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PINNING DOWN SEMANTICS

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So what is meaning? Well, at one level 'meaning' is an ordinary English word, which like most words can be used in a number of different ways. Some of them are illustrated by the sentences in (1.1).

EXERCISE

1.1 How else could you describe each of these uses of the word 'mean'?

- a It's a good job he doesn't know what 'malaka' means.
 - b I'm sure she didn't mean to pour olive oil in your hair.
 - c Mean it? I didn't even *say* it.
 - d I think that means she isn't coming back.
 - e So he's Russian. Does that mean he's good at chess?
 - f 'Irony is the gap between what is said and what is meant'.
-

But semantics is not about the use of a particular English word, or its correlates in other languages, though these may give us clues about the area under discussion. The Greek word (from which we get 'semantics') conveys the idea of *importance* (compare the English words 'meaningful' or 'significant'). The Chinese equivalent is also used to mean *interest*. This suggests that the subject touches on questions of why people bother to use language in the first place, and why we bother to listen to them. It is certainly a far cry from

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what people have in mind when they dismiss something as 'a matter of semantics'!

However, semantics as covered by this book is more limited in scope. In terms of the contrast in sentence f above, it is confined largely to the study of 'what is said', leaving aside such interesting issues as irony, metaphor, and social interaction. It tries to characterize the meaning of expressions in relation to other expressions, and in relation to the objects and situations about which they offer information.

1.1 FORM AND CONTENT

Take a simple word like 'book'. It can be analysed at many different levels. First of all we know how it is pronounced and spelt (or spelled?); this is one kind of information. And when we encounter it, we associate it in some way with *books* – either some mental concept of them, or objects in the real world instantiating the concept (never mind which for the moment). The first thing is to distinguish systematically between the first kind of information, which concerns 'book' as an expression in a language, and the second kind, which we can call (very provisionally) the concept of *book*. Typographically, this distinction will be re-inforced by using quotation marks for the former and italics for the latter, as in the previous sentence. (A word of warning: many linguistics books use different conventions.)

It may help to think of situations where words in different languages are said to 'mean the same thing'. For example, 'book', 'livre', 'carte' 'kniga' and 'hon' are expressions in different languages, but are associated with the same concept, *book*. Note that although I have used an English word to label the concept, this is just a matter of convenience. I could have used anything – a word in another language, a number, or a little picture of a book. Equally, I am not implying that speakers of all languages have exactly the same stock of concepts.

Conversely a single word may have more than one meaning. For example the English word 'table' can mean an item of furniture or a kind of chart. To avoid confusing the two meanings (not likely in this case, but it is not always so simple), we should use different labels for the two concepts. Since these labels are arbitrary anyway, one way of doing it is to use *table*₁ and *table*₂ respectively (rather like in a dictionary). These may be termed word senses, as opposed to word forms.

There is no guarantee that a single word form in another language will cover the same group of word senses. For example in Greek 'trapezi' means what I have called *table*₁, while to express *table*₂ you would have to use a different word form, like 'pinakas'. However, certain clusters of word senses often go together in many languages.

EXERCISES

synonyms

1.2 If two word forms share at least one word sense, then they are **SYNONYMS**. Pick out synonyms from the following list, and make sentences illustrating the word sense which they share (note that

some of these senses may be specific to colloquial British English). The words may have slightly different connotations – it is quite rare to find *exact* synonyms in language.

store	lies	gift	bottle	porkies	current
guts	shop	hoard	intestines	present	betray

1.3 Conversely if two distinct word senses correspond to one word form, they are known as **HOMONYMS**. The 'same word form' can of course be defined in terms of sound or spelling, depending which medium is being used. (In the first case they are called 'homophones', in the second case 'homographs' – two different types of homonym.) Make pairs of homonyms of either kind based on the words below.

drag	wrap	wheel	read	polish	practice
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1.4 Investigate whether English word forms with more than one sense correspond to the same word form in some other language known to you; and compare results. (You may be able to do this using a good bilingual dictionary.) Here are a few to start you off:

head	branch	cheek	sex	hard	appointment
black	field	terribly	way	bird	board
miss	pass				

One simple approach to meaning is to associate each expression with a particular object in the world. This seems more or less plausible with certain types of expression, such as proper names: 'Bill Clinton' or 'Saddam Hussein', for example seem to refer to recognizable individuals. Similarly phrases like 'the Eiffel Tower' or 'the moon' seem to pick out particular objects. This idea of picking out objects can be termed the **REFERENCE** of an expression (the object picked out is its **REFERENT**).

