

COURSE: SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS

LECTURE 1: INTRODUCTION TO ASPECTS OF MEANING

LECTURER: DR. LILLIAN KEMUNTO OMOKE

Lecture learning outcome:

At the end of the lecture, you will be able to:

- a. Describe what meaning entails.
- b. Discuss the levels of meaning.
- c. Distinguish between semantics and pragmatics.
- d. Discuss the relationship between semantics and other disciplines.

What is Language?

“A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which the members of a society interact in terms of their total culture.”

--George Trager: *The Field of Linguistics* (1949)

A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group co-operates.”

**--Bernard Bloch (1907-1965) & George Trager (1906-1992):
Outline of Linguistic Analysis (1942)**

“Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols.”

--Edward Sapir (1884-1939):

Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech (1921)



INTRODUCTION TO MEANING

- ▶ Semantics and pragmatics are related branches of linguistics.
- ▶ They both study meaning.
- ▶ Meaning has a wide range of applications in and outside semantics.
- ▶ It is concerned with words, phrases and sentences, as well as signs and symbols.
- ▶ Semantics is the study of meaning
- ▶ Pragmatics, too, studies meaning.
- ▶ So, how do they differ?

- ▶ Semantics is exclusively concerned with the meaning of linguistic entities such as words, phrases, grammatical forms and sentences.
- ▶ It is not concerned with the meaning of actions or phenomena.
- ▶ Meanings of linguistic utterances is also a matter of semantics.
- ▶ Pragmatics adds contextual meaning to what linguistic utterances mean.
- ▶ It therefore requires extra phenomena to what semantics requires.

LEVELS OF MEANING

- ▶ We can identify the following three levels of meaning:
 - a. Expression meaning
 - b. Utterance meaning
 - c. Communicative meaning

These three levels point to the broad distinction between semantics and pragmatics.

They also show that the two are closely related.

EXPRESSION MEANING

- ▶ This is expressed using content words such as lexical verbs, nouns, adjectives and adverbs.
- ▶ These words carry content and are therefore meaningful
- ▶ However, they do not stand on their own in expressing meaning.
- ▶ They are supported by functional words such as auxiliary verbs, pronouns, prepositions, articles and conjunctions to make grammatical meaning.
- ▶ Consider the sentence below:
- ▶ *The injured children were treated.*

- ▶ The words ‘injured’ ‘children’ and ‘treated’ are content words as they carry meaning.
- ▶ The words ‘the’ and ‘were’ are functional words.
- ▶ Any other words can be used to replace these words to create meaning; these words are used together to form a grammatical sentence.
- ▶ This kind of relationship is captured by De Saussure’s structuralism in his distinction between paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations.
- ▶ Therefore, you can have other structures as:
 - ▶ *The healthy animals were slaughtered.*
 - ▶ *The happy parents were satisfied.*

- ▶ The meanings of words, phrases and sentences (i.e out of context), in their general sense constitute the level of meaning called expression meaning.
- ▶ Expression meaning constitutes the central subject of linguistics semantics.
- ▶ It studies the ‘material’ or ‘equipment’ that languages provide for communication (Lobner, 2002).
- ▶ The determination of expression meaning requires an abstraction from the use of the expression in concrete contexts.
- ▶ Reference

(Lobner, S. (2002). Understanding semantics. London: Routledge.

UTTERANCE MEANING: PRAGMATICS

- ▶ Utterance meaning is also known as speaker meaning.
- ▶ Consider the following media report:
- ▶ A school bus has been involved in an accident along City Road. It was hit by an oncoming lorry that was trying to avoid hitting a motor cycle. It is unfortunate that the accident has claimed the lives of two children. During an interview with the hospital administrators of City Hospital, the superintendent said that:
‘The injured children were treated and released.’
- ▶ Observe that the utterance ‘The injured children were treated’ now has a concrete meaning as it is attached to a context.

- ▶ This is called ‘utterance meaning’.
- ▶ It comes about when a sentence is used in a concrete sentence.
- ▶ It involves reference and truth proposition.
- ▶ A context of utterance is the sum of circumstances that bear on reference and truth.
- ▶ These aspects are important in contextual meaning
 - The speakers or producers of the utterance
 - The addressees or recipients of the utterance
 - The time at which the utterance is received or produced
 - The facts given when the utterance is produced or received.

