Meaning: semantics and pragmatics

1. Ambiguity

Structural  
(1) I saw a film with George Clooney

Lexical  
(2) Selma cannot bear children

- polysemy – related senses
  - category (also in homonymy)
  - homonymy – unrelated senses

(3) a. The lunch lasted 2 hours.  
    b. The lunch was very tasty.

(4) a. This farm can feed us all.  
    b. It's hard to farm this land.

(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.  

(9) a. I ate a cookie with a fork.  
    b. I saw more beautiful women.

(10) a. JOHN saw Mary.  
    b. John SAW Mary.  
    c. He saw me.  
    d. I want to own a cat.  

...
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


- 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.
These 3 basic types of **direct speech acts** correspond to special syntax - occur in most of the world's languages. Examples in English, French and Buang (Malayo-Polynesian language, Papua New Guinea)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speech Act</th>
<th>Sentence Type</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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</table>
| Assertion        | Declarative.  | conveys information; is true or false | (d) "Jenny got an A on the test"
|                  |               |                                   | (e) "Les filles ont pris des photos." ('The Girls took photos')          |
|                  |               |                                   | (f) "Biak eko nos." ('Biak took the food')                               |
| Question         | Interrogative | elicits information               | (g) "Did Jenny get an A on the test?"
|                  |               |                                   | (h) "Les filles ont-elles pris des photos?" ('Did the girls take photos')|
|                  |               |                                   | (i) "Biak eko nos me?" ('Did Biak take the food')                        |
| Orders and Requests | Imperative           | causes others to behave in certain ways | (j) "Get an A on the test!"
|                  |               |                                   | (k) "Prenez des photos!" ('Take some photos!')                           |
|                  |               |                                   | (l) "Goko nos! " ('Take the food!')                                     |

Explicit performatives – also compositional: (12a-c) above.

- When we exploit rationality & felicity conventions = indirect
  (18) a. Can you pass the salt? b. Do you know who was there?
  c. Would you mind passing the salt? d. I'd like to ask you for the salt.

The work of H.P. Grice takes pragmatics from the descriptive study of speech acts to the explanatory theory of utterance meaning: how does utterance meaning arise from sentence meaning?

**The Cooperative Principle:**
Many aspects of "speaker's meaning" (utterance meaning) result from the assumption that the participants in a conversation **expect each other to be cooperating**: Conversational Participants have a mutually-known expectation of each other to make their contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which they are engaged.

1. **The maxim of quality.** Speakers' contributions are expected to reflect their beliefs (ought to be true)
   - lying and bull, questions and answers
2. **The maxim of quantity.** Speakers' contributions are expected to be as informative as required (not saying either too little or too much).
   - questions and answers
3. **The maxim of relevance.** Contributions are expected to relate to the purposes of the exchange.
   - questions and answers, anaphora
4. **The maxim of manner.** Contributions are expected to be perspicuous (e.g., orderly and brief, avoiding obscurity and ambiguity).
   - given vs. new information, using the right language, speaking audibly

**How we exploit these expectations:**
Indirect speech acts   (18) a. Can you pass me the salt? - violates Quantity   d. I'd like to ask you for the salt - Relevance

Sarcasm  (19) Great weather we're having! - violates Quality

Metaphor  (20) Some word there was, worser than Tybald's death,
  That murd'red me; I would forget it fain,
  But O, it presses to my memory
  Like damned guilty deeds to sinners' minds:
  "Tybald is dead, and Romeo banished."
  That "banished," that one word "banished,"
  Hath slain ten thousand Tybalts. Shakespear, Romeo and Juliet

Implicatures  (21) a. John has one good leg. b. How's your work coming along? - It sure is sunny outside.
  c. Boys are boys. d. John and Sue got married and had a baby.