

Meaning: semantics and pragmatics

1. Ambiguity

Structural (1) I saw a film with George Clooney

Lexical (2) Selma cannot bear children *semantic fields: event* *food*

- polysemy – related senses (3) a. The lunch lasted 2 hours. b. The lunch was very tasty.
 - category (also in homonymy) (4) a. This farm can feed us all. b. It's hard to farm this land.
- homonymy – unrelated senses (2) (5) a. I put a check in the bank. b. I walked by the river bank.

Exercise: lexical? structural? both?

- i. We laughed at the colorful ball
- ii. I cannot recommend visiting professors too highly
- iii. For Sale: Several old dresses from grandmother in beautiful condition (Actual notice)
- iv. **(challenge)** What looks better on a handsome man than a tux? Nothing! (Attributed to Mae West)

Ambiguity vs vagueness in word meaning

- (6) John walked by the bank, and Mary did, too.
- (7) John met a tall student, and Mary did, too.

Semantic meaning of declarative sentences

Truth-Conditional (also Model-Theoretic) Semantics

To know the meaning of a sentence is to know the conditions or situations under which it is true.

- This is different from remembering by association the situations in which a sentence is true
- The number of situations in which a particular sentence is true (or false) is potentially infinite!
- The approach of comparing sentences with **situations** (also termed **possible worlds** or **models**) to see if they are true or false is called **Model-Theoretic Semantics**.

Model that supports the sentence = a situation in which the sentence is true

Tautology, contradiction, and ambiguous sentences (How many models? How many truth conditions?)

So, we must have some algorithm that would tell us how to distinguish situations in which the sentence is true from those in which it's false – a recipe for truth-conditions.

How do we get sentence meanings: **Compositionality**

- Frege (1890) – a central assumption in current semantic theory:

The Principle of Compositionality

The meaning of a complex expression is determined by the meaning of its parts and the way those parts are syntactically combined

- (8) a. I ate a cookie. b. John ate a cookie. c. I ate an apple. **meanings of words/morphemes**
- (9) a. I ate a cookie with a fork. b. I saw more beautiful women. **syntactic structure**
- (10) a. JOHN saw Mary. b. John SAW Mary. c. He saw me. d. I want to own a cat. ?????

Meanings of parts (source of lexical ambiguity)
The way the parts are combined (structural ambiguity)

2. Context

Linguistic context

- Coercion: creating different meanings on the fly
(10) a. The sandwich lasted 2 hours. b. I met her a grief ago.
- Anaphora and bridging: hooking up with prior expressions
(11) a. A man was reading a book. b. He shook it. c. The pages fell out.

Extra-linguistic context

- Acting with language (felicity conditions)

Speaking is action!

We use language to *abolish, accept, acknowledge, acquit, admit, admonish, advise, announce, answer, apologize, ask, assent, assert, authorize, baptize, beg, bet, bid, call upon, caution, charge, christen, claim, command, congratulate, convict, counsel, declare, declare out, delegate, demand, demur, deny, disagree, dispute, donate, dub, excuse, exempt, fire, forbid, give notice, grant, guarantee, hire, hypothesize, implore, inform, instruct, license, name, notify, offer, order, pardon, permit, plead, pray, predict, prohibit, promise, question, rank, recommend, refuse, reject, renounce, report, request, rescind, resign, say, sentence, swear, testify, thank, urge, volunteer, warn, welcome, ...*

J.L. Austin, "How to do things with words": **speech acts** (distinct from **physical** or **mental acts**)

Felicity conditions: preparatory, manner of execution, sincerity

(12) a. I dub thee Sir Galahad. b. I apologize. c. I welcome you. d. He went thataway!

- Indexicality

(13) a. Is it on? b. I am here now. c. That is the man we need! d. This band was "The Beatles"

3. Rationality in language use

Sentence vs Utterance meaning (contribution of word-meanings & structure vs. context)

Sentence is a **syntactic** notion:

It's an expression (string of words) that is recognized by native speakers to be a complete sentence (consisting of predicates with all the complements and modifiers included).

(14) **How are you?** - sentence

(15) **Fine.** - not a sentence

(16) **When I go for a walk, it rarely rains.** - two sentences combined (to make a third sentence).

Utterance is a **pragmatic** notion:

It's an act of uttering something (a sentence, or a sentence fragment, or a few sentences).

None of (14-16) is an utterance on this page. When actually uttered, they're all utterances!

Sentence meaning is directly connected to the grammar: it has to do with situations that the sentence deals with, and comes from meanings of words/morphemes and from the way they're put together.

Semantics deals with word/morpheme and sentence meaning

Utterance meaning is related to **both** grammar and context: it is the meaning behind the action of uttering something, and may involve intentions of speakers/hearers, and other aspects of context.

Pragmatics deals with utterance meaning.

Direct & Explicit vs Indirect Speech Acts

- Compositional, syntax-based meaning, un-fiddled-around-with by context = direct
(17) a. I saw her standing there. b. What shall I do? c. Now let me hold your hand.

