

## SEMANTICS\*

Semantics, according to the author's words, pretends to be an introduction to semantics for readers new to the subject. In so being, the author presents to the reader the central ideas of this field together with the main theoretical approaches, without promoting any of them. After reading the book, readers are supposed to gain the background to proceed to more specialised material.

The book is organised in eleven chapters grouped into three sections. The first section, *Preliminaries*, includes the first two chapters, where the author discusses the place of semantics within linguistics, according to different scholars, along with the relations with the disciplines of philosophy and psychology, since all of them have an interest in the creation and transmission of meaning. Finally, readers are faced with the referential and representational theories of meaning.

Those topics related to the analysis of word and sentence meaning are dealt with in the second section, called *Semantic Description*. It is a very extensive section comprising six chapters. Firstly, the author deals with word meaning or lexical semantics, concerned not only with the representation of the meaning of each word in the language, but also with the interrelation of the words in that language. This is connected with the idea of the lexicon as a *network*, organised in *lexical fields*. Secondly, regarding sentence meaning, five main topics are taken into account, each of them corresponding to a chapter.

The first topic has to do with semantic relations between sentences and the use of the tools of logic to represent meaning. In so doing, synonymy, entailment and presupposition are characterised in terms of truth relations according to the notion of linguistic or analytic truth. That is to say, the truth follows from the meaning relations within the sentence, regardless of any relationship to the world. However, this approach fails to account for presupposition, due to its sensitivity to contextual features. From a pragmatic point of view, presupposition is considered a speaker's strategy of organising the information in the message according to his estimate of what the listener knows.

The second point deals with the classification of situations, taking into account semantic distinctions such as static/dynamic, telic/atelic and durative/punctual. Those situations will be related to time by the grammatical categories of tense and aspect, and the semantic categories *modality* and *evidentiality* will allow the speaker to assume various attitudes towards a proposition.

The third topic presents to the reader the roles of the entities involved in a situation and the relationships between them and grammatical relations such as Subject and Object. The grammatical category *voice* allows speakers to relate thematic roles and grammatical relations in different ways.

The role of context in constructing and interpreting the meaning of utterances concerns the fourth topic. The knowledge necessary to fill in deictic expressions, fix the reference of nominals, access background knowledge and make inferences will be provided by contextual information.

And, finally, the fifth topic deals with speech acts, characterised by interactivity, due to the speaker's involvement with other language users, and context-dependence, since they rely on social conventions.

The last section in the book, *Theoretical Approaches*, includes three chapters and is mainly a review of three important semantic theories: Componential Analysis, Formal Semantics, and Cognitive Semantics.

In Componential Analysis semantic representation should involve primitive semantic components which combine to form grammatical units. Katz and Fodor (1963) provide listings of these components at the word level which allow combinations between words, whereas Jackendoff (1987) provides conceptual structures where components are arranged as functions and arguments which are embedded within one another. This approach tries to establish a semantic metalanguage through the identification of semantic components.

Formal Semantics, on the other hand, makes use of logical expressions as a semantic metalanguage, which has the advantage of avoiding ambiguities in natural languages. Afterwards, it is established a mathematical model of the situation described; and, finally, following a denotational approach, this logical language is connected to real world situations in order to check its truth value, or what is the same, whether the logical expressions correspond to the modelled situations.

Cognitive Semantics rejects the *correspondence theory of truth* adopted by Formal Semantics, in the sense that there is no access to a reality independent of human categorization, but instead the structure of reality as reflected in language is a product of the conceptual frameworks in human mind which people have formed from experience. According to Mark Johnson's (1987) approach, conceptual structures include pre-linguistic *image schemas*, more abstract cognitive structures formed by processes of metaphor and metonymy. They allow people to conceive of emotional states as containers (She's in love), or purposes as paths (A: Have you finished the book? B: I'm getting there).

After looking briefly at each of the sections, it has to be said that the author raises two main questions in this book. The first one, which is developed along the first two sections, is the distinction semantics/pragmatics. Although many linguists insist on maintaining this distinction, it is argued by others that in interpreting meaning, apart from linguistic knowledge which is considered properly part of semantics, contextual information, commonly seen as part of pragmatics, is also required. Following a functionalist view, syntax cannot be autonomous from semantics or pragmatics, since the study of the language system must take place within the framework of the system of language use, and then pragmatics becomes the all-encompassing system within which semantics and syntax must be studied (Dik 1989).

A second important issue developed in the third section is that, in order for semantics not to be simply a form of translation, semantic representations have to be grounded in some way. In that sense, Componential Analysis fails to be semantically grounded, since interpreting a language by means of a metalanguage implies translating from one language into another. This second language then needs a semantics and the process will never end, at the risk of falling into circularity. On the other hand, Formal Semantics and Cognitive Semantics seek to be semantically grounded: the

former is grounded in the non-linguistic world or reality; the latter seeks that grounding not in reality, since from their point of view it is not directly accessible, but in conceptual structures derived from human experience.

From a general perspective, it can be said that *Semantics* answers the author's purpose as an introduction to the field of semantics. The topics and approaches presented are sought to be linked and contrasted, in order for the reader to have an overview of them. Moreover, it is a very useful manual, including introductions, summaries, specific readings and exercises for each chapter, along with a general and extensive bibliography at the end of the book. However, the reader sometimes has the feeling that the author tries to deal with too much information, and due to its complexity, some ideas are not completely clarified. In those cases the author provides the reader with the appropriate readings.

As a conclusion, approaching *Semantics* the reader will not only gain the background to proceed to more advanced material, Saeed's purpose in writing this book, but also will be encouraged to go into the broad and diverse field of semantics.

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### Work Cited

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\* Saeed, John I. *Semantics*. Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 1997, pp. XIX, 360. ISBN 0-631-20035-5.