COMMUNICATIVE MEANING: PRAGMATICS

- ▶ Our main concern with expression meaning and utterance meaning is the communicative intention.
- ▶ Verbal exchanges are a form of social interaction as they form part of our social lives.
- ▶ Hence, they are always interpreted as part of the whole social exchange and relationship entertained with a speaker (Lobner, 2002).
- ▶ An utterance can have different interpretations and different communicative motives;
- ▶ Hence different communicative meanings or speech acts and inferences.
- ▶ Communicative meaning is described as the meaning of an utterance as a communicative act in a given social setting

Therefore,

The study of meaning of words, phrases, and sentences.

- Lexical semantics (words and meaning relationship among words)
- Phrasal/ sentential semantics (syntactic units larger than a word)
- ▶ What a speaker conventionally means (objective or general meaning)- *not what he is trying to say* (subjective or local meaning- the subject of **Pragmatics**)

HOW MEANING IS COMMUNICATED: SIGNS

- ▶ We have noted that ‘Semantics is the study of meaning in language’.
- ▶ This implies that language is not the only way in which we can communicate.
- ▶ We also use signs and symbols such as traffic signs, danger signs among others.
- ▶ The study of signs in general is carried out by semiotics.
- ▶ Studies how signs mean: how we can make one thing stand for another.
- ▶ A signifier stands for a signified as postulated by Ferdinand De Saussure:
- ▶ For example, wearing black clothes signify a sombre atmosphere in some cultures.

MEANING THROUGH LANGUAGE

- ▶ Meaning is also communicated through language using various linguistic levels:
- ▶ PHONOLOGY
- ▶ Sound symbolism/phonosemantics is a certain association between the sound of an utterance and its meaning.
- ▶ The sound /i/ have a certain tendency to be associated with small things and the sound /o/ with big things:
- ▶ See the words in the next slide:

Sound symbolism

A bit

- ▶ Teeny
- ▶ Tweeters
- ▶ Squeak
- ▶ Tiny
- ▶ Mini

A lot

- ▶ Humongous
- ▶ Woofers
- ▶ Roar
- ▶ Colossal
- ▶ Enormous
- ▶ Jumbo

- ▶ Some words are onomatopoeic.
- ▶ This is linguistic mimicking of non-linguistic sounds such as bow-wow, crack, bang, glitter, stroll, stampede.
- ▶ Prosody such as rhythm, stress, intonation also contribute to meaning.
- ▶ By varying the pitch of the words we utter, we can express quite different variations in meaning.
- ▶ Intonation can be used to convey different meanings .

Morphology

- ▶ Meaning could be in:
 - ▶ Morphemes
 - ▶ Words
 - ▶ Sentences
 - ▶ Paragraphs; etc
-
- ▶ We call these ‘texts’ or ‘utterances’
 - ▶ But is a morpheme an utterance?
- What do you think of ‘bound morphemes’ here?

Morpheme--the minimal unit of meaning

Words are composed of morphemes. Words may consist of one morpheme or more morphemes, e.g.

- ▶ 1-morpheme fresh, imagine
- ▶ 2-morpheme fresh+ness, imagin+able
- ▶ 3-morpheme un+imagin+able
- ▶ 4-morpheme gentle+man+li+ness,
- 5-morpheme un+gentle+man+li+ness
- ▶ 6-morpheme anti+dis+establish+ment+ arian

