

# **Linguistics Simplified Semantics**

**By**

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## Chapter 1

### A Brief History of Semantics

#### When was semantics first used as a word?

The word semantics was first used by Michel Bréal, a French philologist in 1893. It is derived from the Greek word *semantikos* (significant). Bréal's work on semantics was particularly focused on meaning in language and how words change meaning over time (how meaning can have different meanings for different people, due to their experiential and emotional backgrounds). SEMANTICS is no longer confined to the study of meaning in its historical perspective. - In linguistics, semantics is the subfield that is devoted to the study of meaning.

#### What is semantics?

Semantics is the branch of linguistics that deals with the study of meaning, in language, and how words, phrases, and sentences convey meaning in different contexts. It examines the relationship between signifiers-such as words, signs, and symbols, and what they represent.

#### Why is semantics important?

- 1- It aims to provide a clear understanding of how language operates at the level of meaning (how meaning is structured, expressed, and understood in the use of a language).
- 2- It helps language learners and translators grasp both the literal meaning and cultural nuances, leading to more accurate translations and interpretations.
- 3- If studied in a proper spirit, it can certainly help us improve our linguistic behavior.
- 4- It enriches our understanding of how language functions at the level of meaning.

#### If Semantic is the study of meaning, what is meaning?

The Oxford English Dictionary lists more than 25 meanings of the verb (MEAN) and more than 10 meanings of the noun (MEANING). In their

famous book (The Meaning of Meaning) Ogden & Richards discuss 16 different meanings of the word (MEANING)

### ***Examples***

1- *Mary means well* (One implies that Mary is well-intentioned, that she intends no harm). This implication of intention would normally be lacking, however, in an utterance such as

2- *That red flag means danger.*

In saying this, one would normally be implying that the flag had plans to endanger anyone; one would be pointing out that it is being used to indicate that there is danger in the surrounding environment, such as a crevasse on a snowy hillside or the imminent use of explosive in a nearby quarry. Similar to the red flag use of the verb ‘mean’, in one respect at least, it is used in.

3- *Smoke means fire.*

In both (2) and (3) one thing is said to be a **sign** of something else: from the presence of the sign, *a red flag* or *smoke*, anyone with the requisite knowledge can infer the existence of what it **signifies**, *danger* or *fire*, as the case may be.

But there is also an important difference between (2) and (3). Whereas smoke is a **natural** sign of fire, directly connected with what it signifies, the red flag is a **conventional** sign of danger: it is culturally or societally established **symbol**.

### **Which discipline is closest to Semantics?**

The discipline that is closest to Semantics is **Pragmatics**.

### **What is pragmatics?**

Pragmatics is the study of the ways people use language in actual conversation, OR is the study of the meaning of words, phrases, and full sentences, but unlike Semantics which deals with the objective meanings of words that can be found in dictionaries, pragmatics is more concerned with

the meanings that words convey when they are used, or with intended speaker meaning as it is sometimes referred to.

***Examples:***

Time is a thief. [Metaphor]

I'll meet you there at five. [Deixis]

**What is the relationship between Semantics and Pragmatics?**

Three distinct logical possibilities are identified by Leech (1974) regarding the relationship between semantics and pragmatics: *1- Pragmatics should be subsumed under semantics. 2- Semantics should be subsumed under pragmatics and, 3- Semantics and pragmatics are distinct and complementary fields of study.*

**What is the best way to describe these two fields?**

The best way of describing these two fields would be to say that they are two distinct disciplines with a considerable area of overlap.

**There are areas of linguistics that are of common interest to both semanticists and pragmatists, what are they?**

- 1- Ambiguity
- 2- Entailment
- 3- Contradiction
- 4- Propositions
- 5- Synonymy
- 6- Antonymy.
- 7- Presupposition

**Assignment**

You will be asked to discuss these two questions inside the class.

**Topics for Discussion**

1. Discuss the relationship between semantics and pragmatics.

2. "Semantics is a branch of linguistics but not a branch of philology".  
Discuss.