

A Glossary of Semantics and Pragmatics

ALAN CRUSE

anomaly puns
entailment
speech acts
deontic modality
metonymy explicature
prototype theory
sense relations
truth conditions

**A GLOSSARY OF
SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS**

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Introduction

Who is the Glossary for?

This Glossary was written with beginning students of linguistics in mind, typically first-year undergraduates, with little or no prior knowledge of any of the topics. However, it should also be useful for more advanced students who are beginners as far as semantics and pragmatics are concerned, especially in the early stages of a course.

What is it for?

The aim of the Glossary is to provide, in a convenient format, concise explanations of concepts likely to be encountered by beginning students in semantics and pragmatics. Entries typically give more information than is usually found in an encyclopaedia entry, but of course there is less than would be expected in a chapter or chapter section of a textbook. Some terms can be given a concise definition, but with broader topics, such as a particular theory, this is not possible, and the aim has been to indicate what sort of thing the theory is about, rather than to give an exposition that can stand on its own. The handy size of the Glossary means that it can be easily carried around and frequently referred to.

What does it cover?

The areas of language study covered in this book are those which conventionally fall under the headings of **semantics**,

pragmatics, and **semiotics**. Taken together, these correspond roughly to ‘matters pertaining to meaning as conveyed through language’. There is inevitably some overlap with meaning-related aspects of neighbouring areas such as sociolinguistics and stylistics, but this has been kept to a minimum.

Semiotics: This is the study of signs in general. It covers all types of sign – visual, auditory, gestural, olfactory, and so on – whether produced by animals or humans. The entries in this book are confined to aspects of semiotics relevant to human language.

Semantics: The major division in treatments of linguistic meaning is between semantics and pragmatics (although the term *semantics* also sometimes has a general sense which covers both). Unfortunately, there are no fully agreed definitions of the two fields. But there are conventions about what semantics books usually contain and what pragmatics books usually contain. (Having said that, there seems to be a tendency these days for pragmatics to creep more and more often into semantics textbooks. It is, in fact, difficult to keep the two apart.) A very rough working distinction is that semantics is concerned with the stable meaning resources of language-as-a-system and pragmatics with the use of that system for communicating, on particular occasions and in particular contexts. But that characterisation leaves a number of disagreements unresolved.

The bulk of the content of a typical semantics textbook will fall under either **grammatical semantics** – that is, meaning conveyed by grammatical means, such as *Bill saw Pete* vs *Pete saw Bill*, or *Pete saw Bill* vs *Pete will see Bill* – or **lexical semantics**, which deals with the meanings of words. **Historical/diachronic semantics**, which deals with the ways in which meanings change over time, may also be included (but less often). Various approaches to meaning may be adopted: **formal semantics** approaches aim to explain and

describe meanings using the tools of logic, **componential semantics** approaches try to account for complex meanings as being built up out of a limited number of semantic building blocks, and **cognitive semantics** approaches treat meanings as ‘things in the mind’, that is as concepts. All these topics are represented in the Glossary.

Pragmatics: The central topics of linguistic pragmatics are those aspects of meaning which are dependent on context. Two are of particular importance. The first type go under the name of *conversational implicature*. This refers to meanings which a speaker intends to convey, but does not explicitly express:

Pete: Coming down to the pub tonight?

Bill: I’ve got to finish a piece of work.

Bill’s reply will normally be taken to indicate that he is not free to go to the pub, even though he does not actually say that. The second type of context-dependent meaning concerns expressions which designate different things, places, or times in the world, in different contexts: *this table, over there, last night*. The general term for identifying the things in the world that a bit of language is about is **reference**, and the mechanism whereby it is achieved, using the speaker as a reference point, is called **deixis**.

An important part of language in use, and therefore of pragmatics, is what people are actually doing with language when they speak; whether they are informing, criticising, blaming, warning, congratulating, christening a baby, and so on. This is the topic of **speech acts**. Other topics covered by pragmatics are politeness as expressed linguistically and **conversational analysis**, which deals with the way conversations are structured.

Theoretical bias

On all topics, there are a number of different theoretical

approaches, and a textbook treatment is likely to betray at least to some extent the theoretical preferences of its author. In this Glossary, an attempt has been made to be as 'ecumenical' as possible, and to include all the main theoretical approaches. Also, since interest in meaning did not begin with modern linguistics, there are a number of well-established traditional notions and terms which a beginning student may encounter. The most useful of these, too, have been included.

Using the Glossary

The amount of space given to an entry is not necessarily proportional to its importance. The fact is that the essence of some very important notions can be conveyed quite concisely, whereas some concepts, less important in themselves, need a more discursive explanation with more background information and more exemplification.

Repetition of material has been avoided, as far as possible. This means that it will frequently be necessary to follow up the links printed in bold in order to get the full benefit from an entry. An entry for X of the form 'see Y', means that X and Y are synonymous. An entry of the form 'see under Y', means that more information regarding X will be found in the entry for Y.