anti+dis+establish+ment+ari+an+ism

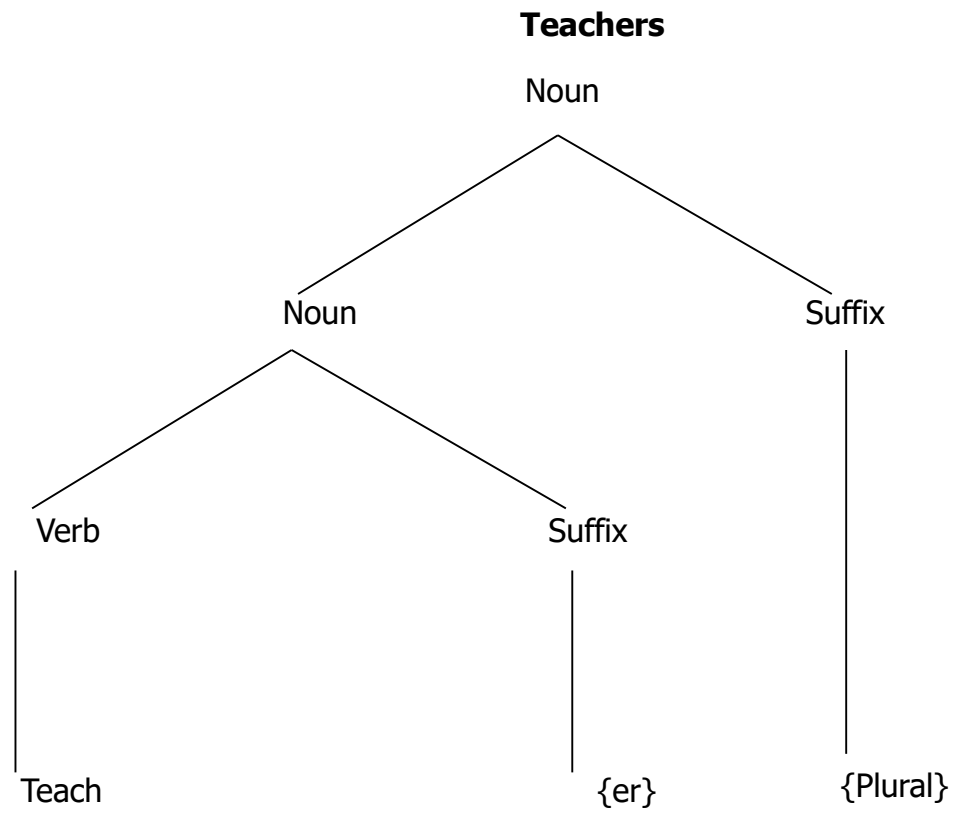
Affixes

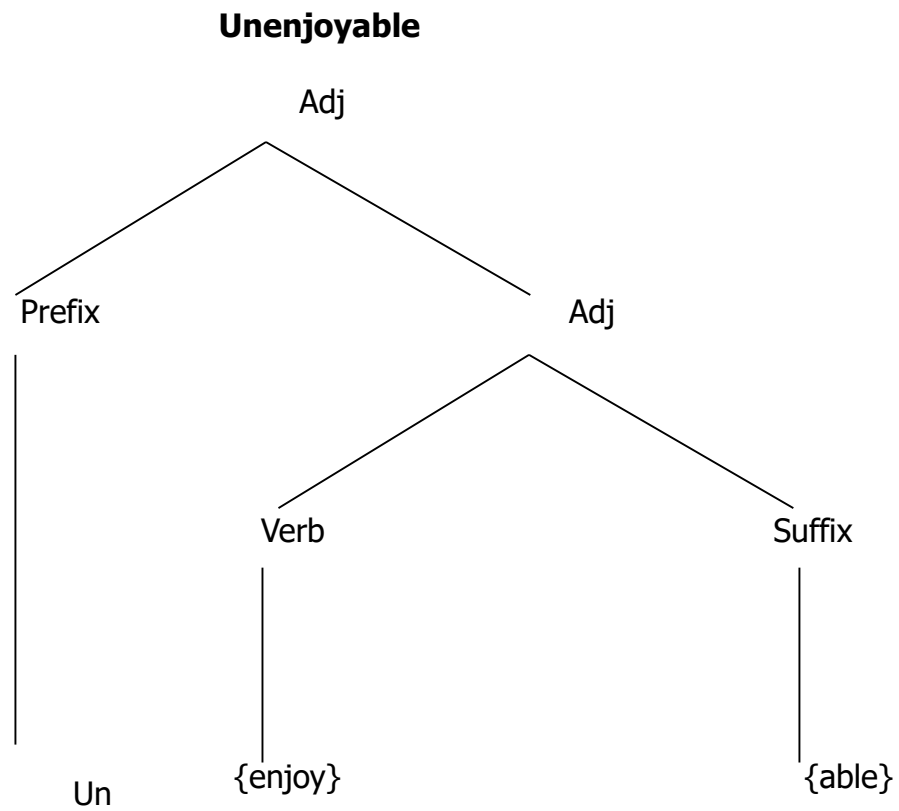
- ▶ Prefix ---- morphemes that occur only before the root, e.g.
un-, dis, anti-, ir-, etc.
- ▶ Suffix ---- morphemes that occur only after the root, e.g.
-ful, -er, -ish, -ness, -able, -tive, tion, etc. Infixes- the are infixed between elements in the root.

