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The Scope Of Semantics Chapter Two

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The Scope of Semantics

Semantics, as one of the core branches of linguistics, deals with the study of meaning in language. Its scope is wide and touches upon different aspects, from the relationship between words and objects to the way meanings are structured in the mind and communicated in context. Scholars such as Palmer (1981), Hurford, Heasley, Smith (2007), Kroeger (2018), and Misbah (2016) have each contributed to clarifying this scope. Their combined perspectives highlight that semantics encompasses naming, concept, sense and reference, kinds of meanings, and the word as a semantic unit.

1-Naming

The earliest theory of meaning was the naming theory, which proposed that words are simply labels for objects in the world. Palmer (1981) suggested that language might be thought of as a communication system on one hand the signifier, on the other signified.

Signifier

The signifier is the form that the sign takes. In spoken language, this would be the sound pattern of a word; in written language, it would be the letters or symbols. For example, the word “tree” when spoken, the sound /triː/, is the signifier.

Signified

The signified is the concept or the mental image that the signifier refers to. In the case of the word “tree,” the signified is the mental concept of a tree—a tall plant with a trunk, branches, and leaves.

For examples

The Word “Apple”

-Signifier: The signifier is the sound or the written form of the word. So, the spoken word “apple” or the written letters a-p-p-l-e are the signifiers.

-Signified: The signified is the concept of an apple in our minds. This includes the idea of a round fruit, usually red or green, sweet, and with a core.

This relationship is arbitrary because the word “apple” in English has no inherent reason to refer to that fruit; other languages have different signifiers (like “pomme” in French).

The Word “Love”

- Signifier: The signifier is the word “love” itself, whether spoken or written.

- Signified: The signified is the complex concept of love, which can include affection, deep care, passion, and attachment. This concept can vary greatly depending on context and culture.

Lastly the word “Unicorn”

- Signifier: The signifier is the word “unicorn”, the way it sounds or is written.

- Signified: The signified is the concept of a mythical horse with a single horn on its forehead.

This example highlights that the signified doesn’t have to correspond to anything in reality; it’s purely a mental construct.

Lastly these examples show how the same basic relationship between the signifier and the signified underpins all words, whether they refer to concrete objects, abstract ideas, or mythical creatures.

According to F. R. Palmer (1981, Semantics), the problem of naming lies in the fact that the naming theory of meaning is too simple to capture the complexity of language. The naming theory assumes that every word has meaning because it names or labels some object in the world.

Palmer identifies several problems with this:

1. Abstract terms – Many words do not refer to physical objects.

For example: “justice”, “love”, “freedom” → they have meaning but don’t correspond to concrete, nameable entities.

2. Non-existent or imaginary entities – Some words refer to things that do not exist in reality.

For e example: “unicorn”, “ghost”, “dragon” → meaningful words, but they lack real-world referents.

3. Functional words – Many words in language (like “and”, “if”, “because”) cannot be explained as names of objects at all.

For example: “and” doesn’t name anything—it signals a logical relation.

4. Multiple meanings – A single word may refer to different things depending on context.

for example: “bank” can mean a financial institution or the side of a river. Naming alone cannot explain this ambiguity.

Thus, Palmer concludes that while naming works for simple, concrete nouns, it fails as a general theory of meaning because language also includes abstract, imaginary, relational, and functional expressions.

Hurford et al. (2007) also criticize this approach, noting that words like “ghost” or “Pegasus” still convey meaning despite lacking real-world counterparts. Kroeger (2018) adds that language does not only name things but also encodes relations and processes, such as “running” or “ownership”, which cannot be reduced to naming objects. Thus, naming is only one narrow aspect of meaning.

2-Concept in Semantics

Palmer (1981) emphasizes that the meaning of words cannot be limited to naming

objects; instead, it is better explained through concepts.

A concept is a mental representation shared within a speech community, allowing speakers to classify and communicate experiences. For example, the word “dog” evokes the concept of a domesticated four-legged animal, regardless of breed, while “justice” or “freedom” evoke abstract concepts without physical referents. Palmer also highlights cross-linguistic differences: English uses one word “lion” for both sexes, whereas Arabic distinguishes أسد (’asad, male lion) and لبوة (labwah, female lioness). These variations show that meaning resides in socially shared concepts rather than in direct physical reference. Thus, the concept serves as a crucial bridge between language and thought, explaining how words remain meaningful even in the absence of tangible referents.