The annotated bibliography contains a brief guide to further reading, both of longer introductory texts which contain fuller accounts than can be given here, and of more advanced texts under the main subject divisions. There is also a list of works that are cited in the text only by the author's name.

Typographic conventions

Small capitals: For concepts.

Small capitals in square brackets: For semantic components

or features. Occasionally to show where intonational stress falls in a sentence.

Bold type: Terms in bold within an entry have their own separate entries where a full definition or further information can be found.

Italics: For citation forms when not set on a different line.

Single quotation marks: For meanings (including propositions); technical terms, and as 'scare quotes'.

Double quotation marks: For quotations from other works.

Question mark preceding a citation: For semantic oddness.

Asterisk preceding a citation: For ungrammaticality or extreme semantic abnormality.

Forward slash: Indicates words that can substitute for one another in a sentence: *She prefers whiteredrosé wine.*

A

absolute adjectives Adjectives such as *brown*, *dead*, *married*, and *striped*, which denote properties that are not normally thought of as **gradable** (that is, varying in degree), unlike **relative adjectives** such as *large*, *heavy*, *fast*, and *hot*. The interpretation of an absolute adjective is not dependent on the noun it modifies in the same way that the interpretation of a relative adjective is. For instance, if something is *a brown mouse*, then it is also *a brown animal*, and *a dead mouse* is *a dead animal*; *a large mouse*, on the other hand, is not *a large animal*.

absolute synonymy see under **synonymy**

abstract see under **concrete vs abstract**

accessibility This usually concerns some piece of knowledge stored in memory, and refers to how easy it is to make it available to an on-going process, in terms of speed or cognitive effort.

achievements see under **event-types**

accomplishments see under **event-types**

active voice see under **voice**

addressee see under **speech event participants**

adjacency pairs see under **conversational analysis**

adjectives (order and placement) There are two main positions for adjectives, (1) as a modifier in a noun phrase (*She is wearing a red dress*) and (2) as a complement in a verb phrase (*Her new dress is red*). The first is called the ‘attributive’ position and the second the ‘predicative’ position. Prototypical adjectives, like *red*, can occur in either position, but a minority are confined to one position. For instance, *main* as in *He is our main supplier* can only occur in attributive position (**This supplier is main*), whereas *afraid*, as in *I am afraid*, is normal only in predicative position (*?I am an afraid person*). With adjectives that can occur in both positions, a subtle difference of meaning can sometimes be detected between the two uses. The attributive position has a preference for more stable properties and the predicative position for changeable properties. For instance, there is a detectable difference between *The water in that pan is hot* and *That pan has hot water*. The former suggests a temporary state, whereas the latter would be more normal if the water in the pan was kept permanently hot. When several adjectives occur together, there are restrictions on the order in which they can appear:

Several beautiful thick old purple rugs.

*Purple thick beautiful old several rugs.

The order seems to have a semantic basis. One proposal is that it depends on concept type (the symbol > is to be interpreted as ‘precedes’):

QUANTITY > VALUE > PHYSICAL PROPERTY >
AGE > COLOUR

This fits most cases, including the one above; however, it

does not provide an explanation. A more explanatory proposal is that more objective properties tend to occur closest to the noun and more subjective properties further away. This has some intuitive plausibility in cases like *horrid red wallpaper* (**red horrid wallpaper*), but it does not explain the relative ordering of, for instance, physical properties, age, and colour.

affix A grammatical element that is an integral part of a word, but is not the main meaning-bearing part (known as the ‘root’). The *-ed* of *walked* and the *dis-* of *dislike* are examples. There are two important types of affix, known as ‘inflectional affixes’ and ‘derivational affixes’. Both types can carry meaning (this is one variety of **grammatical meaning**). Typical examples of inflectional affixes in English are: the *-ed* and the *-s* of *waited* and *waits*; the *-en* of *eaten*; the *-s* of *dogs*; the *-er* of *shorter*. Inflectional affixes do not play a part in determining which **lexeme** a word represents, and differently inflected forms do not have separate entries in dictionaries. Inflectional affixes never function to change the grammatical category of a word. Typical examples of derivational affixes are: the *dis-* of *disapprove*; the *de-* of *defrost*; the *-ment* of *development*; the *-ise* of *nationalise*; the *-ish* of *yellowish*. Unlike inflectional affixes, the derivational variety do create new lexemes which are listed separately in dictionaries. They frequently function to change the grammatical category of a word, as in the case of the *-ment* of *development*.

agent, agentive see under **functional roles**

agentive (qualia role) see under **qualia roles**

Agreement Maxim One of the maxims of **politeness pro-**

posed by Leech. It is fairly straightforward (here slightly modified):

Maximise agreement with hearer.

Minimise disagreement with hearer.

The effect of this maxim is illustrated in the following:

A: Do you agree with me?

B: Yes. (slightly less polite); Absolutely. (more polite)

A: Do you agree with me?