Eg. Kalamab**bloody**zoo- These are rare in English. They are commonly used as expletives

Free morpheme & bound morpheme

- ▶ Free morpheme----is one that may constitute a word (free form) by itself,
 - ▶ such as *bed, tree, sing, dance, etc.*
- ▶ Bound morpheme----is one that may appear with at least one other morpheme.
 - ▶ They can not stand by themselves, such as “-s” in “dogs”, “al” in “national”,
 - ▶ “dis-” in “disclose”, “ed” in “recorded”, etc.





Morphemes

- ▶ Inflections express grammatical meaning:
- ▶ Plurality- -s
- ▶ Possession- 's
- ▶ Gender- -ess
- ▶ Size- let - booklet, piglet
- ▶ Tense- worked
- ▶ Person and number- she works - She worked
- ▶ Aspect- ing

Morphemes

- ▶ Derivational morphemes may change the class or meaning of words:
- ▶ -er- one who does X- painter
- ▶ -less- without X- merciless
- ▶ -al- relative to X- derivational
- ▶ -ful- full of X-merciful
- ▶ -ology- the science of X- Biology.

Syntax

- ▶ Meaning can be expressed by ordering words in a specific way.
- ▶ Therefore, elements are organized in a specific way (SVO)
 - a. The dog bit the man.*
 - b. The man bit the dog.*
- ▶ These two sentences contain the same words in a different order and their meanings are different.
- ▶ In (a), the dog is given agency.
- ▶ In (b), the man is given agency.

Syntax

- ▶ Also, words can be grouped in different ways and elicit different meanings:
- ▶ Consider,
- ▶ The mother of the boy and the girl.....
- ▶ This utterance has two meanings.
- ▶ Note that the connections between syntax and semantics are quite solid.
- ▶ This is because language users use syntactic information to infer the meaning of the unknown.

CLAUSE AS A PROCESS

- ▶ The processes may be:
- ▶ **Material-** the process of doing
- ▶ **Mental-** the process of sensing
- ▶ **Relational-** the process of being

CLAUSE AS A PROCESS

- ▶ Process consists potentially of three components
- ▶ 1. The process itself(usually represented by the verb in the clause)
- ▶ 2. The Participants in the process (Usually represented by Nouns in a clause)
- ▶ 3. The circumstances in the process (Usually represented by Adverbials in a clause)

HISTORICAL SEMANTICS

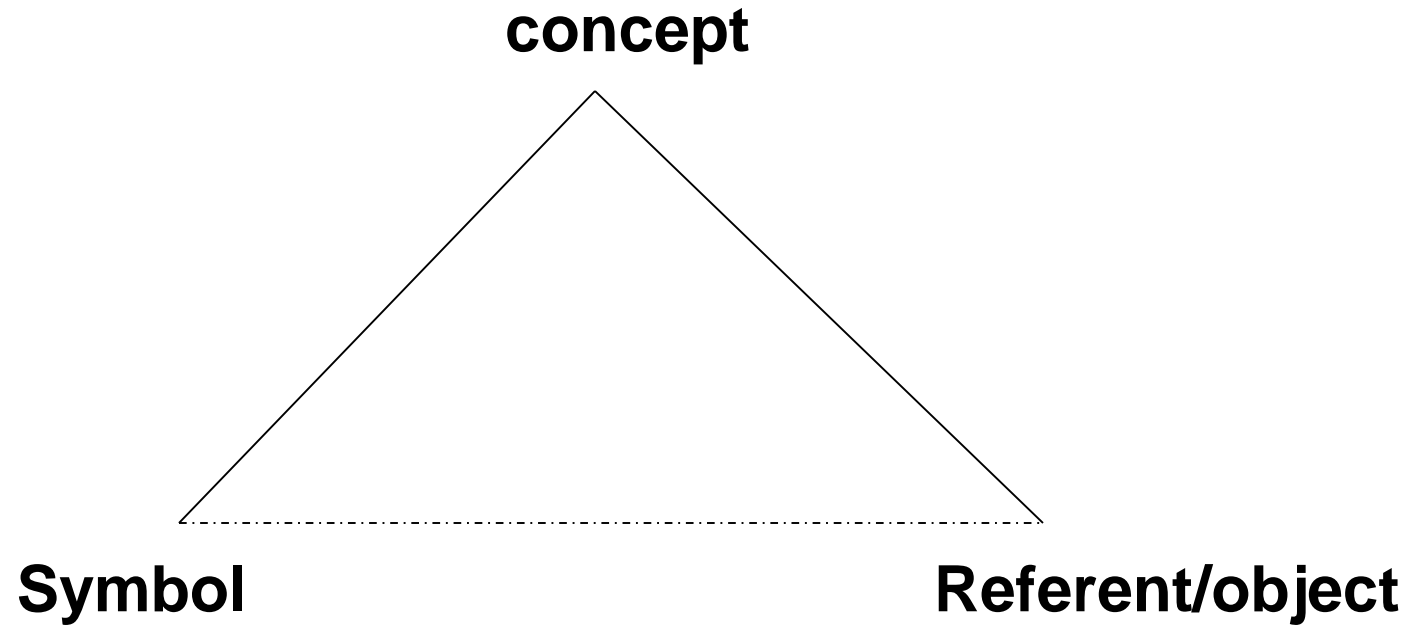
- ▶ Palmer (1976) gives an account of Semantics :
- ▶ This study is called Diachrony
- ▶ Alfred Korzybski was the first person to attempt studying semantics as a distinct discipline, separate from the discipline of philosophy.
- ▶ Described all entities and realities by assigning labels to them (common things, collections and abstract labels).

