ENG 331:   INTRODUCTION TO SEMANTICS
(3 Credit Units)

MODULE 1   DEFINITION AND SCOPE OF SEMANTICS

UNIT 1   DEFINITION AND BRIEF HISTORY OF SEMANTICS

CONTENTS

1.0   INTRODUCTION

Semantics simply implies the study of how meaning in language is produced or created. Semantics encompasses how words, phrases and sentences come together to make meaning in language. The term semantics simply means the study of meanings. It has been the subject of discourse for many years by philosophers and other scholars but later was introduced formally in literature in the late 1800s. Hence, we have philosophical semantics, linguistic semantics among other varieties of semantics.

For the purpose of the present discourse, we shall be focusing on the development and nature of semantics. Hence, we shall be learning the definition and beginnings of linguistic semantics.

2.0   OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:

•   define and explain the meaning of semantics; and

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- trace the beginnings of linguistic semantics.

HOW TO STUDY THE UNIT
a.   Read this unit as diligently as possible.
b.   Find meaning of unfamiliar words in the unit using your dictionary.
c.   As you read, put major points down in a piece of paper or jotter.
d.   Do not go to the next section until you have fully understood the section you are reading now.
e.   Do all the Self-Assessment exercises in the unit as honestly as you can. In some areas where it is not feasible to provide answers to Self-Assessment exercises, go to the relevant sections of the unit to derive the answers.

3.0   MAIN CONTENT

3.1   The Concept of Semantics

Semantics is the area of linguistics dealing with the meaning of words or the meaning attached to words or symbols. This view places semantics at the core of communication in language. Indeed, there is no communication without the sharing of meaning.

3.2   The Definition of Semantics

Semantics as a term was first formally used by Breal in 1897. Hence, we can deduce that Breal was the first to bring to the fore in a formally acceptable way, the nature of meaning in language. Though the quest for the understanding of meaning has always been of interest to scholars, semantics was not mentioned as a term and did not come up in literature until 1897 when it was first used by Breal. This first attempt to study meanings by philosophers brought about the area of semantics called philosophical semantics, which examines the relationship between linguistic expressions and the phenomena they refer to in the external world. Philosophical semantics focuses on examining the conditions under which such linguistic expressions and the phenomena they refer to are true or false. This can be traced to as far back as Plato and Aristotle's works**.**

However, contemporary philosophical semantics can be traced to the works of the following authors: Rudolf Carnap (1891 - 1970), Alfred Tarski (Born 1902) and Charles Peirce (1839 - 1914). According to Peirce, philosophical semantics developed as Semiotics in America while with the influence of Saussure in France, the term "semiology" was used. However, the idea of truth-based semantics was Tarski's major contribution.
Linguistic semantics emphasises the properties of natural languages while pure or logical semantics is the study of the meaning of expressions using logical systems or calculi. Examining semantics in this dimension makes it more mathematically related than linguistic in nature. It is important to note

that the discussion of semantics as a branch of linguistics began recently and this shall be our next focus.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1

What do you understand by the word "semantics?" Read 3.1 above for the correct answer

3.3   Brief History of Semantics

Alfred Korzybski was the first person to attempt studying semantics as a distinct discipline, separate from the discipline of philosophy. Incidentally, Korzybski was a non-linguist who was passionate about introducing a generally acceptable science of communication. Prior to the work of Korzybski, semantics has been looked at from a non-scientific perspective but Korzybski's work was the first formal attempt at bringing in a scientific model to the study of semantics.

Korzybski started by describing all entities and realities by assigning labels to them. He went further to group the names into three. He had names for common objects such as chair, stone, cow and so on. He also had labels for groups and collections like nations, animals, people and so on. Korzybski's third group of labels do not have identifiable referents in the outside world.

These labels are highly abstract and do not readily lend themselves to the assignment of concrete reality. These labels are only assignable to concrete realities by imagination. Such labels include but are not limited to freedom, love, and democracy among others. They feature in aesthetics, philosophy and politics. However, this is not the same with common objects since there seems to be a direct correspondence between items and linguistic expressions. It is interesting to also know that a serious difficulty tends to be posed by labels for groups as a result of the wide range of items within the group. The main challenge with abstract labels stems from the fact that meaning does not have an objective reference in reality because different people will react to different words differently. For instance, the word "love" would be viewed differently by different people as a result of their circumstance or present reality. One person who probably is in a loving relationship will view it positively while another in an unfulfilled relationship will view it negatively. Hence, their reactions will be different and will therefore evoke different emotions from them.