Palmer explains that words may or may not have a referent in the external world, but they always have a concept.

For example, “dog” has both a concept and a referent, while “unicorn” has a concept but no real-world referent. This shows that meaning depends on concepts rather than direct physical reference.

3-Denotation& conceptual meaning (Reference &Sense)

Semantics studies the denotational (conceptual) meaning of words, phrases, and sentences. It focuses on what expressions mean within the language system itself, independent of context. This includes:

Denotation (reference): the actual entity a word refers to in the real world.

Conceptual meaning (sense): the idea or mental concept associated with the word, even if no real-world referent exists.

Examples

1. cat → “A small domesticated feline animal.”

2. bat → “A flying mammal” OR “a piece of sports equipment used in cricket/baseball.”

3. The morning sun = The evening sun → Denotation: the sun; Sense: different times of appearance (morning vs. evening).

4. generous → “Willing to give or share freely.”

5. phoenix → “A mythical bird that regenerates from its ashes” (conceptual meaning exists even though no physical referent).

The distinction between Sense and Reference

Kroeger (2018) explains that words and sentences can be understood in terms of sense and reference, two sides of meaning that work together but are not the same.

Reference (also called denotation) is about what a word or phrase points to in the real world. For example, the phrase “the President of the United States in 2024” refers to one individual, Joe Biden. Reference is therefore tied to actual people, objects, or events.

Sense, on the other hand, is the way in which that reference is presented, or the concept that comes with the expression. Two different expressions may point to the same thing but present it in different ways. A classic example is “the morning star” and “the evening star.” Both refer to the planet Venus, but their senses differ: one means “the bright object in the morning sky,” while the other means “the bright object in the evening sky.”

This distinction matters because it explains why some sentences are informative and others are not. Saying “The morning star is the evening star” provides new information, since the senses differ even though the reference is the same. In contrast, “The morning star is the morning star” is trivial because the sense is repeated.

Kroeger also applies this to whole sentences. The reference of a sentence is its truth value—whether it is true or false. The sense of the sentence is the proposition or idea that it expresses. Finally, Kroeger notes that some words have sense but no reference. For instance, “unicorn” has a clear sense (a horse-like animal with a horn) but no real-world referent.

The Semiotic Theory of Triangle by Ogden and Richards

• The semiotic theory of the triangle*by Ogden and Richards introduces a multi-dimensional approach to understanding meaning in communication. This theory encompasses three key dimensions: "Meaning Theory."