1.5 List the words and phrases in this text which have the same referent.

Einstein College today announced the firing of its director. The chairman of the board of governors said that he had phoned him last night to inform him that his services were no longer required. This follows overspending on a new residence for students, with resulting cutbacks in academic programs. Their representative, Tracy Sharpe, commented that they now had nice accommodation but no professors.

homonyms

1.2 OBJECTS AND THEIR DESCRIPTIONS

reference referent

EXERCISE

Reference appears to be an important part of meaning. For example, words like 'it' and 'they', which occur in some form in all languages, depend on it. But it is easy to see that this cannot be the whole story.

EXERCISE

1.6 What are the referents of the following expressions? (i) 'the president of the USA'; (ii) 'the World Cup winners'; (iii) 'the highest mountain in the world'; (iv) 'the first astronaut'.

These are easy enough to answer, but the problem with this exercise (or pseudo-exercise) is that it reads like part of a trivia quiz, rather than an analysis of meaning. It is possible to be mistaken about the answer to one of these questions (i.e. the referent of the phrase) while understanding perfectly its meaning (in the intuitive sense). Moreover the referent of some of these descriptions changes with time. As I write this chapter, the referent of the first is Bill Clinton (or let's say *bill_clinton*, the same object that is the referent of 'Bill Clinton'). But this may well not be the case by the time it goes into print. On the other hand we would hardly want to say that 'the president of the USA' has changed its meaning.

There are other considerations as well. To take a well-known example, 'the morning star' and 'the evening star' refer to the same object. But it would seem paradoxical to say that they have the same meaning, especially given that 'morning' and 'evening' have (intuitively) opposite meanings. Again, if they had the same meaning, then the discovery that the two phenomena are one planet would hardly be news. It would be like discovering that $1 = 1$. And so with all factual discoveries about the identity of objects.

Thus reference cannot be the whole of meaning. What I have called the 'intuitive sense' of meaning, which remains constant when the referent changes, is often called the *SENSE* of an expression. If we know its sense, we should be able to pick out its referent in any particular set of circumstances, as long as we know the appropriate facts.

I am going to introduce another terminological distinction, that between reference and *DENOTATION* (though you should note that sometimes these are used almost interchangeably). If I use the phrase 'the queen', I am likely to be referring to *queen_elizabeth_II*, the daughter of *george_VI* and the mother of *prince_charles*. On such occasions, she will be the referent of the phrase. But its denotation is something more abstract. It will include all those individuals that could be referred to using the word 'queen'. If you like, it is classifying objects into those which come under the heading 'queen' and those which don't. More precisely, it includes those entities which can be classified by a given sense of the word 'queen'. If you see a pub called 'The Queen's Head' with a picture of Freddie Mercury

sense

denotation

outside it, a different word sense and hence a different scheme of classification is at work.

EXERCISE

1.7 For each of these words, distinguish at least two senses. Give two examples of individuals or objects which fall within the denotation of each word sense, and give an example sentence in which they are the intended referent.

- a bank
- b star
- c pig

The distinction between denotation and reference brings into focus another crucial aspect of meaning – the context in which an expression is used. To take an obvious example, the phrase 'my wife' can be used by any number of men, normally referring to a different woman in each case. Likewise the referent of 'yesterday's paper' depends when the expression is used (besides the speaker and his or her reading habits). We have to account for the fact that the same expression used in different contexts may have the same meaning in some respects but different in other respects, notably reference.

It is helpful here to distinguish between *TOKEN* and *TYPE*. To take some standard non-linguistic examples, two pound coins are two different objects but they are instances of 'the same thing'. They are two tokens of one type of object. Similarly the 10 a.m. flight to Bucharest is 'the same flight' each day, though the actual aircraft used may be different. (The relevant criteria of sameness or difference depend, of course, on the level of detail required.)

**1.3
CONTENT
AND
CONTEXT**token
type

1.8 Count the words in the last sentence, first the number of word tokens and then the number of word types.

EXERCISE

In language, the same expression, say a sentence, may be used on different occasions. It is 'the same', that is, as far as its phonological and syntactic analysis is concerned, but used at different times or by different speakers (and showing small phonetic variations which may be irrelevant to its linguistics structure). It can be said that it is the same sentence but different utterances of that sentence. The terminology I will adopt here is to say that it comprises one sentence type but several sentence tokens. A token occurs in a context, and this context will normally affect its meaning; especially its reference and that of its subparts.