Two other scholars, Odgen and Richards came very close to the analysis of meaning by combining philosophical processes and linguistic methodologies. How did they do this? They introduced the concept "referent" to describe the physical object or situation which the word identifies in the real world. They pointed out that the representation or

situation should be seen as a referent while the actual pronunciation or orthographic representation will constitute the symbol. For example, the figure or silhouette of an adult female human being will be the referent while the word used to describe the referent will constitute the symbol. The symbol is similar to Korzybski's concept of label.

Since the world is dynamic, the study of semantics has not been left out. One of such areas that have remained dynamic among others is the concept of change in meaning. Semantics has been at the fore in the study of change in meaning. As early as 1933, Bloomfield observed a system of change in the meaning of words. Instances of change in meaning of words overtime:

1.   Meat used to represent all types of food.
2.   Bitter derives from the metaphor of biting.
3.   The meaning of astound derives from the weakened meaning of thunder.
4.   The meaning of knight has been an elevation of the concept of boy
5.   The word "money" relates to the Latin word *moneo* (warn) or admonish because money was made in Rome at the temple of the goddess, Junto Moneta.
6.   Tanks in modern warfare derived their names from the 1914 – 1918 war in which the Germans were deceived into believing that the structures being moved around were just water tanks.
7.   The modern word "car" originated from the word "chariot".

Etymology, which focuses on the discovery of the origin and earlier meanings of words, also played an important role in earlier studies in semantics. However, it should be noted that there is a challenge with etymological studies. The major one being that no one can state with certainty the origin of the meaning of any word.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2

Mention five scholars who have been associated with the development of semantics. Read 3.3 above to locate the answer to the question.

4.0   CONCLUSION

In this unit, we have tried to explain the concept of semantics as the study of how words, phrases and sentences come together to create meaning in language. We have also tried to examine the history of semantics from its first appearance in literature and the contributions of scholars like Breal, Bloomfield and Korzybski among others.

5.0   SUMMARY

In this unit, you have learnt:

- the definition and explanation of the word semantics,
- the history of semantics , and
- how scholars contributed and what they contributed to the history of linguistic semantics.

6.0   TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

i.   Trace the development of linguistic semantics.
ii.   Briefly describe with appropriate examples how change in meaning overtime has occurred in linguistic semantics.
iii. What are the contributions of Alfred Korzybski to the development of semantics?

7.0   REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

Ogbulogo, C. U. (2005). *Concepts in Semantics*. Lagos: Sam Iroanusi Publications.

Microsoft Encarta. (2009). "Semantics." Microsoft® Student 2008 [DVD]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2007.

UNIT 2   THE SCOPE OF SEMANTICS

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1.0   Introduction
2.0   Objectives
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1.0   INTRODUCTION

We have noted that semantics has its origin in philosophy. Earlier scholars in philosophical semantics were interested in pointing out the relationship between linguistic expressions and identified phenomena in the external world. In the contemporary world, especially in the United States (US), philosophical semantics has led to the development of semiotics. In some other parts of the world, and especially, France, the term "semiology" has been favoured. The reliance on logical calculations in issues of meaning has led to the development of logical semantics. However, for our purpose in this course, emphasis is on linguistic semantics – with our interest on the properties of natural languages. We shall see how this study relates to other disciplines. We shall also examine the real issues in linguistic semantics.

2.0   OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:
•   explain how semantics relates to other discipline; and
•   discuss the main areas of focus in semantics.

HOW TO STUDY THE UNIT

a.   Read this unit as diligently as possible.
b.   Find meaning of unfamiliar words in the unit using your dictionary.
c.   As you read, put major points down in a piece of paper or jotter.
d.   Do not go to the next section until you have fully understood the section you are reading now.
e.   Do all the Self-Assessment exercises in the unit as honestly as you can. In some areas where it is not feasible to provide answers to Self-Assessment exercises, go to the relevant sections of the unit to derive the answers.

