**Semantics**

**Introduction**

The term ‘semantics’ was coined in the late 1890s, by the French linguist Michel Bréal., the word ‘sémantique’, derived from the Greek verb for ‘to mean’, however, it was not used to refer to meaning but to its developments, or what was called later ‘historical semantics’. In 1900, Breal’s book *Semantics: Studies in the science of meaning* signaled the beginning of the scientific study of meaning instead of focusing on the historical change of meaning (Palmer, 1976).

Semantics is a branch of linguistics that refers to *the study of meaning* as it is conveyed by language. Speakers of a particular language should have a linguistic competence which involves phonological, morphosyntactic, and semantic knowledge. Semantic knowledge refers to the speaker’s ability to differentiate between meaningful and meaningless utterances.

In modern linguistics, the study of meaning has been always conceived as a central component in the study of language although it is not always easy to achieve a precise specification of the nature of meaning; unlike structure or sound, meaning does not touch aspects of language only, but also some crucial aspects of thinking and philosophy, and aspects of psychology.

1. **Traditional Views on Meaning**

Traditionally, meaning was analysed mainly by philosophers. Greek philosophers considered words, not sentences or utterances, the basic units of any analysis of meaning. Words were considered **signs** with **Form** and **meaning.**

Sign/ word

form meaning

Hence, words were connected to what they signify by the relation of **naming.** However, Greek philosophers divided in their views of naming. The first group, **naturalists,** viewed naming as a natural relation between the signs and what they signified justifying their view with the existence of a number of onomatopoetic words in natural languages such as *cuckoo, splash and hoot* in English. The second group, **conventionalists,** viewed naming as a pure convention, it is a man-made decision which became later a norm that should not be violated. They supported their view with the fact that the overwhelming majority of words are not onomatopoetic.

Despite the fact that traditional views on meaning paved the way for modern semantics, these views remain vague and imprecise from a scientific point of view; meaning was studied as a part of philosophy and the philosophical analysis of meaning sometimes resulted in total confusion. Besides, terminology used in the analysis of meaning was imprecise; for instance, the words *concept* and *meaning* were not clearly delineated, and the form of a word was sometimes used to signify both the concept and the thing(s) it refers to.

The abstract nature of meaning and the unscientific traditional views on meaning were the reasons behind the structuralist neglect of the study of meaning.

1. **Aims of Modern Semantic Theory**

* The first aim of modern semantic theory is to specify clearly the various semantic properties and semantic relations of words and sentences in a particular language.
* The second aim is to be able to account for the infinite number of meaning combinations that expressions may have on the basis of the acquisition of a finite number of semantic rules and principles.
* A semantic theory should be maximally constrained and aim at providing rules that distinguish between meaningful and meaningless sentences.

Semantic theories are not concerned with ‘extra-semantic’ aspects of meaning or aspects related to contexts in which sentences take place such as the speakers’ status, these are dealt with in the fields of pragmatics and sociolinguistics.

1. **Semantic Properties**

The identification of the various semantic properties and semantic relations of words and sentences in a particular language (which is the first aim of the semantic theory) involves accounting for the ***Compositionality Principle***, ***reference, sense, ambiguity, redundancy, anomaly.***

* 1. ***Compositionality Principle***

Words, phrases and sentences are typically compositional; that is, their meanings are basically determined by the meanings of their components. This is clear at the level of the sentence (mainly complex sentences). Thus, the *syntactic structure of sentences* and the *meaning of words* have direct bearings on the semantics of these sentences. Meaning is often derivable from the various structural patterns of the basic units of a language, as it is affected by the meaning of the selected words as shown in the following examples.

e.g.1 (a) Mary wrongly accused Peter (b) Peter wrongly accused Mary

these two sentences are completely different at the semantic level although they contain the same words, yet the *word order* affects the meaning in each case.

e.g.2 Peter admired Mary Peter despised Mary

I met a woman I met a female

The overall meaning is determined by the meaning of the words that constitute the sentence.

One exception of the principle of compositionality is ***idiomatic expressions*** in which the whole meaning of the expression can not be inferred from the sum of meanings of composing words or the relations between them. For instance: *to kick the bucket* is an English idiom that means *to die,* a meaning that can not be attained through understanding the meaning of individual involved words.

* 1. **Reference**

Reference is a notion used in the study of meaning which basically relates the meaning of words to what they refer to in the real word such as *table, tree…*, therefore, reference presupposes existence in the real world. Reference is linked to the *denotative or referential meaning.* On the other hand, the connotative meaning is the social meaning, it is context-dependent and often used to achieve irony, sarcasm, metaphor, figurative speech. These aspects of meaning fall outside the scope of the denotative meaning. Henceforth, semantics studies the denotative meaning of words or sentences not the possible meanings (connotative meaning) that words may have in particular contexts or for specific people. The connotative meaning and extra-linguistic aspects of meaning are dealt with in pragmatics.

* 1. **Sense**

Reference is usually distinguished from ***sense*** which is concerned with the various relations which exist between the meanings of words or sentences (**syntagmatic vs. paradigmatic relations).** In semantics, **Paradigmatic relations of sense** include:

* **Synonymy:** involves the association od two or more forms with the same denotative meaning such as *liberty/ freedom, small/ tiny.*
* **Homonymy:** the association of one form with one or more meanings. For instance, *bank* can mean: 1. The border of a river 2. The institution where money can be deposited.
* **Polysemy:** the prefix “poly” means several, and the root “semy” relates to the word semantics? That is, polysemy refers to the multiplicity of meaning. For example: *service* can be:
* The state of being a servant
* Government employment
* Help
* Benefit, advantage
* Worship, prayer
* Complete set of plates
* Playing a ball in tennis.

Homonymy and polysemy are similar in that both involve the association of more than one meaning with the same form. However, in homonymy one particular form is associated with usually two essentially unrelated meanings, while polysemy involves the association of more than two often related meanings. Besides, the relationship of meanings in polysemy are sometimes related to historical and etymological facts.

* **Hyponymy:** involves meaning inclusion, that is the meaning of a word is included in the meaning of a larger class. For example: *cat, horse, donkey* are **co-hyponyms;** they belong to a larger class which is *animal.*
* **Antonymy:**  is a semantic relation that involves oppositeness of meaning. The words *beautiful* and *ugly, rich* and *poor* are antonyms in English.
* **Incompatibility:** incompatible words do not co-occur; they do not occur together at the same time. In other words, the meaning of a word excludes one or other meanings such as words that contradict, or the case of colour terms.
  1. **Ambiguity**

There are two main types of ambiguity: ***Lexical ambiguity*** and ***Structural ambiguity.*** Lexical ambiguity involves words which have more than one meaning. Thus, the word *bears* causes ambiguity in the following example:

* Mary bears children with no problem

The sentence may have two different meanings:

* Mary bears children without complaining about pregnancy problems.
* Mary bears children for long hours without complaining about the noise they make.

Structural ambiguity results from the various structural relations between words in a sentence, for example: the lamb is ready to eat. This sentence may mean

* The lamb is ready to be fed, or
* The lamb is ready to be eaten.
  1. **Redundancy**

Refers to unnecessary repetition of meaning, such as *Mary is single and not married.*  The meaning of the expression ‘not married’ is already included in the meaning of the word ‘single’.

**References**

Palmer, F.R. (1976). *Semantics : Anew outline.* Cambridge University Press.

Sadiqi, F. & Ennaji, M. (1999). *Introduction to modern linguistics (2nd ed.).* Afrique- Orient.