

ING218
Lecture 1
The study of meaning

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The systematic study of meaning

Three disciplines are concerned with the systematic study of 'meaning' in itself: Psychology, philosophy and linguistics. Their particular interests and approaches are different, yet each borrows from and contributes to the others.

Psychologists are interested in how individual humans learn, how they retain, recall, or lose information: how they classify, make judgments and solve problems – in other words, how the human minds seeks meaning and works with them.

Philosophers of language are concerned with how we know, how any particular fact that we know or accept as true is related to other possible facts – what must be antecedent (a presupposition) to that fact and what is a likely consequence, or entailment of it: what statements are mutually contradictory, which sentences express the same **meaning** in different words, and which are unrelated.

Linguists want to understand how language works. How two people shares knowledge through language in order to give or get information, to express their feelings and their intention to one another, and to be understood with a fair degree of success. Linguistics is concerned with identifying the meaningful elements of specific languages, describing how such elements go together to express more complex meanings and telling how these are related to each other. Linguistics also deals with the meanings expressed by modulations of a speaker's voice and the processes by which hearers and readers relate new information to the information they already have.

schizophrenia



Psychologists

Philosophers

Linguists

Semantics



Semantics is the systematic study of meaning, and linguistic semantics is the study of how languages organize and express meanings. It is an attempt to explicate the knowledge of any speaker of a language which allows that speaker to communicate facts, feelings, intentions and products of the imagination to other speakers and to understand what they communicate to him or her.

The nature of language

All animals have some system for communicating with other members of their species, but only humans have a language which allows them to produce and understand ever-new messages and to do so without any outside stimulus.

But human language differs from these animal communication systems in two crucial ways (Hockett 1957:574–85; Bickerton 1990: 10–16). First, animals can communicate only in response to some particular stimulus. Bees, when they have located a source of nectar in some group of plants, fly back to their hive and report this discovery by doing a dance that indicates the approximate direction and distance to the site, but in general non-human communication takes place on the spot, and is concerned with what is immediately present. No animal can tell another one about past experiences, and still less are they able to communicate their plans for the future. Humans alone are able to talk about vast numbers of things which come from accumulated knowledge, memory and imagination.

Human language is stimulus-free

(Kreidler, 1998, p. 4)

Second, while animals have only fixed repertoire of messages, human language is creative: we are always producing new utterances which others understand: we comprehend new sentences which others have produced (as you understand this sentence, though it is not likely you have read it before).

This **freedom from context** is possible only because language is conventional, or has the feature of **arbitrariness**. There is no natural relation between the word *goat*, for instance, and what that word designates. Since ancient times people have been arguing about whether language is 'natural' or 'not'. We can only conclude that it is natural for humans to have language – that a human child has a natural propensity to acquire the language which is used by the members of its family. But the ways in which meanings are communicated through language are not natural, nor is one language more natural than another.

Early in life every human acquires the essentials of a language – a vocabulary and the pronunciation, use and meaning of each item in it. **The speaker's knowledge is largely implicit.** The linguist attempts to construct **a grammar**, an explicit description of the language, the categories of the language and the rules by which they interact. Semantics is one part of the grammar; phonology, syntax and morphology are other parts.

Speakers of a language have an implicit knowledge about what is meaningful in their language, and it is easy to show this. Some technical terms related to that language are:

- anomaly
- paraphrase
- synonymy
- semantic feature
- antonymy
- contradiction
- ambiguity
- adjacency pairs
- entailment
- presupposition