



SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS: UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING AND USE OF LANGUAGE

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Annotation: *This article provides an overview of the themes of semantics and pragmatics in linguistics, exploring how they help us understand the meaning and use of language. It highlights the importance of semantics in studying the meaning of words and phrases, including word relationships such as synonyms and antonyms. The article also delves into pragmatics, discussing how language is used to achieve specific goals and how meaning is interpreted based on context.*

Key words: *linguistic, communication, semantic, pragmatic, synonym, antonym.*

Linguistics is a complex field that explores the intricacies of language and communication. Two important themes within linguistics are semantics and pragmatics, which help us understand the meaning and use of language. In this article, we will explore these themes in more detail, providing an overview of their significance and real-life examples.

Semantics is concerned with the meaning of words and phrases. It explores how we assign meaning to words and how we interpret the meaning of words in different contexts. For example, the word "bank" can refer to a financial institution or the side of a river. In semantics, we would study how we assign these different meanings to the same word and how we interpret the intended meaning based on context. Another important aspect of semantics is the study of word relationships, such as synonyms and antonyms. Synonyms are words that have the same or similar meanings, such as "happy" and "joyful." Antonyms are words that have opposite meanings, such as "hot" and "cold." Understanding word relationships is essential for effective communication and for building a rich vocabulary.

Pragmatics, on the other hand, is concerned with the use of language in context. It explores the ways in which we use language to achieve specific goals, such as persuading, informing, or entertaining. Pragmatics also examines how we interpret meaning based on context, such as understanding sarcasm or irony. An important aspect of pragmatics is speech acts, which are the actions we perform through language. For example, making a promise, giving an order, or making a request are all examples of speech acts. Understanding speech acts is essential for effective communication, as different speech acts require different linguistic



strategies and can have different social consequences. Another important aspect of pragmatics is the study of implicature, which is the meaning conveyed by an utterance that is not explicitly stated. For example, if someone says "It's cold in here," the implicature may be that they want you to close the window. Understanding implicature is essential for effective communication, as it can help us interpret the meaning behind indirect or implied messages.

There are two major difficulties with this approach to the semantics/pragmatics distinction — the Carnapian approach, as I will henceforth call it. The first one is due to the fact that the conventional meaning of linguistic forms is not exhausted by their relation to designata. Some linguistic forms (e.g. goodbye, or the imperative mood) have a “pragmatic” rather than a “semantic” meaning: they have use-conditions but do not “represent” anything and hence do not contribute to the utterance’s truth conditions. Because there are such expressions — and because arguably there are many of them and every sentence contains at least one — we have to choose: either semantics is defined as the study of conventional meaning, or it is defined as the study of words-world relations. We can’t have it both ways. If, sticking to Carnap’s definition, we opt for the latter option, we shall have to acknowledge that “semantics”, in the sense of Carnap, does not provide a complete (descriptive) account of the conventional significance of linguistic forms. The second difficulty is more devastating. It was emphasized by Yehoshua Bar-Hillel, a follower of Carnap who wanted to apply his ideas to natural language. Carnap explicitly said he was dealing “only with languages which contain no expressions dependent upon extra-linguistic factors” (Carnap 1937:168). Bar-Hillel lamented that this “restricts highly the immediate applicability” of Carnap’s views to natural languages since “the overwhelming majority of the sentences in these languages are indexical, i.e. dependent upon extra-linguistic factors” (BarHillel 1970: 123). In particular, Carnap’s view that words-world relations can be studied in abstraction from use is no longer tenable once we turn to indexical languages; for the relations between words and their designata are mediated by the (current) context of use in such languages

Can we save the semantics/pragmatics distinction? Yes: we can give up Carnap’s definition of semantics as the study of words-world relations, and define it instead as the study of the conventional, linguistic meaning of expression-types. According to Jerrold Katz, who made that view explicit, “Pragmatic phenomena [are] those in which knowledge of the setting or context of an utterance plays a role



in how utterances are understood”; in contrast, semantics deals with “what an ideal speaker would know about the meaning of a sentence when no information is available about its context” (Katz 1977: 14). This view has been, and still is, very influential. Semantics thus understood does not (fully) determine words-world relation, but it constrains them (Katz 1975: 115-16)

Since words-world relations in natural language (hence content and truth conditions) cannot be studied in abstraction from use, those assumptions form an inconsistent triad or so it seems. Semantics cannot be legitimately contrasted with pragmatics, defined as the theory of use, if semantics itself is defined as the study of words-world relations. It is important to realize that, on this view (which I will shortly criticize), semantic competence involves more than the ability to determine the context independent meaning of any well-formed expression in the language. It also involves the ability to assign values to indexical expressions in context. Those assignments are themselves determined by linguistic rules, which linguistic rules constitute the context independent meaning of indexical expressions. In virtue of its linguistic meaning, an indexical expression like I tells you three things: (i) that it needs to be contextually assigned a value; (ii) which aspect of the situation of utterance is relevant to determining that value; and (iii) how the value of the indexical can be calculated once the relevant feature of the context has been identified. If one adds to one’s knowledge of the language a minimal knowledge of the situation of utterance — the sort of knowledge which is available to speech participants qua speech participants — one is in a position to assign contextual values to indexicals, hence to determine the truth conditions of the utterance

In conclusion, semantics and pragmatics are crucial areas of study within linguistics that help us understand the meaning and use of language. Semantics explores how we assign meaning to words and interpret their meaning based on context, while pragmatics focuses on the use of language in achieving specific goals and interpreting meaning based on context. Understanding these themes is essential for effective communication, as it helps us convey our intended message accurately and interpret messages from others correctly. By improving our understanding of semantics and pragmatics, we can become better communicators and build stronger relationships with others.



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