LIN1180/LIN5082 Semantics

Course tutor:
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Lecture notes (mainly) by Albert Gatt

Course material will be published every week on VLE.

Course assessment is by assignment.

Textbook and readings

Course textbook:

This course will largely follow Saeed, J. *Semantics.* Oxford: Blackwell

Many other texts are suggested in the study unit description.

Several additional readings will be made available on VLE along the way.

Semantics
Third Edition

John I. Saeed

⊛WILEY-BLACKWELL

What is expected of you

- Check VLE regularly for updates.

- Keep up by reading what is required.
  Core readings will be indicated on the lecture notes (VLE). You **should** read these **right after** each lecture.
  Additional readings will also be indicated. These will be a bit more technical, but **DO** refer to them to get a better idea of what we are talking about (and ask me for more if something catches your attention).

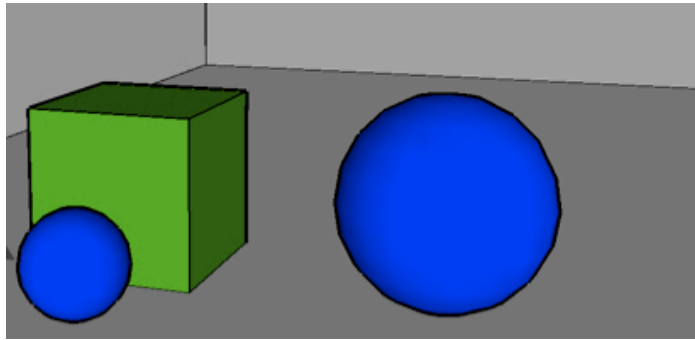- Hand in your work **on time**.

- Participate in lectures!!!

Questions...

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Lecture 1

Doing semantics

Some things we know

Consider:

- *The small blue circle is in front of the square.*
- *The square is behind the small blue circle.*

We are capable of verifying that both sentences are **true in this particular situation.**

This is because we know what the world must be like in order for these sentences to be true.

Some things we know

Now consider:

She drove past the bank.

This sentence then can mean more than one things (it is ambiguous).

This seems to be related to our knowledge of what *bank* denotes.

Some things we know

Finally, consider:

1. *John murdered the president.*
2. *The president is dead.*

We also know that sentence two follows from sentence 1 (technically: sentence 1 entails sentence 2)

In this particular case, it seems to be related to the meaning of *murder*.

Semantics in contemporary linguistics

Semantics is defined as that part of linguistics that deals with meaning

- word meaning
- sentence meaning

The remainder of this lecture will try to outline:

- Why this is of interest to the linguist
- (Some) problems that can arise with this enterprise

Semantics in contemporary linguistics

Grammar (<u>in the linguist's sense</u>) is a characterisation of the knowledge of a speaker/hearer.

We ask: *when a speaker "knows" a language, what does she know exactly?*

Broadly speaking, the linguist's task is to characterise what the speaker/hearer has to know in order to be able to produce and comprehend linguistic strings.

Semantics in contemporary linguistics

So, what does the speaker/hearer has to know in order to be able to produce and comprehend linguistic strings?

* Bis sbudy ukit it boting.

* Went yesterday Bob school to.

* Colourless green ideas sleep furiously.

Speakers have some internalised knowledge such that:

They understand what other people mean

They are able to say what they mean

In <u>this</u> sense, semantics is part of grammar.

Semantics in contemporary linguistics

In some theories, such as Generative grammar, the language faculty is divided into modules:

| phonology | ←→ | syntax | ⬌ | semantics |

This view emphasises distinct roles played by different components.

There is a separate component for meaning, completely unrelated to syntax or phonology.

Semantics in contemporary linguistics

Still, it seems clear that some structural patterns must take meaning into account.

Jake opened the door.
The door opened.

Open is a change of state verb.

The girl kissed Steve.
?Steve kissed.

Kiss is not a change of state verb.

It looks like the meaning of the verbs affects their syntactic behaviour!

But let's not complicate things (yet)…

Semantics in contemporary linguistics

Consider:

Work on the world's largest solar bridge has started in central London. The new solar roof spanning Blackfriars Railway Bridge above the River Thames will cover more than 6,000 square meters when finished. Over 4,400 individual photovoltaic panels are expected to produce around 900,000 kilowatt hours of electricity every year. These will provide the station with half of its energy needs. (CNN news)

How many of the sentences in this text have you seen/heard before? All are completely 'new', but you can still understand them.