3.0   MAIN CONTENT

3.1   The Nature of Semantics

In semantics, we study the meaning of words and sentences of languages. Linguistic semantics studies meaning in a systematic and objective way. Since meaning as a concept is not static, a great deal of the idea of meaning still depends on the context and participants in the act of communication.

There is a strong connection between meaning and communication. Communication as used here is the exchange or relay of information, message, attitude, feelings or values from one person to another. This is done mainly by the use of language. It is often expressed that language is a system, which uses a set of symbols agreed upon by a group. These symbols can be spoken or written, expressed as gestures or drawings.

The symbols employed in language must be patterned in a systematic way. Indeed language is organised at four principal levels – sounds (that is phonetics/phonology), words (that is phonology, sentences (that is syntax) and meaning (that is semantics). Indeed, phonology and syntax are concerned with the expressive power of language while semantics studies the meaning of what has been expressed. Knowledge of grammar is an aspect of the innate cognitive ability of human beings. The power of interpretation complements that innate ability. Interpretation is an aspect of semantics. Therefore, language acquisition or learning includes not only the knowledge of the organisation of sounds and structures, but also how to associate meaning to the structures. Semantics can, therefore, be characterised as the scientific study of meaning in language.

3. 2   Semantics and other Related Disciplines

We recall that philosophy has been linked to the earliest postulation about meaning. There are still other disciplines that are relevant to semantics. A very strong ally of semantics is logic- a branch of philosophy. Logical systems are known to exhibit coherent and consistent models for evaluating thought. Thus, logical postulations are the ideal but may not always reflect the real world in matters of language.

Semantics is also related to sociology and anthropology because of the connection between language and culture. The whole essence of cultural relevance in language justified the reliance on context for the meaning of expressions. Of particular interest to semantics is the intricate system of kinship terms and colour expressions.

By relying on the distinction between deep and surface meaning and the power of the human brain to generate many paraphrases of a single

structure, semantics is related to psychology. Indeed, the mentalistic approach to meaning and language use in the tradition of generative grammar is a psychological issue. Furthermore, the approaches adopted by behavioural semantics in the stimulus – response connection in meaning are a purely psychological affair.

Semantics is also related to communication theory. Information is carried and processed in the communication system passing through the channel and the medium. The minimalisation of noise and the processing of feedback are aspects of the communication system. These are achieved by ensuring logical thinking.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 1

List other disciplines related to semantics. Read 3.2 above for answer to the question.

3.3   Major Concerns of Semantics

Semantics is associated with different issues related to meaning including naming, concept, sense and reference. Naming as a semantic process derives from the understanding that words are names or labels for things. The major problem with this naming view of semantics is that, it is only nouns and nominal expressions that can be analysed semantically. In addition, abstract nouns like: love, hatred, truth will be difficult to explain since they are not living things.

(i)   There is a red bull in the park.

This will have meaning, only if there is a red bull in a particular park. Thus, sentences that are lies may not be interpreted.

Concepts mediate between what the mind constructs and objects in the real world. Saussure's sign theory and Ogden and Richards, semantic triangle derives from the conceptual approach to semantics. The approach emphasises the power of the mind to make images and to associate these images to objects and ideas. The approach is highly mentalistic, relying on the ability to associate one thing with another. This ability of association may not yield universal understanding. That explains why language experts develop dictionaries to aggregate meaning on a universal basis. Interestingly, the production of dictionaries relies heavily on denotations and connotations, two major angles to the study of meaning.

Reference relates to things, people and events in the world. It is the object or entity to which a linguistic expression relates. Thus, the referent of the word "boy" is a human being called boy. If meaning were restricted to

reference, many words without obvious referents will be left out. It will be difficult to explain the meaning of prepositions, conjunctions and other grammatical unit.

Again, several linguistic expressions may relate to single referents. To avoid these limitations, semanticists use the words denotation and connotation to distinguish between meaning based on ostensiveness (that is, pointing) or reference and extension.

Another interesting area of concern for semantics is sense. Sense explains the system of linguistic relationships, which a lexical item contracts with others. If that relationship is paradigmatic, we have synonymy, antonymic, and so on. However, if the relationship is syntagmatic, we have collocation.

The scope of semantics covers a wide range of issues related to meaning. These issues are discussed in the different segments of this manual.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE 2

What are the main areas of the concern of semantics?