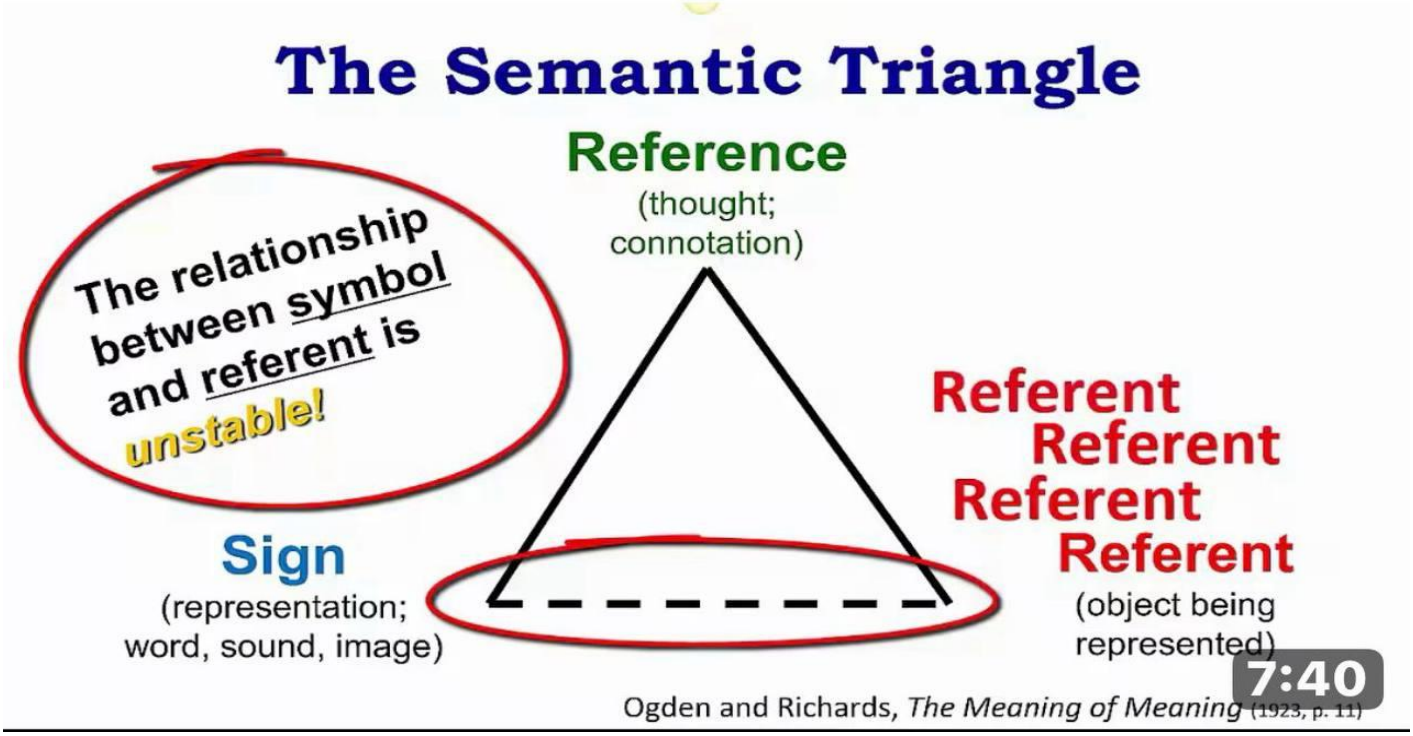
"Definition Theory," and "Symbol Theory." According to the "Theory of Meaning," words do not possess a single universally correct meaning; instead, meanings are subjective and reside within individuals. This perspective acknowledges that words hold different interpretations for different people.

Ogden and Richards further elaborated on this concept with "Definition Theory," emphasizing the ambiguity of language as words can carry diverse meanings for different individuals, highlighting the complexities of communication.

• For example, consider the 'hot' word. Since there is a difference in the meaning of the word between people, one would consider it as 'a weather condition', the other would understand the word as 'a sexually attractive person', meanwhile if asked to another person, and he or she would consider it 'a food with too much spice'.

Finally, "Symbol Theory" was developed that explained the evocation of images on the expression of words in communication (somewhat similarly to the sign theory). Thus it says that there is a personal meaning based on experience.

themselves, such as a sound, whereas symbols as specialized types of signs, such as text. In both cases, signs and symbols are meaningless unto themselves.



In the triangle above, the three factors involved with the statement or idea are placed in the corners and each corner of the triangle corresponds to a component that is integrally involved in the process of meaning. The top of the triangle will be a symbol (a word). Another peak would be a thought, like words to describe a symbol. Eventually, the image we create in our minds will become a reference. Using the Semantic Triangle, Ogden and Richards believe that they have found a way to connect all words to their meaning.

1-REFERENCE/Thoughts: It represents the realm of memory where memories of past experiences and contexts occur.

2-REFERENT: These are the things that are understood and thus make the impression stored in the thought area.

3-SYMBOL: It is the word that calls up the referent through the mental processes of the reference.

There is a causal relationship between the thought and symbol, this means that an attitude or effect is evoked on another person. Similarly, the relationship between the

thought and the referent can be direct e.g. seeing something in front of us, or indirect e.g. An image or idea about something.

Meanwhile, the relationship between the referent and the symbol entirely indirect, unstable, and is arbitrary.

Limitations of Conceptual Theory of Meaning

Critics have identified several flaws in the linguistic theories proposed by Saussure, Ogden, and Richards. One major concern is that these theories rely on a physiological and often inaccessible concept of associative bonds between words and their meanings, as individuals may not always mentally visualize or connect concepts as suggested. Additionally, critics argue that these theories oversimplify communication by focusing solely on word meanings, neglecting the significance of non-verbal communication cues and the potential for different interpretations based on context. Furthermore, the idea that words only gain meaning in context challenges the validity of the "definition theory." In sum, critics contend that these theories fail to fully capture the complexities of human communication.

