

Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics

Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics

Key concepts, definitions, and relationships – a quick-reference guide

1. What Are Semantics and Pragmatics?

Aspect	Semantics	Pragmatics
Focus	Meaning encoded in language itself (words, phrases, sentences).	Meaning that arises in actual use, considering context, speaker intentions, and shared knowledge.
Question answered	<i>What does this sentence mean?</i>	<i>What does this sentence mean in this situation?</i>
Level of analysis	Lexical, compositional, truth-conditional, model-theoretic.	Speech-act theory, relevance theory, deixis, implicature, presupposition.
Typical data	Dictionaries, corpora, formal semantics models.	Conversational transcripts, discourse analysis, experimental pragmatics.

2. Core Topics in Semantics

2.1 Lexical Semantics

- **Word meaning:** sense (intensional) vs. reference (extensional).
- **Semantic relations:** synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, hypernymy, meronymy, troponymy.
- **Polysemy & Homonymy:** multiple related senses vs. unrelated meanings.

2.2 Compositional Semantics

- **Principle of Compositionality:** meaning of a complex expression = function of meanings of its parts and their syntactic combination.
- **Formal tools:** lambda calculus, type theory, model-theoretic semantics.
- **Quantifiers & Scope:** universal (?), existential (?), scope ambiguity (e.g., “Every student read a book”).

2.3 Truth-Conditional Semantics

Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics

- **Sentences as propositions:** evaluated as true or false relative to a possible world.
- **Possible-world semantics:** models a world as a set of individuals, properties, and relations.
- **Entailment & Presupposition:** logical consequence vs. background assumptions.

2.4 Semantic Roles & Thematic Relations

- **Agent, Patient, Experiencer, Instrument, Goal, Source, etc.**
- **Theta-criterion:** each argument receives exactly one theta-role; each theta-role is assigned once.

2.5 Formal Semantics Frameworks

Framework	Main Idea	Typical Formalism
Montague Grammar	Natural language as a formal language; uses intensional logic.	Typed lambda calculus, possible worlds.
Dynamic Semantics	Meaning updates a discourse context (information state).	Discourse Representation Theory (DRT), Dynamic Predicate Logic.
Distributional Semantics	Meaning derived from statistical patterns of co-occurrence.	Vector space models, word embeddings.

3. Core Topics in Pragmatics

3.1 Speech-Act Theory (Austin & Searle)

1. **Locutionary act** – utterance and its literal meaning.
2. **Illocutionary act** – intended force (e.g., assert, question, request).
3. **Perlocutionary act** – effect on the listener (e.g., persuade, frighten).

Illocutionary Force	Example
Assert	"It is raining."
Question	"Is it raining?"
Command	"Close the window."
Promise	"I will call you tomorrow."

Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics

3.2 Conversational Implicature (Grice)

- Cooperative Principle