



## THE SEMANTIC-PRAGMATIC DISTINCTION

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Historically, the semantic-pragmatic distinction has been formulated in various ways. These formulations have fallen into three main types, depending on which other distinction the semantic-pragmatic distinction was thought most to correspond to:

- linguistic (conventional) meaning vs. Use
- truth-conditional vs. non-truth-conditional meaning
- context independence vs. context dependence

In my view, none of these distinctions quite corresponds to the semantic-pragmatic distinction. The trouble with the first is that there are expressions whose literal meanings are related to use, such as the utterance modifiers mentioned above. It seems that the only way to specify their semantic contribution (when they occur initially or are otherwise set off) is to specify how they are to be used. The second distinction is inadequate because some expressions have meanings that do not contribute to truth-conditional contents. Paradigmatic are expressions like 'Alas!', 'Good-bye', and 'Wow!', but utterance modifiers also illustrate this, as do such linguistic devices as *it*-clefts and *wh*-clefts, which pertain to information structure, not information content. The third distinction neglects the fact that some expressions, notably indexicals, are context-sensitive as a matter of their meaning.

Now the linguistic and the truth-conditional conceptions of semantics would come to the same thing if, in general, the linguistic meanings of sentences determined their truth conditions, and they all had truth conditions. Many sentences, though, are imperative or interrogative rather than declarative. These do not have truth conditions but compliance or answerhood conditions instead. Even if only declarative sentences are considered, in a great many cases the linguistic meaning of a sentence does not uniquely determine a truth condition. One reason for this is ambiguity, lexical or structural. The sentence may contain one or more ambiguous words, or it may be structurally ambiguous. Or the sentence may contain indexical elements. Ambiguity makes it necessary to relativize the truth condition of a declarative sentence to one or another of its senses, and indexicality requires relativization to a context.



Moreover, it is plausible to suppose that some sentences, such as 'Jack was ready' and 'Jill had enough', though syntactically well-formed, are semantically incomplete. In these cases, as observed earlier, the meaning of such a sentence does not fully determine a truth condition, even after ambiguities are resolved and references are fixed. Syntactic completeness does not guarantee semantic completeness.

A further source of confusion is a clash between two common but different conceptions of semantics. One takes semantics to be concerned with the linguistic meanings of expressions (words, phrases, sentences). On this conception, sentence semantics is a component of grammar. It assigns meanings to sentences as a function of the meanings of their semantically simple constituents, as supplied by their lexical semantics, and their constituent structure, as provided by their syntax. The other conception takes semantics to be concerned with the truth-conditional contents of sentences (or, alternatively, of utterances of sentences) and with the contributions that expressions make to the truth-conditional contents of sentences in which they occur. The idea underlying this conception is that the meaning of a sentence, the information it carries, imposes a condition on what the world must be like in order for the sentence to be true.

In order to make sense of the semantic-pragmatic distinction, we need to take several other distinctions into account. The first involves context. It is a platitude that what a sentence means generally doesn't determine what a speaker means in uttering it. The gap between linguistic meaning and speaker meaning is said to be filled by "context": we say that what the speaker means somehow "depends on context," or that "context makes it clear" what the speaker means. But there are two quite different sorts of context -- call them wide and narrow context -- and they play quite different roles. Wide context concerns any contextual information that is relevant to determining, in the sense of ascertaining, the speaker's intention. Narrow context concerns information specifically relevant to determining, in the sense of providing, the semantic values of context-sensitive expressions (and morphemes of tense and aspect). Wide context does not literally determine anything. It is the body of mutually evident information that the speaker and the hearer exploit, the speaker to make his communicative intention evident and the hearer, taking himself to be intended to, to identify that intention.

As for the semantic-pragmatic distinction, it can be drawn with respect to various things, such as ambiguities, implications, presuppositions, interpretations, knowledge, processes, rules, and principles. I take it to apply fundamentally to types of information. Semantic information is information encoded in what is uttered --



these are stable linguistic features of the sentence -- together with any extralinguistic information that provides (semantic) values to context-sensitive expressions in what is uttered. Pragmatic information is the (extralinguistic) information the hearer relies on to figure out what the speaker is communicating. It is generated by, or at least made relevant by, the act of uttering it. This way of characterizing pragmatic information generalizes Grice's point that what a speaker implicates in saying what he says is carried not by what he says but by his saying it and perhaps by his saying it in a certain way (1989, p. 39).

There are also distinctions to be drawn with respect to the terms 'utterance' and 'interpretation'. An utterance can either be the act of uttering a sentence or the sentence uttered. Strictly speaking, it is the sentence that is uttered (the type, not the token) that has semantic properties. The act of uttering the sentence has pragmatic properties. The notion of the content of an utterance of a sentence has no independent theoretical significance. There is just the content of the sentence the speaker is uttering, which, being semantic, is independent of the speaker's communicative intention, and the content of the speaker's communicative intention. As for the term 'interpretation', it can mean either the formal, compositional determination by the grammar of a language of the meaning of a sentence or the psychological process whereby a person understands a sentence or an utterance of a sentence. Using the phrase 'utterance interpretation' indiscriminately, as often happens, can only confound the issues. For example, talking about the interpretation of an utterance in a context rather than of a sentence with respect to a context leads to paradox. An oral utterance of "I am not speaking" or a waking utterance of "I am asleep" cannot fail to be false, and yet the sentences themselves are not necessarily false. Relative to me, the first is true whenever I am not speaking, and the second is true whenever I am asleep.

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