Chomsky (1986) identified this as Plato's problem:

> How do we manage to understand and produce such an infinite variety of things, even if we've never heard them before?

Semantics in contemporary linguistics

Our semantic theory needs to account for this productivity

Our mental lexicon stores the meaning of thousands of words.

We can create an infinite number of sentences, using grammatical rules of our language.

Is this enough?

The sentences *the man bit the dog* and *the dog bit the man* are structurally identical, but differ in meaning.

Frege's Principle of Compositionality: The meaning of a sentence is a function of the meaning of its component words **and the way they're combined**.

An example situation

So did you like the food?

You made great black coffee.

Requirements for our theory

What kinds of knowledge do you need to understand a reply such as *you made great black coffee?*

Word meanings:
black, coffee, great, make

Phrasal and sentence meanings (Compositionality):
black + coffee
(great + black + coffee) + (make + PAST)

Requirements for our theory

You also need to consider contextualised meaning:

The pronoun *you* means *person of unspecified gender whom the speaker is addressing*

It only makes sense in a context where there is an interlocutor

Let's get one thing out of the way:

The phrase *you made great black coffee* seems to acquire new shades of meaning in different contexts:

A: *Did you like the food?*

B: *You made great coffee!*

You may **imply**:

You're a hopeless cook, but at least, the coffee was OK…

You completely failed to impress me…

Are such context-dependent effects part of semantics?

Semantics vs. pragmatics

(Many) linguists distinguish between

Literal/conventionalised meaning

"core meaning", independent of context

This belongs to semantics proper

Speaker meaning & context

What a speaker means when they say something, over and above the literal meaning.

This and other "contextual" effects belong to pragmatics

NB. The distinction between semantics and pragmatics is not hard and fast

Is the context-dependent meaning of *you* a matter for semantics or pragmatics?

So, let's do semantics!

The task:

Design a theory that will explain a speaker's semantic knowledge, i.e.

- Word meaning
- Sentence meaning
- …

The solution (take 1):

Suppose we just claimed that meaning is about knowing "dictionary definitions"

Problem 1: Circularity

Knowing the meaning of a word = knowing the definition
   e.g. coffee = *a beverage consisting of an infusion of ground coffee beans*

We need to know the meaning of the words making up the definition (*infusion*, *coffee beans*)!
   This involves giving further definitions…
   Where would this process stop?

The problem here is trying to define word meaning using other words…

Problem 2: World knowledge vs. Linguistic Knowledge

Suppose you think of coffee as:
black, hot, bitter…

Suppose I think of coffee as:
black, hot, ground from coffee beans, grown in Brazil…

Which of the two conceptions is correct?

Which of these aspects belongs to language, and which are "encyclopaedic knowledge"?

How much do we need to agree on in order to understand each other's uses of the word?

Problem 3: Individual differences

Suppose we agree that coffee is typically black.
We might not agree precisely on the true meaning of the word *black*:
How dark must something be to qualify?
When does black become dark brown?

People often differ on the boundaries
This doesn't seem to stop them understanding each other

Two possible goals of a semantic theory:
to identify aspects of meaning independent of individual variation
to account for how speakers manage to understand each other even where there is such variation

Interim summary

Thinking of meaning as "definition" is problematic because:

1. Definitions are linguistic, and so their components will themselves need definition.

2. People won't necessarily agree on definitions.

The need for a metalanguage

To meet these problems, we need to characterise linguistic meaning independently of words:

This involves using a semantic metalanguage: A way of "translating" meaning into a form that is language-neutral.

We might assume that speakers have a stock of concepts in their heads
    e.g. the meaning of *coffee* is the concept COFFEE

The concept is not tied to its "English" usage. A Maltese speaker has the same concept when she uses *kafé*

Such concepts might be argued to exist in a speaker's mental lexicon

Summary

Semantics is part of linguistic knowledge

This is productive and systematic

Compositionality of meaning helps us to explain how people can interpret a potentially infinite number of sentences

Theories of linguistic meaning must account for distinctions between:

Linguistic knowledge and world knowledge

Literal meaning vs contextualised or non-literal meaning

Questions

?

Homework

Core reading: Saeed (2003), Chapter 1

Additional reading: Read the introductory part (up to Section 4) of the following paper: J. Katz and J.A. Fodor (1963) 'The structure of a semantic theory'. *Language*: 170-210.