Palmer, F. (1976). *Semantics: A new outline*. NY: Cambridge. (pg. 12)

- ▶ According to De Saussure (1923, Translated to English in 1959), the linguistic sign consists of a **signifier** and a **signified**
- ▶ **Signifier (SIGNIFIANT)** - the word's definition in a dictionary
- ▶ **Signified (SIGNIFIE)**—not actually what we have been shown but an abstract concept formed in our mind.
- ▶ He used the term '**Sign**' to refer to the association of these two.

De Saussure, F. (1959): Translation- *A course in general linguistics*. NY: McGraw Hill.

Ogden and Richards: semantic triangle



- ▶ Ogden and Richards came very close to the analysis of meaning by combining philosophical processes and linguistic methodologies (Palmer, 1976)
- ▶ They introduced the terms symbol, referent/object and concepts as seen in the diagram above.
- ▶ As early as 1933, Bloomfield observed a system of change in the meaning of words. Instances of change in meaning of words overtime: (Palmer, 1976)
- ▶ Palmer, F. (1976). Semantics: A new outline. NY: Cambridge. (pg. 14-16)

Palmer (1976)

Meat used to represent all types of food

Bitter derives from the metaphor of biting

The meaning of astound derives from the weakened meaning of Thunder

The meaning of knight has been an elevation of the concept of Boy

The word “money” relates to the Latin word moneo (warn) or admonish because money was made in Rome at the temple of the goddess, Junto Moneta

Tanks in modern warfare derived their names from the 1914 - 1918 war in which the Germans were deceived into believing that the structures being moved around were just water tanks

The modern word “car” originated from the word “chariot”

Palmer, F. (1976) Semantics: A new outline. NY: Cambridge. (pg.12-16)

- ▶ These changes occurred due to various reasons such as:
- ▶ Language contact
- ▶ Obsolescence
- ▶ Words acquiring specialized meanings
- ▶ Taboos
- ▶ New needs.

- ▶ Historical change is properly an area of comparative and historical linguistics (comparative philology)
- ▶ It attempts to reconstruct the history of language.
- ▶ Relates languages coming from a common ancestry (father/paternal)
- ▶ Scholars are also interested in etymology: the discovery of earlier meanings of words.
- ▶ Dictionaries try to satisfy this interest by quoting at the least, the most recent origin of each word.
- ▶ Linguists have, in recent years, concentrated in the synchronic study of language.

References

- ▶ De Saussure, F. (1959): Translation- *A course in general linguistics*. NY: McGraw Hill.
- ▶ (Lobner, S. (2002). *Understanding semantics*. London: Routledge.
- ▶ Palmer, F. (1976). *Semantics: A new outline*. NY: Cambridge. (pg. 12)