

# The Dividing Line between Semantics and Pragmatics

## LA LIGNE DE DÉMARCATIION ENTRE LA SÉMANTIQUE ET LA PRAGMATIQUE

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**Abstract:** Sense and reference are two very important terms in linguistics. However, adequate importance has not been attached to them. As a result, they are often approached separately or subordinately in the textbooks of linguistics. This essay will discuss the two terms more deeply as a whole and at the same time, reveal their importance, functions and nature.

**Key Words:** sense, reference, semantics, pragmatics

**Résumé:** Le sens et la référence sont deux termes très importants en linguistique . Or , l'importance adéquate n'est pas encore accordée . Par conséquent , ils sont souvent traits de façon séparée ou subordonnée dans les méthodes de la linguistique . Cet essai , discutera les deux termes de façon plus approfondie dans l'ensemble et à la fois révèle leur importance , fonction et nature .

**Mots –clés:** sens, référence, sémantique, pragmatique

Sense and reference are two very important notions in linguistics. Both of them are concerning meaning and related to each other, but quite different approaches to meaning. As a result of this, they are the dividing line between semantics and pragmatics, which means that sense reveals the characteristics of semantics, and reference shows the characteristics of pragmatics. Semantics and pragmatics are two very important branches of linguistics, and just for this reason, sense and reference should be clearly distinguished and further studied.

### 1. SENSE: INTRA-LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO MEANING

Sense refers to any of the various meanings conveyed by word, phrase or sentence. It relates to the complex system of relationships that hold between the linguistic elements themselves. It is concerned only with intra-linguistic relationships. Sense reveals the sense relationships among words, phrases and sentences. Sense relationships refer to the relations among words,

phrases, and sentences.

Sense relationships formed an important part of the study of language. Take English for example, pairs of words can be formed into certain patterns to indicate particular kinds of sense relationships. Look at the following examples:

- a) [ $\pm$  Males]: man/woman, cow/bull, sow/boar, ewe/ram, mare/stallion
- b) Antonymy: narrow/wide, male/female, give/receive, dead/alive, buy/sell, come/go, give/take, advance/retreat, arrive/depart, push/pull, send/receive, buy/sell
- c) Synonymy: big/large, learn/study, hard/difficult, shop/store
- d) [ $\pm$  Adult]: duck/duckling, pig/piglet, dog/puppy, lion/cub

The examples for each group of the pairs mentioned above share the common feature of process and indicate certain sense relationships respectively. The first group of the pairs refers to sex; second one is concerned with opposition, the examples of antonymy; the third one is related to sameness of meaning and the fourth one indicates the relation between adult and young. Sense relationships in all the groups are in fact a part of the

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\* Received 15 March 2005; accepted 31 March 2005

semantic structure of language. The common sense relationships for the semantic structure of language are synonymy, antonymy, polysemy, homonymy, hyponymy, etc. and sense also covers semantic features, sentence meaning and selectional restrictions and so on. Words make up of different semantic fields and words that have different sense relationships belong to different semantic fields. This is the nature of sense.

## 2. REFERENCE: NON-LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO MEANING

Reference refers to the relationship between the linguistic elements and the non-linguistic world of experience. It deals with the semantic value of a word, phrase, sentence or any utterance. In other words, reference is concerned with the relationship between a referent (a concrete entity or abstract idea) and the symbol that is used to symbolize it. For example, apple/love/thought are symbols or linguistic elements, and they all stand for certain referents respectively, which refer to a concrete entity or abstract ideas in the non-linguistic world of experience. Reference deals with the relationship between apple/love/thought and the concrete entity or abstract ideas. In a simple way, sense and reference may be taken as two different aspects of semantics. Sense deals with the semantic structure of language, and reference deals with the meaning in terms of our experience outside language. Take the word *bachelor* for another example, the reference of *bachelor* refers to "a man without a wife" in the non-linguistic world of experience while the sense of *bachelor* refers to the opposite of married in the intra-linguistic relations, i.e. *bachelor*=never married. From what is mentioned above, we can get to know that meaning is a complex system, and to cope with it, knowledge of semantic structure alone is not enough. Just because of this, we should attach same importance to the two sides, especially to reference, the little more flexible one.

