

Studying meaning

1 What does a sentence mean?

- (1) Today is Monday.
- (2) This is semantics class.

(1) and (2) are both true. But they do not “mean” the same thing.

One way (1) and (2) are different is that it is hypothetically possible for one to be true without the other being true. This follows if we think of *meaning as truth-conditions*.

- (3) The sentence “Today is Monday” is true if and only if today is Monday.

We can also interpret sentences we have never heard before:

- (4) Coconuts taste best when it’s raining.

Is this true? How would you verify its truth or falsity? We can make truth conditions explicit by thinking through their verification strategies.

“Even for a thought grasped for the first time by a human it provides a clothing in which it can be recognized by another to whom it is entirely new. This would not be possible if we could not distinguish parts in the thought that correspond to parts of the sentence, so that the construction of the sentence can be taken to mirror the construction of the thought. ... If we thus view thoughts as composed of simple parts and take these, in turn, to correspond to simple sentence-parts, we can understand how a few sentence-parts can go to make up a great multitude of sentences to which, in turn, there correspond a great multitude of thoughts. The question now arises how the construction of the thought proceeds, and by what means the parts are put together so that the whole is something more than the isolated parts.”

Gottlob Frege, in H&K pp. 2–3

- (5) **The Principle of Compositionality:** The meaning of a linguistic expression is built of the meaning of its constituent parts, in a systematic fashion.

How exactly this compositional interpretation works will be a central concern for our class. Today we concentrate on describing meaning.

2 Relationships of meaning

- (6) a. Sarah is from Australia.
- b. Sarah lives in Boston.
- c. Sarah is from Australia and lives in Boston.

(6c) *entails* (6a) and (6b).

- (7) Sarah lives in Australia and lives in Boston.

(7) can never be true, so it is a *contradiction*. Sentences which are always true are *tautologies*. Sentences which are neither contradictions nor tautologies are called *contingent* (noun: *contingency*).

3 Entailment vs presupposition

(8) Two tests for presupposition:

Suppose sentence A requires B. We want to know whether B is a presupposition or not.

- a. “Family of sentences” test: (see Chierchia and McConnell-Ginet, 1990)

Consider the following sentences, which embed A:

- i. *Negation*: It is not the case that A.
- ii. *Yes/no question*: Is it the case that A?
- iii. *Possibility modal*: It might be the case that A.
- iv. *Conditional*: If A, then ...

If such sentences also require B, B is a presupposition of A.

- b. “Hey, wait a minute!” test: (see von Stechow, 2004)

If another speaker can reply to A by “Hey, wait a minute! I didn’t know that B!”, then B is a presupposition of A.

(9) H&K p. 77:

- a. John is absent again today.
- b. Today is not the first time that John is absent.
- c. John is absent today, and that has happened before.

(10) The family of sentences test for (9a):

Notice that “John is absent again today” requires that “John was absent before.” We want to test whether “John was absent before” is a presupposition or not.

- a. *Negation*: John is not absent again today.
- b. *Yes/no question*: Is John absent again today?

- c. *Possibility modal*: John might be absent again today.
- d. *Conditional*: If John is absent again today, I will be upset.

These all require that John was absent before. Therefore “John was absent before” is a presupposition of “John is absent again today.”

- (11) My sister has two dogs.
 - a. I have a sister.
 - b. She has a dog.
 - c. She has two dogs.
 - d. (She does not have three dogs.)

4 Ambiguity

- (12) I hit a man with a stick.
 - a. A man, I hit with a stick.
 - b. A man with a stick, I hit.
- (13) I hit a man, and either I used a stick or the man had a stick at that time.

Example (12) has two possible syntactic parses, corresponding to two different readings, picked out by (12a) and (12b). Neither one of these readings is equivalent to (13).

- (14) a. Everyone’s awake.
 - b. Everyone’s not asleep.
- (15) a. Some boy loves every girl.
 - b. A different boy loves every girl.
- (16) Some guard is standing in front of every building.

References

- Chierchia, Gennaro, and Sally McConnell-Ginet. 1990. *Meaning and grammar: An introduction to semantics*. MIT Press.
- von Stechow, Kai. 2004. Would you believe it? The king of France is back! (presuppositions and truth-value intuitions). In *Descriptions and beyond*, ed. Marga Reimer and Anne Bezuidenhout. Oxford University Press.