 'a nice distinction'. It once meant 'silly'.

- Part of the difficulty for the layman is that words are not the same often as they seem to be.

- E.g. 'Gooseberry' has nothing to do with 'geese'.

- 'Strawberry' is not directly connected with the use of 'straw' to protect the fruit (Palmer, 1997)

- Synchronic study must precede the diachronic study of language because we cannot study change in a language until we have first established what the language was like at the time during which it changed (Palmer, 1997).

Semantics in other Disciplines

- Linguists are not the only scholars who are interested in semantics.

- The subject has been of concern to philosophers, anthropologists and psychologists.

- Nothing clearly be said to draw a specific line between linguistic, philosophical and psychological approach to semantics (Palmer, 1997).

- Linguistics has gained a great deal from the scholars in all three disciplines.

- Some philosophers have suggested that many philosophical problems may be solved by the study of ordinary language.

- E.g. the problems of the nature of 'good' and 'evil', of right and wrong, in moral philosophy.

- Such works have had an impact upon linguistics, notably that of Austin (performatives and speech acts), of Strawson (Presupposition) and of Grice (Implicatures).

- Traditional logic is also concerned with semantics as some of its proposals range from simple syllogism to highly complex logical syntax.

- Logic makes use of concepts found in ordinary language ('and', 'or', etc.).

- However, the logical systems are self-coherent and internally consistent models of an idealized kind similar to those of mathematics.

- These may not be invalidated by the mere observations of natural language - far neater and consistent (Palmer, 1997).

- Anthropologists are also concerned with language as an essential part of the cultural and behavioural patterns of the people - a linguist should not ignore this.

- The importance of these patterns has been established by Malinowski in his proposals concerning the CONTEXT OF SITUATION (Palmer, 1997, p. 14).

- The students of semantics have been particularly interested in an area of anthropological research – Kinship.

- Intricate kinship relations of many societies are revealed in equally intricate semantic patterns.

- The relation between Psychology and Linguistics has given rise to Psycholinguistics.

- Aims to understand how we process language both in its production and reception.

- However, we still need to work on its various aspects, especially in relation to meaning.

- It is largely through the influence of certain psychologists that behaviourist analyses of meaning have been proposed.

- One example is to be found in the work of Charles Morris, his book, Sign, Language and Behavior published in 1946.

- He is more concerned with the signs and what they denote or signify.

Semantics and Semiotics

- Linguistic meaning is a special subset of the more general human ability to use signs to convey meanings.

- E.g., traffic lights are the combination of colours to instruct (convey meanings) the drivers and even to warn them.

- It is believed that human language differs in kind more than degree from other languages. (Palmer, 1997)

- Let us have a look at the following examples:

- 1. Those vultures mean there is a dead animal up ahead.

- 2. His high temperature may mean he has a virus.

- 3. The red flag means it is dangerous to swim.

- 4. Those stripes on his uniform means he is a sergeant.

- The verb 'mean' is being put to several uses here.

- These uses reflect the all-pervasive human habit of identifying and creating signs based on inferences, cause and effect, arbitrary symbols, etc. – making one thing stand for another.

- This process of creating and interpreting symbols is called signification - far wider than language.

- Often we observe some symbolic, metaphorical or personified descriptions.

- Scholars (e.g. Ferdinand de Saussure, 1974) are of the view that linguistics is a part of the general study of the use of the sign system, which is called Semiotics.

- Semioticians have probed the relationship that may be between the sign and the object it represents, or, in Saussure's terminology, between signifier and its signified. (Saeed, 2004)

- *Important Terminology*

- Signifier: any material thing that signifies, e.g., words on a page, a facial expression, an image.

- Signified: the concept that a signifier refers to.

- *Together, the signifier and signified make up the meaning.*

- Sign: the smallest unit of meaning. Anything that can be used to communicate

- Types of Signs:

- Distinction, highlighted by C. S. Peirce, between Icon, Index and Symbol.

- Iconic signs: signs where the signifier resembles the signified.

- Similarity between a sign and what it represents. e.g., between a picture and its real-life subject.

- Indexical Signs: signs where the signifier is caused by the signified.

- Causal relationship

- e.g., smoke signifies fire

- Symbolic (arbitrary) signs: signs where the relation between signifier and signified is purely conventional and culturally specific (e.g., most words; Use of insignia to denote military ranks).

- Wearing black colour to symbolize mourning in some cultures (Saeed, 2004).

- Linguistic Sign:

- The linguistic sign is the unity of the signifier (a sound-image) and the signified (a concept)

- The system of signs in language is over-complex

Concept

Sound Image