• In conclusion, Saussure stressed the close relationship between the signifier and the signified, with each influencing the other in the human mind through an associative link.

4-Kinds of Meaning

This subject argues that the traditional semantic view—which focuses on factual information, truth conditions, and propositions (e.g., whether a statement is true or false)—is far too narrow. It introduces and elaborates on several other crucial kinds of meaning that are fundamental to how we actually use language in social and interpersonal contexts.

The core idea is that language is not just a tool for conveying facts; it's a multifaceted instrument for building relationships, influencing others, expressing attitudes, and performing social rituals.

Six kinds of meaning discussed by Palmer

1. **Language Functions**: Statements, Questions, and Orders Language isn't just for making statements. We also ask questions (requests for information) and give orders (requests for action). While questions can be partly handled by an "information-based" view of meaning, orders clearly cannot. Their purpose is to elicit action, not to state a fact. The grammatical form (e.g., a statement like "You're coming tomorrow") can often mask a different function (e.g., an order).

2. **Speech Acts**: Using Language to Do Things We use language to perform actions: we persuade, warn, promise, insinuate, and more. This is the functional, interactive aspect of language. The text notes that this is actually the first function of language a child learns—using sounds to manipulate their environment and get needs met. This functional meaning is distinct from pure ideational content.

3. **Evaluative/Emotive Meaning**: Expressing Attitudes Many words carry a built-in positive or negative evaluation, not just a neutral fact. The famous examples are pairs like politician (often negative) vs. statesman (positive), or hide (neutral) vs ***conceal*** (can imply sneakiness). This evaluative function is powerful in politics (e.g., using "fascist" as a pure insult) and varies between cultures (e.g., "liberal" is positive in the UK but can be negative in other contexts). Words like palace, hovel, hero, and villain all have strong evaluative components.

4. **Social Meaning**: Managing Relationships Language is a key tool for navigating social hierarchies and relationships. We constantly choose our words and phrases to be rude, polite, formal, or intimate based on who we are talking to and the social context. For instance, the choice between "Shut up!" and "Would you mind keeping your voice down, please?" conveys the same basic request but carries vastly different social meanings. Some language, like greetings ("Good morning") and small talk about the weather, has almost purely social function—its purpose is to establish and maintain social contact, not to exchange factual information.

5. **Meaning Through Intonation and Implication** We often don't "mean what we say" literally. Through intonation (prosody) and context, we can imply the opposite of our words (sarcasm: "That's very clever") or suggest something unstated (saying "I don't like coffee" with a specific tone to imply "...I prefer tea"). This demonstrates that a complete semantic analysis must consider how something is said, not just the dictionary meanings of the words.

6. **Presupposition**: The Hidden Background Some sentences carry built-in assumptions that are not directly stated but must be accepted for the sentence to make sense. The classic example is "When did you stop beating your wife?" which presupposes that you once beat her. Similarly, "The King of France is bald" presupposes that there is a King of France. This "presupposed" meaning is different from the "asserted" meaning and is a crucial part of what is communicated.

The final example shows that interpreting what a speaker intends for us to conclude from an utterance often goes far beyond semantics and into the realm of specific context and inference.

Other Semanticists distinguish between several types of meaning.

1-Palmer (1981): Conceptual vs. Associative Meaning

Conceptual meaning (core, dictionary definition): for example,

Cat → "a small, domesticated carnivorous mammal."

Teacher → "a person who educates students."

Associative meaning (emotional, cultural associations):

Cat → independence, mystery, bad luck (in some cultures).

Teacher → respect, authority, inspiration, or strictness.

Home → comfort, warmth, family bonds.

2. **Hurford et al. (2007):** Denotation vs. Connotation

Denotation (literal reference):

Rose → a type of flower.

Snake → a legless reptile.

Connotation (implied feelings/associations):

Rose → love, romance, beauty.

Snake → betrayal, danger, cunning.

Slim (positive) vs. Skinny (negative).

3. **Misbah (2016)**: Literal vs. Figurative Meaning

Literal meaning:

She is looking for her keys → actually searching for physical keys.

Time flies → time passes quickly.

