Definition: **semantics** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Branch of linguistics and philosophy concerned with the study of meaning. In historical linguistics, it generally refers to the analysis of how the meanings of words change over time. In modern linguistics and philosophy, semantics seeks to assess the contribution of word-meaning to the meanings of phrases and sentences, and to comprehend the relationship among and between words and the things they refer to, or stand for.

Summary Article: **semantics**
From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

[Gr.,=significant] in general, the study of the relationship between words and meanings. The empirical study of word meanings and sentence meanings in existing languages is a branch of linguistics; the abstract study of meaning in relation to language or symbolic logic systems is a branch of philosophy. Both are called semantics. The field of semantics has three basic concerns: the relations of words to the objects denoted by them, the relations of words to the interpreters of them, and, in symbolic logic, the formal relations of signs to one another (syntax).

In linguistics, semantics has its beginnings in France and Germany in the 1820s when the meanings of words as significant features in the growth of language was recognized. Among the foremost linguistic semanticists of the 20th cent. are Gustaf Stern, Jost Trier, B. L. Whorf, Uriel Weinreich, Stephen Ullmann, Thomas Sebeok, Noam Chomsky, Jerrold Katz, and Charles Osgood. In the linguistics of recent years an offshoot of transformational grammar theory has reemphasized the role of meaning in linguistic analysis. This new theory, developed largely by George Lakoff and James McCawley, is termed generative semantics. In anthropology a new theoretical orientation related to linguistic semantics has been developed. Its leading proponents include W. H. Goodenough, F. G. Lounsbury, and Claude Lévi-Strauss.

In philosophy, semantics has generally followed the lead of symbolic logic, and many philosophers do not make a distinction between logic and semantics. In this context, semantics is concerned with such issues as meaning and truth, meaning and thought, and the relation between signs and what they mean. The leading practitioners have been Gottlob Frege, Lady Welby, Bertrand Russell, Otto Neurath, Rudolf Carnap, Alonzo Church, Alfred Tarski, C. I. Lewis, Ludwig Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin, W. V. Quine, P. F. Strawson, Steven Schiffer, John Searle, H. P. Grice, Saul Kripke, Donald Davidson, and Gilbert Harman.

Since the publication of the influential *The Meaning of Meaning* (1925) by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, semantics has also become important to literary criticism and stylistics, in which the way that metaphors evoke feelings is investigated and differences between ordinary and literary language are studied. A related discipline, general semantics (so called to distinguish it from semantics in linguistics or philosophy), studies the ways in which meanings of words influence human behavior. General semantics was developed by Alfred Korzybski. The key term in Korzybski's system is evaluation, the mental act that is performed by the hearer when a word is spoken. Among the most prominent followers of Korzybski are Stuart Chase, S. I. Hayakawa, and H. L. Weinberg.

Bibliography


For semantics in literary criticism, see Burke, K., A Rhetoric of Motives (1950) and A Grammar of Motives (1955) and the works of W. Empson and P. Wheelwright.
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