Answer: naming, concept, sense and reference.

4.0   CONCLUSION

Semantics has been found to be related to a wide range of disciplines because of the general interest in meaning. In specific terms, semantics has been formed to be relevant to naming, reference and sense. It is also concerned with the interpretation of sentences.

5.0   SUMMARY

In this unit, we have discussed the following:
•   the place of linguistic semantics in the study of meaning,
•   semantics and other related disciplines,
•   the major concerns of semantics.

6.0   TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

i.   Discuss how semantics relates to other disciplines.
ii.   Identify the major areas of emphasis in the study of semantics.

7.0   REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

Lech, G. (1981). *Semantics*. London: Penguin Books.

Ndimele, O. M. (1998). *Semantics and Frontiers of Communication*. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press.

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Palner, F.R. (1996). *Semantics.* London: Cambridge University Press.

UNIT 3   APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF SEMANTICS

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1.0   INTRODUCTION

You have learnt that the study of meaning in language has been of interest to both the linguist and the philosopher. It has also interested the general communicator. Since meaning has occupied a central position in communication, there have been different perspectives to the study of meaning. That means over the ages, different approaches to the study of semantics have emerged. In this unit, we shall focus on some of the time-tested approaches to the study of semantics.

The study of semantics has developed from the earliest times to the modern period, giving it a historical view. That way, we can focus on four major approaches – traditional, behavioural, structural and generative perspectives.

2.0   OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit, you should be able to:
•   highlight the different approaches to the study of semantics; and
•   point out the merits and demerits of each of the approaches.

HOW TO STUDY THE UNIT

a.   Read this unit as diligently as possible.
b.   Find meaning of unfamiliar words in the unit using your dictionary.
c.   As you read, put major points down in a piece of paper or jotter.
d.   Do not go to the next section until you have fully understood the section you are reading now.

e.   Do all the Self-Assessment exercises in the unit as honestly as you can. In some areas where it is not feasible to provide answers to Self-Assessment exercises, go to the relevant sections of the unit to derive the answers.

3.0   MAIN CONTENT

3.1   Traditional Semantics

Traditional semantics is associated with the works of such great philosophers as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle as well as many others who came after them. Their focus was on the nature of human language itself. Based on their views of the nature of human language, these early philosophers were divided into two – the naturalists and the nurturists.

To the naturalists, language was God-given such that there was hardly anything anybody could do to understand language. Man was not expected to make alterations, but should concern himself with merely observing and describing the rules of language. The Greek language was perceived to be the chosen language upon which all other languages should be based. Later, Latin became the focus of philosophical analysis.

The nurturists on the other hand viewed language as a social property common to a speech community. Language was therefore perceived to be man's creation for the convenience of communication. Thus, in spite of difference in languages, the uniting point is that they are all for communication.

Traditional semantics was also concerned with the relationship between form and meaning. Following Carnap (1927), Firth (1957) and Ayer (1936), the meaning of a word is actually what it refers to. Ogden and Richards (1933) have also shared this view. There have also been later scholars – Grice (1957) and Katz (1972) who believed that the image of a word takes shape in the speaker's or hearer's mind. Another major view of traditional semantics is that the meaning of a word can be decoded from its shape or sound. Words in this category are onomatopoeic. The major ideas in traditional semantics are reference, concepts, truth conditions, and so on.

3.2   Behavioural Semantics

This approach has been influenced by the works of Watson Bloomfield and Skinner. Idealism or mentalism in traditional semantics looks at meaning as something established in the hearer's or speaker's mind. There is usually a non-physical process of thought, concept or feeling generating a mental experience. On the other hand, behaviourism relies on observables and

records of utterances. These observables and records are linked to their relationships with the immediate situations that produce them.

To the behaviourist, there is no belief in such mentalistic constructs as mind, concept and ideas. As a result, there is no room for introspection as a means of obtaining valid information since thoughts and feelings are usually personal. As a result of the highly psychological dimension of this theory, human and animal behaviour is identical. Experiences coming through the senses are the major sources of knowledge. There is determinism in the affairs of the world. There are universal laws governing every situation. As a result of this reliance on determinism, there is no predictability in evaluating human behaviour. The external environment is perceived to be the major stimulus to all human utterances. The stimulus-response scenario is synonymous with the cause and effect connection in most natural situations.