EXERCISE

1.9 How many sentence types and tokens are there in this exchange?

- a 'My theory of X-bar syntax is better than yours.'
- b 'No it isn't. My theory of X-bar syntax is better than yours.'
- a 'Look, it's simple. I'm right and you're wrong.'
- b 'Don't be so childish. I'm right and you're wrong.'

How does the reference change between different tokens of the same sentence type?

As has already been hinted, linguistics in general is more concerned with utterance types than tokens. Suppose in a given situation Mary says to you, 'My computer's crashed.' You can get different kinds of information – that she is still alive, that she speaks English (perhaps with an accent which tells you where she comes from), that she is still talking to you – but linguistic semantics concerns itself with the information offered about her computer. That is derived from the sentence type, in conjunction with *some* contextual information, namely that which identifies the speaker as Mary. The branch of study that concerns itself more extensively with the interpretation of utterances in context is known as **PRAGMATICS**. This is the subject of another book in this series, written by Jean Peccci. The exact borderline between semantics and pragmatics is a hazy one, but the relationship between them is certainly a very close one. This must be the case because for many linguistic expressions a crucial part of their meaning (including reference, and hence the truth or falsity of sentences) cannot be determined without looking at context.

pragmatics

1.4
WORDS AND SENTENCES

lexical semantics

truth-conditional semantics

There are two main approaches to linguistic semantics. The first, **LEXICAL SEMANTICS**, focuses on the meaning of words. The vocabulary of a language (the 'lexicon') is treated not just as a list of words but as a very rich and complex set of associations, a line of thought that will be explored in Chapter 5. Often this approach overlaps with cognitive psychology. The second approach starts with the meaning of sentences, and borrows heavily from ideas in formal logic and philosophy. This approach is often termed **formal or TRUTH-CONDITIONAL SEMANTICS**, for reasons which will soon become apparent.

The question is sometimes asked which is the basic unit of meaning in language, the word or the sentence. (There are also intermediate levels which seem to have some significance – phrases like 'the girl in the yellow dress', or to 'cook your goose'.) At one extreme, sentences could be regarded as simply combinations of words. After

all, many words ('dog', 'apple', 'hot') have an obvious significance of their own, one which can be grasped for example by children before they learn to deal with sentences. Of course such an approach still has to deal with what the Chinese tradition calls 'empty words' – words like 'the' and 'and' which don't have such an obvious reference but which help to glue the sentence together and contribute to its overall meaning. At the other extreme, sentence meaning can be taken as basic and the semantic content of words (whether full or empty) defined in terms of the contribution they make to that of a sentence.

I have no particular axe to grind on this issue of which comes first. However, this book will start by talking about sentence meaning, and will go on to treat word meaning largely in that context. Another book in this series is devoted to lexical semantics – *Word Meaning* by Richard Hudson.

The important thing to bear in mind is that sentence meaning is different in kind from the meanings of words or phrases. This is not a matter of length – you can have very long words and very short sentences (compare 'antediluvian' and 'Get out!'). The point is that only a sentence can be true or false. A word or phrase by itself cannot (unless it happens to constitute a complete sentence.).

EXERCISE

1.10 Say whether or not the following expressions can be true.

- a 'the man who you saw at the bus-stop yesterday'
- b 'I miss you'
- c 'very nice'
- d 'the truth'
- e 'it is not true that I burnt the turkey'
- f 'the fact that they didn't come'

I will assume as a working definition that a sentence is an expression which can be judged true or false (i.e. 'assigned a **TRUTH VALUE**'). Strictly speaking this applies directly only to certain types of sentence, which I will call 'statements'. (Other kinds of sentences, like questions or commands, require a more indirect approach, which is beyond the scope of this book.) The truth value does not exhaust the meaning of the sentence (we don't want to arrive at a situation where any two true sentences have the same meaning!). But it is the main thing that distinguishes sentence meanings from the meanings of other expressions. It has been said that 'to know the meaning of a sentence is to know what the world would have to be like for the sentence to be true'. This is not uncontroversial, but it will be the starting point for the treatment of sentence meaning which starts in the next chapter.

truth value