We know that meaning also concerns with logic, psychology, sociology, etc., which means that language is not just providing factual information, and meaning is inter-personal or social frequently. For example, the sentence *I warn you that there is a sleeping dog in the closet* does not only provide a piece of information or state something, but also perform a certain speech act, for the speaker not only say something, but also warn someone. Verbs like bet, promise, warn, and so on are all performative verbs or performative speech acts. Using them in a sentence may sometimes perform some non-linguistic act. There are hundreds of performative verbs in every language. The following sentences illustrate their usage:

*I bet you five dollars the Yankees win.*

*I challenge you to a match.*

*I dare you to step over the line.*

*I nominate Batman for mayor of the city.*

*I promise to improve.*

*I resign!*

Uttering the sentences is performing some non-linguistic acts, such as daring, nominating, resigning. All this is typical of performative sentences. Every utterance is some kind of speech act. The study of how we do things with sentences is the study of speech acts, which are the part of pragmatics. Besides, there are other examples to show the non-linguistic world of experience in different directions. The sentence *You're coming tomorrow* can semantically function as an order, not only a statement or information. In pragmatics, there is one principle called politeness principle. Politeness is the symbol of human civilization. It is one of the most effective ways dealing with inter-personal relationship in human communication. One's impolite or rude speech acts would result in offence against other people in communication. So the purpose of politeness principle is to reduce the expression of an impolite statement or belief to a minimum degree in the context. The following sentences all indicate the request for silence (*Shut up, Be quiet, Would you please be quiet? Would you keep your voice down a little please?*), but they have different meaning according to different non-linguistic world of experience. These sentences are related to various social relations, and different people with different status may choose different expressions according to different purposes. Imagine you always say "*Shut up!*" no matter what the situation is, and you may make your listeners annoyed. If you use the sentences like *Would you please be quiet?* or *Would you keep your voice down a little please?* things maybe quite different. The sentence *Be quiet!* is also OK, for it is in a general sense. If you fall into a rage, *Shut up!* will become suitable. Here, the information is same, but reference is different. This is the nature of reference.

## 3. SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS

There are many kinds of meaning concerning the non-linguistic world of experience, and reference may be flexible and complex. It is impossible for the semantic structure of a language to cope with it. That is why some linguists hold the view that there are two kinds of semantics, and one handles sense or sense relations, semantic structure or intra-linguistic relations; the other deals with reference or meaning in the non-linguistic world of experience, the experience outside language. In fact, we can say that pragmatics results from semantics and to some degree, pragmatics is the further development of semantics. From this point of view, sense or sense relations should be included and dealt with within the field of semantics, and reference should be included and dealt with within the field of pragmatics. As a result of this, they become the dividing line between semantics and pragmatics.

Language can be studied statically or dynamically. The central core of linguistics such as phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics cover the statical language system, the internal structure of language while pragmatics, the comparatively-new branch of linguistics, focuses on the dynamical analysis of language. So it can be concluded that though semantics and pragmatics are concerned with meaning, they approach it in a quite different way. Semantics is a traditional way of studying linguistics. It studies meaning with its abstract semantic structure. However, pragmatics is a comparatively new branch of linguistics. It studies actual use of language in context. Language can be studied statically or dynamically. Simply speaking, pragmatics is mainly concerned with how

language users use their linguistic knowledge and non-linguistic knowledge of the world to interpret utterances in particular context. The study of semantics often asks this question: *What does X mean?* while the study of pragmatics often asks *What do you mean by X?* The two questions are very typical for distinguishing semantics from pragmatics in that the two questions reveal semantic meaning and pragmatic meaning clearly.

The discussion mentioned above shows that sense and reference indicate two important branches of linguistics. The study and understanding of the two terms for sure need strengthening and deepening. Only by doing so, will it be beneficial to the further and deeper study of both semantics and pragmatics.

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