

## Notes towards a Course in English Semantics at UFRN [LEM2015]

Note: The actual conduct of this course was driven by textbook work and occasional exercises rather than a collation of documents in the pattern of the usual Ricorso Classroom Course pages. Further bibliography and details will be supplied at some date in the future. [02.03.2023]

Semantics is the study of meaning in language – a distinctively human medium of communication which involves sounds organised as words and then larger units of expression (phrases and sentences) in such a way that the thought or intention encoded by the speaker can be decoded by a listener who shares the same language. Yet, since *phonology*, *syntax*, and *semantics* constitute the three levels of message-making known as language, the discipline of Semantics clearly fits into the wider area of Philology — the study of languages — but also pertains to Semiotics — the study of signs which embraces non-linguistic systems including such inferences from the general order of natural entities and forces such as the one which gives rise to the common dictum, ‘no smoke with fire’ (i.e., ‘smoke *means* fire’).

*Signs*, in semiotics, are considered either *icons* or *symbols* as referring variously to objects or processes (including acts and events) which belong to the common stock of human experience and sometimes to specific context such as the radiation symbol and its counterpart, the icon of the Anti-Nuclear Movement. Thus a *stick-man* and a *rose* are taken respectively to refer to *toilet* and *female beauty* in the contexts in which they are most often met (public places and romantic songs). In languages, however, the function of representative is almost taken up symbols — unless we count *onomatopoeia* as an iconic form of language. Yet not only nominals (*toilet* and *beauty*) are understood to be the symbolic counterparts of the things they represent. There are also words such as *adjectives*, *verbs*, and *adverbs* which “say” something about the things to which they are attached or simply point to them in a manner known as dixis where the thing referred by a given *pronoun* or *synonym* to has already been met with by the listener/reader. In addition, there are *verbs* which convey the idea of actions performed by, with, or on a given entity (living or inert).

English and other-language verbs are sometimes capable of expressing the action of a given agent (personal or material) on a given recipient but can also convey the action of a given thing itself without human intervention. Hence, *He opened the door* and *The door opened*. To see how special this is, you can compare *He ate his dinner* with *The dinner ate* — yet *the dinner was eaten by him* makes perfect sense, using the passive voice to shift the recipient to the subject position in the grammatical sense. Likewise, verbs have tenses can be used to signify temporal states and these to can be ergative or non-ergative — e.g., *They ran away when the teacher came* and *The car was still running when the ambulance arrived*. In addition, phrasal verbs allow us to speak about the more complex personal relations involved in certain actions. Thus, *I had my hair cut on Tuesday* is very different in meaning from *I cut my hair on Tuesday* in English.

Obviously that example of distinctly English phraseology (i.e., *had something done*) is a result of culture specifics such as the widespread — and now, perhaps, universal — practice of paying someone to cut one’s hair. The phrase is nonetheless worth noting although it cannot be called core feature of the Semantic discipline. In fact Semantics is less interested in anthropological differences, where they exist, than with the distinction between *utterances*, *sentences*, and *propositions* in considering how speakers’ ideas about self, other, and the world around them are conveyed to listeners in the various contexts of normal communication. Again, semanticists are not concerned with the *truth* or *falsehood* of facts or ideas communicated but only with the means by which a successful act of communication is effected when the hearer can be said to have understood the speaker. Hence we say that it is the semantic competence of speaker and listener that counts, not the state of knowledge – commonplace or more encyclopaedic – possessed by either of these or the validity or falsehood or each or both’s understanding of the matter in question.

It appears to be the case that the indifference of Semantics to the meaning of the communicative acts of which it treats is widely understood as a token of the that semanticists regards all meanings as purely arbitrary in the sense of only having truth-status amid the total of such statements which makes up the communicative universe of the speakers. Hence, according to the popular conception, Semantics supports the view that meaning and value are always relative. In fact, this philosophical conclusion lies far outside the scope of Semantics as an intellectual discipline and it can be confidently asserted that few semanticists are interested in attacking or defending the truth of any given opinion or idea — at least *not* when they are wearing their professional hats *as* semanticists. The most probable source of this idea about Semantics as a form of relativity is probably the thesis

that the meaning of words themselves is conferred on them solely by their relation to other words and phrases in a given language, an idea that reflects the most famous insight of Ferdinand de Saussure in his *General Theory of Linguistics* (1915).

Saussure's breakthrough concept of the "arbitrariness" of signs has in fact been taken up and employed as a guiding principle in a range of cultural-study areas with the effect that any representation of a given person, thing, or formation in the world today is likely to be treated by the intelligentsia, if not all thinking citizens, as a "construct" rather than a fixed aspect of nature or society. Indeed, the supposed fixity of ethical and civil ideas associated with more conservative societies is widely considered today as a manifestation of patriarchy echoing the dictatorial certainties of the Bible and generations of bearded clerics. The obvious wisdom of this relativistic outlook and associated movements which aim to "deregulate" social values and behaviour in our own time is obvious to everyone today and most of our personal experience bears the imprint of it.

Clearly we do not act or think in the same way as our medieval forebears, and for good reason. Whether their ideas and actions were *de facto* wrong is another question. Yet the theory of arbitrary meaning has been carried a great deal further than that. In Anthropology, for instance, it has even been suggested that we have no real knowledge of the world *outside* of the language we speak — or which, as members of a given group and culture, we *inhabit*. This style of thinking, sometimes identified as the "prison-house-of-words" or the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, has been matched by another of more overtly political intent which associated with the term "hegemony" coined by the Italian socialist thinker Antonio Gramsci who believed — following Marx — that ideas and their symbolic counterpart in language and culture are produced and circulated by the class for whom such representations are the most beneficial and securing the support and even acquiescence for such ideas from those who suffer under them. (Clearly class conflict is the dominant concept in that style of thinking.)

Such cultural theories often turn to Saussure's notion of arbitrary signifiers for epistemological verification. Yet, once again, neither those theories nor their refutation forms the disciplinary subject of Semantics either in principle or in practice. Semantics has no case to make about constitution of the world or the social people in it. It is not a political philosophy of any kind and, if the semanticist privately agrees with Wittgenstein that 'whereof we know nothing we must remain silent', he had no occasion to say it when working within his discipline. Nor does he fulfil his mission by testing the 'rightness' of any theory or opinion using the tools of Semantics. Instead, he concerns himself exclusively with the way in which the main features linguistic meaning can be seen to operate whenever speakers and listeners can be said to use the same language.

These two main features are *reference* and *sense* and it is toward an examination of these that, John Saeed turns in Chapter 2 following some preliminary definitions of Semantics considered as an academic discipline in Chapter 1, as we have seen.