English Vocabulary and Meaning

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Just a little reminder . . .
Semantics is concerned with the study of meaning in language and is related to both philosophy and logic. Semiotics is the study of communication systems in general. Sign language is a common means of communication among those who are deaf and can, if learned from childhood, approach natural language in terms of scope and flexibility.

Pragmatics is the study of language from the point of view of usage. It has various sub-forms depending on the emphasis given by linguists, for instance it can be investigated from a strictly linguistic stance or with regard to social factors.
Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913)

‘ségnifiant’
word in language

‘ségnifié’
extra-linguistic concept referring to an object in the world

[buk] ← arbitrary relationship (set by social convention) →  

book
There are four recognisable types of meaning: lexical meaning, grammatical meaning, sentence meaning and utterance meaning which refer to the areas of derivational morphology, inflectional morphology, syntax and pragmatics respectively.

External meaning relationships involve sense (relationships between words) and denotation (relationship of word to what it signifies).
Types of meaning

1) LEXICAL MEANING is that of individual words or of compound words, for instance, What is the trachea? What is lexicology? What is a drumlin?

2) GRAMMATICAL MEANING is that of form words which only obtain significance when used in connection with lexical words. Such form words are the many prepositions, conjunctions or determiners in a language. Their meaning is only evident in a sentence or phrase containing lexical items. For instance, the word to has no independently specifiable meaning but in the sentence He gave a lovely present to his wife it has grammatical meaning as it precedes the beneficiary of an action. These elements typically have many functions, for example, to is commonly used as an infinitive marker as in They decided to come.
3) SENTENCE MEANING results from the combination of words in a sentence. This can vary even with the same words as with a sentence where the subject and the object are exchanged. Meaning can furthermore depend on the scope of an element, deriving from its position in a sentence, compare that of all in the following sentences All the boys ate the food and The boys ate all the food which contain the same words but in a different order.

4) UTTERANCE MEANING is that of a sentence in a particular spoken context which is not necessarily the same as its literal meaning, cf. Can you pass me the salt? which is not a question but a request. Utterance meaning is closely linked to the area of linguistics called speech act theory which examines the use and classification of language in concrete situations.
Meaning relationships

There are various internal meaning relationships such as synonymy (sameness of meaning), antonymy (difference in meaning), hyponymy (hierarchical order of meaning). Antonyms can be classified as graded and non-graded. Perfect synonymy does not exist as similar words usually differ in the stylistic contexts in which they are to be found.

Deixis concerns the various types of pointing which is possible with language. This can be direct, with adverbs of direction, or indirect, for instance with different types of pronoun.
Models for analysing meaning

Different models for semantic analysis are available: prototype theory, where a central concept is taken as typical and less central ones are peripheral, and componential analysis which seeks to break words down into their component semantic parts.
Presupposition and entailment

Presupposition
A statement presupposes that something else is also true.
Did you enjoy your dinner? Presupposition: You had dinner.

Entailment
Refers to a sentence which, if true, mean a further, more general sentence is also true.
Fiona has two boys entails Fiona has children.
A speech act is a classifiable and structured utterance spoken in an actual communication situation. There are preconditions for speech acts such as felicity conditions which must be met for a speech act to be successful.

Speech acts are classified according to their effect. Locutionary acts simple express sense or reference. Illocutionary acts express the intentions of the speaker whereas for perlocutionary acts the effect is of greatest importance. There are further subdivisions in type such as directives (commands for example) or commissives (promises for instance). An indirect speech act is one where the intended meaning of a sentence is different from the literal one.
Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is concerned with the analysis of spoken language in sections larger than the sentence. The two main features for successful discourse are coherence (based on semantic transparency) and cohesion (achieved through formal mechanisms such as sentence connectors and anaphoric elements).

In the analysis of conversation various implicatures – ‘rules’ if you like – are taken to apply. They refer to the quality, quantity, relevance and manner of conversation and are assumed to be almost universally valid.
Dictionaries and the mental lexicon

A dictionary is a book with definitions, normally in alphabetical order.

The mental lexicon is the set of word meanings which are stored in one’s brain. These are not in alphabetical order and contain much additional information such as additional shades of meaning and the phonetic shape of words.
Dictionaries and the mental lexicon

You use a dictionary to look up word you do not know.

The mental lexicon is extremely fast, you cannot measure the time it takes to retrieve a word (unless you have a temporary block).
The acquisition of semantics and pragmatics

Children pass through clear stages of acquisition in the first five or six years of their lives. Within each of these stages there are recognisable characteristics. A prominent characteristic is overextension. Children always begin overextending, e.g. in the realm of semantics by using the word dog for all animals if the first animal they are confronted with is a dog. Or by calling all males papa or by using spoon for all items of cutlery.

Often children begin by using a proper name for things, e.g. calling all dogs “Grover” (if the family dog has this name). Later children abandon this and use common names, i.e. “dog” for all dogs. What this means is that children learn the cognitive distinction between a class of objects/beings and individual members of a class (“Grover” is a single member of the class of dogs). Furthermore, children learn to distinguish between a single, non-specific member “a dogs” and a specific reference “the dog we have at home” and a generalised, non-specific reference “dogs are nice pets”.

The acquisition of semantics and pragmatics

The conclusion one can draw from this behaviour is that children move from the general to the particular. To begin with their language is undifferentiated on all linguistic levels. With time they introduce more and more distinctions as they are repeatedly confronted with these from their surroundings. Increasing distinctions in language may well be linked to increasing cognitive development: the more discriminating the children’s perception and understanding of the world, the more they will strive to reflect this in language.
The acquisition of semantics and pragmatics

Children acquire the meanings of use from their use in the language they hear around them. If words come to be used in slightly different contexts, then their meaning changes and later generations will acquire these words with the shifted meanings. For instance, the word „joy“ is now used in the sense of „success“, e.g. „He got no joy out of the insurance firm.“ So one can say that the meaning of „joy“ has expanded from „feeling of happiness, well-being“ to encompass the meaning of „success“ (because this triggers well-being in the person who experiences it).
Since the Old English meanings in English have changed considerably. One significant fact in this process was the Anglo-Norman invasion of 1066 which led to many French words entering the English language and replacing older inherited Germanic words.

The language of Chaucer (1340-1399) is no longer readily understandable to us whereas that of Shakespeare (1564-1616) is still comprehensible, albeit with difficulties.
Meaning across varieties of English

English is spoken throughout the world and the various forms of the language vary in meaning and use as on other levels.

Many overseas varieties show older meanings which have been preserved or new words which have been borrowed from native languages they have come in contact with in the new locations.
Recommended literature