Figurative meaning:

He has a heart of stone → emotionally cold, unkind.

Time is money → time is valuable, should not be wasted.

The world is a stage → life is like a performance.

4. **Kroeger (2018):** Pragmatic Dimension (Context-Dependent Meaning)

Meaning depends on context of use:

"It's cold in here."

As a statement: describing temperature.

As a request: asking someone to close the window.

"Can you pass the salt?"

Literally a question about ability.

Pragmatically a polite request for action.

"Nice job!"

With genuine tone → praise.

With sarcasm → criticism.

5- Word as a Semantic Unit

Traditionally, linguists treat the word as the basic unit of meaning. However, closer study shows that meaning does not always align neatly with words.

1. ***Not All Words Are Created*** Equal (Full vs. Form Words)

The text begins by distinguishing between two types of words, a classic idea from grammarian Henry Sweet:

Full Words (e.g., tree, sing, blue): These have rich, dictionary-style meanings—the kind semantics is primarily interested in.

Form Words (e.g., the, of, and, it): Their meaning is grammatical and relational. You can't define "the" in isolation; its meaning only emerges in relation to other words in a sentence. They belong more to the domain of grammar than to the lexicon (vocabulary).

2. ***The Word Itself Is a Fuzzy Unit***

Is a word a real linguistic entity or just a writing convention?

The definition of a word is often based on the simple rule of putting spaces between items, but this is arbitrary. For example, the Arabic definite article is written as part of the word, while in English it's separate.

Is "greenhouse" one word but "White House" two? The spacing rule doesn't provide a deep linguistic reason.

· The proposed solution of a word being the "minimum free form" (the smallest thing that can stand alone, like "Love!") is circular. We can only say "the" in isolation because we've already been taught it's a word.

3. ***The Solution: Lexemes, not Words***

To handle this, linguists use a more precise term: the LEXEME.

A word-form is the specific shape a word takes (e.g., love, loves, loved, loving).

A lexeme is the abstract, dictionary-entry unit that encompasses all these forms (the verb LOVE).

· This allows us to separate the meaning of the lexeme (e.g., LOVE) from the meaning of the grammatical elements attached to it (e.g., the -ed signaling past tense).

4. ***The Problem of "Transparent" vs. "Opaque" Words***

Transparent Words: Their meaning is obvious from their parts (e.g., doorman = door + man, chopper = chop + -er).

Opaque Words: Their meaning cannot be deduced from their parts (e.g., porter, axe, thimble, glove).

· This shows that the number of meaning "bits" inside a word is arbitrary and depends on the language. The German word for glove is Handschuh ("hand-shoe"), which is transparent, while glove is opaque.

5. ***The Sound-Meaning Connection*** (Phonaesthetics)

Some words have sounds that suggest their meaning. For instance:

· sl- often suggests slipperiness (slide, slip) or pejorative qualities (slob, slut).

· sk- often refers to surfaces (skin, skate, skim).

· -ump often suggests a roundish mass (plump, rump, hump, dump). This phenomenon challenges the idea that a word's meaning is purely arbitrary, but it doesn't provide a reliable way to break words into precise semantic units.

6. **Semantics Overrides Grammar**

Sometimes, the semantic unit cuts across word boundaries. For example:

A heavy smoker isn't a smoker who is physically heavy; it means "one who smokes heavily." The meaningful division is heavy smok- + -er, not heavy + smoker.

The same logic applies to good singer (sings well) or amusing examples like criminal lawyer (a lawyer specializing in criminal law, not necessarily a lawyer who is a criminal).

7. **Words Can Pack Multiple Meaning "Bits"**

The vocabulary of a language doesn't provide equal coverage for all concepts. We have specific words like ram/ewe and stallion/mare for some animals, but for others like giraffe or elephant, we must use compounds: male giraffe, elephant cow. This

forces us to analyze a word like bull not as a single unit of meaning, but as a package containing multiple semantic features: male + adult + bovine.

8. **The Ultimate Challenge: Idioms**

Idioms are multi-word expressions that function as a single semantic unit (e.g., kick the bucket = to die).

Their meaning cannot be predicted from the individual words. While they are semantic units, they are not grammatical units; you can't say "he kick the bucketed." This is the clearest case where the semantic unit is larger than the word.

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