Those who favour the behavioural approach to semantics have argued that by reducing meaning to observable entities, language, as an aspect of human favour can lend itself to examination. They also argue that meaning is influenced by reinforcement. The theory stresses nurture rather than nature. Thus, the physical environment is perceived to contribute to meaning rather than the internal thought processes.

Though behaviourism tends to lend meaning to experimental explanation, it has been criticised for its rejection of introspection, concepts and ideas. It is not everything in language that can be observed physically. The over-reliance on reinforcement tends to present animal and human behaviour as identical.

3.3   Structural Semantics

The father of structuralism is Ferdinand de Saussure. Structuralism as a linguistic theory considers the structures and systems in language. Emphasis is on the process of segmenting and classifying the features of utterances.

Under structuralism, emphasis is on the analysis of sense relations that connect words and meaning. Sense is an expression of the system of semantic relationships a given word keeps with other expressions in a given language. This relationship is usually paradigmatic in terms of similarity and dissimilarity. The relationship of similarity occurs as synonymy, while the relationship of dissimilarity is referred to as antonymy. Structural processes are useful in lexical relations in the study of words.

3.4   Generative Semantics

Noam Chomsky is the father of generative grammar. According to the theory of transformational generative grammar, knowledge of language is generated in the mind. A language user has a finite set of rules from which he can generate an infinite number of sentences. This power of generations is facilitated by the power of transformational rules, which convert deep structure sentence types into other various forms via transformations. At the beginning of Chomsky's generative grammar, there was the assertion that syntax was autonomous and independent of semantics. It was only later in *Aspects of the theory of Syntax* (1965) that Chomsky pointed out that the semantic component specifies the rules necessary for the interpretation of deep structures. This observation enhanced the semantic representation of sentences. Deep structures specify the original meaning of sentences before the application of transformations.

There was the immediate problem of explaining the meaning of multiple paraphrases from a single deep structure. Thus, generative semantics would be concerned with sentence meaning and interpretation. This will require the interpretation of functional roles in sentences. This interpretation has been explained by the Case theory as propounded by Charles Fillmore, and further elaborated in Chomsky's case theory and thematic theory.

The semantic component has been presented as being partially dependent on syntax and at the same time distinct. This produces a composite relationship between grammar and meaning. The deep structure is deemed to determine how sentence parts combine to make meaning for the whole. The syntactic component is the generative source of grammar. Thus, the output of syntax forms the input to the semantic component. The semantic component is perceived to operate on the structural description of sentences to provide a representation of the meaning of sentences. Grammar as used here is the totality of the mechanism and rules of language organisation including meaning. As a result of the complexity of this theory, we shall have a more elaborate discussion of its implication in another unit. Perhaps the philosophical postulations of Aristotle provided impetus to critical thinking in semantics. Based on the major areas of concern, there have been traditional semantics, behavioural semantics, structural semantics and generative semantics.

SELF-ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

i.   List the different approaches to the study of semantics.
ii.   State the contribution of the naturalists and the nurturists to the study of semantics.

Answers:
i. Tradition, behavioural, structural and generative
ii. Read 3.1 (traditional Semantics) for the correct answer

4.0   CONCLUSION

We have observed the progression in the development of semantic thought. We have noted the positive relationship between semantics and other components of the language system. We can safely conclude that while syntax, for instance provides the basis for the structure of the sentence, it is semantics that holds the key to meaning. This means that semantics is critical to communication.

5.0   SUMMARY

In this unit, you have learnt the approaches of the traditionalists, the behaviourists, the structuralists and the generativists to the study of semantics. You learnt that the traditionalists were related to the early philosophers, while the behaviourists were more concerned with psychology, with the object of study being what is observed. Structuralists emphasised the sense relations between words while the generativists depended on the deep structures of sentences for meaning. It would be possible to identify the essential ingredients of these approaches to the study of semantics.

6.0   TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENT

i.   Discuss the contributions of the traditionalists to the development of semantics.
ii.   Explore how generative grammar has featured in the study of semantics.

7.0   REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

Barnwell, K. (1980). *Introduction to semantics and translation.* Summer Institute of Linguistics.

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Ogbulogo, C. (2005). *Concepts in Semantics.* Lagos: Sam Iroanusi Publications.