B: No (less polite); Up to a point, but ... (more polite)

aletheutic modality see under **modality**

ambiguity An expression (strictly, an expression form) is said to be ambiguous if it has more than one possible distinct meaning. However, since virtually every expression can be interpreted in more than one way in some context or other, the term is usually reserved for expressions with more than one established meaning. The notion of the distinctness of meanings is also important. Consider the sentences *My best friend has just had a vasectomy* and *My best friend is pregnant*. In the first case, we will interpret *friend* as ‘male friend’, and in the second case as ‘female friend’. However, *friend* is not normally considered to be ambiguous. The reason is that the readings do not have the right kind or degree of distinctness (sometimes called ‘autonomy’). Most potentially ambiguous expressions in normal language use do not give rise to any problems of interpretation. This is because typically one of the possible interpretations fits the context better than the alternatives. The process of selection from ambiguous alternatives is known as ‘disambiguation’. Truly ambiguous readings show a number of characteristic properties (2, 3, and 4 are sometimes referred to as ‘ambiguity tests’):

1. In normal language use, a speaker who produces an ambiguous expression will intend only one of the interpretations and will expect the hearer to attend to that interpretation.
2. Prototypically, it is not possible to avoid choosing between the alternative readings; that is to say, there is no interpretation which is neutral between the possibilities. (For example, there is a **hyperonymic** interpretation of *friend* in *Why don't you bring a friend?* which is neutral between male and female, but there is no parallel reading of *bank* in *I'll meet you at the bank*, which is neutral between 'margin of river' and 'financial institution').
3. It is not possible to activate both meanings at the same time without producing the effect of **zeugma**.
4. Ambiguous expressions show the **identity constraint**.

The ambiguity of an utterance may be purely lexical in origin, as in *I'll meet you at the bank*, or it may be purely grammatical, as in *The chimpanzee is cooking*, and *old men and women*, or it may be both lexical and grammatical, as in the classic telegram *Ship sails today*.

amelioration see under **semantic change**

analytic proposition A proposition which is necessarily true (in a logical sense) by virtue of its meaning, independently of contingent facts about the world. That is to say, it is true in all possible worlds: 'All divorcees have been married at least once', 'No living mammals are liquids', 'A blind person has impaired sight' (compare **synthetic proposition**). An analytic proposition which is true purely by virtue of its logical form is known as a tautology. An example is 'Either today is Pete's birthday or it is not his birthday'.

anaphora, anaphor An anaphor is an expression that must be interpreted via another expression (the ‘antecedent’), which typically occurs earlier in the discourse. The term ‘anaphora’ refers to this phenomenon. In the following examples, anaphor and antecedent are in bold:

1. I saw **Pete** leaving the house. **He** must have forgotten to set the alarm.
2. Pete was driving a **blue car**. I’m pretty sure **it** wasn’t insured.
3. **George Bush** arrived in London this morning. **The President** will address the Cabinet tomorrow.

This type of anaphora is called ‘coreferential anaphora’, because anaphor and antecedent have the same referent. In ‘non-coreferential anaphora’, as in *Pete shot a pheasant; Bill shot one, too*, the default interpretation is that anaphor and antecedent have different referents. In some cases, the antecedent occurs later in the discourse; this is sometimes called ‘cataphora’: *Before he locked the door, Pete checked that all the lights were off*. In cases of ‘zero anaphora’ there is no overt anaphor, but the anaphoric process is still observable. For instance in *Pete tore up the letter and threw it in the dustbin*, there is no overt expression of the subject of *threw*. Anaphoric expressions must be distinguished from exophoric expressions, which refer directly, rather than through antecedents:

(Woman pointing to a man) **He** was the one who snatched my bag.

animacy A property of nouns which is reflected in the grammar of many languages. It may, for instance, determine pronominal reference, use of **classifiers**, the order of elements, the distribution of inflectional categories such as number, and so on. The basic animacy dis-

inction is between living and non-living things, but the linguistic distinction between animate and inanimate often does not match the scientific one. For instance, in English, the pronouns *he* and *she* are prototypically reserved for living things and *it* for non-living. However, among non-human members of the animal kingdom, only domestic animals are regularly called *he* or *she*, and plants hardly ever are, although they too are living. An examination of a wide range of languages suggests that there is a universal ‘scale of animacy’, and that different languages draw their distinction between animate and inanimate at different points on the scale. Underlying the scale is something like perceived potency, importance, or ability to act on other things, rather than a simple possession or non-possession of life. One version of the animacy hierarchy is as follows (in order of decreasing animacy):

1st person pronoun > 2nd person pronoun > 3rd person pronoun > Human proper noun > Human common noun > Animate noun > Inanimate noun

anomaly (semantic) We speak of semantic anomaly when interacting meanings in a grammatically well-formed expression intuitively do not ‘go together’ normally, as in *plastic anxiety* or *feeble hypotenuses*. Expressions like these are not necessarily uninterpretable; indeed, anomaly in a literal interpretation of an expression is often a sign that it is intended to be taken non-literally. There are several ways in which an expression may be semantically odd (including **pleonasm** and **zeugma**), but the term *anomaly* usually refers to cases where there is a conflict in domains of applicability. For instance, it is hard to see how the notion of feebleness can be associated in any meaningful way with hypotenuses. Some